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Character Design: Momiji Tsubakidani

2

The
Invisible Wallflower
Marries an
Upstart Aristocrat
After Getting Dumped for
Her Sister!

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The Invisible Wallflower Marries an Upstart Aristocrat After Getting Dumped for Her Sister! Volume 2

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KONYAKU HAKI SARETA “KUUKI” NA WATASHI, NARIAGARI NO

DANNA SAMA NI TOTSUGIMASHITA. Volume 2

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I never dreamed I'd spend a peaceful moment with my husband by my favorite window in the house I grew up in. My past self would've surely been surprised by this future.

"Iris, are you asleep?"

"No, I was listening to your heartbeat."

His sweet fingertips played with my hair, and the warmth beside me was just so comfortable...

THE INVISIBLE WALLFLOWER MARRIES AN UPSTART
ARISTOCRAT AFTER GETTING DUMPED FOR HER SISTER!



KIKI

A maid of House Stock. Loves Iris and Lucas very much. Despite her dark past, she's able to act strong and optimistic.

"Madam, I received an order from the owner of this place. He wants to buy a few items from us."

"My goodness! You're splendid, Coldola!"

"Heh, he said, 'If it's the place that Lady Iris married off to, I'm sure it's trustworthy.'"

It was smooth sailing from there."

"That makes me happy to hear!"

I must express my gratitude!"

IRIS STOCK

Comes from the traditional house of Marquess Karelia. Though she carries on the bloodline, she's unable to succeed her house because she's a woman. As the wife of a new aristocrat, she steels herself to stand by her beloved Lucas.

COLDOLA VII

A woman working at the Stock Trading Firm. Strong-willed and acts like an older sister toward others. Childhood friends with Lucas. Decided to move on from him and changed her appearance to look more manly.

Prologue

AUTUMN arrived in Solalitika. There was a nip in the air as the maids carried in the linen fabric. Lucas gazed at the scene while he walked around the manor. He glanced around, searching for Iris, but her fragile back was nowhere to be seen.

“I guess she’s spending another day in bed,” Lucas said with a worried sigh.

Ever since Iris had received a letter from her sister, she’d fallen ill and remained in bed. Her body was still not used to the weather in Solalitika. Combined with the stress that had been tormenting her heart, she could no longer withstand it all. Her spirit had snapped in half.

Lucas had glanced at the letter. Despite his lack of education, even he could tell it was filled with grammatical and spelling errors, but the general gist was, *“No one’s helping me, so assist me in preparing for my engagement party. At this rate, I can’t socialize well with others, and House Karelia may fall into ruin. Help me.”* No one could blame Iris for falling ill.

“Tch,” Lucas muttered with an annoyed click of his tongue. “They threw her out of the house with practically nothing but the clothes on her back, yet they come crawling back to her for assistance and money. How audacious can they be?”

“Your anger sounds quite humane and reasonable—unfitting for the nouveau riche who purchased an etiquette book from the Karelias to utilize to his heart’s content,” his butler quipped.

“Shut up.”

“Even now, you worry for your restless wife and sleep beside her every night. When you proposed to her, I couldn’t have imagined you ending up infatuated with the lady. Even I, Leikzig, unworthy of a master like you, am moved to tears.”

“Quiet, you.”

“And yet, you insist on a mariage blanc. My lord, I can tell you are quite shy—no, you possess a mental fortitude of steel! I am truly astonished.”

“Leik, there’s a legend in the Orient stating that when you bury a corpse under a tree, a beautiful flower will bloom. I’ve always wanted to plant a tree, so this seems like a perfect opportunity. Let me bury you.”

Lucas walked around while bantering with his butler, Leikzig, when he noticed someone sitting near the flowerbeds. The gardener and the maid, Kiki, were picking the flowers in full bloom. The flowers, shaped like distinct lamps with pale purple petals, bloomed in a row. Lucas didn’t know the name of this flora.

“What are those flowers called?” Lucas asked, approaching the two.

The gardener and the maid immediately smiled at him and bowed.

“These are bellflowers,” the gardener said, using his wrinkled hands to position the petals neatly. “My lady was looking forward to these blooming, and they finally have.”

Kiki smiled beside him, her braided milk-tea hair swaying with her movements. “We were planning on decorating Lady Iris’s room with these. I thought she might enjoy the beautiful flowers for a short while without enduring the cold breeze of the garden.”

“I see,” Lucas said after a brief pause. “Thanks for thinking about her.”

He shifted his gaze to the garden. The paradise of flowers, previously covered in vibrantly colored petals to match the summer season, had changed to calmer tones. They had been prepared with the help of Iris and the gardener. Iris had been involved with every spot, from the gardens to the manor.

His wife carefully selected the furniture within the rooms and the books and paintings that decorated the drawing room. Lucas had zero clue on how to decorate the interior of his mansion and had tried his best by making do with what he had. However, ever since Iris came to marry him, within a matter of months, the manor turned into an elegantly decorated space that wasn’t too showy.

Lucas was a new aristocrat and had little history to his name. Naturally, this meant that he possessed nothing old. That must've been a bizarre sight for Iris, born surrounded by old traditions and ideals, but she'd happily said, "We can carve out our own history. And for that, we shall make preparations."

His wife usually joyfully walked around the manor and busily tended to her tasks, but now that she had fallen ill, the manor had lost its vitality—indeed, they missed her dearly.

Lucas parted ways with the maid and the gardener as they made bouquets, and he gave a dry laugh. "Man, I'm so lame. Just a few months ago, it was normal to *not* have her in this manor."

As he mumbled to himself, he looked up at the window of a separate building where his wife was resting. In the end, they still resided separately. They decided that now wasn't the best time to change their environment, and hadn't touched on sharing a room yet.

"In the end, there's been no closure whatsoever."

Nothing had been settled. House Karelia still had its issues, and Mikhail Streltsy of the first prince's faction was still not convicted of his crimes. Lucas had to face these obstacles so Iris could live her days in peace.

Chapter 1

THE letter was delivered three days ago. Both my body and soul were unwell, and I could barely get out of bed. Today, I finally gained enough strength to sit on the chair in my room and gaze outside.

“Lady Iris, how are you feeling?” Kiki hesitantly knocked on my door and entered the room. In her hand was a bouquet. She showed the utmost care not to talk too much. She rearranged the flowers and poured some tea before turning to leave. “I shall be in the room right next door. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask!” she said brightly.

“Thank you,” I replied.

I watched her leave before I shifted my gaze toward the bellflowers by the windowsill. “They’re beautiful,” I murmured.

The beautiful bouquets Tom and Kiki gave me every day soothed my heart quite a bit. Lucas would visit me every night without fail and cheer me up as we engaged in small talk. I knew he was busy and felt bad for making him care for me so much.

In a daze, I stared out the window as the sky turned crimson. Days were long within Solalitika, and this color signaled the beginning of the evening. A pair of magpies spread their black-and-white wings and playfully flew together, entangling their bodies with each other, before they flew into a grove. I sighed and murmured to myself in my spacious room.

“I might not be able to eat dinner today either...”

I knew I had to at least eat properly, but my throat felt tight, and I had lost my appetite. *This will only make Kiki worry about me further,* I thought when footsteps approached my room. I realized they belonged to a man and quickly stood up.

It was rare to hear these steps during this time of day—he took long strides

and walked firmly without hesitation. I only had a few moments to panic as the door opened and Lucas entered. He gazed down at me and patted my head.

“I’m back, Iris.”

“Lucas... I’m sorry to welcome you in such an attire.”

I felt ashamed to greet him in my informal clothes—a simple dress. I clenched the stole around my shoulders and brought it toward my chest. Lucas silently stared at me in astonishment before he gently scooped me up in his strong arms.

“Eek!” I cried in shock.



“It’s tough for you to even stand, isn’t it? Don’t push yourself,” he said.

“Um, I can stand. And, uh, I must be heavy, aren’t I? You may let me down.”

“You’re not heavy at all. There’s no need for you to act strong in front of me, is there?”

“No...” I replied, unable to refute it. I entrusted my body to him.

“Where do you want to go? The bed or the sofa?”

“The sofa, please.”

He carried me like a princess and gracefully sat on a long sofa.

“Kiki, could you bring Iris her dinner?” Lucas called.

“Yes, my lord!” Kiki replied.

He still held me while he gave his order, and I realized I was on his lap like a cat.

“U-Um, I’d like to be set down, Lucas,” I said hastily.

“After you’ve eaten,” he replied. “You only drank some soup for lunch, didn’t you?”

“Did you perhaps come home early today because you were worried about me?”

“Nah, it’s just a coincidence.”

I could tell from his confident denial that he had returned home quickly out of worry for me. If he simply got off work early, he would’ve offered a teasing reply.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

Guilt and remorse welled within me, but Lucas adjusted his grip tightly as though he was determined to never let me go. The other servants swiftly prepared the table for me while I was in this position. I was so embarrassed I felt like running away. As the lady of this house, I was responsible for managing household affairs, including the dinner menu. Since I was out of commission, I was causing great trouble for everyone else.

Someone gently pinched my cheek. I looked up and saw Lucas give me a carefree smile.

“You’re thinking about some unnecessary stuff again, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I just felt shameful,” I replied.

“Everyone shows their weak side now and then. I’m a bit relieved.”

“Relieved?”

“You’ve shown us your weak side, Iris. You might think that pathetic, but you trusted us enough to show your weakness. It’s a relief to see, you know?”

“Lucas...”

My husband reached out his large hand, his long fingers enveloping me as he stroked my head. He combed my hair, and it felt so comfortable that my excuses and apologies melted away. I quietly let him do as he wished as he squinted his amber eyes and smiled.

“It’s gotten cold recently,” he said. “It would be a shock for you since it’s your first autumn here. It’s only natural for you to fall ill, so don’t worry about it.”

“But...” I started.

“Besides, you work too much. Rest a little. Or am I too unreliable for you?”

“Nothing like that at all.”

“Then come on. Act a little spoiled toward me.”

His hands ran through my hair before he caressed my cheek. As he peered at me with his eyes that resembled the sunset, my ears grew warm.

“I’m not a man who can’t spoil his wife, you know,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied.

“Good. You can stay that way.”

He smiled and once again used his large hand to stroke my head like he was rewarding me. I was the eldest daughter in my family and had rarely been spoiled in my youth. I still wasn’t used to being touched so lovingly. *Perhaps that’s why I get so happy when he pets my head. I want him to touch me more.*

It feels rather odd to want that, but I do.

“I’m always acting spoiled toward you, Lucas,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s not what you’re supposed to say, is it?” he asked.

“Thank...you,” I ventured. I was still quite clumsy at entrusting my emotions to him, and I couldn’t suppress the feeling of guilt for having him care for me so much.

The dinner prepared for me was a lightly seasoned risotto soup, some thinly sliced peeled pears, and a small salad.

“We’ve prepared a light dinner, but if it’s not enough, please tell me!” Kiki said with a cheery smile. “We’ll bring lots more!”

I felt better when I saw her jovial demeanor and smiled back at her. “Thank you,” I said.

“Lord Lucas, you must blow on the food to cool it down and feed it to her!” Kiki said.

“Hey, don’t tease me,” Lucas replied.

“Eek!” The maid pressed her hands on her cheeks and jogged away.

“Good grief... She’s beginning to resemble Leik,” he said wearily.

“I agree.” I nodded, my cheeks growing warm. He glanced at me. “Lucas?”

“Er... If you want me to do it, I will...” he said.

“I-I can eat by myself! Thank you, though!”

“I-I see. Sorry, I said something weird.”

“N-Not at all.”

We tried to ignore the awkward air, and I decided to focus on my meal.



LUCAS stayed by my side until I finished eating and returned to his room. I felt a little better after eating and requested Kiki to prepare a bath for me. My husband visited my room once more when it was late at night.

“The color’s returned to your face,” Lucas said, visibly relieved.

He stroked my damp hair. It'd gotten chillier recently, and I was grateful for the fireplace. We sat next to each other on the sofa, where he'd carried me earlier in the evening. I gazed at him. *I think I can talk about it tonight.*

"May I say something?" I asked.

"Sure," Lucas replied, light dancing in his gentle, calm gaze. He must've known what I was going to talk about.

"You're aware that I fell ill because of the letter I received from my family, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yep."

As I hung my head, Lucas grasped my hand. His tender warmth cheered me up and soothed my soul. I stroked his large hand and slowly formed my feelings into words.

"Quite honestly, I'm the most surprised by my physical reaction," I said. "Being treated poorly like that was the norm in my former household. It must've hit harder because I've learned what it was like to live happily and peacefully here with you. The moment I received the letter, I shuddered and felt like I was about to be pushed to the bottom of the valley. Simply remembering my time back at home made me feel so empty...and gloomy."

My back trembled, and Lucas used his other hand to rub calming circles into my back. Encouraged by the warmth of his large hand, I continued.

"If I return home, I'm certain that I will once again suffer. I must face the reality that the Karelia manor and family name my mother had carefully protected has been shattered. And for me, that's a very, very painful truth to bear. Even so..."

Even while I'd fallen ill, I decided to divulge the thoughts that had filled my mind to Lucas.

"I'd like to go and help my sister with her engagement party," I finished.

"Are you serious?" he asked, furrowing his brows. "Your father is the lord of that house now. A woman who married out of her household has no obligation to return."

“But I must go. I’d like to fulfill my duties as a woman who originated from House Karelia. This is my pride. And...”

“And?” Lucas asked, raising an eyebrow.

I stared into his eyes and told him what Leik had reported to me in the past while munching on a rose.

“Lucas,” I said. “My former fiancé is up to no good, isn’t he?”

He looked surprised.

“And you’ve received secret orders from His Highness, the third prince, to look into it, haven’t you?”

Lucas widened his eyes in shock as though caught off-guard. He quickly knitted his brows. “That’s right,” he finally said.

“Then please use my sister’s engagement party as the opportunity to ascertain his evil deeds,” I said.

He seemed at a loss for words as he stared at me. Lucas’s most influential supporter was Duke Cyrus Monzlaus, the king’s younger brother, often referred to as His Highness the Third Prince. Both he and the king pushed to reform aristocratic society. Lucas had received a secret order from the duke to look into Mikhail, my former fiancé and son of Marquess Streltsy. Based on the results, my husband could receive requests from the royal palace to use his imported Marmaria stone slabs for their repairs. It was a golden opportunity, for the royal capital still underestimated him as a “country bumpkin nouveau riche.”

“Please use this chance,” I said.

“But...” he started.

“Lucas, you initially planned on utilizing House Karelia for your benefit, didn’t you?”

He grimaced and gave an obedient nod. “Yeah. I used repaying their debts as an excuse to ask for the hand of the daughter of Marquess Karelia. I didn’t mind if they rejected my offer; it would’ve been great if I was just referred to a governess with ties to the Karelins. But I luckily ended up marrying a bona fide

daughter of the marquess, and I switched gears, hoping to learn more about Mikhail Streltsy through you. Our marriage started that way, and it's true that I initially had nothing but a calculating plan in mind. I can't deny that."

I smiled as he spilled all his thoughts, elated by his honesty.

"And yet...you're worrying about me now," I said.

"Well, yeah. I officially married you. And...I want to be with you for the rest of our lives. I know I'm being selfish. So..." His voice grew smaller, and he trailed off. I thought I saw his cheeks grow red under the lamplight and found it heartwarming. I giggled. "What's so funny?" Lucas asked.

"You're worried about my former household," I replied. "You got to your current position by doing whatever you could to produce results, so I find your hesitation to be rather unfitting for you."

"Yeah, but unlike me, you call House Karelia home and your family, right?"

"It may be my childhood home, but the family I'd like to protect is you." He widened his eyes as I enveloped his large hands with mine. "My younger sister, Airia, is now the only daughter representing Marquess Karelia. During her engagement party, not only will the Traditional Twelve be called to attend, but I guarantee that the royal family will be invited as well. New aristocrats rarely get a chance to meet them. It's a perfect stage to settle things with the man in the king's older brother's faction. Should the Karelis be dragged into the conviction of this man's sins and end up in ruin, that is simply their fate."

"Hey now," Lucas said wearily, a little taken aback. "You've gotta be kidding me. Are you saying you don't mind if I crush one of the twelve marquess houses?"

"If you awkwardly leave this to your personal feelings, you may trip yourself up," I said.

"Do you know what you're implying here?"

"I do. You're a very compassionate man, but you aren't the type to get swept away by your feelings. It doesn't suit you."

Upon sensing my earnestness, Lucas's gaze finally turned serious as he

stopped smiling. “If I’m gonna do it, I’ll go all out. Is that all right with you?” he asked.

I met his determined amber eyes and firmly nodded, holding my ground. “I don’t plan to go back on my word. If my former fiancé should be convicted for his sins, then that’s what must happen. If the Karelias get dragged into it and fall into ruin, that’s that. And the Royal Police are under the faction of His Highness the first prince—as a former commoner, they’re your enemy, are they not?”

“They are.”

“Then they shall cunningly move to protect House Streltsy. If you still choose to fight against them, I won’t be so naïve as to state that I’d like to protect my former home. In fact...”

I paused. The image of my dignified mother flashed across my mind—as a woman of House Karelia, one of the twelve marquess households, she had remained tough and courageous until her very end.

“If we can protect the nation from a conspiracy that could jeopardize the reign of His Majesty and His Highness the third prince, I’m sure that even the first Marquess Karelia would earnestly desire it,” I finished.

“Is that your answer, as Iris Karelia?”

“Yes.”

For a while, we gazed into each other’s eyes. Lucas Stock looked as serious as ever; I didn’t recognize him for a moment. I thought I’d gotten used to his face as his wife, but his expression was cold enough to give even me chills right now. I was sure that he was making rapid calculations within his mind. A few seconds later, he slumped his shoulders and ran his hands through his hair.

“Heh,” he chuckled. “You’re on. You’re a lot gutsier than me. Nerves of steel.”

“Lucas,” I said.

“Haha... I thought you were down in the dumps, but I didn’t think you were thinking so far ahead for me. You really are interesting.” He laughed for a brief moment before he squinted. “Iris, I’ve been thinking about this for a while, but

you're pretty hot-blooded, aren't you?"

"Am I?"

"You're willing to crush your own household, and you told me to go all-out for my work and the nation. What kind of warrior woman are you?"

"I've never been told such a thing."

Long ago, House Karelia was well-renowned for producing excellent officers. I didn't deny that the blood of military personnel flowed within my veins, but I'd never received such a comment before.

"I see now," Lucas nodded with satisfaction. "I can sort of understand why they had you dress so dully and treated you like air. If you went all out, you would've terrified everyone in your path. Regarding you as a wallflower was the best way to keep you sheathed within your scabbard."

I had no idea what he was on about.

"Well, I don't care about that, though. I've received your resolve," my husband said, his large palms enveloping my cheeks. His sweet gaze looked at me dearly as his hand slipped from my cheeks to my hair.

"Lucas..." I murmured.

Feeling a little ticklish, I let him do as he pleased when he gently knocked his forehead onto mine.

"I won't hold back. I'll catch your former fiancé and reveal his true identity," Lucas said. "Iris, you can go settle your matters with your family. Why don't we finish everything and welcome spring with a smile?"

"Let's."

He patted my shoulders and stood up. "All right. I'll leave for tonight."

When he turned his back toward me, I instinctively grabbed his shirt sleeve.

"What's wrong?" my husband asked kindly, stroking my head.

"Are we...not staying together tonight?" I asked.

"Together?"

My face grew warm. “U-Um, recently...y-you’ve always spent your time with me, so, um... I-I wondered if we would be together tonight too... I-I’m sorry. I must’ve...gotten all excited...on my own.”

“Huh?”

“Please forget what I’ve said. I’m terribly sorry.”

Lucas froze in place. *Ah, I’ve done it now. Why did I say such a thing?! I internally agonized. He spent the nights with me recently so I could sleep better. Since I’ve recovered, there’s no need for him to be with me. He just praised my strength and gutsy attitude. Y-Yet, I asked to spend more time with him. How could I be so...so... We’re in a marriage blanc! We shouldn’t even be in bed together! He even created another building to fulfill this unconsummated marriage. So how could I be so spoiled and take advantage of his kindness?! I borrowed his arm every night and found that to be so warm and comforting as I dozed off, but that already is rather bizarre, Iris! Oh, how could I say such a thing? How could I horridly hold him back? It’s preposterous! Even if he’s my husband, how could I prevent a man from leaving for his bed? How could I?!*

“Uh, Iris... Don’t stop me and stay silent,” Lucas said, looking a little troubled as he sat back down and stroked my hair. “Ah, I guess it’s my fault. We spent our nights together lately, so I can see why you’d be puzzled by me suddenly leaving.”

“I’m sorry for being so shameless,” I apologized. “I mustn’t...”

“Shameless? You haven’t done anything shameless at all.” He gazed down at me, looking troubled. “And I’m your husband. There’s nothing shameless going on.”

“Husband... *Husband...*”

“Argh, don’t try to reflect on that word! You’ll embarrass me, too. Come on, let’s sleep.”

He stood up and quickly headed for the bedroom. When I followed him, he seemed surprised to see my bed.

“There’s a new set of linen...” I observed.

Until now, my bed had been fitted with cute linen sheets patterned with pale flowers. Today, there was even an extra white pillow. A clatter was heard from outside, and Kiki popped her head in from behind the door. In her hands was a large pillow that had been used until yesterday.

“Er, I’ve made it easier for you two to sleep together... Um...” she trailed off.

We looked on in silence.

Kiki squealed in excitement. She buried her face in the pillow, bowed, and ran off. Only the faint buzzing of the lamp echoed throughout the room. Lucas and I looked at each other.

“Let’s sleep. We’re only just *sleeping*,” he said.

“Right...” I replied.



WHEN morning came, Lucas slipped out of the room before Iris awoke. He returned to his room at daybreak when Leik, who was preparing a suit for him, narrowed his eyes.

“You good-for-nothing,” he said.

Lucas didn’t answer him.

“Ah, pardon me, my lord. I suppose it was much too great of a request for you. Oh, please forgive poor little Leik here. I’m such a klutz. Tee hee.”

“You’ve got your morning reports, don’t you?” Lucas asked. “Which do you want first? Being kicked out the window, kissing the leaves and the pill bugs, or reporting to me about important affairs?”

“*First*... So either way, you’re planning on chasing me out the window. Oooh, I’m terrified.”

“This will be your exit.”

The baron smiled and opened a window as his butler exaggeratedly fixed his posture. On the desk were reports and letters all fanned out.

“This is from His Highness the third prince,” Leikzig said. “It details several prepared lodgings in the royal capital as well as a list of trustworthy people

under his control.”

“Got it,” Lucas replied. “What about the ship we had tailing Mikhail Streltsy’s international trips?”

“According to the last report we received since it departed from Port Lest, it should arrive in about a week. If we must make preparations from here, we should barely make it in time for the party. But this includes our wishful thinking of them making it back alive.”

“How is the faction of the first prince moving?”

“Perhaps he fears your vigilante committee. There are no major movements near Solalitika. They seem to be circulating bad rumors about you, my lord, but we have little choice but to treat them like gnats and ignore them.”

Lucas washed his face and fixed his hair while listening to the report. Leikzig assisted him with putting on his clothes. The butler fixed his lord’s collar, sniffed a little, and chuckled through his nose.

“What?” Lucas asked.

The former “dog” looked up at his master with his unique, golden eyes and formed a downward crescent moon with them.

“You smell of your wife,” the butler said. “You must’ve gotten quite friendly with her, I presume?”

“Got a problem?”

“Oh, no. I’m quite happy, in fact. You have a woman’s scent on you when you return in the morning. You’ve become rather splendid.”

Leikzig maintained his usual teasing tone, but he seemed genuinely happy, causing Lucas to be at a loss for words. In the end, the baron lost his opportunity to throw the extremely rude butler out the window.



EVERYTHING will be made clear at my sister’s engagement party. With that thought in mind, I pepped myself up the next day and prepared my belongings to head to the royal capital.

“Lady Iris, I’ve brought a letter for you,” the always cheery Kiki said.

It was an invitation to the salon of the manor in the royal capital from the aristocrats that I was familiar with. Since I was married to a new aristocrat, I couldn’t be the one to invite others. However, when people heard about my return home, I’d graciously received numerous invitations to enjoy a pleasant chat with them in the royal capital.

“I can use this to introduce Lucas to all sorts of people,” I said with a sigh of relief.

I stared at Kiki’s back as she quickly helped me gather my belongings. She’d had a terrifying experience within an aristocratic household in the royal capital.

“Kiki, may I talk with you for a moment?” I asked.

“Of course! What do you need of me, Lady Iris?” my maid asked, jogging over to me.

I encouraged her to take a seat, and she quizzically did so. I sat across from her and peered into her eyes.

“Kiki, why don’t you remain in Solalitika?” I suggested.

Kiki’s eyes went wide as her expression grew dark and gloomy. “Have I done something to anger you, my lady?”

“No, nothing like that at all. You’re a reliable maid whom I treasure very dearly. But you had a horrific experience in the royal capital, didn’t you? You might even encounter the aristocrat who caused you such fear.” She looked shocked as I wrapped my hands around hers. “I don’t want to remind you of your painful memories, and there’s no need for you to get hurt. I’d like you to stay in this peaceful city and wait for our return.”

She looked down and pressed her lips together tightly. After she thought about my words for a while, she finally looked up at me, firm determination brimming in her eyes.

“Lady Iris, please take me with you,” she said.

“Kiki...”

“If you desire, my lady, I’d like to be your maid for my entire life. If so, I can’t

be afraid of aristocrats forever. I don't want to be." She squeezed my hands tightly. "I should overcome it—no, I *must* overcome my fears. I don't want to remain as a scared Kiki who can't do anything and must be protected. And..."

Kiki paused and smiled at me. Her expression was so beautiful and bright that I could only gulp.

"Lady Iris, you're returning to the house that you fear, are you not? Whatever will you do when I'm not by your side?"

"Kiki..."

"I want to protect you too, my lady! I do!"

Something welled within my chest as my maid smiled at me. I clenched my fists. *That's right. I'm not headed home alone. I'm not my old self anymore. I have so many people supporting me by my side.*

"Thank you," I said. "But don't push yourself, all right?"

"Of course. Lady Iris, whenever you feel down, please don't hesitate to talk with me. I may not be large like Lord Lucas, so I can't squeeze you tightly in my arms, but I can at least listen to you."

"Oh, goodness..." I said with a bashful giggle.

"Hee hee. My lady, your ears are red!"

"Because you've said something odd! Oh dear..."

We laughed together.



KIKI left the room and quietly rolled up her sleeve. She revealed a mark that blossomed on her body like a blue flower. The doctor had told her that it would never fade—it was the scar of her traumatic past that remained on her skin.

"I hope I smiled well," she whispered to herself, clenching her trembling hands and holding back the tears. "I won't lose. Ever. There's something only I can do."

She refastened her cufflink and slapped her cheeks. She stood tall with her delicate body and formed a smile as she walked down the hall.



IT was a beautiful day. I was in Lucas's office, going over our final plans together. On the table between us were papers containing information we believed we should share. While we were discussing serious affairs, I snuck glances at his face. Until my sister's engagement party, we would be apart. Lucas would finish his work in Solalitika before entering the royal capital on a different route to fulfill the secret order of the third prince and make preparations for the approaching party. I had to return to the House of Karelia before him and help prepare for the party.

"Don't keep looking, please. You'll stare holes through me," Lucas said, noticing my glances and raising his head from the papers. He gave a forced laugh before he peered at me with worry. "Iris, you sure you'll be okay by yourself?"

"Yes," I replied.

My husband was still hesitant to let me return home alone, but I specifically requested we take separate routes. I didn't want my former fiancé and the first prince to catch on to Lucas's movements.

"If we stay together, we'll both be in danger," I said.

"But..."

"The higher-ranking officials of the Royal Police are in the faction of the first prince. There are no guarantees that they'd protect new aristocrats like us. You've said so yourself."

"Well, yeah, but I feel restless when you're not by my side," my husband said, scratching his head.

My heart grew warm and fuzzy. "I feel the same. When you're not beside me, it's as though half of me is gone."

His vibrant, sunset-colored eyes grew round with shock as he gazed at me. Then, as though to hide his reddening face, he tousled my hair.

"E-Eep! Lucas..."

"We're gonna be apart soon. Don't say cute stuff like that," he murmured as if

scolding me. He took his hand away. "Listen, I'll have my men protect you in the royal capital. You've seen them visit us now and then, haven't you? They're a rough lot with no manners, and they call you my wife."

He gave a dry chuckle as I nodded in understanding.

"If they're with me, I'll feel at ease," I said.

"You look at guys like them and feel at ease? I'm glad I can rely on those nerves of steel of yours."

Suddenly, we heard small knocks on the door that reminded me of a woodpecker.

"My lord! My lord! May I enter right now? Can I truly enter? Or shall I leave you two be for five minutes? I hear no response. I'll open the door in threeeee... twooooo..."

"Just open the door normally!" Lucas roared.

Leik covered his face with his hands and gingerly entered the room. "Ah, well, I would've felt bad if I disturbed you two in the middle of your fun."

"What do you think we'd do in the middle of the day? Stop making that face."

"Righto." Leik dropped his humorous act and skillfully cleared away the empty tea set without making a sound. "The carriage is prepared," he said. "You may depart whenever you wish."

"Thank you," I said.

I stared into Lucas's eyes, hoping to burn his gaze into my heart.



I stood in front of the carriage as the staff who would remain at the manor lined up to send me off. Tom took a step forward and approached me.

"My lady... I hope this can soothe your heart even a little," he said, handing me a beautiful wreath of flowers. "If you can use this as decoration, it shall turn into dried flowers. Kiki has been instructed how to maintain its aroma."

"Thank you," I replied.

Tom clutched his hat in front of his chest and bowed deeply. "My lady, by the

time you return, I shall welcome you with a beautiful bed of spring flowers. Please take care of yourself.”

“I shall. The weather will start to turn chillier, so please take good care of yourself as well,” I replied. I straightened my back and faced the rest of the servants. “Please take care of the manor.”

“Please take care of yourself, Lady Stock,” everyone said.

I got into the carriage but froze when I saw someone had boarded the vehicle before me.

“Lucas?” I asked.

“Hey,” he said, already on board for some reason.

“Er, why are you...”

“I’ve got some business with my company, so let me ride until midway.”

“A-Ah, I see.”

I nodded. Since our manor was atop a small hill, it was a good distance from his company building near the port. I was happy to spend as much time as possible with him. Silence filled the carriage as we traveled through the gates and went down the stone-paved hill. I suddenly noticed Lucas staring at me. Just when I thought he was so close to me, his sunset eyes looked resolute as I was reflected in them.

“Iris, please return to this city as my wife,” he said.

“Lucas...”

“*This* is your place to return to. So, you’ve got nothing to fear. Let’s end this all together.”

“Ah...”

My husband took my left hand and removed my glove with his teeth. With tender care, he placed his lips close to my fingers. On numerous occasions, I’d experienced people kissing the back of my hands as a greeting. But wherever Lucas’s lips touched me, I felt a warm, tingling sensation that caused my body to jolt. He placed his mouth close to my ring finger as though he was about to play

the flute. His powerful gaze pierced through me, making me feel like prey. He opened his lips, flashed his canines, and tenderly bit my ring finger.

“Lucas...” I murmured.

“Think about what kind of ring you want on this finger,” he replied.

He kissed the area where he left a faint bite mark.



I stared at him in stunned shock when the carriage stopped.

“Later,” he said before he left.

I wanted to send him off properly but couldn’t find the strength. Once his footsteps faded away, I heard Kiki’s voice from outside.

“L-Lady Iris... May I come in?”

I quickly pulled on my glove and took a deep breath before replying, “Yes, you may.”

Both Kiki and my guard, Leik, entered the vehicle. They both gazed outside before they exchanged a glance and started chuckling.

“Heh heh heh.” They both erupted in a fit of giggles.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“Eh heh heh. It’s nothing. Right, Leik?” Kiki replied.

“Indeed,” my guard replied. “I shall never tell you about how my lord left the carriage, his ears bright red as he quickly took large strides to flee the area and hide his face. I shall never say how adorable that was.”

“Eep! You’ve said it!” Kiki swatted him.

“Oh my...” I said, embarrassed.

My left hand throbbed with warmth as I still felt the heat of his lips. I stroked my fingers above my glove and tried to play it off. The carriage rattled ahead toward the royal capital, a city filled with gray memories of my past.

“Lucas, I shall be off,” I said to the passing Solalitika scenery outside the window.

I bid my husband farewell. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t anxious, but simply touching the sweet pain of my ring finger through my glove, still throbbing with warmth, I felt as though Lucas was by my side.



“**SHE’S** gone.” Lucas licked his lips.

The sweet taste of her skin remained as he walked toward his company. He’d

left a bite mark on the daughter of an aristocrat; her soft, white skin was still unfamiliar to scratches and wounds. He couldn't contain his excitement, basking in the afterglow of that moment. A bright red Iris had accepted his mark, and Lucas wanted to be praised for not pinning her down right then and there.

He wasn't getting divorced from Iris—no, this was a temporary separation. And yet, he felt as though there was a gaping hole in his heart. This sense of loneliness was mixed with excitement, and he couldn't quite put his finger on his emotions.

It still hadn't been a year since Iris had become his wife. Even so, he found himself searching for his wife's straight back, assuming she'd be here. He glanced at the port, his brick company building, and the city. A city without Iris seemed like a completely different place.

"What good is it for me to feel lonely?" Lucas muttered.

He ran his hands through his hair, and the ocean breeze blew his regrets away. This was their first trial together as a married couple embarked on a journey to a happy future.

It wasn't fitting for him to stand still here.

He wanted to gain even greater happiness and have his wife smile joyfully and elated like never before.

Chapter 2

EACH aristocrat had an estate located in their territory and one in the royal capital. They only used their estates in the royal capital during the social season, and most were narrower townhouses. However, the residence of Marquess Karelia, one of the Traditional Twelve since the founding of this kingdom, was a former citadel. House Karelia had a large manor that was a good distance from the rest of the aristocratic residential area.

The weather was cloudy, just like my feelings. Fields surrounded the streets, their fall harvests done. The carriage proceeded forward as the Karelia manor gradually came into view. I hadn't been back in quite a while.

The moment we entered the front gates, my premonition was proven true. Even from afar, it was clear that the flowerbeds weren't well-maintained and the garden lawns had been left to grow out of control.

"Wow... Grandpa Tom would be furious if he saw this garden," Kiki muttered with a bit of surprise and weariness.

"It seems like they've fired the gardener and had the servants look after the garden instead," I replied. "At this rate, not a single flower will bloom next spring."

The manor was also a miserable sight. The large windows' beautiful curtains had changed into something unfamiliar, and the entire exterior seemed a little dirty. However, from afar, it still had a majestic and dignified aura.

"This is like a manor of vanity..." I murmured.

Since this estate was so massive, it required a lot of money and manpower to maintain, but it seemed they no longer had the leeway to do so. Once I stepped out of the carriage, Kiki and I looked at each other and nodded. Resolved, I entered the building. But it wasn't a servant who greeted me—my younger sister, Airia, practically flew into my arms.

“Sister! You’re late! Just how much time have you taken?! I was in such a spot of trouble!” my sister cried.

“Airia,” I said, taking care not to be swept up by her energy. “You must greet me properly. I’m Baroness Stock. Though we may be siblings, we should at least show each other the bare minimum of formality.”

“This is no time for you to be so stiff!” she protested.

“Your greeting,” I insisted.

She fell silent before reluctantly taking a few steps back and giving me an awkward curtsy. “How do you do, Baroness Stock? You must be tired from your long journey. I hope you can rest here.”

I made sure my back was pin straight and gave her a proper high society greeting. “I shall be in your care for a while. I would love to greet Lord Karelia, but is he out currently?”

“Come on, stop the platitudes already!” she whined. “Father isn’t here; he must be out gambling again. And Mother is—”

It was then I noticed my stepmother in a poison-colored garment walking down the stairs that gazed over the entrance. Amidst the slightly dirty manor, her smile was nothing short of eerie.

“You’ve really started to resemble *that* woman, Iris,” she spat. “Your cheeky gaze looks just like her.”

Even from a distance, I could smell alcohol on her. My father lost himself in gambling while she drowned in liquor. I suppressed a sigh, curtsied, and lifted my gaze up to look at her.

“This may be sudden, Mother, but may I bring in my belongings and servants?” I requested.

“Do as you like,” she replied. “If you can help with preparations, I don’t mind what you do.”

“Very well.”

I glanced at Kiki, and she jogged away toward the carriage and the servants. Leik entered just as she left.

“Ah, well, pardon me,” he said.

Several servants flooded inside behind the butler, carrying my personal belongings and items required to prepare for the party. My mother and sister looked bored at first, but they were visibly surprised by the number of objects I’d brought with me.

“Oh my, oh dear,” my stepmother said, her frosty tone turning joyful. “Are you preparing so much for us?”

“This party is to announce the engagement between the Karelías and Streltsys, an engagement between two important households. In addition, we shall be inviting His Highness, along with other members of the royal family. My husband has offered his aid so that we may prepare a party that will not sully the name of House Karelia,” I replied.

“I’m glad we had you marry a nouveau riche. Keep it up.” With that comment, my stepmother retired deeper within the manor, seemingly implying that she would leave everything to me.

“My lady, I would like to converse with that beautiful woman,” Leik whispered to me, winking with his right eye.

I nodded, catching his implication—he wanted to become friendly with my stepmother in hopes of gleaning some information.

“Have a fruitful conversation,” I said.

“I’m quite used to her type. Don’t worry, woof.”

Once Leik departed to find my stepmother, I glanced at my younger sister. She was squealing with joy over the luggage being brought in.

“Airia,” I said.

“This is amazing, Sister! You should’ve told me you were with such a prosperous man!”

“Calm down, Airia. You will be assisting with preparations for the party as well,” I told her.

“But why? Since you know everything, you don’t need me.”

Her lips formed a pout. She was already at the age she'd be making her social debut, yet her words and manners reminded me of a young child. I started to see her as terribly pitiful.

"Don't you want to learn a few things necessary for a noblewoman?" I asked. "You haven't attended a women's academy either. It would be best for you to learn as much as possible."

"I've already got a fiancé, and I'm set to marry. Women don't need an education or to learn about culture," Airia replied.

"Who told you such a thing?" I asked, appalled.

"Mother did. And so did Father."

"You still require training as the future wife of a marquess. Has Marchioness Streletsky given you your bridal training?"

"That old lady nags too much!" she snapped. "I gave her a piece of my mind."

"Oh my."

"But who cares? Lord Mikhail said that he'd throw out my mother-in-law eventually."

"And you took his words seriously?"

Something felt rather off if my former fiancé could jest about such a thing. Airia couldn't maintain the house as a marchioness, and it seemed absurd to throw out the current marchioness, who would become my sister's mother-in-law. A shiver ran down my spine.

"I'm different from you, Sister," Airia said with a triumphant grin as she puffed out her chest. I knew that she misinterpreted my stunned silence. "I'm different from you, who needs to put on pretenses and pleasantries just to be liked. I'm loved. Do you understand the difference?"

"Forget it," I said with a shake of my head. It was useless to argue with her any further, and we didn't have the time. "Airia, please assist me. I'll have you know I've been married off and am not part of this family anymore. You must know more about this manor's current affairs than me, and I require your assistance to pull this off for you."

“All right, all right. I’ll help, so don’t look so scary. You’re so troublesome,” Airia groaned. She had a begrudging expression while sticking out her tongue at me, but she acquiesced to my request.



MY parents and sister were ecstatic upon seeing the gifts and servants that Lucas had dispatched for this occasion, but after three days, they began to throw complaints and words of dissatisfaction at me, looking uncomfortable.

“Hey, Iris!” Father barked at me one morning.

I was ordering the servants and managing the household when my father, who returned early in the morning and had been in bed from a hangover, suddenly yelled angrily.

“Tell your silver-haired butler to gimme the alcohol from the wine cellar!” he demanded.

I shook my head. “The alcohol we currently have is all for the party. Please don’t lay a finger on it.”

His face twisted in fury. “Who do you think you’re—”

“Father, please calm down,” I said, giving him a meek expression and trying to act subservient. “I simply believe it shall do us no good to show yourself looking perpetually drunk in front of the other aristocrats at the engagement party. If you don’t take care of yourself and your body for the next month, I fear how His Highness shall view us.”

My father closed his mouth at the mention of the prince. His Highness had been trying to revolutionize aristocratic society by making the barrier of entry to attain a title laxer. At the same time, he was famous for being rather strict with the old aristocrats. My father knew how troublesome matters would become should the prince find fault with him.

I turned to a nearby footman. “Could I trouble you to bring my father some water and medicine for his hangover? Please allow him to cool off on a breezy terrace.”

The footman gracefully guided my father to the terrace. I hoped the medicinal

soup would help his stomach and prayed that his pallid skin would look a little brighter for the party.



“**IRIS!**” my stepmother cried hysterically. “How could you change the interior of our entire house? This isn’t your residence anymore!”

I’d changed the curtains in all the drawing rooms. After she had been off the alcohol for a few days, she had gotten calmer. The servants stopped working upon hearing my stepmother’s screams, but I glanced at them, encouraging everyone to carry on. I turned to her, keeping my back straight, causing her to falter when she met my gaze.

“Mother, ever since I’ve been married off, I see that much of the Karelia storied fortune has been sold off,” I said.

“So what? I’ve prepared the latest trendy furniture, haven’t I?” she demanded.

“Pardon my insolence, but we can’t possibly welcome the royal family into a manor decorated with such a cheap, gaudy interior.”

“How could you be so cheeky?!”

She turned red and tried to grab me, but Leik stepped between us and naturally intercepted her hands with a gentle smile. A smile from him was all it took to quell my stepmother’s anger. *I can’t hold a candle to you, Leik.*

“Cheap, you say?” my stepmother huffed. “And I suppose *you* can tell the value of items?”

“I am, of course, not a professional and lack the skills to appraise an item’s value. I can’t accurately price every piece of furniture. However...” I glanced at the pulled-up carpet leaning against the wall. “That is simply an old, used carpet that has been redyed and sewn together with various patchwork, choosing only the better bits. It’s quite filthy, and insects have eaten away at it.”

My stepmother couldn’t refute my claims.

“I don’t deny that there are expensive patchwork carpets. But this is much too...” I grabbed the carpet. A huge tuft of fibers fell out. “The sharp heels of

our noblewomen visitors shall destroy this carpet in moments.”

I proceeded to turn toward the windows. “The curtains were thinner and served no practical purpose. They failed to shield the sunlight. That would only cause our furniture to weather away. And as winter approaches us, those curtains won’t trap any warm air. During dinner parties, our guests, especially the ladies, would catch a cold.”

My stepmother fell silent. I thought I’d said too much, but if I hadn’t expressed my opinions clearly, I knew she wouldn’t listen. She glared at me reproachfully.

“You’ve said what you like, but do you have proof that the items you’ve brought are indeed of good quality?” she growled. “A mere nouveau riche of the countryside can’t compare to the merchants of the royal capital.”

That was the one point that I was confident about. I held my head high and smiled. “My husband has received approval to graciously be given an audience with His Highness the third prince,” I replied. “He has spent ample time and money carefully selecting items that match the status of House Karelia, as well as furniture that will befit the presence of the third prince. I believe this isn’t a bad arrangement for you, Mother. And should anything unusual or bizarre be mismatched for this manor, I shall surely tell my husband about it.”

I mentioned the third prince to add a sense of authority, the house of Marquess Karelia to remind her of our respect, and the willingness to be flexible and change the furniture if there were any issues. Even my stepmother couldn’t find fault in my words and reluctantly regained her composure.

“V-Very well,” she said.

“Marchioness Karelia,” Leik said with a kind smile. “For today’s tea, we’ve prepared some jam from Relaiza. It’s got the same shade as your eyes, my lady—the color of beautiful jewels. You’ve been bravely protecting this manor by yourself, have you not? Why don’t we spend some quiet time together?”

He tilted his head to one side and squinted his golden eyes. His voice and the silver hair that slid down his back were beautiful, and it all seemed calculated to me.

“Y-You’re right,” my stepmother said, her thorny attitude fading away as she gazed at Leik in a stupor.

“Please leave the rest to me, Mother,” I said.

She snapped back to her senses and turned away with a huff. “Very well, do as you like. But know that failure isn’t an option. I will not forgive even a single mistake.”

“I understand,” I replied. “Leik, I leave my mother in your care.”

“Most certainly,” the butler said. “Now then, marchioness. Please do continue the story you were telling me earlier.” Leik beautifully whisked my stepmother away, expertly escorting her. He showed me a victorious peace sign behind his back.

“He’s saved me...” I sighed with relief, the strength leaving my shoulders.

I glanced at the drawing room. Its appearance was quickly changing. This time, Lucas had generously provided enough money to purchase an entire manor. I thought back to our conversation in Solalitika.

“If there isn’t a place for you to stay back at home, just redecorate the entire house as you wish. Don’t hold back on expenses,” Lucas had said. “Your prideful father, stepmother, and sister, all obsessed with appearances, won’t be able to dissent then. They’ll see you as a powerful lady and a reliable wallet.”

I was shocked at his daring suggestion. “But that will require you to use much of your precious money, Lucas.”

He crossed his legs and flashed a fearless smile while I hesitated. “You think I became a nouveau riche without knowing when and where to spend my money? This is a perfect opportunity for me, too. There aren’t many opportunities to show off my wealth that puts me on par with the mighty house of Marquess Karelia. They boast a large plot of land and one of the most massive townhouses within the royal capital.”

“Well, now that you mention it...”

“I can exhibit my wealth within the royal capital where prideful royals and aristocrats will be gathered. And I get to use the manor of Marquess Karelia, to

boot. It's a win-win for me." He turned toward me. "I'll leave choosing the furniture to you. I want you to make House Karelia as *you* desire, Iris."

His amber gaze flashed across my mind. I still felt the warmth emanating from my ring finger. If the Karelias were to utilize Lucas as their wallet, my husband simply needed to use their renown in turn. I accepted Lucas's idea, finding this to benefit both parties—though it would benefit Lucas more—and completely renovated the manor's interior.

Just then, a maid hastily cried out from a room a short distance away.

"Lady Airia! Please don't!"

I hurried toward the voice and found Airia inside the room I was given, raiding my closet without my permission. All the beautifully prepared dresses were laid out messily on the floor; it was a wretched sight.

"Airia, what are you doing?" I asked.

She turned around and smiled without looking at all apologetic. "Sister, you've been wearing such adorable dresses, haven't you? Is this what that nouveau riche likes or something? Give me some outfits, too."

Glancing at the maid, I could tell how forcefully my younger sister had pushed her way into my room to mess it all up. I requested the servants to clean up, took Airia's hand, and left the room.

"I have two things to say to you, Airia," I started. "First, my dresses won't fit you, and the colors won't complement your blonde hair."

"You're so stingy! You're the only one with cute dresses." She pouted.

"Second, my husband has told me to prepare a dress for you."

"Huh?! So, he's buying me a dress too?!"

"Of course. It's your big moment, yet I don't see a suitable dress for you."

"Yeah! I haven't been able to visit my favorite dressmaker since Father gambled our money away and made his deferred payments."

"I figured as much."

"I'm sooo happy! Everyone should have an older sister who marries off to a

rich man!”

She squealed with elation, quickly changing her attitude. I wearily couldn't help but feel impressed by her rapid changes in mood. Her honesty was, in a way, a talent.

“I'll have you measured tomorrow, so keep that in mind,” I said.

“I'm so excited!” she replied. “Then I don't need your dresses. I'd like something cuter and trendier than anything you've got. It's a promise, all right?”

She went on her merry way as she left my room. A maid with a brown chignon bun, tan skin, and dazzling blue eyes wearily approached me. She was a maid who came with me from Solalitika—Rusk.

“My lady, I've finished cleaning up,” Rusk said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I'm sorry, I've only given you more work.”

“That, I don't mind at all. However...” Her boyish, determined gaze followed Airia. “You don't have to prepare a dress for such a rude younger sister.”

“I don't blame you for thinking that way, but I cannot have her face the third prince in her current attire. I'm not doing this just for my sister and parents, but for Lucas and His Highness as well.”

“I suppose I can understand that reasoning.”

“I'm sorry to trouble you so much,” I said.

“Not at all. I understand that you're the one who's most troubled by it all, my lady.” She gave a tired shrug of her shoulders.

“Could I ask you to continue cleaning up after her and keep watch so they don't get in my way?” I requested. “We must have every item we've brought into this manor under attentive surveillance. I've asked the pawnshop not to accept anything from our house, but it doesn't hurt to be extra careful.”

“I understand.”

I've still got a mountain of work to do.



AS always, the royal capital was quite cloudy. Inside my rattling carriage, I headed for the city. Spires and chimneys poked the gray skies as various rooftops came into view. The moment we entered the city, the stuffy scent of the bustling crowd filled the carriage. The uneven cobblestone tiles, both old and new, caused the carriage wheels to clatter. Numerous buildings lined the main road. Some were new. Others were old and dull, still carrying scars from the war. This was the city where many had gathered in ancient times, our kingdom's capital. The scene reminded me that I had truly returned to my hometown. When I closed my eyes, the vibrant, blue skies of Solalitika filled my mind.

"I yearn for the bright skies," I murmured.

The carriage was taking me to each aristocrat's house I had successfully arranged meetings with. I would greet each one and offer a word of apology. The reputation of the Karelias had fallen into ruin, and I was known as a woman who had married a nouveau riche. When I'd received letters from those I used to be friendly with, declining my request to meet them, my heart ached. However, this too, came with the duties that fell to me, and I had to accept reality.

Within the carriage were me, Kiki, another maid, and a dignified woman dressed in a two-piece suit.

"Madam, can I— Ahem, I mean, are you sure you don't have a problem bringing someone such as myself along?" Coldola asked, looking stunning with the black coat pulled over her suit. She seemed a touch nervous as she rearranged her hat. Today, she was wearing burgundy lipstick and a reserved rose fragrance. She had recently cut her hair short, and it suited her splendidly.

"I'm bringing you along precisely *because* you're you," I replied. "I'm relying on you and hope for your assistance."

"Well, I don't mind being relied on by you, madam."

Her cheeks turned pink as she played with her bangs and looked outside. The exchange reminded me of our time in Solalitika and helped ease my nerves. The carriage took a right on St. Santia Street.

"We shall arrive soon," I said. "We'll be meeting my mother's uncle, Count

Klaus.”

“Count Klaus,” Coldola mused. “What kind of person is he?”

“He’s the youngest brother of my mother’s biological father—the previous Marquess Karelia. He turns fifty this year and is quite a gentleman. Forty years ago, the Battle of Lionel—a navy battle—caused House Klaus to lose all their male heirs. My uncle married into their family and succeeded the title of count,” I explained.

“He’s quite old.”

“Indeed. In a few years, I imagine he’ll pass the title to his son.”

As Coldola had stated, there weren’t many aristocratic men who lived past the age of sixty. It was rare to see someone like Count Garner, a nobleman Lucas had once served, be so energetic despite his age. I gazed out the carriage window, feeling nostalgic for the scenery I was so used to.

“I’m elated he still wants to see me even though I’ve become Lucas’s wife...” I murmured.



HIS silver hair was slicked back, and his well-maintained mustache was a nostalgic sight. When Count Kaizert Klaus saw me, he widened his reddish-brown eyes in shock and scrutinized me intently.

“I’m surprised,” he finally said. “I almost didn’t recognize you, Iris.”

“It certainly has been a while, dear uncle.”

He had more white hairs than before, but his voice was kind, and his perfect manners remained as I’d remembered.

“And this noble lady must be the merchant you told me about in your letter.”

When my uncle’s gaze fell on her, Coldola gave a slight bow, and I introduced her.

“She’s the manager of my husband’s newly built sewing factory in Luxiano. Her name is Miss Coldola Vii. She’s in charge of all the seamstresses we’ve gathered throughout the kingdom.”

“My goodness,” Countess Miazea Klaus said with a kind smile and nod while standing beside her husband. “If she’s in charge, I’m sure all the parents that have sent their daughters will be at ease.”

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance,” Coldola replied with a dignified smile. Her long eyelashes and proud brows complemented her face as she stood tall and confident. Her hair, which she’d recently cut short, made her look like a beautiful woman dressed like a man.

“Now then, why don’t we end the stiff greetings here? Come inside,” my uncle said. He exchanged a happy glance with his wife and nodded before the countess guided us into their residence.

“But, of course, you’d mature splendidly, Iris. At first, I mistook you for Louisa,” Aunt Miazea said with a smile, holding my hands and mentioning my mother’s name several times. Her curly hair had some traces of white, and her dress was patterned with pedicels, making her adorable. She was a woman who reminded me of cotton candy.

“When Lord Karelia had you marry off to a nouveau riche without consulting anyone, I was rather worried,” confessed my uncle. “But you carry yourself quite well no matter where you go. You’ve grown to resemble my late niece in every way.”

Setting foot in the drawing room was like being taken back in time. Glossy, well-polished tables with beautiful inlays, mahogany cabinets, snow-white porcelain from the Orient, and a well-used, polished tea set greeted me. None of these had changed since my youth, and they remained as beautiful and lustrous as ever. I was familiar with many of the servants as well. I felt more at home in this residence than in the Karelia estate.

After we engaged in small talk and notified each other of any changes, I asked him about my former household.

“How is the state of the Karelia lands? I’ve heard it was quite warm in the summer,” I said.

The job of managing the Karelia fief had been transferred from my father to my uncle. When my mother, Louisa Karelia, passed away, my father had almost been accused by the royal palace of failing to manage and report on the citizens

living on his lands. The royal palace was in an uproar, but my father prevented any legal action from being taken against him. My uncle requested a separate trial and was granted the power to manage the Karelia territory for one generation.

“There are no issues at all,” my uncle replied. “Since last year, we decided to test out growing a new type of wheat this year, and it went very well. The crops didn’t lose to the summer heat, and we had a good harvest. We harvested some good potatoes, too, and the serfs had a grand autumn festival.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I was the one who stated that I couldn’t let your father handle it all and butted in. I’ll take responsibility for my words and actions,” he said.

“I’m so terribly sorry. I apologize that my father’s lack of management caused you much trouble.”

He closed one eye and smiled. “Raise your head, Iris. I’m not doing this for your father. I’m simply fulfilling my duties as a person with the Karelia blood flowing in my veins.”

My uncle’s demeanor was gentle and kind, but he was a firm man who detested corruption and unjust acts. He fundamentally couldn’t get along with my father, who wanted to coast through life without working hard—or at all, for that matter.

“The Karelias wouldn’t have fallen into difficult times if *he* hadn’t taken our money,” my father always muttered angrily. However, I knew my uncle only used the bare minimum funds needed to maintain the fief and returned any excess. My uncle was saving my father, but I wondered when—or if—he would ever realize that.

“Iris, I’d thought that you would eventually divorce and return to the Karelias, but judging from the looks of things, you seem to be quite comfortable with where you married off to,” my uncle said, sounding a little down. “You stated this was a *mariage blanc* in your letter, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did...” I replied, trailing off. He wasn’t wrong, after all.

“You’re the only one who carries on the dark hair and eyes of a Karelia. You

don't have to live as the wife of a new aristocrat. Your father being alive still is a bit troublesome, but everyone would be most satisfied if you filed for divorce and had a man marry into House Karelia to take over."

"Dear!" Aunt Miazea scolded. "You're saying a bit too much!"

I wasn't bothered; I knew well that they were both worried about my future. But I firmly shook my head.

"I'm grateful for your kind concerns, but since I've married into House Stock, I'd like to fulfill my duties as Baroness Stock," I replied. "I'm sorry."

"I see..." my uncle replied.

"I expected you to say that. You're Louisa's daughter, after all," my aunt said, turning to me and giving a broad smile, forming wrinkles around her lips and eyes. "He's brought out your hidden beauty in spades. I don't doubt that you've got a splendid husband."

"I do," I answered, unable to suppress a smile at the praise for my husband. "He treats me very well."

"My, oh my! Goodness! I can tell that divorce is out of the question!" my aunt said, looking happier than ever.

In contrast to my beaming aunt, my uncle's face turned grim. He shook his head and sighed. "Good grief... It's a huge loss to aristocratic society to have the daughter with the Karelia blood flowing thickest in her veins marry off elsewhere. I can't possibly understand what your father is thinking."

My uncle sounded irritated as he stroked his mustache, possibly remembering my father. My aunt gently stroked his back to console him, a gentle smile on her face.

"Ever since you've left, Iris, House Karelia has fallen into utter ruin. It's so grossly blatant. I assumed that that profligate of a father had been doing *some* work, but I soon realized *you* were supporting everything from the shadows," he said.

"I apologize for causing such trouble and worry," I said.

"Whatever are you on about? That man is at fault for leaving everything to a

daughter in her early teens. Good grief, had my late older brother known that we were dealing with such a horrid man, he wouldn't have accepted that marriage..."

Before the complaints continued, I decided to discuss the main reason I was visiting today.

"Dear uncle, I've heard that you've not only been managing Karelia's fief but my father's debts as well. And about that..." I started.

My uncle's brows furrowed with repugnance at the mention of money. I couldn't blame him. No matter the generation, relationships between relatives would grow tense when money was involved.

"Does he require *more* time to repay his debt?" my uncle asked. "If this is *your* request, Iris, I don't mind complying..."

"Nothing like that. I would like to repay his debt," I said. "If you don't mind us repaying it without interest, my husband can pay you the money today in full."

"What?!" my uncle cried in shock.

It was rare to hear him raise his voice. He stared at me, wide-eyed. "If possible, I would love to accept your husband, Baron Stock's, offer. Even I hesitated to ask for interest from a relative in hopes of getting my money back."

"But are you all right, Iris?" my aunt asked, a hand on her cheek. "I hope Baron Stock isn't pushing himself."

I offered a serene smile in hopes of dispelling her worries. "If you will accept our offer, my husband shall officially visit you soon with a notary. You may work out some details there, but in terms of money, it isn't a problem at all."

Because of my current status, I was visiting this house under the guise of being called for tea by a relative of the Karelias. If my uncle accepted our offer, he would create another opportunity that would allow my husband to greet him.

"My husband has been worried about something more than the money," I continued. "Your youngest granddaughter, Lady Alice, will debut at the Queen's Flower Garden Banquet next spring, won't she?"

“My goodness! You remembered that?” my aunt gasped.

“Of course. And during such a blessed, special occasion for Lady Alice, my husband didn’t want the relatives to bicker about money. He finds it better to resolve those matters at once.”

“I see... I’m very grateful,” Uncle Kaizert said, his stern expression gone. He stroked his mustache with relief.

“And my husband has provided some celebratory gifts for Lady Alice,” I said, turning toward Coldola. “Could you bring the items to me?”

“Of course,” Coldola replied, elegantly lining a few boxes of gifts on the table. “I believe a unique ribbon was revealed during the third princess’s engagement party. The same craftsman created this ribbon.”

“Oh my!” my aunt gasped, her eyes glittering with joy. “This is the ribbon that’s been all the rage recently. It’s silk with unique embroidery. It has been quite popular in aristocratic society, but no one knew where it came from. I’m so happy!”

As my aunt proceeded to ask numerous questions, Coldola answered them expertly. I was glad that we were able to bring back some good results.



ABOUT an hour later, we returned to our carriage. Once the wheels started to clatter over the cobblestone, Coldola sighed and undid the buttons on her jacket, slumping her shoulders.

“Thank you for your hard work today, Coldola,” I said. “As always, I’m impressed by your composure.”

“I wondered why you called for me,” Coldola said, checking her makeup in the mirror before grinning. “I see why now. You wanted me to naturally include the name of the Stock Trading Company into the conversation to promote our company.”

I nodded. “That’s right. Had I brought a man from the company with me, I would only cause unnecessary rumors. But with you, you can introduce Lucas’s company without bringing about any malicious gossip. Since the wife generally

manages household affairs, it's quite reassuring to have a female employee that wives can easily meet with. And it's much more convincing for an expert like you to provide explanations instead of an amateur like myself."

"And you can appeal that women are working hard at his company, clearing our president's name of any ill rumors."

"This time, I got to arrange for my uncle—Count Klaus—to meet with my husband, and you explained that ribbon very well. This meeting was a success, thanks to you. I cannot thank you enough."

"I haven't done anything."

"Because you were with me, I felt more at ease and acted as relaxed as I've been in Solalitika."

When I expressed my gratitude to Coldola, she widened her eyes and looked a little angry.

"D-Don't try to woo me too," she muttered under her breath.



AND so, I visited a different manor every day, offering gifts of apology or celebration to the opposite party. By meeting and socializing with each aristocrat face-to-face, I worked to quell the shameful rumors of Lucas being a "suspicious nouveau riche baron" and tried to glean any information on what was occurring in high society. Depending on the situation, Coldola would even close a few business deals.

"Yeah... You *are* that president's wife, all right," Coldola said with a meaningful sigh while undoing the buttons on her jacket.

After our last visit, we sat in a private room of a café to take a short break. When I traveled with Coldola, dressed in manly attire, it felt like I was on a date with her.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Exactly what I said," she replied, gazing at me in awe. "You call yourself 'air,' but you're *very* well-connected and skilled at providing gifts that each party would like. You're exactly the kind of wife that our president desires most."

“You’re praising me too much. My knowledge of products comes from my husband and employees like you. And since he graciously supported my family without caring about the expenses, I’d like to at least make all that money back in the future. As the former daughter of a marquess, I’m just doing what I can.”

I took a sip of my tea. Every person I met couldn’t hide their curiosity about Lucas, and I couldn’t fault them for that. In a sense, I was an important source of information to them so they could understand what these mysterious new aristocrats were about.

“For better or worse, the fact that you acted like a wallflower and strived not to stand out negatively worked in our favor this time,” Coldola said. “I don’t know how you used to be, madam, but every person seems stunned by you. Their reactions are shocking.”

I couldn’t deny her claims. Many didn’t recognize who I was for a moment. No one had seemed interested in my appearances before, so I felt troubled every time the aristocrats expressed their astonishment over how I’d changed.

“Anybody could look decent with the right clothes,” I replied.

“Heh. It’s so fun when the aristocrats look so surprised when they see you, madam. I think a lot of men are vexed that they didn’t call on you sooner.”

“That can’t be so...”

“I’m tired of hearing your modesty. Ah, by the way...”

“Yes?”

Coldola recrossed her legs and glared at me like a cat who’d found a new fun toy to play with. “Madam, did something happen with the president?” she asked.

“L-Like what?” I asked, placing my hand over my chest to cover my secrets as my heart thumped.

Coldola grinned. “Every time he’s mentioned, you start stroking your hand, so I just made my own deductions, I guess.”

I jolted in shock and looked down, noticing that I was touching my ring finger as we spoke. My cheeks warmed, and I didn’t know where to look.

“U-Um...” I stammered, unable to find the words.

Coldola gave a hearty laugh. “Well, I won’t pry. I can tell by your behavior that something *did* happen, indeed,” she concluded and happily said, “Now I’ve got a new thing to tease him about.”

I’m sorry, Lucas. If you get teased later, it’s my fault.





ONCE I finished doing the high society social rounds, I parted ways with Coldola within the large Karelia manor. She headed for the building made for guests while I had the carriage brought to the entrance of the main residence.

Leik was waiting for me there. *If he's here, that means...*

He approached me and slightly bent down, bringing his lips to my ear. "Your father seems to be in a terrible mood. I suppose he's lost quite a bit with his gambling."

"Did you learn which gambling house he frequents?" I asked.

Leik nodded confidently, and I nodded back.

"Thank you," I said. "First, I must calm him down."

I found my father right away; he was lying in the hall near the entrance, passed out from ingesting too much liquor.

"Father..."

I'd been greeting well-mannered, tidy aristocrats every day, a far cry from my inebriated father in front of me. The difference was dizzying. He was my only biological parent remaining within this world, and yet he'd declined so much.

"Please wake up, Father," I said, shaking him awake. "I told you so many times to abstain from heavy drinking."

"Shut up! Silence!" he roared, swinging his arm around.

Just when I thought that he was about to hit me, I felt my body float back; Leik had moved in to protect me. My father fell onto the ground by the force of his empty swing.

"Gh..." he grunted.

"Apologies," Leik said with a flick of his glossy, silver hair. He gave an uncaring apology to my father. "It is my master's orders to protect my lady."

"You cheeky man..." my father said with an annoyed click of his tongue. "A silver-haired dog is unfitting for a nouveau riche baron."

He tried to push Leik away but lacked the strength. I ordered the servants who'd rushed to my side.

"Please provide medicine for his drunkenness and some water. Could you carry him into his room?"

As I gave out my commands, my father glared at me and gave another click of his tongue. "You're just like *that* woman. You're just like Louisa, who mocked me for being a second son and marrying into her family."

"Father, what did you say?" I asked, feeling my blood run cold at his mention of my mother.

He glared and pointed a finger at me. "Marrying Louisa was the greatest mistake of my life. Because I married that impertinent woman, I was constantly in her shadow as a man who married into his wife's family. The house moved under *her* authority, *her* name, and *her* management. People pointed their fingers at me, calling me a vase, a mere decor of a master. I was always treated like air! Because that woman was too smart for her own good!"

"Father, did you always call me 'air' because..."

He gave a hollow laugh and gazed at me. It was painful to receive such a gaze from my biological father.

"You were supposed to be transparent like air, Iris. And yet, you've started to resemble that cheeky woman!"

As he continued to rattle on and bellow angrily, my stepmother appeared.

"Hey! What's going on here, dear?" she asked.

"Shut up!" my father roared. "And you! You're always smiling around that young silver-haired man! Do you like him more than me?"

My stepmother felt my father's disdainful gaze and gasped as she shook her head. "L-Leik is simply Iris's butler! It's all her fault! Do something about it!"

They both blamed me. Logically, I knew that they were pushing their problems onto me, but it hurt to have my relatives insult me without holding back. My fingertips grew cold.

"Argh, shouting hurts my head..." my father grumbled.

“Then hurry up and go to sleep!” my stepmother screeched.

With loud thumps, my father borrowed a servant’s shoulder and disappeared into his bedroom while my stepmother watched him leave wearily. She angrily walked away in a separate direction. Their bedrooms were separate, and it had been a while since the two had shared a room. When I was married off, my father had gloated he could simply have her give birth to another child.

“Those two don’t change,” Leik said behind me, shrugging his shoulders. “They’re like spoiled kids who do whatever they like toward you, my lady.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “Because I pushed keeping watch and gaining information from my stepmother all onto you, I dragged you into this mess.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I’m used to people like her. They keep up appearances, but if you peel back a layer, they’re nothing much. There are plenty of women like her.”

“Could I ask you to continue appeasing my stepmother when you find the opportunity and try to gain more information?”

“Most certainly. But I believe you should rest as well, my lady.”

“Me?”

He narrowed his beast-like eyes as though he’d seen right through me. “Indeed. You should rest for a while. At least until your hands stop trembling.”

I clenched my fingertips and nodded. “Thank you. I shall be in the gallery room, so please call for me if you need anything.”

“Do take your time.”

Leik saw me off as I took a lamp and quickly headed to the depths of the manor. He’d kindly told me about my trembling hands to make sure the other servants and my sister wouldn’t see my weak side.

“I’m a failure of a lady of the house if I have a servant notice my feelings,” I muttered. I was grateful for his consideration, but at the same time, I disliked how weak I was to insults hurled by my father and stepmother.

In the depths of the second story was a large rectangular space called a gallery room. Only a few paintings and antiques remained within the Karelia

estate.

On one side of the room were four large windows, each covered by heavy, velvet curtains. On the other side were portraits of my predecessors—the Marquess Karelias of the past, a map of the former fief of Karelia, a treasured sword, and other invaluable items. I stretched up and opened each curtain. The cold moonlight spilled into the gallery room. These items, meant to display the power and influence of the Karelias, were now enveloped in a pale blue light and greeted me like ghosts. My parents had sold off most of the items within this house, but the items engraved into House Karelia’s history remained within the gallery room and were unable to be sold.

I walked across the rug and gazed at the wall decorated with numerous portraits, big and small. My eyes fell on the largest and most prominently displayed portrait—the first Marquess Karelia. He had the same black hair and eyes as mine, served as an army general, and boasted many grand achievements during the Founding War.

“I wonder how he’d feel if he saw the current state of the Karelias,” I mumbled.

My voice sounded far too feeble for my usual self. My father’s insults and my stepmother’s shrieks had emotionally exhausted me. I bowed toward my great ancestor and rolled up a quilt against the wall. I opened the lock behind it, revealing a hidden room that sank into the wall. From there, I took out a frame that contained a certain portrait of a lady with black hair, strong facial features, and a determined gaze.

The name Louisa Karelia was written in silver ink.

“Mother...” I murmured, making sure that not a scratch was on this portrait as I quietly clutched it to my chest.

When I was a child, I’d hidden this portrait away to ensure it wouldn’t get tossed out. Because these portraits were assets of House Karelia, I’d left them behind when I’d gone off to marry.

“Mother... Your daughter is trying to crush the Karelia name you protected until your death.”

Within the frame was the austere face of my mother, her lips shut and stern eyes gazing into the distance. She was a lady and could've very well smiled, but she pursed her lips, forming a nostalgic expression as she listened to my innermost thoughts.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't protect this place. I'm sorry for being so pathetic."

My voice trembled.

I knew that the official lord of the house, my father, couldn't handle holding this house together, much less my stepmother. House Karelia's ruin was inevitable; it was simply a matter of time. The best way for the Karelias to end was if I dealt the final blow. It was my final responsibility as a woman born into this family. *I know that all too well. Yet...*

"Perhaps if I was born as a boy or was a more proper daughter, I may have been able to protect everything before this all happened..."

Once I fell into a negative mindset, I sank deeper and deeper into a downward spiral. *If only I'd been a boy who could personally succeed the title of Marquess Karelia. If only I was more adorable and lovable and was a daughter who could attract the eyes of many. If only I didn't lack charm, my father wouldn't neglect me. If only I'd managed my stepmother and sister better. If only I'd been more skilled.* So many desires welled within me, and I continued to wish for things I would never possess.

"Lucas..."

I couldn't stay brave without his steadfast gaze kindling my spirit. I realized just how much support he'd given to my heart.

"If I'm not under your light, I..."

Just then, a shadow appeared on my mother's portrait.

"Baroness Stock, the moonlight from outside puts your treasures into full view," a familiar, husky voice said.

Before my mind could even process it, my body jolted. I turned around and saw who I'd longed for outside the window—a person I'd been dying to meet.

"Lucas," I murmured. I opened the window and he gracefully slid inside. "Why

are you here?" I asked. "And you came in through the window..."

"I'm not Lucas. I'm Dazzle. Or at least until moments ago, I was."

Donned in a worn jacket and a hat, a pair of glasses obscured my husband's bright eyes. He tilted my chin up toward him.

"I'm in disguise. You know, since it'd be a pain if people constantly pinned me as the 'cheeky nouveau riche kid' as I'm going about my business. I finished some work nearby and wanted to see your face, so here I am," he said.

The fingers that touched my chin smelled faintly of smoke. It was a nostalgic scent; he'd often come home with this aroma after socializing at work.

"You're amazing, Lucas," I whispered.

"Hm?"

"Just when I feel like my heart is about to break, you appear."

His amber eyes gazed down at me as he blinked. "Did something unpleasant happen again?"

"A little."

"I see."

He gently took the portrait of my mother from my arms and returned it to the shelf. Then, as though to console me, he brought me close to him.

"I might be a little sweaty, but endure it for me," he said.

I shook my head as I entrusted my body to his chest. "Endure? Not at all. I feel at ease. It truly makes me feel like you're with me."

"As always, you're good at wooing me."

When I closed my eyes and snuggled up to him, his warm hand brushed against my ears and stroked my hair. He took longer, gentle strokes than usual, possibly because my hair wasn't in a bun. My heart, frozen in pain, slowly warmed again, and my weak spirit dissipated in an instant.

I looked up at him in a daze. Illuminated by the moonlight, Lucas squinted and smiled.



Without thinking, I told him my true thoughts. "Lucas, you're like my light."

"Your light?"

"Because you light me up, I'm no longer air but a rainbow. Ever since I returned to the royal capital, I feel that so much."

"True to your name, you're an iris. You've always glimmered brightly. The people you've met until now simply didn't care to look up at the skies."

"But you're the one who brought me out of my shell. Without you, I would've stayed air."

"You really must've been about to shatter, from the looks of it."

"I was. But now that you're here, I'm fine."

He clicked his tongue as the hands that stroked my hair moved to my shoulders, hugging me tight.

"Damn it. If it wasn't here and now..." he mumbled.

"Lucas?" I asked, looking up at him.

His cheeks flushed as he frowned and locked eyes with me. He seemed a little angry or displeased, but oddly enough, it wasn't scary.

"I would've liked to stay with you until morning," he said.

"I don't mind. We can stay here right now, like this," I answered.

I glanced around the room lit by the moon. There wasn't a fireplace, and it was a little cold, but if we had a blanket and stuck close together, I was sure we could sleep. I felt excited by the prospect of this fresh experience, but Lucas narrowed his eyes.

"You don't get it, do you?" he said, sounding a touch tired. "In front of your ancestors, the past Karelias? I feel like I'd get cursed with a, 'What do you think you're doing to my descendant?'"

"Do you think so?" I asked.

"I'd rather save it for next time. It'll give me the energy to keep working."

He gave me a childlike smile and kissed me below my eye.

“Next time we meet, it’ll be at the party,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied with a nod.

I placed a hand over my eye. Lucas ran his fingers through my hair one last time before he headed for the window. While he headed out into the garden, I rushed toward him.

“Lucas,” I called out.

“Hm?”

As he turned around, I stretched out and hugged him tightly, making sure his warmth would stay in my arms.

“This is...er...a good luck charm, so we may safely meet at the party,” I stammered.

“Tch, now I won’t be able to leave,” Lucas muttered, his face nearing mine.

I shuddered at his strong gaze and closed my eyes. My neck stung as though he’d bit me, and I placed my hand against the sweet sting. He gave a mischievous grin.

“You should be careful, too, Iris. Of bad men, that is.”

He winked with a gaze brighter than the moonlight and gracefully disappeared from the window.



WHEN I opened the door to leave the gallery room, I found Kiki hugging her knees on the floor in the corridor. She jumped up upon seeing me. I realized why she’d been waiting there.

“Leik must’ve asked you to wait for me,” I said, smiling in gratitude. “Thank you.”

She let out a giggle and smiled. “I’m glad. You’re back to your usual self, Lady Iris.”

“I’m sorry to make you worry. Thank you.”

Upon seeing my elated expression, she looked at me perplexed. “Lady Iris, your face is flushed. Do you perhaps have a fever?”

“Huh? N-No, nothing like that at all!”

I tried to walk ahead of her, but my feet were unsteady, and I almost tripped on the carpet.

“Lady Iris! Ah, I knew it! You must be ill!” Kiki hastily called out, “Someone! Please help me with Her Ladyship!”

“K-Kiki, I’m fine. I really am...”

She took my hand and guided my staggering and dazed body back to my room. I couldn’t refuse her.



AS I walked toward the dining area through the cold corridor, I noticed the golden branches of the acacia reaching for the skies. When I spent my days in this manor, I felt the footsteps of autumn approaching, and memories of the manor in Solalitika filled my mind. The autumn flowers must’ve been in full bloom by now, and the rosehips that Tom had been lovingly growing were surely brimming with fruit. When I reached the dining area, an unusual slew of faces greeted me: my pale-faced father, my stepmother who, as usual, refused to meet my gaze, and Airia, who was noisily slurping her soup.

I locked eyes with the maids that had been serving them. Judging by the looks on their faces, it seemed to be rather sudden for them as well. Until yesterday, my family had purposefully shifted their dining hours so they wouldn’t eat with me. My father suddenly changed his expression upon seeing me and made his thoughts clear.

“Uh, Iris,” he said. “I said too much yesterday. Sorry.”

“Father...” I replied.

“Um, so, don’t get angry and go home, all right? The fate of House Karelia’s reputation depends on you.”

I suppressed my feelings, my voice devoid of all emotions. “That was my plan from the start.”

My father gave a smile of relief. “I-I see.”

As he resumed his meal, I felt empty inside at my father’s vulgarity and

shallow-mindedness. At the same time, I remembered my childhood. When my mother, Louisa Karelia, was still alive at least, my father did not lack total restraint and refrained from indulging in immorality. My father had completely fallen apart after my mother passed, but he eventually welcomed my stepmother and younger sister. I was happy to see him brimming with energy once more with their addition to the family, no matter the position it put me in.

“Lady Iris, your tea,” Kiki said.

“Thank you,” I replied, bringing the cup to my lips. I glanced at my father, who was eating a plate of eggs. “Father, you’ve always liked to eat your eggs like that,” I said, reminiscing about the past and almost smiling.

But my father immediately grew grumpy and glared at me. “I didn’t think you’d gotten so great as to order me on how to eat my eggs,” he spat.

“I didn’t mean it that way...”

“You make me sick. Leave me alone.” My father tossed aside his cutlery with a loud clang and stormed out of the room.

“Ah...” I murmured.

My stepmother placed her elbows on the table and started wrapping a piece of bacon around her eating utensil. “Ugh, why are you making him angry again?” she asked wearily. “You just need to act like air and bring in the money, girl. You’ve always been terrible at choosing your words.”

I quietly stared at what remained of my father’s food and bit my lip. When I was a child, my father had noticed me staring at his plate of eggs. “Want half?” he’d offered, cutting up the food and giving it to me. That moment made me so happy, and I simply wanted to tell him about the joyful memories of my childhood.

“You’re so not cute, Sister,” Airia said with a grin. “You better be careful so the nouveau riche doesn’t toss you aside.”

My eyes fell on an orange in a fruit bowl on the table. The vibrant color reminded me of his eyes. I remembered touching him the night before and how comforting it was to be in his arms.

“Sister?” Airia asked, her eyes narrowing quizzically.

I gasped and snapped back to my senses. “I-It’s nothing.” I pressed my hands against my warm cheeks and tried to shake everything off as I faced my breakfast.

“You’re so weird,” Airia said, seemingly giving up on having a conversation with me. She proceeded to push the vegetables she disliked to the side of her plate.



“**MY** lady, we’ve got a problem!” A maid rushed over to me as I finished my breakfast. Her name was Ray, and her strong Solalitikan accent was a part of her charm. She had a panicked expression. “I just received a letter for you,” she said.

I understood her unique intonation and received the letter. “A letter? This must be different from the one I received in my room this early morning.”

“It is. It was suddenly delivered while I was cleaning the entrance.”

As a general rule, any letters delivered to the manor were brought to me first thing in the morning. I read through them as I tidied myself and would adjust my daily schedule if needed. It also allowed me to tell my servants about my change of plans and shift their duties. However, the letter I’d just received wasn’t mailed and had been delivered directly to our manor. The sealing wax on the envelope hadn’t fully hardened yet.

“How unusual. Why was there a need to be in such a hurry?” I wondered.

But when I saw the familiar seal on the letter, my heart gave a dreadful thud. In the past, I’d been relieved when I received a letter from *him*, knowing that I hadn’t been forgotten.

“Mikhail Streltsy...” I read. It felt like decades since his name tumbled off my lips. Ray gasped in shock.

“Isn’t he your former fiancé who horribly canceled your engagement?” she asked.

Why did he send me a letter? After all these years? Why? As memories

flooded my mind, the blood drained from my face.

“My lady?” Ray asked.

“I’m fine,” I finally replied, snapping back to reality.

If I looked anxious, I would make my maid needlessly worry. I nodded my head at the kind Ray and opened the letter, my hands almost trembling. On the snow-white paper were words written in familiar handwriting, inviting me to tea.

“‘To deepen our future relationship with the house of Baron Stock, I’d like for you to attend the tea party that my mother is hosting. I apologize for the sudden invitation, but my mother eagerly waits for you,’” I read. “I see...”

“What shall we do?” Ray asked. “It sounds a little ominous.”

“Well...” I started, glancing down at the letter. “This is an invitation that I must accept.”

“Huh? But he’s your former fiancé! It’s such a sudden invitation as well; he underestimates you, my lady.”

“Look. This letter is written in a manner forbidding me from declining.”

Ray sounded confused, so I stretched out the paper and pointed to the words. I taught all the maids in the manor to write and read simple words enough to understand letters. I took this as a teaching opportunity and placed my finger on the words to explain.

“The marquess’s son is the one inviting me, but the host is the mistress of the household, his mother, Marchioness Streltsy,” I said. “And he’s also properly implied that this is an afternoon tea party, a social act that ladies normally do without a problem.”

“Indeed...”

“In other words, while this invitation may seem rude, a baroness must attend such events. Or else, I shall be rude toward the marchioness.”

“How troublesome...”

“And this phrase, ‘to deepen our future relationship.’ At face value, this could

simply be a request to maintain ties with our house, but there's a hidden meaning in these words this time."

Ray knitted her brows and tried to think about this meaning. "Um, does it mean, 'if you don't go, you better know what'll happen to you in high society in the future,' or the like?"

"Correct," I replied. "He's implying the future relationship between my husband and the Streltsys."

"Wow, he's horrid!"

"And I believe..."

Mikhail's dark accusation flashed across my mind. A streak of silver hair flashed by the corner of my eye as the letter was plucked right out of my hands.

"Leik," I said.

The bright morning rays made his silver eyelashes shimmer as he narrowed his eyes. He seemed to possess a white glow as he stood there, his beauty both stunning and otherworldly. The butler then made some puzzling gestures with his hands and smiled.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "Who shall we bring to bust 'em wide open?"

"B-Bust?" I stammered.

"C'mon, Leik, my lady won't understand that phrase. And your hands are moving vulgarly," Ray said wearily, her eyes half-closed.

Leik winked and tried to play it off. "Ah, pardon me. I suppose I'm letting my hometown habits show."

"Nah, I getcha, though," Ray said. "You better believe I won't forgive *anyone* who underestimates my lady."

I didn't quite understand what they were saying, but it was clear that they were angry on my behalf.

"Now then," Leik said. "Who shall we bring to this tea party to start our declaration of war, my lady?"

"I-Indeed," I replied, placing a hand on my chin. "I suppose a capable

manservant is necessary.”

Just then, I heard someone jogging across the hall. Airia barged in on our conversation.

“Hey, wasn’t that horse from Lord Mikhail’s manor?” she asked. “What did he want?!”

“You’ve got good eyes,” I said in awe. I handed the letter to her. “I suppose I shouldn’t keep this a secret from you.”

She yanked the paper from my hands and read it through before she showed an expression of shock.

“Why are *you* being invited?! I don’t understand!” she cried.

“I feel the same,” I replied.

“Then I’ll go too! I won’t hear any complaints! I can, can’t I?!”

“I suppose. Indeed, it shall be a lot more reassuring if you’re with me.”

I felt a little relieved to receive unexpected support. My sister was Mikhail Streltsy’s official fiancée, and there was nothing odd about her attending this tea party. In terms of rank, she was above me since she was the unmarried daughter of Marquess Karelia. If she was by my side, I could utilize her rank to get me out of possibly sticky situations.

“Leik, could I ask you to change my afternoon schedule?” I requested. “As for footmen, I’d like Seino and Toggio since they look quite powerful. As for a maid, I’ll have Kiki remain at the manor. In exchange...”

“Lady Iris,” a voice called out to me.

I only knew one person who spoke to me in that fashion. I turned around and saw Kiki, her expression serious as she gazed up at me, her fists clenched. She gave a stiff, deep bow.

“Please. Take me with you,” she implored.

“Kiki, this is not a good person for you to be around. Please don’t push yourself,” I answered.

“I *must* be the one to go. I’m begging you.” Her voice was trembling, but

when she raised her head, her piercing, firm gaze was determined like never before.

“My lady, I’d also like to ask for you to allow Kiki to join you,” Leik said.

After I thought for a moment, I understood the implications and stood tall.

“Very well, Kiki,” I said solemnly. “This must be your resolve.”

“Yes,” she replied.

And so, we hurriedly made our preparations for the afternoon.



UNDER the chilly, cloudy skies, the carriage rolled down the path I knew so well. When I entered the manor through the gates, the one who greeted me wasn’t the lady of the house but my former fiancé, Mikhail Streltsy.

“It’s been a while, Iris,” he said.

His clear voice and long, blond hair hadn’t changed. It felt like I was in a nightmare. *I never expected him to call my name again.* I summoned my courage to hold my head high and greet him.

“I thank you for inviting me, son of Marquess Streltsy.”

“Stiff as usual, aren’t you?” he said. “Can’t you call me ‘Mikhail’ like before?”

As I fell silent, Airia leaped out next to me.

“Lord Mikhail! I’ve been wanting to meet you ever so terribly!” she cried. “Why don’t we hurry along and head inside? I’ve even got us a cake as a gift.”

When Airia threw her arms around him, Mikhail looked at her with cold eyes before he broke out into a gentle smile.

“I don’t think I invited you,” he said. “Did you have too much time on your hands?”

“B-But I’m your fiancée,” Airia whined. “It’s not fair for only my sister to attend this party.”

“I see. You’ve thought quite a bit about this. How admirable.”

Mikhail stroked Airia’s head while he offered me a faint smile. His gaze caused

a shiver to run down my back, but I tried my best to act composed.

“This may be Marchioness Streltsy’s tea party, but a married woman such as myself couldn’t possibly attend while leaving your fiancée behind,” I replied.

“Ah, I forgot. You’re a baroness now, aren’t you, Iris?” he said.

Every time he called my name, an inexplicable sense of discomfort gripped me. Was I just imagining things? Was he always a man who would give such a cold, emotionless smile? Perhaps my view of him had changed after I left since I now knew about his suspicious acts as a part of the first prince’s faction.

“Quite so,” I replied. “I’d appreciate it if you refrained from calling my first name.”

“You’re so unfriendly,” he replied. “Well, no matter. Come along, you two. It’s not appropriate to remain standing in the hallway. It’s rude to both the newly wedded baroness and my dear fiancée.”

“Lord Mikhail, I...” Airia started.

“I’ll hear you out, so come with me,” Mikhail said.

The intimate couple proceeded deep inside the manor. Before I followed them, I glanced back at the servants I’d brought with me: Leik, blond-haired Seino, Toggio with tied, black hair, and Kiki, who looked quite nervous. They lined up behind me and gave a firm nod.

“We’re currently in the enemy stronghold,” I told them. “I’m relying on each and every one of you.”

Today’s tea party would be anything but a casual affair.



WE were guided to a familiar room. This was where Mikhail had canceled our engagement. Just like that day, the three of us returned to this room, though our situation was completely different.

Porcelain clattered atop a wagon as the maids prepared the tea set on a low table. I was accustomed to the elegant, white teacups boasting their history and the cutlery embossed with gold. The simple yet traditional snacks for tea and the colorful assortment of jams hadn’t changed. Marchioness Streltsy preferred

this style. The large Mont Blanc dessert must've been reserved for my younger sister as only one appeared in front of her while she sat by Mikhail's side.

"Since my mother will come a bit later, why don't we enjoy ourselves first?" Mikhail suggested.

"I understand," I replied.

I was bothered by the young maid who awkwardly tried her best to serve us. The servants of the Streltys were known to never show themselves in public. It was almost unheard of to see them out and about like this, but the servant who had served me as a guest was a girl younger than Airia. That was rather unusual. Mikhail elegantly sipped his tea with Airia close at his side. I sat on a sofa across from them.

"The cream on top of this Mont Blanc is curly and golden like my hair," Airia squealed. "Isn't it beautiful? Do have a bite, Lord Mikhail."

"You can eat, Airia," he replied. "I'm more curious about something cold than sweet right now."

"Cold? Should we have iced tea prepared?" she asked, her head tilted.

"Oh, the cold object is already prepared." He talked sweetly to my sister while peering at me with a smile. "You can just eat your cake and sit there like a pretty doll."

He had one arm wrapped around Airia's waist and was as gentle with her as before, but he didn't even glance her way—his eyes fixed on me to an unusual extent. In contrast, it looked as though Airia was desperately trying to win his attention.

He intently observed my every move. I felt like prey being devoured by a snake. He had always been cold to me, even when I was his fiancée. It was a political marriage, where I was a plain, invisible pawn while he was a young, beautiful nobleman popular within high society. Our house names aside, there was a world of difference between our standings. I had never been *stared* at by him before.

"Speaking of, Iris," Mikhail said, calling me by my name as usual. I was reluctant to answer him, but I held his gaze as his lips curled into a smile. "I

heard that you've formed a mariage blanc with your husband. You must be very lonely."

"Not at all. He treats me so well that I feel I hardly deserve him. Every day is blissful and fun for me," I replied.

"I see. I always imagined that you wouldn't be able to endure marrying a former commoner and a nouveau riche at that, but it does seem like you're being treated well."

"Indeed."

Supposedly, this was a normal tea party to enjoy some conversation, but I couldn't form my words well. He kept scrutinizing me. Every word out of his mouth sounded meaningful, and I couldn't quite grasp the pace of this exchange. I tried to calm myself down, placing a hand over the ribbon on my collar as I took deep breaths. *I'll be fine. I've got trustworthy people by my side.*

"How are you faring with Airia recently?" I asked. "I had a brief exchange with the marchioness on proper procedures."

"We don't need to talk about my fiancée, whom I can meet anytime. I want to hear more about you, Iris," he replied.

"Oh, Lord Mikhail! We get along so well, and indeed, we can meet whenever we wish," Airia said. "But I feel lonely when you talk with my sister for so long."

"Ah, Airia, don't say that," he said sweetly.

"I'm actually making a new dress! You see, I—"

Mikhail conversed with my sister, but his eyes arched up as he stared at me. I felt a terrifying chill when he smiled, but I couldn't understand why I was so revolted by him. I did my best to reject his constant staring. Then, a loud clatter sounded outside. A Streltsy servant entered the room and rushed over to us.

"We've got a problem! The Karelia's horses are running amok! Could we please beg for some aid?" the servant asked, looking at the three men I'd brought with me.

Seino and Toggio hesitated for a few seconds.

"Please! If we don't hurry, the horses will enter our manor!" the servant

cried.

“Very well,” I finally said. “Please help them outside.”

My two footmen grimly left.

“Are you not going with them?” Mikhail asked my butler as he recrossed his legs.

Leik bowed. “As you can see, I’m not too confident in my strength. And my lord has told me to never leave my lady’s side.”

“I see. You’re quite the well-behaved dog.” Mikhail laughed through his nose as the word “dog” left his lips, as though he knew Leik’s true identity. The two men glared at each other.

“Hey, Lord Mikhail! Are you listening?!” Airia cried.

She grabbed onto his arm and puffed out her cheeks. Mikhail softened the deadly aura he gave off and crafted a gentle smile.

“I’m sorry. Let’s listen to what you have to say,” he said.

“Heh heh! So the cake we’ll provide at the party will be...” she started again, one-sidedly chattering away as time ticked by.

The steam rising from the tea had dissipated as our drinks grew cold. The long hand of the pocket watch had indicated that over thirty minutes had passed, but neither Seino nor Toggio showed any signs of returning. I impatiently glanced at the door when Mikhail interjected while Airia was talking.

“Iris, you haven’t taken even a sip of tea since you’ve come here,” he noted. “Are you not thirsty, perhaps?”

“I would like to drink after I meet the marchioness,” I replied. “Is she still running late?”

“My mother won’t come.”

“What?”

I quickly turned to meet his gaze when, unbeknownst to Airia, I saw Mikhail tilt the teapot. It was a purposeful maneuver.

“Eek!” Airia cried. Her face turned pale as a liquid darker than any tea I’ve

ever seen spilled onto her clothes. “No way! Argh! This is my favorite dress!”

“Well, that’s not good,” Mikhail said. “You should go wash yourself before it stains your dress.”

He was the one who’d caused the spill, but he gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders and glanced at a maid who was waiting. She bowed her head and opened the door.

“This way, Lady Airia,” the maid said, swiftly leading my sister deeper into the manor.

“Do you have another dress for her?” Mikhail asked, looking at me.

“Yes,” I replied. “It’s prepared for her in the carriage.”

“Then let’s have her change. Can your maid with braided hair help Airia out? It’s not a problem, I hope.”

Kiki’s shoulders jolted.

“She’s...” I started, trying to refuse.

“Lady Iris, I shall be fine,” Kiki replied, cutting me off. “I’m quite worried about Lady Airia, so I shall go with her.”

Her dark green eyes were brimming with determination as she gave a firm nod—it was apparent she was quite worried for my younger sister.

“Then I’ll entrust her to you,” I replied, nodding reluctantly.

I was set on not leaving Kiki alone here. I didn’t want her to fight through this all by herself.

“My lady,” Leik whispered, leaning in to whisper to me. He stood behind me while I sat on the sofa. “If you can buy some time, I’ll take care of everything myself.”

I couldn’t help but turn toward Leik. His golden eyes were right next to me. I thought for a few seconds before I finally nodded.

“Then I’ll leave it to you,” I said.

“Your wish is my command,” Leik replied before he turned to my maid and spoke in a cheery tone. “Kiki, I’ll go along with you.”

He patted her shoulders as he swiftly walked ahead.

Kiki widened her eyes in shock. “What?! Leik?!”

“Come now,” he replied, pushing her back. “I’m worried about Seino and Toggio, too, so let’s finish this in a jiffy.”

“Huh? Wait, but, er...”

The two left the room. The doors then closed. As silence settled in, I heard a clack, indicating that the room was being locked. I knew it was coming, but I still couldn’t suppress my blood from running cold. I swallowed nervously as Mikhail faced me. He elegantly crossed his legs and tore a scone in half.

“What a coincidence,” he said. “We’re all alone together.” He took a large bite, licking his fingers that were sticky with honey as he glanced at me.

“Coincidence?” I asked. “Please don’t feign ignorance. You planned this from the start.”

The horse outside was an excuse to lure my manservants out. The dress had been sullied to chase out Kiki and Airia. I glared at him, but he only chuckled.

“I was wondering how I could chase away that *dog* of yours, but I never expected him to be such a useless cur.”

“When will Marchioness Streltsy arrive?” I asked.

“You’re being persistent. My mother isn’t coming. She’s at the royal palace to create invitations and prepare for the engagement announcement. She’ll be back late, perhaps even at night.” His tenacious, violet gaze pierced through me as my blood froze. “I didn’t think you’d look this inviting under a man other than myself,” Mikhail said slowly.

“*Another* man? I’m Lucas Stock’s wife, not yours,” I replied.

“But you’ve gotten beautiful. What did that lowly man do to you to make you look this way? You were always the personification of mourning, always gloomy. You even acted cold toward me, your fiancé.”

“Cold? Nothing of the sort.”

“You did.” The corners of his mouth curled upward. “You always had a

composed gaze and closed off your heart to others. You never flirted with me like other women do, and you always rejected my advances when I tried to touch your hips. What are these actions if not cold? You should've obediently entrusted your body to me like other women have."

"Even with my fiancé, an aristocratic woman has to remain chaste."

"I don't deny that. You were a boring woman who could only be a tool for a political marriage. I didn't think you would turn into such a beautiful woman." Mikhail stood up from the sofa and slowly inched toward me. "I only thought of you as a Karelia before, but it seems I can have some fun."

I instinctively jolted. I clutched the armrest of the sofa and glared back at him.

"Please unlock the doors. I'm the wife of Lucas Stock. I mustn't stay alone with you for much longer," I said.

He turned creepily expressionless and tried to get on top of me as I turned around to scream. However, he grabbed my arm and pinned me onto the sofa, placing his other hand over my mouth.

"Mmph! Mmph!" I shouted, trying to fight back.

"This is *my* manor. It doesn't matter how much you fight back; no one will come to save you. Neither those reliable men nor your maid will come for you," Mikhail whispered, his voice filled with excitement. He undid the ribbon on my blouse. "It's your fault, you know. You were turned into a woman by a lowly man."

I shuddered, about to cry, as he stuck his hand down my blouse. His hands felt so different from Lucas's, and my body recoiled in disgust. I bit my lip and realized I was losing sight of the matter due to fear. I was supposed to buy time. No matter how much I screamed or fought back, I couldn't possibly overpower a man like Mikhail. To protect Kiki and Airia, Leik trusted me and left the room. He would protect them; all I had to do was buy time until his return. I had to defend myself until then. *I must think about what I can do!* Just then...

"What...is this?" Mikhail said, his face drenched in sweat.

He'd only pulled my collar back, but I immediately noticed the object of his gaze—the mark left by the sweet pain and warm lips of Lucas that night.

“A woman like you... To a lowly man like him...” Mikhail muttered.

His lustful gaze transformed as he looked down at me, his lips trembling. It was an opportunity that I couldn't let pass.

“Lord Mikhail,” I said, breathing deeply and taking care to avoid provoking him. “Please tell me what your true goal is. You're not genuinely planning on hurting our family, are you? That can't be your aim.”

Even I was surprised at how calm I sounded while still pressed down underneath him. Mikhail widened his eyes before he furrowed his brows, creating wrinkles on his face as he looked pained.

“Are you not frustrated?” he asked. “Those lowly women dominate House Karelia.”

“Are you talking about my stepmother and sister?” I asked, blinking in astonishment at his words.

He rambled on as though he were muttering to himself. “After I tossed you aside and a lowly woman stole your fiancé, I expected you to cling on to me. I expected you to painfully understand just how humiliating it was to hit rock bottom as an aristocrat and grow exhausted by it all. Yet, you were immediately sold off...and to some nobody to boot! And he made you into a woman!”

I couldn't believe my ears as I looked up at him. A torrent of words spilled out of his mouth.

“I didn't want to be engaged to Airia, that vulgar, idiotic woman!” he shouted.

“What?” I gasped.

“Airia's just in the way! I could take care of her however I wish if she became my fiancée. However, that worthless man who married into his wife's esteemed household! Has he no shame?! How could Marquess Karelia sell you—your *bloodline*—to some random nouveau riche?! Is he not ashamed of himself as an aristocrat?!”

“My marriage with Lucas wasn't part of your plan.”

The moment the words left my lips, he grabbed my jaw, his face contorting with rage.

“You call that *lowly* man’s name so casually,” he growled. “Did you let that man dye you into his own colors?!”

“P-Please! Let go! It hurts!” I cried.

Mikhail’s messy hair shook as he roared in fury. “It’s your fault for calling that man by his name!”

“I’m sorry. I won’t call his name anymore!” I apologized until he finally released my jaw from his grasp. He huffed angrily, trying to calm his outrage as he pushed his hair back.

“Do you not understand, Iris?” he asked. “You may be a boring, invisible woman, but you’ve got the noble Karelia blood flowing through your veins. I was livid when I first heard you’d been sold off to a nouveau riche, but I soon realized it was a perfect opportunity for me. I wouldn’t have minded if you understood just how harmful and vulgar new aristocrats are and realized just how precious your bloodline is. Once I get rid of that harlot and her foolish daughter that undermines House Karelia, I wouldn’t mind taking you back once more. And yet!”

“What...are you planning on doing to my stepmother and sister?” I asked.

“Wouldn’t *you* be happy if you got to scoff at your younger sister and that harlot as they got what they deserved? I simply want to offer my assistance. Once your house is clean of those impurities, you can return home. And then, I planned on marrying you. That was what I wanted.”

Suddenly, the fuming Mikhail ripped open my blouse with both of his hands, trying to expose my skin.

“Tch, such unappealing lingerie...” he muttered.

My undergarments were filled with wires and required several maids to help me wear them. It covered most of my body and was stab-proof. Still, I was against having my undergarments revealed and used both hands to hide my body, but he climbed on top of me with his knees and proceeded to pin down both of my arms.

Mikhail bit his lip in frustration as he stared down at me with bloodshot eyes.

“Ah, you’ve been so defiled...” He shook his head. “Whatever happened to you? You can’t even wear your evening gown with that filthy mark on your skin. Or is that what that man wants? You’ve been so sullied by that man and forced to wear clothes that remind me of a chastity belt. You’re...”

He stroked my neck. I felt lightheaded and happy when Lucas touched me, but *these* hands felt like a snake waiting to capture its prey. I didn’t want to be touched, but couldn’t fight back. My impatience filled with humiliation and rage. I was tempted to shout, but now wasn’t the time to offer what little resistance I could. *I must fulfill my role. I must bring back results that only I can produce.*

“Lord Mikhail, please tell me what your true goal is,” I said again, acting as calmly as I could and staring into his dull eyes. I smiled and gently enveloped my hands over his, feigning understanding of his situation. “You aim to protect the society of old aristocrats, their bloodline, and to maintain order. And...you’re friendly with the first prince, are you not?”

“Ah, so you’re aware of His Highness’s noble ideals as well?” He happily squinted his purple eyes, clouded by greed. He was quick to anger and smile; fearing his unstable emotions, I gave a small nod.

“I have some knowledge of it,” I replied.

“That’s right,” he said with delight. “The first prince wishes for a resurgence of old aristocrats such as myself and you. Once we chase out your lowly stepmother and sister and have you return to House Karelia, he’ll surely lend you his aid in revitalizing your household. And then I shall marry you and have you birth my children.”

He gazed down at my clothed stomach as he licked his lips excitedly. I feared him so much, and I wished I never knew he could make such a terrifying expression.

“Your late mother, Lady Louisa, should also be happy about our union,” Mikhail said. “Ah, I see now. You’re enduring all this humiliation for the resurgence of old aristocratic society. You’re a noblewoman despite being that lowly man’s wife.”

“May I ask one question?”

He'd clearly calmed down. I gently pushed his hands away and closed my collar, but Mikhail didn't stop me.

"Sure. I can tell you anything," he replied.

"If this all goes as you wish, and you chase my stepmother and younger sister from House Karelia, and I return to my household where I become your fiancée and eventually your wife, what becomes of Lucas Stock?"

"News about unnecessary new aristocrats like him won't taint the ears of a woman of high rank such as yourself."

"I see."

I did my best to prevent goosebumps from appearing as he stroked the loose strands of hair by my ear. I sighed.

"Should you have the assistance of the first prince, I suppose my husband will seem trivial to you. I've heard that the first prince is friendly with the company that rivals the Stock Trading Firm. In that case, perhaps my husband will seem like a petty matter. I can't blame you for thinking so."

You can think that all you like, I added in my head as Mikhail, in good spirits, backed away. As I stood up from my awkward position, I sighed in relief. *Now... what else can I do?* It was then that I heard Airia's voice behind the door.

"Lord Mikhail, I'm done! Why won't this door open?!"

"That was too quick..." Mikhail murmured, widening his eyes.

It must be thanks to Leik and Kiki! I quickly backed away as he gave an angry click of his tongue.

"I see now... I thought you were being meek, but I see what you were going for," he said.

Mikhail leered as he swiftly walked up to me and yanked on my arm. I lost my balance as I fell on top of him. With a grin, he pulled me tight against him and used his other hand to undo his collar.

"Airia!" he shouted. "There's a button at the bottom that acts as the key! Hurry and open the doors and save me!"

“O-Okay!” Airia yelled back.

The doors opened with a loud clap as my sister ran inside the room.

“A-Aaahhh!” she screamed upon seeing me. “Sister! Just what are you doing?!”

From my sister’s point of view, it looked as though I’d pushed down Mikhail. *I’ve been had!* In general, women wore dresses that were difficult to move in, and it was almost impossible to push down a man and climb on top of him of her own accord. If I was trying to force myself upon him, there was no reason for the hair tied behind my head to be mussed. But, of course, my sister was unable to make such observations.

“Sister, why?! Stop it! Stop!” Airia screamed while crying, pouncing on me. “Why? Why? You’ve been living happily all by yourself, and now you’re trying to take Lord Mikhail from me?! He’s all I have!”

“Calm down, Airia,” I said. “Nothing like you’re imagining has gone on.”

“Then why? Why are you so...”

I noticed something unfamiliar on Airia’s skin. In the depths of her beautiful, low-cut attire, a faint bruise blossomed on her chest like a blue flower.

“Wait, Airia,” I said. “Since when have you had that bruise on your chest?”

“What’s it to you?!” she screeched. “Let go of me, Sister! What use is there to look at my body?!”

“Now, now, Airia,” Mikhail said, coldly looking down at her as she hit me angrily. He readjusted his collar and got up. “She’s just a little tired from living in the countryside, which she’s not used to. I’m sure she just let her emotions get the better of her. Or maybe that nouveau riche instilled her with filthy ideas.”

I suppressed my fury and impulse to slap him across the cheek and chose to glare at him.

“Oh, you’re so terrifying! What are you angry about?” he asked, laughing through his nose as he gave my sister an innocent smile. “Come now. I love *you*, my sweet. Don’t you worry. Don’t dampen your pretty face with your tears. I’ll prepare the usual herbal tea for you.”

“Lord Mikhail, you love me, don’t you? You really do, right?” Airia asked desperately, rushing to his side.

When Mikhail raised his hand to pet her head, I realized my sister had reacted oddly. *Did she just flinch?* My sister had always been innocent and naïve, and a horrible scene popped up in my head. Mikhail’s words earlier had held contempt toward my stepmother and sister. Airia, who acted so confidently when my engagement had first been canceled, was now practically begging and imploring for Mikhail’s love. Was the worst-case scenario already happening? Had—

A loud clang cut off my thoughts as a wagon had toppled over in the corridor.

“You’re kidding!” Mikhail said, suddenly bursting out of the room for some reason.

When I chased after him, I saw an unexpected sight. The tea wagon that was about to be brought into our room had been pushed to the side by a pale-faced Kiki. The shattered tableware scattered on the carpet as a bluish liquid seeped onto the ground. *Is this the herbal tea that Mikhail was talking about?*

“What are you doing, you useless maid?!” Mikhail roared with more anger than I’d ever seen. “Just how much money do you think this costs?!”

With large strides and booming insults, he approached my maid. Kiki looked terrified, but she stared at him head-on. *This is dangerous!* I decided to come in between them and outstretched my arms.

“Please, calm down!” I cried.

As I got in his way, my former fiancé widened his eyes like a ruffian. “Move, Iris!”

He quickly raised his arm, and I prepared myself to be slapped by him. Just then, a tall maid appeared behind Mikhail and grabbed his arm.

“Oh, pardon me, dear man! Oho ho! I think I see a woman’s powder on the inside of your right cuff! Hee hee!”

“What?! Who are you?!” Mikhail bellowed.

The silver-haired, smiling maid was taller than Mikhail as the servant twisted

the aristocrat's thin arm.



The maid exaggeratedly cocked their head. “Oh, dear me! What is this scent on your hands? Where did it come from?”

“Ow!” Mikhail yelled. “L-Let go of me!”

“I don’t believe this fragrance can be found in the royal capital yet. Hm? How odd! If you *were* pushed down earlier, why would this scent so heavily cover you, the victim? You surely weren’t *touching* her all over while being pushed down, were you? Dear me, mercy me, how *very* curious!” The tall maid spoke rapidly in a low tone as they placed a hand over their cheeks and looked troubled.

“Wh-Who are you?!” Mikhail stammered. “I don’t remember hiring a maid like you!”

“Of course, you don’t,” the mysterious maid replied. “The maids of this manor are all young, innocent girls... It’s as though you periodically switch them all out.”

“What?!” Mikhail gasped, his eyes growing wider with shock.

The maid’s golden gaze grew sharp. “How awful! There’s a large, venomous spider on your neck! Pardon me!”

A low thud rang through the air as the maid swiftly swung their arm down, karate-chopping Mikhail’s neck with their hand. My former fiancé couldn’t even let out a scream as his eyes rolled into his head and he fell to the ground.

“Oh dear, oh my,” the silver-haired maid said as they scooped up Mikhail. They chucked him into the drawing room and strutted inside after him. I heard fabric being ripped, a few thuds that implied they kicked Mikhail several times, and a low groan.

“Hee hee, I had the young master sleep for a short while,” the silver-haired maid said upon coming out of the room.

The servant closed the door and fiddled with the lock—it could be locked from the outside.

“Since the young master seems unwell and the lady of house won’t return for a while, perhaps we should visit again another day,” the silver-haired maid said

in their high-pitched falsetto. They helped up Kiki, who had fallen onto the ground.

“L-Leik...” I muttered.

“You were very brave. It’s all right now,” Leik, the silver-haired maid, said as he turned around and squinted his golden eyes. “I’ve had Lady Airia return to the carriage. Of course, she hasn’t taken a sip of that herbal tea.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“All right then, since we’ve got the goods, it’s about time we scatter. Pardon me!” Leik said.

“Eep!”

He gracefully carried Kiki and I under each arm back to our carriage. We had Airia’s carriage, donned with the Karelia family crest, plod ahead, and our carriage followed close behind. The rampaging horse was a lie, and the chestnut-colored horse calmly welcomed us. Seino and Toggio had been led down a different hall and were trapped inside a hidden room.

In stark contrast to the sunny and clear weather, a tense and heavy atmosphere filled the carriage. Leik oddly looked very fashionable in maid clothes, and Kiki quietly drooped her head.

“My lady, though this was a difficult plan to propose, I deeply apologize for putting you in such a dangerous situation,” Leik said, bowing his head earnestly.

“And I left you alone as well, Lady Iris. How can I ever apologize to you?” Kiki lowered her head as tears flowed down her cheeks.

I asked them to raise their heads. “You two have worked very hard. In that short time, you kept track of the horses, dressed Airia, and escaped the manor without anyone being injured.”

“But I made you go through such a horrific experience, Lady Iris,” Kiki said with a trembling voice.

“I’m fine. Lucas protected me,” I replied.

“Lord Lucas did?” She looked up at me in confusion, and I nodded.

“He did. Thanks to him, I was able to fight back against Mikhail,” I replied. “So don’t be sorry. And my husband has kept his precious servants under my watch. Then, it’s also part of my duties to protect you all. I’m relieved that we’re all able to return home safely.”

“Thank you, Lady Iris.”

“And we should prioritize organizing the information we’ve obtained from the manor,” I said.

The two servants immediately changed gears.

“I talked with Lady Airia for a few moments earlier,” Leik reported. “It seems she’s aware that her fiancé had attacked you.”

“I see...” I replied.

“It seems she’s been a victim to such an extent that she accepts the reality that the man would try to force himself on her older sister.”

“I...understand.”

Leik fell quiet after that. It must’ve been a trial to push Airia into the carriage; he was unusually sweaty.

“Lady Iris, please hear me out,” Kiki finally said. She looked as though she were about to cry at any moment, but her gaze was firm and resolute. “The aristocratic household that abused me was...House Streltsy.”

“I knew it...” I whispered.

“Yes. Your former fiancé had...” Kiki paused and shook her head. She placed a hand over her chest and held herself together. “A lot of maids experienced the same terror as I had. Even now, I believe that to be the case.”

She bravely placed her fingers on her collar. She noticed Leik had looked away and asked him to look at her as well.

“Please, Leik,” she requested. “I want you to look at the truth too.”

“If you will allow me,” Leik replied, looking unusually pained. He slowly looked at Kiki as my maid’s lips trembled and she apologized.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure something so dirty will make you recoil...”

She opened the blouse of her black maid clothes and revealed her collarbone, shoulders, and chest covered by her undergarments. The sound of the carriage wheels felt louder than before as Kiki's thin body gently moved with her breathing. A blue, rose-like bruise covered her body like a cruel tattoo. It was so large and prominent.

"It's called blue drop flower disease," Kiki said. She seemed ready to cry but wrinkled her face to form a smile. "That person's house had changed my body, Lady Iris."

I couldn't believe it—I didn't want to. There were so many reasons why I didn't want this to be true, but the bruise on Airia's chest looked exactly the same.



WE dropped Airia off at her home and headed straight for the third prince's Royal Medicinal Institution. Once Kiki had shown us her mark, she turned pale and lost consciousness.

Behind the gates was the institution, its walls hardened with white stucco. The grass for people to rest upon was well-maintained without a single dead leaf in sight. Medical personnel dressed in white coats busily walked around. It looked like a scene much different from the outside world. This facility normally treated the royal family or those related to them and conducted research. It was my first time setting foot here.

"Baroness Stock, I take it? This way, please."

I had a servant go ahead to inform them of our arrival, and my entrance into the institution was smooth. The moment my carriage arrived, we were guided to His Highness's, the king's younger brother's, personal entrance, and led into the drawing room. The carriage of a new aristocrat would've normally never been accepted here, but the staff must've been well aware of the relationship between Lucas and His Highness.

"My lady, I shall carry Kiki inside," Leik said.

"Thank you," I replied.

He bowed and carried the unconscious Kiki into the doctor's office. He looked

so reliable that his maid clothes didn't bother me.

"Over here, madam," a different servant said, guiding me into the aristocratic waiting room.

It was just as spacious as the room I had just been in, and I was welcomed with a cup of tea. After a short while, a doctor entered the room.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm the son of Cyrus Monzlaus, Raphaie Carise."

He looked to be in about his mid-thirties. His ashy-blue eyes sparkled behind a stylish pair of spectacles with a gold rim. The second son of the third prince, he resigned his claim to the throne and was given the rank and fief of Marquess Carise, a family related to him. Though a marquess, the Carises were part of the Traditional Twelve and ranked similarly to a duke.

"The pleasure is all mine, Marquess Carise. My name is Iris, and I'm Lucas Stock's wife. My husband is always in your care."

"My father is quite attached to your husband, and I'm indebted to him for my research as well."

He had a thin frame, droopy eyes, and a well-worn white coat that I guessed had been washed numerous times. His hazel hair was long and hadn't been trimmed, and he had a bit of stubble, but he exuded elegance that matched the grand drawing room. He felt mysterious. Behind him was a nurse wearing a white coat that went down to her ankles. After we finished our greetings, he sat on the sofa and explained to me the results of Kiki's examination.

"I'm sure you're worried about Miss Kiki's state, but that's just a psychogenic reaction from stress and the like. With some medicine and rest, she should be fine," he reassured me.

"I'm glad to hear that," I replied.

"About your sister, Lady Airia's examination. I've already dispatched a doctor from our facility. You can leave her to us."

"Thank you."

It seemed like the third prince, his biological father, had assigned the doctor to research the blue drop flower disease.

“Both Lady Kiki and Lady Airia were likely given the same drug,” Marquess Carise stated, narrowing his ashy-blue eyes and stroking his stubble.

I grew tense and stared back at his stern expression.

“This might...be a little unpleasant for you to hear, Baroness Stock. Do you mind if I proceed?” he asked.

“Please do,” I consented.

“Now then.”

Marquess Carise laid several documents on the table. There were records of bodies with the same bruise with the same symptoms as Kiki and Airia. Kiki was also within these records as these documents noted their findings on simple drawings of the human body. Everywhere throughout their bodies were blue bruises that resembled flowers.

“We recorded Miss Kiki Russetbrown’s symptoms the moment your husband, Baron Stock, brought her in. Once a year, we conduct a periodic screening on her,” he explained.

According to the records, Kiki’s body was already covered in these bruises when Lucas had taken her in. She had been tossed onto the streets when my husband found her and picked her up. At the time, her mind was muddled, and he couldn’t gain much information from her other than that she was a maid working in the royal capital.

“How horrid,” I said, my eyes downcast on the documents as I covered my mouth.

“Blue drop flower disease had been seen on bodies discarded on the riverbanks of the lowest region of the royal capital,” Marquess Carise went on. “But the conditions of the corpses were awful, and it was difficult to get samples from them. They were also of low rank, and the Royal Police’s autopsies stated they were infected after they ate food from the river or random scraps, which eventually led to their deaths. However, from examining Miss Kiki and with the help of Baron Stock’s research, I’ve got suspicions that a certain aristocratic family may be involved.”

He sipped on his coffee before he continued. “One will get blue drop flower

disease after continuously ingesting a certain poison orally. I'm unsure just how much Miss Kiki had ingested as the marks cover her entire body, but I believe that the effects are similar to a powerful sleeping drug. And her bruises are a lot larger than the corpses' that were tossed aside on the riverbank. If we were to assume that the size of the bruise has *no* correlation with the risk of fatality, we can deduce that the corpses were used to test the effects of the drug, and Miss Kiki had the drug properly utilized on her."

"After countless sacrifices, they were searching for just the right amount that wouldn't quite kill the victim, but wouldn't keep them alive and well either," I deduced.

"Precisely. After looking into the discarded site of the victims and their history, a certain name popped up."

"The son of a marquess, Mikhail Streltsy," I said.

"Exactly," Marquess Carise said, his eyes stern behind his glasses as he gave a firm nod. "The Royal Police isn't under our faction, but the faction of the first prince. The bodies affected by the blue drop flower disease were likely cleared as unknown deaths. So, my father decided to rely on your husband."

He gazed at me, his gentle, droopy eyes seeming to think about my husband through myself.

"Baron Stock is a capable merchant. He has a few merchant ships, is well-connected, and is proficient in several languages. My father believes that Baron Stock can uncover something that our society cannot, and so gave him an order." For a moment, I thought his gaze was mixed with pity. "And that changed your fate greatly as well."

"Marquess Carise..."

"Had my father not given his order, you may not have been married off to Baron Stock. Even if your engagement with Mikhail Streltsy had been canceled, as part of the Traditional Twelve, you could've easily married a duke. Do you hate us? Do you resent us for dragging you into this mess?"

I realized why he'd been so oddly kind to me; the marquess had pitied my situation. He showed compassion toward me. I'd fallen from aristocratic grace

once my engagement had been canceled, and I was married off to a new aristocrat as part of a calculating scheme. I was the daughter of a marquess, after all.

I firmly shook my head. "I believe I was quite lucky with my fate." I puffed out my chest and smiled. "Our start may have been full of cunning and calculations, but my husband has provided a warm place to return to and days of happiness that can't be easily obtained. I'm not just grateful for my husband, but Solalitika, his manor, and our employees. I'm truly glad I got to meet every single one of them."

"You seem to be telling the truth," he murmured, narrowing his ashy-blue eyes behind his fashionable spectacles. "I can see that your husband has also become a lot friendlier. You're..."

Suddenly, there was a hasty knock on the door.

"Come in," Marquess Carise said.

"Doctor! Pardon me, but we've discovered something horrid!" A young man, dressed in a white coat, panicked.

Behind him was a certain person—still in his maid uniform—who'd gone limp and was borrowing another doctor's shoulder to stand.

"Leik!" I gasped.

"It's awful!" the doctor cried. "I-It seems he gulped down the suspicious medicine he'd stolen from the Streltsys!"

"What?!" shouted Marquess Carise.

Kiki ran in crying. "Leik had taken the tea leaves from the kitchen, stuffed them into bags, and swallowed the bags whole to carry them out of that house! He was wearing the maid uniform to hide his stomach! If we don't hurry, Leik will...!"

We all stared at him in stunned silence.

"Don't worry, Kiki," Leik said calmly in contrast to his pale complexion. He stroked her head as she rushed to his side. "I'm a dog, remember? I've got some resistance toward toxins and immediately coughed it all back up. And if

we record how it progresses in me, I'm sure you can see just how the mark starts to form."

"How can he be so reckless?" a doctor gasped.

More doctors rushed in and prepared to treat him.

"Ah, I feel dizzy..." Leik muttered. "I'm guessing I'll lose consciousness soon... It's similar to an anesthetic. I'll borrow the sofa for a moment."

Though he sounded composed, he fell onto the sofa with a thud, like a puppet with its strings cut. His long, silver hair splayed out on the velvet seat.

"Leik!" Kiki cried, her eyes red as she clutched his hands. She grasped them tightly as though praying and brought them to her forehead, her shoulders trembling. "Leik! Leik! How could you do something so rash?!"

"For my lord, of course," Leik said without hesitation, a smile forming on his pale face. "Both my lady and you, Kiki, are important people to him. Could you blame me for wanting a spot of revenge against the vermin who dares to harm you two?"

"Ugh... Leik, I..."

"I told you, I'm fine. I'm my lord's precious dog, you know?"

The drug was taking effect on him. He sluggishly blinked several times, trying to fight off the drowsiness, as he glanced at me. He didn't forget to close one eye in a wink and act composed despite his situation.

"I had my lady risk her body, so now it's my turn to do the same," he said. "If I don't, it'll tarnish my name. My body's already in tatters, so even if I get an extra bruise or two, it may look like a fashionable tattoo...on me."

"Leik..." I murmured.

"Ah, did you know? Kids born in the Orient are born with a blue bruise on their butts. I had no idea... They're the butt of this joke, at least."

With that, the strength had left his body, and the hand that had been stroking Kiki's head slid down on the sofa. Doctors surrounded the unconscious Leik.

"I see... The victim will be overcome with dizziness, but they hold

consciousness before suddenly being knocked out. He spoke about idle gossip until the end to convey that he still had his wits about him..." Marquess Carise said in awe.

A stretcher was prepared, and Leik was placed on top. Before Marquess Carise chased after my butler, he turned toward me.

"His actions may help us find the antidote. Leave the rest to us. In the name of the Royal Medicinal Institution, we shall do our best to save him. We must reward this fearless butler for his deeds."

"Thank you," I replied. "I leave him in your care."

As I clutched a sobbing Kiki, I bowed my head to him.



THE next day, Leik returned to the Karelia manor looking good as new.

"Waaah! Leik!" Kiki wept.

"I'm hooome!" Leik said cheerfully.

"I'm so glad! So, so glad!"

"I told you I'd be fine, didn't I?"

He spoke casually, but it was clear that he was tired. Even so, the moment he returned, he took a freshly baked baguette sandwich from our chef, Lee, and gobbled it down in a few big bites. After his meal, the butler visited me.

"Please allow me to report back to my lord," he said.

"Shouldn't you rest for a while?" I suggested.

"We don't have much time. And..." Leik narrowed his golden eyes, his sharp gaze reminiscent of his "dog" days. "The faction of the king's older brother surely knows about our recent development. I'm sure he's in danger, so as a former dog, I'm quite worried."

"I understand."

"Woof."

He must've dressed in a hurry; the ribbon that tied his silver hair back was

slightly crooked. I reached out and fixed it for him.

“Please be careful,” I said. “And please protect Lucas.”

“Of course.”

He bowed before swiftly leaving the manor. It was sunny and clear today.



DURING the afternoon in the royal capital, within a hotel in a trading district meant for the middle class, Lucas had just finished a few jobs and took off his fake glasses. He entered the guest room, removed his old clothes he’d used as a disguise, and headed for the bathroom. The unpleasant stench of mold and dust unique to the entertainment district caked his body, and he found it offensive to his nose.

He turned the faucet, letting it gush out water. He stepped into the bath and dampened his hair, washing away the gray. He’d dyed his unique, yellow hair into an ashy hue.

Lucas had dyed his hair, covered his vibrant, amber eyes with fake glasses, and slumped forward to hide his memorable, tall height. Unlike his hometown, no one in the royal capital knew his face, and he moved around undetected, hiding the fact that he was the young, nouveau riche, Lucas Stock. At worst, he may have been seen as a ruffian debt collector. As he gazed at the water dripping from his bangs slowly turning from gray to transparent, he mumbled to himself.

“I see. So an aristocrat from the king’s older brother’s faction pushed Iris’s father into a life of alcohol and gambling.”

He’d been looking into Marquess Karelia’s favorite tavern and gambling den as well as the barmaid’s boss who worked there.

In short, Marquess Karelia had fallen into a trap. During a socialite party, he’d met an aristocrat who was in the faction of the first prince and had been introduced to a members-only gambling den. From there, the marquess had fallen into immorality, gambling away the Karelia fortune as his mental and physical health were sapped away.

Iris's biological mother, Louisa Karelia, was the one who officially held the Karelia bloodline and had been properly managing the household's affairs in lieu of her husband, who married into the family and had obtained the title. Even to this day, Louisa's name and reputation were well regarded, but once she'd passed, the Karelis fell into ruin.

Lucas used his fingers to jot down his thoughts on the window clouded with steam. He needed to organize the information he had.

"The oldest prince had lost claim to the throne because of his repeated radical ideas. He gained his own faction. The Karelis, having lost their main source of power and management, had thus been the first prince's target. Relatives were aware of this, but no one wanted to oppose the royal family, and thus, no one lent House Karelia their aid. But then, a young nouveau riche who couldn't read the room used his money to meddle with the Karelis' affairs."

He pushed back his wet bangs and sank into the bathtub with a forced laugh as he looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm sure the first prince's faction was surprised. They probably wanted Iris to marry Mikhail Streltsy, a house under their control, and gain possession of House Karelia. But then, someone like me just bought her. I guess I'm glad I got rich then."

Lucas stared fixedly at the ceiling.

"You're there, aren't you, Leik?"

"I haven't seen anything," came a reply.

"Like I care," Lucas replied wearily.

A few moments later, the trusty butler slid into the bathing area.

"How are you feeling?" the baron asked.

The Streltsy incident occurred three days ago. Using a spy, Lucas was notified of the events that transpired on the day of and knew that Leik had fainted and that Kiki's former workplace was House Streltsy.

Leik looked a tad pale, but he seemed as composed as ever. The former dog and butler slowly approached Lucas, skillfully dodging his master's feet that

swiped at him from the tub.

“Well, I feel refreshed after a good nap,” Leik said. “That drug is quite terrifying. I don’t remember anything that occurred immediately before and after I fainted. If you didn’t notice that you’d been drugged and didn’t have the bruise, you would likely not notice anything at all. Oh, but I do have a very faint bruise on me.”

“Show me,” Lucas ordered.

The butler rolled up the clothes around his stomach, exposing his skin filled with old scars. On his pierced belly button was a faint blue bruise. Lucas glared at the mark with a grimace.

“What a horrible drug,” Lucas muttered.

“I agree,” Leik replied. “The institution is quickly trying to analyze the drug. I believe they shall make it in time for the engagement party.”

“I’m grateful to hear that, but isn’t that a bit too quick?”

“The report might be a bit rough around the edges, but perhaps they believe that your eloquent tongue can convict him.”

“Heh, they overestimate me too much.” Lucas gave a dry laugh as he sank into the tub.

“I’ve snuck the report of your findings into the royal capital with my lady’s belongings and handed the institution a copy,” Leik said.

“That’s good to hear. I turned down an entire business deal and gave them a ship for this.”

To investigate the place where Mikhail Streltsy had studied abroad in the past, Lucas had an entire ship normally used to import Marmaria stone slabs make the trip. He had to if he wanted to meet the third prince’s expectations.

“I’m sure your efforts will bear fruit, my lord. The only card you can play is the one where you throw around your money. You must play the hand that you have.”

Lucas clicked his tongue in annoyance as a reply, and Leik smiled. As always, the butler was cunning, but Lucas was relieved to see Leik talking normally after

fainting from the drug.

“Ah, I forgot to mention one more thing, my lord,” Leik said.

“What?” Lucas asked.

“Don’t get angry, all right?”

“What is it now?”

“Mikhail Streltsy tried to force himself on your dear wife.”

Lucas needed a moment to process those words. His mind blanked as several words flashed through it. Almost reflexively, he stood up.

“Huh?! What the *hell* are you on about?!” Lucas growled, standing and grabbing Leik by the collar.

“I asked you not to get angry.”

“What the hell is going on?! I haven’t heard anything about this news!”

“I apologize. It’s all my fault,” the butler replied with a serious expression, facing his master. “I was worried that you would be overcome with anger and become liable to failure. I told the spy not to say a word about it so you wouldn’t get tripped up.”

“Details. Now.”

Lucas released his butler from his grip and sank back into the tub. Leik explained the series of events—had the baron heard about this from his spy, he would’ve been tempted to drive over to House Streltsy and run the man over with his carriage before the engagement party.

“I hadn’t witnessed the scene for myself, but I’m guessing he touched her a bit,” Leik said. “He had her face powder on the cuff of his dominant hand, and his fingertips had the fragrance of soap and vanilla—the perfume you gave to my lady.”

“...And?” Lucas asked.

“It was only attempted, of course. I asked a maid later, and the undergarments she’d worn that morning weren’t askew, and there was nothing more than the mark that you properly left on her. The fact that the lady wears

very unrevealing undergarments that are quite rare to see these days and need several maids to dress her saved us.”

“It’s not all right at all. She was assaulted,” Lucas growled.

“It’s exactly as you say. As her guard, I’m responsible for that.”

“Stop obediently bowing your head. It throws me off. I’m not planning on blaming you, so raise your head.”

Leik was more serious than ever before as he gave a deep bow, and Lucas pushed his wet hair back while he ordered the butler to raise his head.

“I’m sure that *because* you were there, everyone was able to return home safely while bringing back good results,” Lucas said. “Continue to guard Iris for me.”

The butler gazed at his master and seemed at a loss for words. “Will you still place your trust in me?”

“You think a master can’t trust his own dog?”

“W-Woof! Woof! Woof!”

“Don’t let it get to your head.”

Lucas pushed away his butler, who acted like a loyal dog that wanted to be petted. The baron stood up from his tub and received a towel. Indeed, he had no intentions of blaming Leik for the incident; Lucas knew best that he parted with Iris knowing the risks, and his wife, in turn, had entered that manor while understanding the possible dangers. Leik was no doubt fulfilling his role quite well. However, that didn’t mean Lucas’s rage toward Mikhail had subsided.

“That bastard...” Lucas grumbled. “Even if I tore off his fingers, plucked out his eyes, and scattered his parts into the sea while he’s still alive to make him whale food, and went through the digestive tracts of all the sea creatures in the world, I still wouldn’t be satisfied.”

“If you’d like to drown him in the gulf after all is said and done, I shall do the honors,” Leik offered.

“Yeah, I’ll leave it to you,” Lucas said, casually talking about murder. When he got dressed and turned around, Leik was gone.

“I’m trusting you,” Lucas said hopefully, gazing out the window toward the direction of Iris’s manor.

He clenched his fists.

“Iris...”

The thought of another man touching her pale skin made him feel like he’d go crazy with rage. He wanted to hold his wife in his arms. Right now, a single hug wouldn’t be enough. In just a few days, his preparations would be complete. He had to endure it until then.



WE had less than a week until the engagement party, and the first flecks of snow had finally fallen onto the royal capital. I was busily running about every day to prepare for the party. I created invitations, checked the menu for guests, attended tea parties as much as possible, and tried to be up-to-date on the most recent news in high society.

My parents had thrown the responsibility of the engagement documents entirely onto the Streltsys, and I had to look through all of them. However, I couldn’t decide all of this on my own, and I had asked my uncle, Count Klaus, to graciously lend me the aid of his butler, Mr. Feils. With his assistance, I checked through the documents to make sure nothing was amiss. The butler with tidy, blond hair was about ten years my senior and turning thirty this year. I’d known him since my childhood.

“You’re never free of worries, Baroness Stock,” Mr. Feils said with a strained smile, his blond hair fluttering.

I gazed at the documents. “It might be unnecessary, but I simply couldn’t be satisfied if I hadn’t checked these myself.”

“You’re very reliable.”

I noticed him staring at me thoughtfully.

“Has anything caught your eye?” I asked.

“Ah, pardon me. It’s rude for me to stare at a married woman, isn’t it? It really isn’t much,” Mr. Feils said before he continued. “I just thought I’m quite glad

you were born as a woman.”

“Hm? Whatever do you mean by that?”

I blinked at his unexpected words. Since I was young, I’d always been told that if I were a boy, House Karelia wouldn’t have been troubled. I tilted my head to one side as Mr. Feils squinted like he’d been blinded by looking at me.

“Due to the nature of my work, I’ve been employed at numerous households. I’d felt it was much too wasteful to have your abilities and talents cooped up within aristocratic society. Instead of simply socializing like a lady, I feel that you’re far more suited to exerting your efforts toward business and such duties like these.”

“My father had always told me that being intelligent was being cheeky,” I said with a strained laugh.

But the butler shook his head firmly. “Not at all. A lady with talents and abilities will surely be a treasure as a merchant’s wife. Even more so in your case because you’re so well-informed about high society.” He spoke confidently and without hesitation. “Needless to say, Baron Stock must be lucky and happy to have you for his wife. But you will also be able to broaden your horizons and fully blossom your talents with him as your husband.”

“Thank you,” I said, unable to look at him from embarrassment.

Mr. Feils tapped the documents in front of me, tidying up. “I wish for nothing less than your happiness. I’ve known you since you were a child, after all.”

I thought I was invisible within the royal capital and never knew that some had viewed me that way. When I lived in the royal capital, I was in denial and had barely noticed it, but people had always been watching over me.



THOUGH my parents had tasked me with planning the entire party, they were required to provide a few final confirmations. I parted ways with Mr. Feils in the morning. In the afternoon, I consulted with my parents about the guest list and other necessary information. While hearing my explanation, they quickly skimmed over the documents.

“This is fine as-is. Do what you like,” they said.

“I understand,” I said with a bow of my head.

I handed the documents to Leik and conversed with him while glancing at my parents sitting in front of me. After carefully readjusting their horrible diets, which had taken some work, the two looked a lot better this past month. The moment I returned home, I had their measurements taken for their party attire as a way to maintain their health and make them face reality. That seemed the most effective. My father had become more sober and was able to act like a marquess when guests were around.

He would likely be fine during the party. However, one of the main reasons he’d tidied up his attitude was because of the feelings he held against the guests that would be at the party: his older brother, Marquess Eustace, and his younger brother, Lace, an official at the royal palace.

“That should be all for confirmations. Thank you for your time,” I said, wrapping up business. “Father, I’d like to talk about something quite serious.”

“You’ve still got something? Hurry and out with it, then,” he grumbled.

“Are you truly planning on having Airia marry into Marquess Streltsy’s family?” I asked.

My parents widened their eyes in surprise as though I’d brought this matter up far too late.

“Of course,” my father said.

“Obviously,” my stepmother added. “Why do you think we called for a nagging lady like you to help us pull it off?”

“Do you *truly* plan on going through with this?” I asked again, pursing my lips.

My father looked displeased. “Is there a problem with that?”

“Quite a few, I believe. If Airia is married off, the Karelias would lose their last unmarried daughter. Father, who are you planning on having inherit your title? Who will carry on the Karelia name?”

“Didn’t I tell you already? *She’s* gonna bear me a successor.” He jabbed a finger in my stepmother’s direction.

“I’ve seen quite a bit of how you behave together during my time here, and it looks like your relationship with my stepmother has grown quite cold and distant. You don’t even sleep in the same bedroom as her.”

My father’s shoulders jolted. My stepmother, as though to prove my words true, quietly looked down.

“B-But that’s because you brought another man to this house, Iris,” my father said.

“It looked to me like you were already in separate bedrooms by the time I arrived. I don’t think that has anything to do with Leikzig, either. Do you have anything to say, Mother?”

My stepmother bit her lip and glared at my father with anger. “Oh, it’s all *his* fault. He keeps saying that he’s too sleepy or tired from drinking, and we don’t have enough money to bear another child, and all that. He barely even comes home at night.”

One of the reasons I had Leik talk with my stepmother was to scope out my parents’ relationship. I knew my stepmother would be infatuated with his good looks and sweet talk. As I’d thought, she’d chattered on about her deteriorating relationship with my father. Leik had chosen his words carefully when reporting back to me, but it seemed like my stepmother had boldly and aggressively tried to invite him to bed.

“Don’t be stupid,” my father protested. “I’ve been out trying to gather money.”

“Gather money? All you’ve been doing is gambling it all away and putting us in debt!” my stepmother yelled.

“Please calm down,” I said, trying to calm this explosive situation.

“Calm down? You’re the one who touched upon this sensitive topic!” my father roared.

“But it’s important to talk about a successor, Father. We mustn’t hide this away,” I replied, taking a sip of water as I faced him. “I’m quite against having Airia marry off to House Streltsy when we simply don’t have a successor lined up. As long as the engagement party doesn’t include the official announcement,

the union of the two won't be publicly recognized by aristocratic society. We can still turn back."

"We can't change everything now!" my father said. "We can do something about the successor later! We just need Airia to marry."

"Even if you receive monetary aid from Marquess Streltsy, it will only be a temporary remedy," I informed him.

My father jolted.

"Father, please understand the magnitude of the situation you're in. Our relatives and other aristocrats won't lend us, part of the Traditional Twelve, their aid. Is that not odd to you? And why does Mikhail Streltsy want to continue his engagement with a house like ours?"

"A marriage between a daughter of the Karelias and a son of the Streltys has been decided for years," he said.

"This is a political marriage. Just as how Baron Stock took me after agreeing to the terms and offered money, Marquess Streltsy is trying to do the same. But isn't it odd that their house continues this engagement despite Airia not having much noble blood within her veins?"

My stepmother stood up in fury. "You must be kidding me! This is Airia's only hope of becoming the wife of a marquess! Don't steal that away from her!"

"Mother, I—"

"I see how it is! You've always looked down on Airia because aristocratic blood doesn't run thick in her veins, and now you don't want her to marry someone above you! Because *you* married someone with a lower rank! I see what's going on here!"

When my stepmother grew angry like this, she wouldn't listen to anyone. I calmly watched my furious stepmother rant and sipped my water. *She continues to express her anger while looking away from reality. She's...*

"Mother," I said. "Do you want Airia to be happy?"

"Why, of course!" she said. "I carried her inside of me for months and gave birth to her. It's only natural."

“If you want her to be happy and become a marchioness, why did you not give her a formal education?”

“An education? Wouldn’t she be trained when she gets married off? I was educated on how to act like a marchioness when I married into the Karelias.”

“And you still want her to marry.”

“Of course. Unfortunately for you.”

I did everything I could to stop myself from saying more. Mikhail Streltsy wished for the old aristocratic society to continue. He planned on using the Karelias by having Airia marry him. But I couldn’t tell my parents, “Are you planning on marrying her off even if he wants to get rid of her?” I couldn’t tell them the truth just yet. If I told them that without proof, I didn’t know what they’d do. And if I disclosed the fact that we had enough evidence to convict him, Mikhail would run. My husband’s efforts, Kiki’s bravery, and Leik’s determination would all be for naught. I fell silent. Satisfied by my reaction, my stepmother huffed and sat back down. My father watched our exchange with disappointment and shrugged his shoulders.

“As always, you’re just like Louisa, too intelligent and cheeky for your own good,” he said. “I’m guessing you’re leading your husband around by the nose, too. You’d best know your place so he doesn’t cast you aside.”

“Father,” I said.

“What?”

“Since my mother is no longer with us, only I can tell you my true thoughts.”

“Your true thoughts?”

As though I were saying my final prayer, I looked at my father. “Do you not care about what happens to the Karelias?”

“Of course, I care. That’s why I had you marry off, and Airia will do the same so that I can rebuild this house.”

“I shall be blunt. Before the Karelias, and by extension, you, Father, become alienated from aristocratic society, you should surrender your title.”

“What?!” he yelled.

I didn't back off as I saw myself reflected in his pale blue eyes. I gazed back at him.

"Father. Please face reality. Once you allowed your relatives to manage the Karelia lands, the state of the fief has improved. It'll be difficult for you to rebuild House Karelia by yourself. Before anything worse occurs, why don't we dissolve the engagement and surrender the title of Marquess Karelia?"

"It's too late," he said. "The wheels have started to turn. Leave."

"I agree... Even I knew that it was all too late."

I knew best that it was too late. High society already ostracized House Karelia. We had so much debt that I had to be married off to Lucas. Airia's engagement couldn't be dissolved. Everything was moving according to Mikhail Streltsy's plan, and there was no turning back. *If only Mother were still alive. If only I knew more about the world and was able to protect this house while I was still a Karelia.*

"Iris. Listen well. Know your place," my father said, pointing his index finger at me. "You've already been sold off. You've been a little useful this time, but don't let it get to your head. You're no longer a daughter of House Karelia."

"You're quite right. I'm no longer a daughter of Marquess Karelia."

I stood up and gazed down at my glaring father and stepmother across the table. We were so close, yet there was a huge gap between us.

"I am Iris Stock, the wife of Lucas Stock. Excuse me," I said.

Even I thought that my words had sounded icy and cruel.



I left the room and returned to a space I'd set up as my temporary office. I gazed at the invoices of items that were delivered to me today.

"As always... My stepmother has been convinced to buy so many expensive items from the merchant in the first prince's faction," I muttered.

The delivered goods were temporarily kept in a room I cleaned for storage. I carefully checked each purchase that my parents and sister made. Since the funds came from the budget for the engagement party that Lucas had provided,

it was my duty to inspect each item.

“This is an invoice from the apparel store on East 16th Street. And this is from an accessory shop on the same street. After forbidding merchants from entering our manor, I didn’t think they’d sneak around and have these merchants continue the shopping sprees.”

Unfortunately, I was busy preparing for the party, so I couldn’t always watch over them. There were plenty of openings for them to do as they pleased. Max, a footman with beautiful, black hair slicked back, apologized. His gestures were graceful, and he had a lovely voice, so I always had him greet our guests at the entrance.

“I apologize, my lady. I guarantee I’ve declined all merchant visits, so I’m not sure how they’re meeting them.”

“It can’t be helped,” I replied. “I’m sure some are forcing past orders on us. Once you confirm where they were purchased, can you return any goods that can be canceled?”

“Certainly.”

As I finished inspecting the items, I sighed, tired, and a maid approached me.

“My lady, shall I bring you some tea?” Rusk offered.

“Could I please ask that of you?” I responded.

Rusk smiled and bowed as she quickly prepared some tea.

“It must’ve been easy to crush this house,” I murmured.

It didn’t matter how vigilant I was. The first prince’s faction would use any opening they could get to approach my stepmother and father to lead this house to ruin. But my parents were so dependent on them that I couldn’t do anything more—I could only end this house with my hands.

“May I ask where Airia is?” I asked.

Rusk looked a little troubled as she shrugged her shoulders. “She’s been sulking this entire time. I’ve had Norzan—he’s good with children—look after the lady, taking her for walks or helping her fit into new dresses, hoping that would elevate her mood.”

“I’m sorry to cause you so much trouble.”

“It’s my job, so I don’t mind it at all, but...” she trailed off, her expression cloudy. “She hasn’t been disciplined at all.”

Airia was certainly selfish and would easily irritate others, but, in the end, she was a pitiful child who grew up to be a spoiled-rotten fourteen-year-old and stripped of her ability to live by herself in this world. Even Rusk couldn’t help but feel sad at my sister’s helplessness.

Airia wasn’t devoid of fault, of course. She was partly to blame, but the situation she was in was just much too cruel.

After taking a break, I went down to the first floor and walked around the back of the manor toward the linen room. It was a bright area where the white sheets were flipped in the backyard. I spotted Kiki folding some small pieces of cloth, the breeze gently blowing her mob cap’s ribbon and fishtail braid. As she slowly continued to fold, she noticed me and stood up.

“Lady Iris!”

“You don’t need to stand. Are you sure you’re not pushing yourself?” I asked.

I approached her as she smiled. “I’m fine. I’d rather work to keep my mind off things.”

She feigned energy, but she looked paler than before. Her thin arms and legs made her look all the more fragile and ethereal. Since that day, Kiki would start to hyperventilate when she went out, so I had her work around servants that she was used to. If she were by my side, she would inevitably need to travel and meet various aristocrats. She straightened a corner of the white linen that had been piled high and gazed at me with her clear, green eyes.

“I look forward to the day of the party,” she said.

Her words made my chest pang with guilt. “I feel bad for requesting you to do something so tough.”

I apologetically hung my head. Had I been a mistress who truly cared about Kiki’s well-being, I should’ve sent her back to Solalitika immediately. At the very least, I wouldn’t have said something so heartless as to ask for her attendance

at a party filled with numerous people, including the royal family and other aristocrats.

“I know I’m trying to utilize your painful past,” I said. “It’s not too late; I truly don’t mind if you decline this request.”

I remembered just how powerless and vexed I felt as my former fiancé tried to force himself on me. I only acted firm and dauntless because I knew Lucas was protecting me, the other servants, and Leik, but I had even been prepared for death that day. I was aware that Kiki had experienced something far more horrendous and lived to tell the tale; I was now cruelly asking her to face her past when she was cast aside with her body in tatters. It must’ve been so painful for her.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I finally said. “Even if you don’t make an appearance, I’m sure I can think of another way.”

“Lady Iris,” Kiki said, stopping me as she clutched my hands. “Please don’t make that face, my lady. I’m looking forward to getting my revenge on them.”

“Kiki...”

“Heh heh. I’m not as kind and weak as you think, Lady Iris.”

As she smiled, unyielding determination filled her green eyes. Her hands were small but firm—hands that belonged to a worker. It was as though she were gently but sternly trying to admonish me for showing her my weak side.

“I not only get to say my farewells to my past, but this is also an opportunity to repay both you and Lord Lucas! I’m very, *very* excited about this!” she said. I felt so guilty; I knew she was hurting the most. “I’m not strong like Leik, nor smart like everyone else. Since I’m so afraid of aristocrats, I can’t do much work either. I’ve always wanted to be more useful to you, so I’m so happy with this, Lady Iris.”

“Thank you.”

“So please fight your own fight! I’m rooting for you!”

She released me from her grasp with an embarrassed laugh.

I was overwhelmed with emotions. Renewed determination filled me; I had to

be undaunted by all with my back kept straight. The exchange with my parents and my former fiancé had made me feel a bit down.

“You’re right,” I said. “Since you’ve made your resolve, I can’t be whimpering. You made me regain my energy.”

I smiled, and she smiled back.

I vowed to be unwavering and face everything that barred my path.



THAT night, I turned on the lights in the gallery room as I entered alone. I spent time with the last remnants of the Karelia fortune. The portraits hung beside various guns and blades, attesting to my predecessors’ military prowess. A shredded military uniform that once covered a Karelia’s body and numerous medals of honor were within the glass cases. These priceless treasures of House Karelia couldn’t be sold for money.

Since my youth, this place reminded me of the history, bloodline, and heavy responsibilities that fell on the shoulders of House Karelia. But now, this was the only room within this manor engraved with memories of the time I spent with my husband.

“Lucas...” I murmured his name dearly as I opened the curtains.

The night sky of the new moon was absent of both a round moon and Lucas. When I entered this room before, he held me in his arms.

“I’m no good. My predecessors will get angry at me,” I said.

I fanned my reddening face with my hands before I reached for the hidden shelf of the wall and pulled out my mother’s portrait. She wore a stern expression with her dark hair and eyes, and as always, I felt like she’d start talking to me. Just then, I thought I felt a slight breeze that caused a few strands of my hair to flutter. I didn’t turn around but confidently spoke to the presence behind my back.

“You’re there, aren’t you, Leik?” I asked.

“Did you notice me?”

“I’m starting to. Just a little.”

From the shadows of the velvet curtains, Leik, with his long, silver hair, emerged as though he were melting away from the darkness.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“As you can see, I’m quite energetic. I’ve reported to my lord about being unable to protect you, and he was furious with me, but here I am, all well.”

“You’ve met with Lucas.”

“I have. He was quite worried about you.”

I fell silent for a moment. “I see.”

I raised the portrait of my mother and stretched out to return her to her usual place. Leik slipped the portrait from my hands and gracefully placed it on the hidden shelf.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Not at all,” he replied.

He was beautiful enough to be well-suited in maid clothes, but his height was, indeed, a man’s. I closed the door with a quiet click and faced the butler as he cocked his head to one side.

“My lady?” Leik asked.

“I just envy you very much right now. You can meet Lucas whenever you want.”

“Whatever are you on about? You’re the adorable, beloved wife of my lord, my lady. There’s nothing for you to be envious about.”

“But I can’t meet him so easily like you, and I can’t be relied on as much.”

“Are you perhaps jealous of me, the unworthy Leikzig Kudrya?” His golden eyes sparkled.

I gasped, realizing that I had been childishly jealous of him. I placed a hand over my mouth and shook my head.

“I’m sorry. As you say, I was jealous of you. Please forget my words,” I said.

Leik chuckled. “Heh, why are *you* being jealous of *me*? You’re his wife, my

lady. After this is all over, you can flirt with him all you like.”

“When I meet Lucas, I’ll tell him I was saved thanks to you and request he not scold you.”

“No need, no need. I’ve already been forgiven and praised by my lord. Besides, he’s angry more than usual precisely for the same reason as you.”

“The same reason?”

“He’s worried about you and is dying to meet you again. He’s simply angry and jealous of me for being by your side.”

I couldn’t hide the twinkle in my eyes. “Is that true?”

“Of course,” Leik replied with a nod. “Once the party is over, I’m sure my lord will cling on to you so much that you’ll get fed up with how spoiled he acts. Once he decides on something, he won’t stop and is very thorough, I’ll have you know.”

He spoke with grand gestures like a stage actor. I once again straightened my back and expressed my gratitude to him.

“Leik, thank you so much for the other day,” I said.

“I haven’t done much,” he replied.

“That’s not true. I was surprised by your quick thinking of disguising yourself as a maid. You did that to chase away the Streltsy maids who were trying to buy time so you and Kiki could swiftly help Airia change into a new dress. It was also so that you could march right into the kitchen.”

“I just wanted to wear maid clothes,” Leik said, using a silly excuse to hide his thoughts as usual.

“That’s not all. Kiki was able to topple that wagon in a convenient place, and the guards never showed up, all thanks to you, no?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.” He turned away and pouted like a child. “Even if your deductions prove true, my lady, I’ve only done my duty as my lord’s dog. You don’t need to be grateful since my lord has asked me to protect you.”

“You’ve accepted my word of thanks, I take it?” I asked with a smile, peering into his face.

He likely didn’t like my expression as he frowned and narrowed his eyes. The corners of his eyes turned slightly red—I could tell because the slightest shade showed up beautifully on his pale skin.

“You always throw me off when I’m with you,” Leik said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Good grief!” he said with a grin. He didn’t play it off like usual, and it felt like he was showing me his real feelings. “My lady, I was saved by you as well, so please allow me to express my gratitude too.”

He straightened his posture and bowed deeply. “You obtained a lot of information from him, and you even used your body to buy some time. I’m deeply indebted by your actions. Had you screamed and panicked, I’m sure that Mikhail Streltsy would’ve tried to take you by force. I was even able to sneak out the tea leaves because you remained firm.”

“I believed you’d save me, Leik.”

“And I believed you’d lead that bonehead son of a marquess by the nose.”

“Oh my.”

“Heh heh.”

We looked at each other and laughed.

“Let’s keep working hard for just a bit more. For Lucas,” I said.

“Indeed. Let’s work together for my lord,” Leik replied.

We both reached for a handshake.

Chapter 3

THE rugs of the Karelia manor had been changed to welcome winter. The engagement party was tomorrow, and I was meeting with Marchioness Streltsy for final confirmations. The marchioness offered to meet at House Streltsy, but I politely refused. I wasn't sure if she was keeping quiet about the events that unfolded there the other day or was kept in the dark about it, but I couldn't bring myself to pass through those gates again.

It had been a while since I'd met Marchioness Streltsy. She looked a lot older than I last remembered her and had lost so much weight that she was practically skin and bones. Even her exquisite makeup couldn't hide the anxiety and troubled expression she wore on her face; the rumors of her failing health had been true. She was guided to the salon and widened her amethyst eyes in shock—Mikhail had his mother's eyes, all right.

"My goodness," she gasped. "You were able to prepare such a grand room."

She likely knew about the sorry state of House Karelia. When she laid her eyes upon the salon I renovated with money from Lucas, she placed a hand over her mouth. The sun's rays gently peeked through the lace curtains, revealing the elegant mahogany table and chairs. I'd chosen wallpaper with pale flower patterns to brighten the room, and fine china hung from the walls, decorated with floral art from the Orient. The imported mirror was also easy on the eyes and added a hint of playfulness.

Only the mahogany furniture had been from House Karelia; everything else had been imported to create a space that could welcome guests. I made sure to keep in mind proper etiquette while breathing fresh air into the room. That also hinted at who was behind revitalizing the Karelia manor into a beautiful space. I encouraged the marchioness to take a seat, and as she slowly did so, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the salon. My plan was a success. Once the tea set appeared in front of us, she gazed at me as though she snapped back to

reality.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Let’s get to business, shall we?”

“Certainly,” I replied. “I’ll be in your care today.”

We proceeded to confirm the guest list, menu, the placement of servants, and seating. Our meeting went smoothly, and I could see just how much experience she had as a lady of the house.

“It’s as though I’m speaking with Louisa,” the marchioness said suddenly, looking at me nostalgically. She gazed into the distance as she imagined someone else where I was. “As though Louisa is possessing her daughter right now. You’ve also become much more beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

I should’ve been happy to be compared to my mother, but the marchioness’s gaze caused cold sweat to trickle down my back. When I faced her, I remembered the cursed words she never stopped telling me.

“You already have a fiancé, so you must look plain.”

“That lascivious mole by your eye makes you look shameful.”

“You’ve gained too much weight. How unbecoming.”

I thought back to the words she’d driven into me, along with the strict bridal training she had me undergo. Only now did I finally realize who she was yearning for as she continued to stare into the distance. A certain slender woman with a less full chest, devoid of a mole by her eye, that suited dark dresses very well.

“Marchioness Streltsy, you’ve always been yearning for Louisa Karelia,” I observed.

“She was the object of my admiration,” she admitted. “She was a dignified and beautiful woman.”

The marchioness stretched her back, and she took a sip of tea as she eloquently discussed her thoughts. “I first met Louisa Karelia at her debutante ball. We were still mourning the Battle of Lionel. A gloomy cloud fell over aristocratic society. And there she was—like a goddess of a black pearl, a

strong, dignified woman. The men feared and besmirched her, but all the women respected her. Unfitting for a woman, she was the embodiment of the chivalry of Karelia; she was a tough, beautiful lady.”

Marchioness Streltsy’s eyes were misty. Captivated. She must’ve seen my mother within me. “She was far too strong of a lady. Everyone had their misgivings when she took a husband, worried that her strength would cause her husband to tremble in fear. As I’d expected, that man has an inferiority complex against her. And though you’re her child, you’re different from Louisa. You two are similar but completely different.”

She gasped and cleared her throat. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry. Please forget I said anything.” She glanced over the various documents that I’d prepared. “And I’m sorry for having you make all these preparations by yourself.”

“You’re very important to this engagement party, Marchioness Streltsy. We can’t have you fall ill,” I replied. “I’d like for you to prioritize your health.”

“You’re the one with Louisa’s blood in your veins, carrying on the spirit of the Karelias. That child...is simply not suited to become a marchioness,” she said.

“Are you referring to Airia?”

The marchioness fell silent. She seemed a lot older than I’d remembered. The wrinkles on her face were much deeper. She stiffened as I peered into her face.

“If you knew she was unsuitable, why are you proceeding with the engagement?” I asked.

“A union between House Streltsy and House Karelia had been decided since you were born. I can’t change that of my own accord with my husband still overseas,” she replied.

“Are you unaware of your son’s deeds? Of his terrifying plans?” I asked.

“I don’t... I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

For a split moment, her eyes flashed with a dark glimmer. I didn’t miss the tell. From within her aged, exhausted face was a strong spark of ugly greed. I was certain she was also in the faction of the first prince; she was determined to have the household of Louisa Karelia, a subject of her desire, within her

grasp.

“Iris,” she said, pulling me back to reality.

I placed my teacup onto my saucer, my hands trembling with rage and a sense of futility. The marchioness narrowed her eyes as she saw my weakness.

“Even now, I wish for you to return,” she said. “Your dauntless attitude and your expressions are so similar to Louisa. If you cast aside that nouveau riche dress and tidy up your hair in a tight bun to fit a marchioness, you’d resemble her even more. The shameful mole by your eye can’t be helped, I suppose, but surely you could hide it with makeup.”

The same feelings of emptiness I had when I talked with my father the other day resurfaced. My father had harbored jealousy toward my mother that bordered on hatred and animosity. An obsession with using me as a replacement for my mother possessed the marchioness as she dyed her hands in the brutality of the first prince’s faction, silently allowing her son’s misdeeds.

I took a deep breath and faced her. “I’m Iris and Baroness Stock. I’m a separate entity from my mother, Louisa Karelia. If you love and admire my mother, surely, you’d know that.”

“Precisely because I loved and admired your mother, I know very well that you can become a lady like Louisa.”

“We’re simply going in circles here. Why don’t we stop this conversation?” I suggested with a sigh.

Nothing I said would change her mind. Ever since I was a child, I’d been at the mercy of the whims of those in the royal capital who had been chasing after my mother’s shadow.



I walked with the marchioness to her carriage to send her off.

“I’ll see you again, Iris,” she said with a smile before parting ways.

It seemed like she was much livelier than when she first arrived. I took a deep breath, stood tall, and faced her.

“I’m Baroness Stock. And that will *never* change,” I declared.

Before she boarded her carriage, I thought I saw her eyebrows twitch, but I offered her a smile and watched her leave the Karelia estate.

“My mother is no longer in this world. I’m the wife of Lucas Stock,” I said.

I searched for the setting sun, hoping to shake off the obsessions that tried to engulf me. The glimmer of the sunset was vivid like Lucas’s eyes, and the sky glowed as though to cheer me up as it shone down on the manor.

“I long to see you again soon, Lucas,” I whispered.



THE day of the engagement party finally arrived. The party would start at night, but the Karelia servants were busily running about since the morning to prepare everything, and employees from the Stock Trading Company dropped by to offer their assistance as well. As everyone bustled within the manor, I tidied myself up quickly and engaged in my duties as the mistress of this house.

My stepmother hadn’t helped me one bit, as usual, but my father, showing his pride as the master of House Karelia, went to confirm the state of the men’s lounge and tended to other duties. He was sober today.

“It’s been a while since Marquess Karelia last made a grand appearance, after all,” I said as I gazed at my father’s back and thinning hair.

I silently made my resolve.

“Lady Iris!” someone shouted brightly behind my back. Only one person called out to me in such a manner. I turned around and saw Kiki jogging up to me. “Coldola has asked me to fetch you. We need your approval for Lady Airia’s attire,” she said.

“Very well. Let’s go,” I replied.

Tonight was a turning point in Kiki’s life as well, but she showed me an energetic smile. My heart invigorated, I headed for Airia’s room. She wore a luxurious dress in front of a mirror, making her seem like a flower fairy. Her golden curls bounced beautifully atop her puff sleeves, and her skirt had been layered with organdy fabric. Many airy, fluffy, translucent ribbons decorated the entire garment. The most eye-catching ribbon by her chest had been

ornately patterned with detailed embroidery that almost made me dizzy.

When Coldola caught sight of me, she wrapped the tape measure around her arm. “We somehow had it made in time,” she said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I’m sure we pushed the seamstresses quite a bit.”

A dress as fabulous as this would easily take half a year to sew. This was rushed work, making tweaks and arrangements from a ready-made dress, but it was still splendidly done to hide that. Coldola tucked her short hair behind her ear and grinned.

“We actually didn’t push them too much,” she divulged. “Are you aware that the president had test implemented the newest sewing machine into the factories recently?”

“Ah, I remember such a thing happening... Is this perhaps a practical application of the product?” I asked.

“Precisely! I think we’ve got the fastest record in producing dresses.” Coldola proudly puffed out her chest, causing me to feel happy about their accomplishment.

“Sister...” Airia said. She’d been beaming as she looked over her appearance in the mirror, but when she caught sight of me, she gave a look of clear displeasure. She had acted coldly toward me ever since that day with Mikhail, though I couldn’t blame her given the situation. “How do I look? I look much more lovely and adorable than you, don’t I?”

She spread her dress and gave an exaggerated smile. “I’m going to get engaged to Lord Mikhail. By next year, we’ll be officially married, and I’ll be a marchioness. I’ll invite you to my wedding. Of course, I shall be the one to send an invitation to you, baroness. You couldn’t come otherwise, could you?”

“Airia, do you know the proper paper, words, and timing to send this letter, along with the proper format?” I asked.

Her cheeks twitched. “Huh?”

“Do you know who to invite, what the seating arrangements are, and what the required merchants are for each category of items? Do you know how to

socialize and create a network for yourself? At the very least, you must know the faces and names of the royal family and the titled nobility. As a marquess's wife, you require the bare minimum of political knowledge," I said matter-of-factly.

"What are you trying to say?"

I looked at her through the mirror and quietly conveyed my intentions. "Until today, I worked hard to prepare for your engagement party. All by myself."

"I know," she replied. "And you were a big help. And I'll need you in the future, too."

"There is no 'future' help coming, Airia."

I spoke firmly, causing my sister's lips to quiver. My adorable sister widened her eyes as I gazed at her through the mirror. As I stood stern, I felt like I resembled my mother.

"I'm Baroness Stock," I said. "I'm no longer worthy of helping you, the fiancée of a marquess's heir."

"What are you talking about? Today is—"

"I simply offered you my final assistance as a daughter of Marquess Karelia."

Everyone present froze like ice, at a loss for words. Even I knew that my voice was cold and detached.

"Airia, do you remember how I replied in my letter? I told you that this was the last time I'd help you. As your older sister, I felt it was my final responsibility to give you the bare minimum amount of training as a lady and to educate you. However, not once did you try to help me. Not once did you ask me to teach you. If you desired, I would've happily offered you all the knowledge I had. You're my younger sister, after all."

"Iris...?"

My angry younger sister's face turned pale as she seemed to recoil in fear. She had finally realized just how serious I was.

"Airia, you cannot flee from the responsibilities of your actions. You chose to turn away from reality and your fiancé's true identity. That's about all I can say

now as your older sister.”

Silence settled in on the room as I made to leave. I felt reassured that Kiki silently chased after me. A while after I left, my sister’s shrill shrieks could be heard from the room.

“Arghhh! Goodness! What’s with her?!”

I closed my eyes, remembering the first time I’d met her. She was like a spring fairy with her lovely golden locks and soft, white cheeks. House Karelia had become grim from the loss of my mother, but her smile as she called out “Sister” was like a brilliant ray of sunshine.

“Airia, I was truly happy when I got a younger sister...” I said, my voice trembling.

I stood in the cold corridor as Kiki quietly wrapped her hands around mine.



“**GOOD** morning. Please die.”

It was the day of the engagement party, and this couldn’t have come at a worse time. When Lucas woke up, an assassin disguised as a hotel employee delivering room service pointed a gun at him. The baron had made swift use of martial arts to knock the assassin unconscious and fled out the window of his room, but his carriage had been destroyed. The assassins had their bases covered.

“Tch,” Lucas clicked his tongue in annoyance.

He switched gears, borrowed clothes from a hotel employee, and fled. Unfortunately for him, his height and bright, canary yellow hair made him stand out in a crowd. No matter how he hid and tried to escape, he’d get caught time and again. Now, he was running through the streets of the lower class.

“Tch! Goddammit!”

If he were allowed to fight back, he would’ve done so. But today was the day when he’d put on a show in front of the lofty nobility, convicting a certain man for his crimes. He didn’t want to create a violent incident and have that used against him. It was difficult for him to flee and be on the defensive, hoping his

assailants would leave without a scratch.

He ran through the slum alleys, scaring the rats and large insects in his path, bought some clothes from a stall selling secondhand items, and wore them to disguise himself. He hid his hair with a tattered hat, wore a pair of glasses that shadowed his gaze and shielded him from the sun, and slipped his arms into smelly, old clothes. When he sagged his shoulders in this attire, he stood a better chance of blending into the crowd than wearing the hotel employee's attire. The clothes didn't fit and were ill-matched for his stature, but that worked in his favor within the poverty district.

He ran around wildly, hiding inside trashcans and dashing through some homes. Thankfully, the working class who came from the countryside in search of jobs flooded the royal capital streets. Once Lucas reached the sewers that smelled of stagnant water, he'd shaken his assailants off his tracks.

"I just need to change location, and we should be good."

Lucas wiped off his sweat and gazed down from the stone bridge atop a river that reeked of sewage waste. Several boats filled with items floated across the river when a vessel with a familiar red-headed, curly-haired man caught his eye. This man had helped Lucas within the royal capital when the baron had been disguised as Dazzle.

"Hey, Jake!" Lucas called.

"Huh?" Jake asked. "Hey there, what's going— Whoa!"

Lucas timed his jump onto the boat just as it passed under the bridge. Jake, the large man with red hair, hastily tried to regain the balance of his vessel.

"Boss! Don't jump in so suddenly," Jake cried in surprise as he quickly hid Lucas behind his goods.

As Lucas concealed himself under the tattered cloth of the cargo, he gazed at the good-natured man. "A lot of things are going on," the baron said. "I'm being chased. I need you to deliver me to a certain area."

"And where would that be?" Jake asked.

"The fruit store behind St. Hedwig Clock Tower."

“Aye, aye. You got it.”

Jake grinned with his dirty face, quick on the uptake. He transported Lucas to the designated destination in his boat, using the filthy river to deliver the baron near St. Hedwig Square. Lucas may not have been well-connected with high society in the royal capital, but his business dealings allowed him to have a network of information within the city.

Lucas hopped off the boat behind a bridge, blended into the crowd to enter an alley, and went behind a certain fruit store.

“Hey, you! What the ’ell are you doing here?!” the owner of the fruit store shouted angrily.

When Lucas turned around and shifted his spectacles down, the owner recognized him.

“Boss? What’s ’appened?” he asked.

“A lot of things,” Lucas said for the second time that day.

The owner allowed Lucas to hide in the back until a carriage came by. The baron slid into the carriage, and Duke Cyrus Monzlaus, a middle-aged man with glasses, greeted him. The blood of the royal family that flowed in his veins was highly valued, and he was often called His Highness the King’s Younger Brother or His Highness the Third Prince. He held both the title of prince and duke. He narrowed his ashy-blue eyes playfully, his thin lips forming a smile as he gazed at Lucas.

“Your Highness. Please excuse my appearance,” Lucas said, internally shocked the duke himself would meet with him.

The third prince gave a jovial chuckle at the young nouveau riche covered in the stench from the sewers and bringing dirt onto the plush carriage seats. “An interesting choice in attire for an engagement party. It’s good to see that you’ve still got a mischievous streak in you,” he said.

The carriage proceeded directly into one of Cyrus’s manors, and Lucas went into the bath that had already been prepared for him, as if the duke knew this was coming. Lucas then changed into a new set of clothes that had been waiting for him.

“It’s a perfect fit,” Lucas muttered.

Just a touch cold, the baron quickly dressed and was guided into a room where the third prince welcomed him while sitting on a magnificent sofa. His Highness seemed to recently be into photographs—picture frames, big and small, covered the walls of the room with high ceilings.

“Ah, Lucas. Indeed, that chick-like hair color suits you so well,” the third prince said. “Do have a seat.”

Lucas took the gracious offer, bowing once before he sat down. Cyrus seemed to enjoy himself as he observed every action Lucas took.

“Thank you so much for saving me when I was in danger, Your Highness,” Lucas said.

“You can let your Solalitikan accent slip in front of me, Lucas,” Cyrus replied.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to be so rude.”

“I see, I see.”

Cyrus nodded as he took an interest in every one of Lucas’s words. While the royal was a large supporter and backer of Lucas, the baron found the prince difficult to handle. It always felt like he was dancing in the palms of the prince, and the royal was enjoying his every move. This man with his hazel hair slicked back and droopy, ashy-blue eyes that twinkled with his smile was closest to the king—one of the men in the kingdom who held the most power. He was so whimsical that he favored a lowly baron from the countryside who had done nothing more than save the life of the queen once upon a time. The life of the third prince’s mother.

A servant placed a tea set on the table without a sound. As always, Lucas poured the tea as His Highness watched on with an amused smile.

“It seems like you’ve gotten good results,” Cyrus said, skillfully bringing the cup of tea to his lips, making sure that his glasses wouldn’t turn cloudy. “I suppose I can see something interesting tonight.”

“I was about to be killed before we met up. You truly saved me, Your Highness,” Lucas replied.

“Oh, I won’t let that happen. Your duty is to entertain me.”

A sweet aroma from the expensive tea leaves filled the room as though someone had sprayed the area with the fragrance of flowers. Amidst the floral scent, those twinkling ashy-blue eyes gazed at Lucas.

“My son has found numerous corpses with the same symptoms as your maid—Kiki, was it?—and has gathered that information into a report. Use it at the party if you need to,” Cyrus said.

“Thank you.”

Lucas humbly lowered his head, but he was internally terrified by just how well-prepared this man was. How many people in this kingdom had the power to gain evidence using a few photos? The third prince was indeed reliable as an ally but frightening as an enemy.

“Ah, Lucas, I actually had something I was far more curious about.”

“And what might that be?”

“Iris Karelia. You’ve maintained a *mariage blanc* with her, haven’t you?”

“I’m sorry, but could you kindly elaborate?”

Cyrus spoke about this matter as casually as the weather, but Lucas was caught off-guard by the angle of questioning.

“You’ve done well until now, marrying the daughter of the Karelis to find any connection between the Streltsys and my older brother. Once everything is revealed tonight, the marriage will be meaningless, will it not? If you plan on separating from her, it will be a bit troublesome if you didn’t maintain the *mariage blanc*.”

Lucas felt like a chunk of ice pelted him from behind. He acted as calm as he could, forced a smile, and shook his head. “Regarding that, there’s nothing for you to worry about,” he replied. “I don’t plan on divorcing her.”

The third prince gave an exaggerated look of surprise and acted like he’d never known about this turn of events. “How unusual. Once this is over, you won’t have any use for her, will you? It’s not like you to mix your personal feelings into business. It is business, isn’t it?”

A man who knew Lucas's sizes to a tee had to know the real relationship between Lucas and Iris—there was no way he *couldn't*. The prince's prodding stirred indescribable feelings in Lucas, but he pushed them all down and kept a smile plastered on his face.

"If I were to cast her aside once I have no use for her, I would be no different from Mikhail Streltsy and be unable to convict him," Lucas said, staring straight at the prince. "I'd like to continue to be by her side in good faith."

"Is this an emotional stance, Lucas?"

His ashy-blue gaze seemed to peer into Lucas's soul. It made him feel like he was again dancing in the palm of this man. But the baron couldn't oppose his most powerful supporter. The prince was looking for a nouveau riche who would be useful for certain tasks and who would also speak his mind at times. It was a delicate line to toe.

"That's a boorish question to ask, is it not, Your Highness?" Lucas asked with a troubled smile. He tried to be as kind as possible, but the prince wouldn't let up and further demanded Lucas's opinion.

"I'd like to hear it from your mouth," Cyrus said. "I'd like to hear your confession that you've got feelings for a woman."

Lucas had no choice. He made his resolve and said, "It is emotional indeed. I love her very much."

The prince fell silent at Lucas's clear words. The baron gulped and waited with bated breath for his reaction. A few seconds later, Cyrus gave a hearty laughter.

"I see! I see! There's a woman who could make you wear such an expression!"

Lucas felt the air relax—it seemed he'd chosen the right answer.

"How interesting. I don't remember Iris Karelia very well, but I'll be sure to greet her at tonight's party," Cyrus said, standing up in high spirits. "I'm sure you've left your formal clothes and everything else behind at the hotel. Any preparations can be done here."

He left the room in a jovial mood. Once the door closed and Lucas was left alone in the room surrounded by photographs, he let out a sigh.

“Whew...”

He pushed his hair up and entrusted his tired body to the firm backrest.

“I’m grateful for him, but he’s... Never mind.”

No doubt, the middle-aged royal was a troublesome, whimsical man who was difficult to deal with, but his support had helped Lucas out greatly. Even as a young nouveau riche, he couldn’t oppose Cyrus. If being teased was all it took to put the prince in a good mood, it was a small price to pay.



THE sun began to set, and the skies grew crimson as we eagerly waited for the party to commence. I found myself held hostage in front of a dresser.

“U-Um, Coldola? This feels like too much makeup,” I said.

“What are you on about, madam? Compared to the other noble ladies, you still aren’t wearing enough!” Coldola replied firmly, her imported makeup kit filled both of her hands.

“Quite right!” another maid chimed in. “I’ve gone with you to the manors of various aristocrats for tea, and you can look a lot more beautiful!”

“This is a party, is it not?” said another.

Our employees and maids all spoke their opinions as they surrounded me.

“O-Okay...” I stammered.

“Hm, perhaps a pink with a stronger tint of blue will suit you better...” Coldola fretted over the colors as she laid several lipsticks out.

“Er, I’m not the main character here, but a supporting character from the shadows,” I said. “We don’t have to be so—”

“We must! This is your big day to settle things!” Coldola cried, cutting me off.

“That’s right! The legendary female knight, Marchioness Sylvia Silence, used fake blood to color her lips before battle! We must go all out, madam!”

“Th-Then I’ll leave you to it...” I replied, overwhelmed by everyone’s spirit.

I had them take care of my makeup for me. Even if I carelessly declined their

suggestions, I doubted they would listen. Kiki had caught me while I had been finalizing things for the party and was now happily combing my hair.

“I’ve got a beautiful hair ornament prepared, so we should style your hair to show it off. You’ll look lovely if you show off your nape, so we’ll do this...” Kiki said.

Seeing her style my hair so passionately made me happy. My usual tied-up hair was carefully curled with a hot iron and bounced on my shoulders.

“I used to do this for Airia’s hair all the time,” I said. “I’d thought that my dark hair would lack flair.”

“That’s not true at all!” Kiki protested, confidently lifting my hair and showing off my locks. “Look! Your hair is so shiny and beautiful!”

I smiled at her through the mirror.

“Ah!” Coldola suddenly exclaimed. “Hold that expression! We can brush up your cheeks like this and add some highlights...”

I was curious what she was doing, but as she looked so serious, I tried my best to smile and hold still. After about an hour had passed...

“And done!”

I finally faced the mirror and felt like I’d transformed into a different person.

“I...” I murmured.

My shoulders were revealed, and my shimmering, white silk low-cut bodice covered with stunning silver embroidery accentuated my chest. The ornately crinkled azure tulle flowed from my waist, the thin fabric creating a lovely gradient and allowing the embroidered flowers decorating my hem to peek through. It was like a curtain of night cast over a flower garden. My curled hair was down, and elegant powder glimmered on my shoulders and chest.

“You look beautiful, Lady Iris,” Kiki said beside me, sounding enchanted. Job done; she looked proud.

I had worn this dress before to check its design and fit, but I didn’t know it would give off a completely different impression with my hair and makeup done. My face looked more dignified than how I remembered it. I almost didn’t

recognize myself in the mirror.

“This powder is unique and mystical,” I noted. “It seems to glitter and shift colors depending on the angle.”

“It’s a new product, madam,” Coldola said, showing me the silver case. “It’s a powder mixed with crushed pearls. Under the chandelier, your skin will look creamy and lovely. I’ve brushed this powder on your neck, shoulders, décolleté, and upper back.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I wanted to see Lucas as soon as possible. As my emotions welled up within me, I felt a sting of sweet pain in my chest.

“Oh...” I gasped, checking my neck. The mark Lucas had left on me was gone.

“What’s wrong, madam? Is something the matter?” Coldola asked.

“N-Nothing at all,” I replied with a shake of my head. I placed a hand over my beating chest. I’d just gotten my makeup done, but the embarrassment I had forgotten until now was about to make me sweat.

“Lady Iris, here is the final touch,” Kiki said, respectfully bringing me a box.

Inside was a glittering necklace, a memento of my mother. I had hidden it for years so it wouldn’t be sold off. The necklace had turned dull over time, and I’d asked for one of the employees at the company in charge of accessories to polish it. The diamond was heavy on my collarbone—I felt like this was the weight of House Karelia.

“Is the other one ready as well?” I asked.

“It is! Right here!” Kiki said.

She took out a jewelry box that was separate from my necklace and opened it to show me what was inside. Nestled within the box was a lapel pin adorned with a sparkling diamond. It was a pair with the necklace that had decorated my chest and was embellished with gold.

“I can’t believe this used to be a ring. How beautiful,” I murmured, taking the pin in my hands.

I was in awe of how splendid it looked. It used to be a large ring that had twinkled on my mother's fingers. I received this broken keepsake and had asked a goldsmith to fix it into a lapel pin.

"I think Lucas can wear this," I said.

I gazed at myself in the mirror one more time. A woman wearing a silver necklace who looked much like my mother stared back at me. But unlike my mother, I held a gold lapel pin near my chest.

"I'm Iris Stock."

Just saying these words made my chest grow warm with joy and pride. I turned around to face the servants and employees, and they all looked back at me.

"Everyone," I said with a nod, answering their gazes. "Let's make today a success for our Lucas."



THE finishing touches for the party were a hectic affair, and in the blink of an eye, the party had begun. We turned on the lights when the sun started to set. The Karelia manor lit up brightly within the dark world. It was as though House Karelia had woken up from a lengthy slumber. The first guests to arrive were the other half of our main cast, House Streltsy.

It had been a while since I met Marquess Streltsy. As usual, he was tall and burly, fitting for a military officer. The wrinkles around his eyes had grown deeper when he smiled, but he was tan and sturdy as usual, making the healthy man seem more youthful than his age. It was a stark contrast to his paler and meeker son, Mikhail.

When he noticed me in the entrance as I ordered the servants about, the marquess raised his hand in greeting and smiled. I immediately greeted him with a ladylike bow.

"Lady Iris, despite marrying into a different family, I heard you prepared for tonight's party in lieu of your stepmother. I apologize for making you do all of this yourself," he said.

“Don’t mention it,” I replied. “We’ve known the Streltsys for generations. I’ve only done what is expected of me.”

He nodded at my words and gazed at the grand hall. “Tonight will be a night I shall never forget.”

The servants guided the members of House Streltsy into the waiting room. I noticed Mikhail staring at me, but I purposefully looked away. As he passed by me, his low voice whispered in my ear.

“As I thought, it’s a waste for you to be defiled by a canary from the coal mines.”

Goosebumps ran over my body when I heard his words. I hastily distanced myself from him. The edges of his lips curled up at my reaction as he gallantly disappeared deeper into the manor.

“Now’s not the time to let him get to me,” I said.

I took deep breaths and stood tall. The orchestra I had invited into the hall had finished setting up, and gentle music flowed from their corner. As though invited by the music, carriages passed through the gates of the Karelia manor. The wonderfully decorated entrance hall welcomed each guest. Max’s lovely voice echoed throughout the halls as he named each guest, and the true hosts of this party, my parents and Airia, greeted each person. I had been married into another family, so I took a step back and watched over them.

My father proudly showed off Airia in her gorgeous gown. I’d never seen my father smile so happily. He truly must’ve cherished her, and my heart ached when I thought about the events that would unfold tonight.

Just then, I caught sight of an elderly couple that slowly made their way through the entrance—Count Garner and his wife, whom I’d met in Solalitika. I rushed over to help the countess walk up the steps. The moment she saw me, she gave me a broad smile.

“Oh my, you came personally to help me,” she said. “Thank you, dear.”

“The long trip must’ve been tiring. I hope you’re still well?” I replied.

“I am. Will Lucas be here tonight as well?”

“Yes. We shall greet you both properly later.”

Count Garner gazed down at me with his usual stern expression. “I’ve heard that the young man will do something interesting tonight. Or so His Highness tells me.”

He narrowed his cunning eyes as though he was looking forward to seeing how we’d fare. The count was on friendly terms with the third prince and had likely been told what would occur tonight. Not everyone at the party was unaware of what would unfold tonight. Some knew about Lucas and His Highness’s intentions. And...

“Marquess and Marchioness Postis have arrived!” Max’s voice boomed throughout the hall.

My heart skipped a beat when I turned around. Marquess and Marchioness Postis were greeting my parents and Marquess and Marchioness Streltsy. Lucas had told me that House Postis was one of the families belonging to the first prince’s faction. In addition, Marquess Postis was the man who had recommended a gambling arena controlled by the first prince to my father—the very man who had secretly tried to lead the Karelias to ruin.

For a moment, I felt dizzy with anger and sadness, but I held my head high, took a deep breath, and pushed my feelings down. It would do me no good to break out into a furious rage here.

They didn’t even glance my way as they entered the hall for a pleasant chat. I was relieved I didn’t have to talk with them, and I calmed myself down to maintain my coolheaded attitude. Naturally, enemies would enter this manor tonight. I couldn’t let my guard down. Suddenly, the orchestra started playing their music louder, welcoming the new guests.

The royal family started to make their appearance. Though the Karelias only held the title of marquess, they were part of the Traditional Twelve, an ancient household dating back to the founding era of this kingdom. The third prince, his son, Doctor Raphaie Carise, and his wife arrived to represent the royal family.

Like a wave, the aristocrats bowed to the royal family. The hosts, the Karelia and the Streltys, greeted His Highness and his relatives. Both my parents looked excited as they introduced Airia to them. The third prince looked away

from my rambling father and gave a sweeping glance around the hall. He found me hidden behind the furniture, widened his friendly, droopy eyes, and exaggeratedly waved toward me, beckoning me to approach him.

“You must be Iris. Come here!” the third prince boomed loudly.

My father looked flabbergasted by the prince’s words. “M-My daughter has already been married off,” my father stammered. “Her current rank is unfitting to be in your presence...”

“Oh, don’t be so stiff!” His Highness said loudly. “I’d like to speak with her.”

No one could oppose the prince’s orders. I approached him and curtsied. After he told me to raise my head, I found him staring at me intently while nodding several times.

“I see. So, this is what *he* likes. Very well, you may return to your duties. You must be busy,” His Highness said.

“Excuse me,” I replied.

The third prince seemed to have come to an understanding as he shifted his demeanor and entered the circle of aristocrats. Behind him was his son—a doctor I was indebted to—Marquess Raphaie Carise, and his wife. They greeted me quickly before leaving as well, following the third prince. Only I was left behind, staring after them in surprise.

“Iris,” my father said, approaching me. “Since when have you gotten so friendly with the king’s younger brother?”

“You’re misunderstanding the situation,” I answered. “I met him for the first time just now.”

“Then why did he call out to you, a mere nouveau riche’s chit?” he asked angrily, his nose flaring.

If my dress had a collar, he surely would have grabbed it. I stepped away from my father. I tried my best to remain as calm as I could.

“Do calm yourself, Father,” I replied in a tempered tone. “You don’t want to attract a crowd, do you? My husband, Baron Stock, has procured some items for His Highness. That may be why he was interested in seeing me.”

“Hmph,” my father scoffed.

He didn’t agree with my reasoning, but he was more worried about appearances and calmed himself. But before he left, he stepped toward me and whispered in my ear in a low voice filled with disdain.

“Iris, you’ve grown to resemble your cheeky mother in all the worst ways. Remember this well. You’re only the lowly baroness wife of a nouveau riche called in to help with this party. You’re no longer a woman from Karelia. Don’t stand out anymore and vanish like air.”

“I understand,” I replied, my expression schooled into a perfect mask of submission.

Being meek irritated him as well. He tried to open his mouth to insult me again, but Max’s clear voice rang out.

“Count and Countess Klaus have arrived!”

My father’s expression darkened as he fled to a spot where he wouldn’t stand out. My stepmother and sister hastily followed behind. Lucas may have paid off the debt, but my father still held an awkward and rocky relationship with my uncle.

In lieu of my father, who didn’t provide a greeting or even a bit of etiquette, I welcomed my aunt and uncle, who were dressed in beautiful attire fitting for evening balls. My uncle must’ve seen what had just occurred, for he closed one eye and gave me a meaningful stare.

“You’re doing very well, Iris,” he said. “Quite splendid.”

“Thank you, dear uncle,” I replied.

“It’s as though the Karelia manor has been reborn. I know that all the furniture here is new, but it feels like I’ve been taken back in time to when Louisa was still with us.”

My uncle’s eyes were distant as he gazed at the lively hall. As my uncle had stated, I had all the preserved furniture carefully polished, and any damaged items were repaired and made anew. I did as much as I could with the time and money allotted to me.

“Though not everyone will put it into words, they all clearly understand you and Baron Stock’s efforts. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone knew that House Karelia was falling into ruin,” my uncle said.

“You’re too kind,” I replied.

“Half of this party is to demonstrate and show off the items, isn’t it? You’ve got employees placed all around. Absolutely wonderful and clever.” He glanced at Coldola, who was all dressed up for the occasion. She was at the table with light snacks, explaining the unusual cutlery to an intrigued crowd of ladies.

“This is magnificent, Iris,” my uncle said. “Had your mother still been alive, she would’ve grown teary with excitement. You’ve grown into a wonderful lady I’m proud to call my niece.”

My aunt, who had just finished greeting the other ladies, smiled at me. “I remember that pendant very well. To see it glitter once more makes me feel so optimistic about the future.”

“Aunt Miazea...” I murmured.

“But are you all right spending time with us here?” she replied, innocently winking like a young girl. Her pink lipstick suited her lips very well as she formed a knowing smile. “I just saw an unusual carriage pass through the gates. It looked like it belonged to a *certain* baron, my dear.”

The instant I heard those words, it was as though spring bloomed around me. I felt like a warm wind had welled up from within me. The count and countess glanced at each other before sending me off with a brilliant smile.

“Go on. I’m sure your husband is dying to see you, too,” Uncle Kaizert said.



MY next actions were surely unfitting for a lady. I bowed to my aunt and uncle, told Leik he needn’t escort me, and flew out of the entrance hall. The sun had already set, and orange light illuminated the garden, guiding me to my destination. The full moon paled in comparison to the amber eyes I longed to see. I pinched the sides of my dress and tried my best not to trip in my high heels as I rushed through the gardens as fast as I could. When the familiar carriage entered my vision, I ran even faster.

From the carriage emerged a man with vibrant, canary-yellow hair that stood out in a crowd. The tall man noticed me, widened his eyes, and gave me a joyful smile.

“Lucas!” I cried, unable to suppress my glee.

He outstretched his arms to welcome me, and I jumped into them like a child running into their father’s arms.

“Iris!” he replied.

He easily caught me. As my legs lifted into the air, one of my heels dropped onto the ground with a faint clatter. Lucas beamed at me as he looked up at my face.

“I thought that a magpie had flown into my arms. Hi, Iris,” he said. His amber eyes, which I found so dear, squinted at me, causing a sweet sting to pierce my heart.

“I’ve been dying to see you, Lucas,” I confessed.

“I’m honored. I felt the same.”

My tense nerves eased; I was so comfortable in his arms that I wanted to stay with him and never let go.

“Heh, I didn’t think a regal lady like you would fly into my arms the moment you saw my face,” Lucas said, wrapping his arms tighter around my back, my feet still hovering in the air as he held me up.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and brought his head close. When I closed my eyes, his warmth and scent filled my body, and for the first time, I realized that I’d been sad and lonely without him. I was filled with an inexplicable sense of happiness. I loved him so dearly.

After a short while of staying like that, I heard someone clear their throat. When Lucas and I turned around, we saw Leik picking up my shoe and cleaning it.

“A-Ah, Leik, thank you for picking up my shoe,” I said, growing embarrassed as I suddenly acknowledged the stinging pain in my feet from having run in heels.

“I didn’t want to disturb you two, but I thought it best to interfere before my

lady's makeup was ruined. So, you know..." Leik replied.

"Right. A wise decision," Lucas said, receiving the polished high heel.

Our butler quietly opened the carriage door. "I'm sure you've got some matters you'd like to catch up on. I can probably keep people at bay for about ten minutes or so."

"I, uh, e-er..." I stammered.

Lucas still had me in his arms, and since I was missing a shoe, I could do nothing but let him do as he pleased. He carried me into the carriage before I could protest.

Within the enclosed space, a serious expression replaced his smile as he held me extra close. His embrace felt different from just moments ago, leaving me baffled. Lucas placed his hand behind my exposed back and stroked me gently.

"The incident with your ex-fiancé must've scared you," he whispered.

My heart skipped a beat for both good and bad reasons. "Uh, um... You knew?"

"Of course."

A hint of anger tinged his narrowed amber eyes. I remembered the disgust and guilt I felt when Mikhail had touched me.

"I'm so sorry. I'm your wife, and yet..." I started.

I felt filthy because I had been touched by another man. I tried to move away from my husband, but Lucas held me closer still and hugged me tightly.

"Why are *you* apologizing?" he asked in a low voice. "The fact that you're apologizing because of that shitty bastard makes me even angrier at him."

His words and tight embrace were quite uncouth, but my husband's kindness seeped into my body.

"Lucas, could you loosen your hold for a moment?" I asked. "I'd like to give you something."

"Hm?"

He did as I asked, and I took out a jewelry case from my hidden pocket. I

opened it and showed him what was inside. His amber eyes widened in astonishment.

“That’s...” he murmured.

“I wanted us to match, so I had it remade for men,” I explained.

“Are you sure? Isn’t this a treasure of House Karelia?”

“I can only offer you the tradition that the Karelias hold. I’d like you to have this stone and engrave a new tradition with your own hands.”

I undid the pin and fixed it to Lucas’s collar. When I looked up at him, he was staring straight at me. His left hand stroked my cheek, and his thumb touched the mole by my eye.

“As I said before, I was eager to meet you,” he murmured. “You...look beautiful today too.”

“Lucas...”

He loosened his hold on me, took my left hand, and placed his lips near my fingers, just like he’d done the day he had left his mark.

“I’ve been cautioned not to ruin your makeup, but when this is all over... You better be prepared,” Lucas smiled with a gaze that resembled a beast.

I could only nod quietly.

And so, several minutes had passed.

“Iris, uh, are you all right?” Lucas asked worriedly.

“Y-Yes,” I replied as I clung to him while I tried to walk.

Even I could tell that I staggered dangerously in my heels. I’d pushed myself to run and was overcome with a myriad of emotions, so my feet felt unsteady, like I would trip at any moment.

“Um, are you sure I’m not leaning on you too much?” I asked.

“I’m fine. I’ll take responsibility.” Lucas smiled down at me. “It’s hard to imagine you ran to me in high heels just moments ago.”

“That was quite unladylike of me,” I admitted.

I grew embarrassed as I became all too aware of my actions. *I'm glad that no one was watching, but to run out and jump into his arms is much too...*

As I looked down at my feet, I staggered again; Lucas's support kept me standing.

"Thank you," I said.

"Come on, let's give it all we've got," Lucas said, gently patting my back.

"Yes."

Now, I had nothing to fear.

Together with Lucas, I stepped into the bright hall. Lucas's name was loudly announced, and the royal family and the nobility all focused on my husband. Lucas stood proud and tall, confidently walking in his formal attire and emanating a distinct air of elegance. He blended in with the nobility as though it were only natural, but his glittering, canary-yellow hair made him stand out. His suit had spots of vermillion embroidery that accentuated his appearance without looking too gaudy. His manners were perfect—it was as though a high-ranking nobleman had possessed his legs and eyes. I walked beside him, supported by his sturdy body. It was like floating in a dream. I heard whispers all around me.

"I've never seen him before. Who is that nobleman?"

"The dark-haired woman beside him...is a daughter of House Karelia."

"It can't be... Is he the rumored nouveau riche?"

The murmurs of the ladies rang out through the hall, and my husband bent down and whispered into my ear.

"We're the center of attention, huh?" he spoke casually with a hint of amusement.

"Of course," I whispered back. "Everyone has been dying to meet Baron Stock."

"Or maybe it's because I've got a wife more beautiful than anyone here."

"That's not true, I..."

I reflexively tried to deny those claims, but I stopped myself. I had borrowed everyone's efforts and Lucas's money to be dressed up so wonderfully—it didn't seem right to be self-deprecating out of habit whenever I received praise.

"Iris?" Lucas asked, tilting his head to one side.

I'd fallen silent and stared into his eyes. Under the shadow of the chandelier, his amber eyes turned more intense as I saw myself reflected in them. Without a shred of doubt, I was the one by his side. *He's so dear to me, and he's treasured me so much. I shouldn't belittle myself.*

"Thank you...for your praise," I managed to say.

Lucas looked surprised before pridefully squinting his eyes as though he were the one receiving the compliment. "You're the pride and joy of a man who's captured the crowd's attention. Keep being confident as my wife," he replied.

"I shall."

I grew embarrassed and nervous, unable to hold his ardent gaze any longer. He gave a small chuckle.

"You're adorable."

"I-I'd appreciate it if you would refrain from any more compliments. It's quite embarrassing..." I said, his husky voice ticklish to my ears.

I pretended to fix my earrings as I rubbed my warm earlobes. Suddenly, the air around my husband shifted—he was looking ahead with a stern gaze at Mikhail Streltsy. Mikhail flashed a fearless and genial smile. There was still quite some distance between the two men, but a battle of glares had begun. Lucas tightened the grip he had on my waist. Amidst this moment of tension, the one to break it with her shrill shriek of joy was Airia.

"Wow!" she cried. "Who *is* that handsome man?! Are you perhaps Baron Stock?!"

Her face grew red as she jumped a little in the air. Her porcelain skin and golden curls were accentuated by the sweet colors of her dress, making her seem like an adorably dressed piece of candy. Numerous ribbons decorated her hair and had been sewn onto her sleeves and skirt. Every time she moved, she

floated like a butterfly. Her luxurious attire was fitting for the star of tonight's party, a treasure of the Karelías.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Lady Airia. Congratulations on your engagement. I'm delighted to hear that the dress is to your liking," Lucas said with a perfectly crafted smile, respectfully greeting my sister.

He spoke without an accent in flawless speech fitting for the royal capital. I couldn't believe he'd spoken casually into my ear just moments before. My sister placed both hands over her cheeks, her face turning redder as Lucas showed her how kind and suave he was.

"Are you Baron Stock? Are you *really*? Seriously?" she asked, her gaze flicking between us.

"Indeed, I am," Lucas replied.

"I'm so surprised! Everyone pitied my sister and said that she'd been married off to a scary and dangerous nouveau riche! This is so unfair!" I could tell she stomped her feet a little.

I grew exasperated at the number of rude remarks she fit into a sentence as she gazed at Lucas with sparkling eyes.

"You truly are an amusing lady," Lucas said.

"Baron Stock, may I call you by your name?" she asked. "What's your first name?"

"Lucas, my lady. But perhaps doing so would cause me to be reprimanded by your fiancé. I do hope for your understanding."

"Lucas! I see, so your name is *Lucas*!" she exaggerated his name. "It's a wonderful name fitting for a man with beautiful hair like you! It reminds me of a baby chick!"

"Oh dear, please be lenient on calling my name..." Lucas smiled at my squealing sister before he glanced at me as though to ask, "Is she really your sister?" I nodded. She was, without a doubt, my younger sister.

"Hello, Baron Stock," another voice said.

I shuddered as I turned toward the owner of the voice. My former fiancé,

Mikhail, smiled gently as he approached us.

“It seems Iris has been in your care. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Mikhail said with a grin, extending his hand for a handshake.

Lucas gazed down at him, narrowed his eyes, and smiled while grabbing his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Mikhail Streltsy. I’m quite unfamiliar with the etiquette of the royal capital, so I never knew that you could call the name of a married baroness so casually.”

“I’m not unacquainted with Iris, you see. Or are you perhaps displeased despite your *mariage blanc*?”



As the two shook hands, the situation felt like it would turn explosive at any moment. Sparks flew between them. Mikhail gazed at me as though he were licking me all over with his eyes. The moment he opened his mouth to speak, the tension between the two was immediately dispelled by a third party.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Marquess Streltsy said, approaching us with his wife.

Even Mikhail acted meek and obedient in front of his father. Lucas remained confident and firm but softened his expression to fit the moment.

“You must be Baron Stock,” Marquess Streltsy said

“Pleased to meet you, Marquess Streltsy,” Lucas said. “It’s truly an honor to meet the famous admiral of the Battle of Lionel.”

“I’ve often heard about your business overseas as well. I’m happy to be acquainted with you.”

Unlike his son, Marquess Streltsy looked at Lucas favorably. While I couldn’t tell his innermost thoughts, the marquess wanted to be friendly with Lucas on the surface, at the very least. As he’d stated, since he was often at sea, he’d likely heard of Stock Trading Company’s president, Lucas Stock.

Marchioness Streltsy stood beside her husband and looked composed but never tried to meet Lucas’s eye. The two men were engaged in small talk while trying to gauge the other’s intentions. Meanwhile, Leik silently approached me.

“My lady, all the guests on the list have arrived,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “Please report that to my father.”

Leik disappeared once more. Lucas and I glanced at each other and nodded. Our battle was about to begin.



THE music that welcomed the guests into the hall stopped as all the guests naturally turned to my father. He beamed brightly at them and happily began his greetings. Beside my father was Marquess Streltsy, who stood proud and tall. He had a long greeting of his own to give after my father. Mikhail and Airia stood beside each other between the two families. Since Lucas and I were of

lower rank and only their relatives, we stood a distance away and watched over the happy families. It was then that the gossip reached my ears.

“Wasn’t the eldest daughter of the Karelias set to marry him?”

“Why did they have the one with Karelia blood marry a nouveau riche?”

“Even if she seems to be doing quite well...”

“What will the Karelias do about their bloodline?”

Though the aristocrats spoke behind their hands or fans, I could hear the gossip quite clearly. I was sure some were making sure they’d be heard. My past self would’ve felt guilty for standing out unnecessarily, but I was with Lucas today. I had nothing to fear. I kept an indifferent expression as I stared at my father.

Under the light of the chandelier and gathering the attention of the crowd, Marquess Karelia was dressed in new formal clothes and looked the happiest I’d ever seen him. He was a man who only thought about the present and had been obsessed with the fact that he’d lived in the shadow of my late mother.

Mikhail Streltsy, standing beside a blushing and smiling Airia, was trying to destroy his fiancée while trying to bring me back into the Karelias. He then planned on stealing me away from Lucas. From an outsider looking in, this may have seemed like an ill-matched engagement, but in the shadows, this was a union between a person who was walking toward ruin and a person who wanted ruin. Indeed, they suited each other quite well.

“Now then, before we guide you to the banquet...” Marquess Streltsy said, gazing at Lucas and me. “I’d like to use this opportunity to thank the people who prepared for this day: Baron Lucas Stock and his wife, the daughter of Marquess Karelia, and the late Louisa Karelia, Baroness Iris Stock.”

Lucas took my hand, and we both stepped forward. I gazed up at my husband, shining brilliantly under the chandelier. His yellow hair had been tidied to hide his curls, and it looked as if he were glittering from within. As I stood in awe of him, he squinted his eyes softly at me like a prince from a fairy tale. The hand that held mine was soft and firm, telling me to entrust everything to him. He confidently directed his amber gaze to the crowd.

“I thank Marquess Streltsy for graciously introducing me. My name is Lucas Stock, husband of Iris, who was born into the house of Marquess Karelia. I’d like to ask forgiveness for my insolence, but if you’d allow me to use this opportunity to introduce myself, I will be most honored.”

Since when was he able to speak so flawlessly? It was as though he was born and raised in the aristocratic society of the royal capital. His clear, beautiful intonation and choice of words caused those who initially looked at my husband oddly to change their opinion as Lucas smiled and showed off his etiquette. Once he bowed, a soft applause rang out. We exchanged a glance as we decided to use this timing to convict Mikhail. Just then, another voice cut through the applause before Lucas could speak again.

“Wait!” Mikhail Streltsy suddenly bellowed, his long, golden hair fluttering around his shoulders. “Tonight, I’d like to make something clear in front of all of you.” He pointed at Lucas and declared, “I’d like to use this opportunity to reveal Lucas Stock’s crimes!”

I gulped at the sudden turn of events while my husband tightened his hold on my hand. The crowd started to murmur as Lucas and Mikhail faced each other. My husband shrugged and directed a faint smile toward Mikhail.

“You surprised me with such a sudden claim. And what crime am I guilty of?” Lucas asked.

Mikhail didn’t answer as he calmly looked around the room. “Everyone, do you not find it odd? He’s still young and born into the working class of Westmierden. How was he able to take a bride from the Karelias, part of the Traditional Twelve?”

Both my family and the Streltys looked confused by this sudden development. I took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. Mikhail must’ve sensed that he’d be convicted and decided to launch the first strike. No matter how hard Lucas tried, a new aristocrat like him didn’t have many friends here. Mikhail wanted to use Lucas’s standing over proof to back us into a corner. Mikhail looked at me, narrowing his eyes with pity.

“I’d like to tell everyone my suspicions about him for Lady Iris, who admirably sacrificed herself to the nouveau riche for her household,” he said.

Confused whispers danced around the guests. As the earlier gossip proved, Lucas and I were viewed with curiosity. I could sense everyone grabbing onto this sudden yet interesting show. Mikhail drew their attention as he outstretched his arms theatrically.

“Five years ago, I left our island nation to study abroad on the continent. I have continued my relations with the friends I made there and have obtained some shady news. Within the unauthorized zones of the Beria Kingdom, the citizens of our nation have been forced to work like slaves under the guise of being ‘servants.’” He heard the audience stir as he dramatically slumped his shoulders and continued. “I’ve heard that Baron Stock has been importing a good number of Marmaria stone slabs. That was an item that only the Bearbrooks Trading Company had been able to import into our nation until now. Yet, how can a simple commoner from Westmierden, the town of coal, accomplish this feat? Do you not find this unusual?”

I felt curious gazes focus on my husband, who stood tall next to me. But Lucas maintained his gentle expression.

“As you say, I was born in Westmierden,” Lucas said. “When my mother, a former nun, had passed away, Count Garner graciously took me in. I then developed some connections that allowed me to catch the eye of His Highness, the third prince, and received ship assistance from the port city of Solalitika, a city I’d gotten friendly with when I transported coal. That allowed me to successfully import Marmaria stone slabs—I’ve got nothing to hide about my past. The information you received from the Beria Kingdom has nothing to do with me. Pray tell me, how does your information connect to myself?”

Mikhail shook his head, his hair swaying. “How it connects to you isn’t an issue right now. These suspicions are more than enough. I’m making this claim because I fear that perhaps even His Highness is being fooled by a dubious man like you.”

He’s not doubting the prince but worried for him. He’s phrasing it quite well.

My former fiancé continued confidently, “To gain a route to acquire Marmaria stone slabs, he may have sold off slaves to the unauthorized zones of the Beria Kingdom. You all must be aware of the rumors swirling around him. The

servants working under him seemingly vanish into thin air. No one can track where they go.”

Indeed, such rumors did circulate in the royal capital in the past. However, they were baseless rumors with no evidence. Still, Mikhail’s tactic was highly effective as he solidified these rumors into firm claims.

“In addition, look at his canary-yellow hair,” Mikhail bellowed. “Surely, you’re aware that his striking hair color originates from Lapisasther, a nation of the sea? I’m sure those in the navy will be familiar with this color.”

“Indeed...” someone from the crowd murmured.

“So, he’s not simply dyeing his hair...” a woman whispered.

“Trade certainly flourishes in Lapisasther, but it’s a nation known for its lack of resources, limited acreage, and unstable soil,” Mikhail said. “Forty years ago, it remained a neutral nation during the Battle of Lionel and cannot be trusted. What if he has connections to Lapisasther? He clearly holds blood from another nation. What’s more, he’s gained the hand of Lady Iris, a daughter of the proud and dignified Traditional Twelve. Do you not all believe that there may be some sort of shadow of conspiracy looming behind all this?”

The guests grew noisy, murmuring amongst themselves. My parents and sister seemed confused by it all, glancing around quizzically. Marchioness Streltsy clenched her fan and glared at Lucas. However, for some reason, only Marquess Streltsy sternly glared at his son, Mikhail Streltsy, and pursed his lips.

While the guests started to chatter louder, Lucas didn’t seem fazed. He didn’t refute his words and stared at Mikhail. His yellow eyelashes formed a clear shadow over his amber eyes, his vibrant gaze flashing like the sunset and the color of flickering fire. Not once did he look away from his prey—I knew these eyes all too well and the meaning behind them. His reliable nature caused excitement to well up in my chest.

Mikhail, unable to contain his impatience at my husband’s silence, pointed a finger at Lucas. “Baron Lucas Stock!” he roared. “If you truly are innocent, I’d like you to prove yourself!”

Prove his innocence? The suspicions cast on Lucas were unclear and vague, to

begin with; even if the guests were on Mikhail's side, that wouldn't change. My husband remained quiet, waiting for the noise to die down. He slowly took a deep breath and smiled.

"Very well," Lucas said. "I shall admit that I have something to hide." He gave an exaggerated shrug and raised his hand in the air while sighing.

"Are you admitting to these suspicions?" Mikhail asked intently.

Lucas didn't answer and instead put on an air of dignity while glancing at the third prince seated on the sofa, watching over this affair. His Highness quietly nodded, and Lucas took that as his cue to glance around the room and smile faintly.

"I'm sure you must all be very tired, but I'd appreciate it if you heard me out until the end," Lucas said. "Ladies, it must be especially exhausting for you to remain standing. Why don't you sit down on a nearby sofa and relax? Leik, please provide everyone with drinks and snacks."

"No!" Mikhail roared. "There are no guarantees that the food and drinks here are safe! You mustn't touch them!"

"If you can't trust me that much, Leik, bring that wine over here."

Following orders, Leik approached his master without a sound, a bottle of wine in his hand. Upon seeing his silver hair flutter down his shoulders, I heard someone whisper, "He's a dog!"

Lucas smiled kindly at the guests. "This is the wine that my butler had coincidentally tried to serve. Sir Mikhail, why don't you select a random glass within this venue? I shall pour this into a glass and drink."

"Very well," Mikhail said, glancing around.

He selected a random glass, and Leik picked it up and brought it back. The butler gave Lucas the glass and poured in the red wine that glittered a deep garnet under the lights of the chandelier.

"Go on. Drink up," Mikhail said, motioning with his chin.

"I shall," my husband said. He raised the glimmering glass under the chandelier, showing it off, and downed it in one gulp. "Does this satisfy you?"

Lucas asked, licking his lips. He squinted his eyes at my former fiancé and grinned. Enchanted sighs escaped from the ladies.

“Very well,” Mikhail conceded.

The guests sat on the sofas, gazing at us as if watching a wonderful play. A wagon brought in some light snacks, which were laid out on the tables.

“Now then,” Lucas said, confirming that everyone had settled in for the show. He turned to Mikhail. “Before I start, my wife would like to ask you one thing, Marchioness Streltsy.”

My husband put a hand on my back as encouragement, and I stepped forward. It was better for me, a woman with power and a part of the Traditional Twelve, to start this off instead of Lucas, who could easily be scorned because of his lower rank.

“Marchioness Streltsy, as a woman who manages the affairs of a noble house every day while the marquess isn’t present, I’d like to be frank with you,” I said. “Is there a reason behind frequently changing out your servants?”

The marchioness jolted, likely not expecting a question to be thrown her way. “There are various reasons behind it,” she answered. “Some are unsuitable to serve a marquess, and each servant has their own circumstances. I can’t go through each person in detail.”

“Can you provide the identification papers of each person? We may not find every person, but we certainly can track a good majority of them,” I said.

“Wh-What are you on about? Why would you need to track them down?” The marchioness’s hands trembled, hinting that she knew full well what I was referring to.

“As your son had stated earlier, there are rumors of slaves from our nation within the unauthorized zones of the Beria Kingdom,” I went on, undaunted. “Coupled with the recent slew of bodies found within the royal capital, there are suspicions that these victims have all originated from the disappearing servants of House Streltsy.”

“D-Don’t say something so baseless!” she cried.

“Quite so, Iris,” Mikhail said. “Just because you treasure your husband, you mustn’t cast doubts on my noble family. Or are you perhaps being blackmailed by Baron Stock?”

“Kiki, over here,” I said, turning around and calling for my maid.

The guests followed my gaze. Kiki, her legs trembling, appeared while being supported by Leik. Her face was pale, but her green eyes stared at me as she nodded bravely and smiled. She was illuminated by the chandelier and forced under the curious gazes of the aristocrats, only to face the man who had caused her misery. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the turmoil she was going through. As Leik was on one side of her, I took the other and sandwiched Kiki between us while holding her hand.

“My name is Kiki Russetbrown. Do you remember me?”

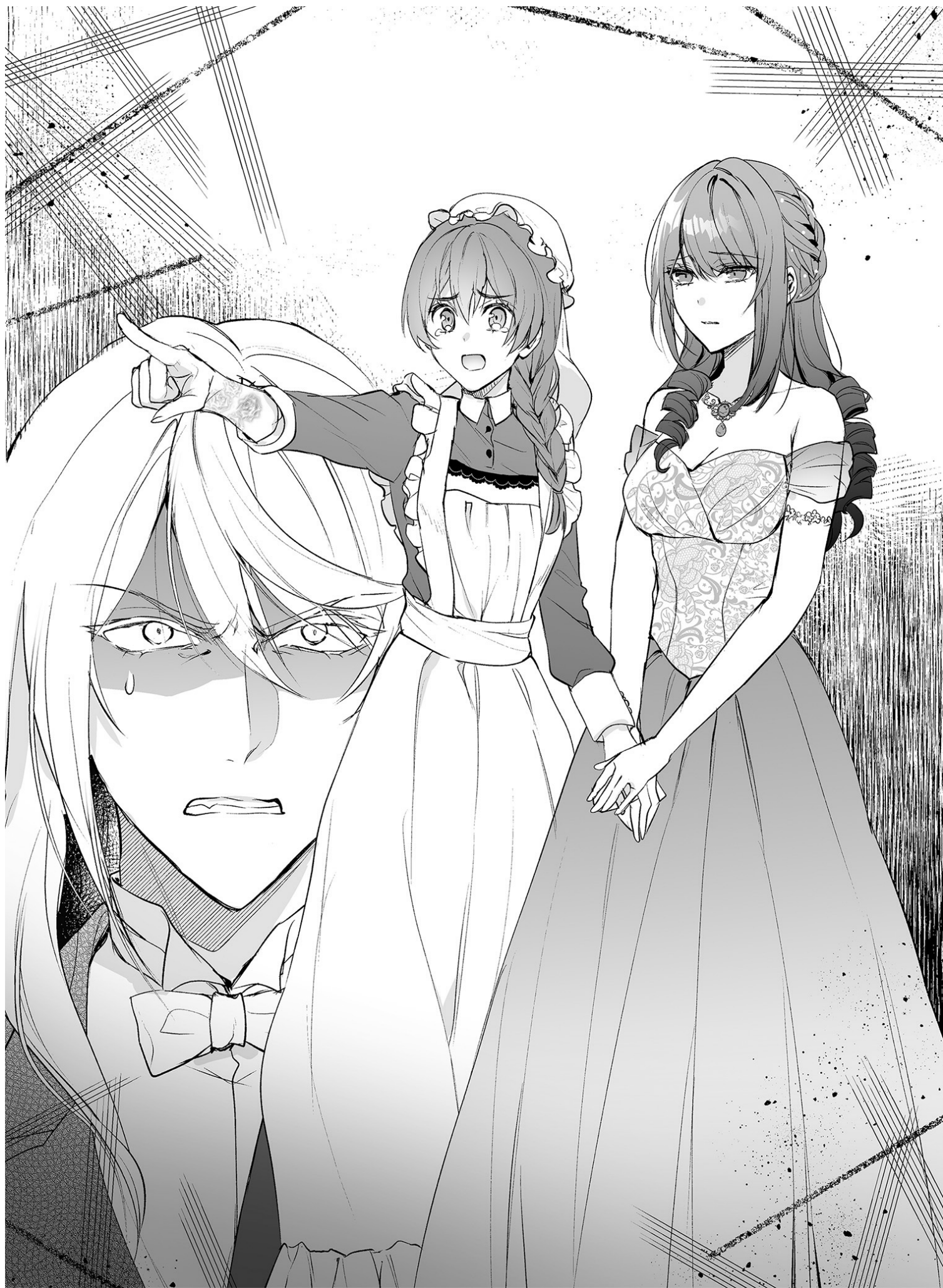
Mikhail remained stiff, but the marchioness’s eyes flickered, implying that she was very familiar with Kiki.

“Four years ago, when I was eleven, I worked for Marquess Streltsy,” my maid started. “Please listen to my story.”

Her voice trembled, and the room grew dead silent.

“My suspicions began when I first started working within the royal capital manor. I couldn’t recall anything I’d done at night. My body felt weird, but I chalked it up to my imagination. But as many nights passed, I realized that I couldn’t recall my nights at all, no matter how hard I tried. It was as though I’d been in a deep slumber. I’d always been a light sleeper and would jolt awake at any sound, but when I started working for House Streltsy, I started sleeping so deeply. In exchange, I started to see fearsome dreams.”

As she spoke, Leik must’ve thought that a man shouldn’t be by her side. The butler tried to leave, but Kiki gripped his sleeve. She smiled at Leik and undid her cuffs, revealing a bruise shaped like a blue rose on her arm. The guests murmured amongst themselves.



“My entire body is covered with these marks. It’s apparently a symptom of Blue Drop Flower Disease, according to a doctor from the Royal Medicinal Institution,” Kiki said. “No matter how many baths I take and how hard I scrub, it won’t disappear. Every time I had a nightmare at the Streltsy’s manor, more bruises appeared on my body. I thought I was affected by a terrifying illness. Out of fear, I consulted Marchioness Streltsy, but she waved it off as a ‘common illness.’ I remember her words very well.”

The marchioness looked away, and Kiki continued. “One day, I had an upset stomach and couldn’t eat a bite of dinner. That night, I oddly couldn’t sleep at all, and I noticed that *he* had slipped into my bed... It wasn’t a nightmare at all... It was all real.”

She pointed at Mikhail, and my former fiancé only gazed at Kiki, expressionless.

“You...knew I didn’t drink the medicine that night, didn’t you?” Kiki said, struggling to get her story out. “The next day, I was suddenly...forced to ingest some sort of drug, and when I came to, I was inside of an unknown cargo wagon. I thought...I’d be taken somewhere terrifying, so I fled. And then...so many things happened. I was unable to regain my memories...but finally, I met Lord Lucas and lived with Lady Iris, and I finally, *finally* was able to remember my past.”

The moment she finished, Kiki sobbed and fell to the floor. I went on my knees with her and hugged her tightly as she wept and clung to me like a child. I noticed Airia tremble in the background, her face filled with anxiety.

“Airia, the mark Kiki just showed us is the same as the one on your chest,” I said. “Do you not remember something similar occurring? Have you never gotten sleepy after ingesting something while at House Streltsy?”

“N-No, I... Lord Mikhail! I...” Airia peered down at her chest before she turned pale and clutched onto her fiancé.

Mikhail gazed down at Airia coldly. “There’s a probability that the maid’s lying, isn’t there? She might be colluding with Lucas Stock to bring House Streltsy to ruin.”

Lucas silently stood in front of us as though shielding Kiki from the horrible man.

“She’s not the only bit of proof I’ve got. Kiki, you’ve done enough,” my husband said as he knelt and patted Kiki on the head, a gesture she often said she found comforting. “Thank you. You can retire in the back now. Could you call for the others?”

“Of course!” Kiki replied with a nod. She borrowed Leik’s hand and swiftly went to where Lucas instructed. As Lucas gazed at her worriedly, he turned to Mikhail and flashed a fearless smile.

“What’s so funny?” Mikhail snarled, no longer looking so relaxed.

Lucas looked around. “As the son of Marquess Streltsy claims, I cannot blame you all for finding me as a suspicious nouveau riche merchant. I understand how difficult it is to gain your trust. And so...”

People flooded into the room.

“What?! How?!” Marchioness Streltsy gasped in horror.

My husband’s grin widened as he addressed all the nobles in attendance. “I’ll spare no expense to obtain your trust. I’ve swiftly hired every single servant that has worked or is currently working for House Streltsy to have them testify.”

More than twenty servants appeared. Men and women of all ages emerged, and I recognized a few house stewards and kitchen maids who were there when I was still engaged to Mikhail.

“I had them testify within the Royal Medicinal Institution, under the jurisdiction of His Highness, the third prince,” Lucas declared. “Those reluctant to show their faces here are currently sheltered within the institution. With all these statements, while there may be a few discrepancies in minute details, the truth shall be revealed.”

“How unfair! You can’t just use money like that!” Marchioness Streltsy shouted.

Lucas revealed a troubled smile. “I’m terribly sorry, but money is all I have, personally. I have also received the cooperation of anyone related who

frequented your manor, gardeners, and other merchants.” He closed one eye, grinning broadly from ear to ear.

“What?! I...” the marchioness gasped.

“The views of the Royal Medicinal Institution should be provided by an expert, not someone like myself,” Lucas said.

Following these words, Marquess Raphaie Carise stepped forward. He was the doctor who had examined Kiki. Once everyone bowed to him, he announced the details of his findings, Kiki’s symptoms, the symptoms of the corpses that were found, and the bodies of the slaves found within the Beria Kingdom. He also noted that the drug Leik had risked his life to carry out matched the drug that the institution had obtained.

Even the men in attendance clasped a hand over their mouths at the atrocious truth and murmured with horror. A few ladies started to cry.

“How could this be?”

“Citizens from our kingdom were being sold off to another nation by one of our own?”

“We’re currently using the Stock Trading Firm’s ship to shelter those who have been sold off,” Marquess Carise said. “For better or worse, most of the victims are young girls; the Royal Medicinal Institution plans on protecting these ladies.”

Once Marquess Carise finished, not one person could open their mouths to speak. Even Airia froze while still clutching Mikhail’s arm.

“That is a lie!” Mikhail roared, cutting through the silence. “You mustn’t believe this farce! It’s all a trap to ruin me!”

His initial relaxed manner was nowhere to be seen as he desperately tried to reason with the crowd of his peers. “As a person who’s studied abroad, I know very well that the Beria Kingdom and our nation have nothing to do with each other due to religious reasons! In contrast, is this not odd? Is this not bizarre?! How can a mere commoner who became a nouveau riche merchant have connections to the royal family?”

The tables had turned. Lucas narrowed his eyes on Mikhail and smiled. “Indeed, it’s precisely because the Beria Kingdom had no ties with us due to religious issues that it was a convenient place to sell off our people. However...” My husband put an arm around my shoulders and brought me close to him. “My wife, Iris, had gotten quite friendly with the royal family of the Orient during her academy days. The Orient has a good relationship with the Beria Kingdom because of the trading of fine china and porcelain. And so, I was able to quickly and efficiently gain evidence that you’ve frequented that kingdom, Lord Mikhail.”

“Iris!” Mikhail growled, hatred filling his eyes.

But the truth wouldn’t change. I touched my long hair, which had been called dull and plain.

“My dark hair is rare within this kingdom, but it’s quite common in the Orient,” I said. “Thanks to that, during my academy days, I’d graciously caught the attention of the princess there. The Orient has its own network, and we swiftly came in contact with the royal family of the Beria Kingdom.”

Mikhail desperately shook his head at my words, sweat forming on his brow, causing his hair to stick to his face. His long hair was becoming a mess.

“I won’t believe this! I won’t!” Mikhail shouted.

“Lord Mikhail Streltsy,” Lucas said, gazing at the man while putting a hand over his heart. “As you’ve stated, I’m indeed a suspicious man. I wasn’t born with a rank worthy of trust, nor do I have a formal education or knowledge of proper etiquette. Even my words were hammered into me by my wife, the daughter of Marquess Karelia. It’s truly only a temporary measure. But even so, a man like me had received the wisdom and assistance of many bright people to gather this information.”

Lucas took a step toward Mikhail, causing the latter to shriek in fear. Only my former fiancé could see my husband’s bright gaze like a beast that cornered its prey.

“Denying my words is akin to denying the fruits and efforts of everyone who had lent me their aid. Can you truly do that?” Lucas questioned.

Mikhail groaned, inching away.

“Now then, is the conviction over?” the third prince said, making his long-awaited appearance.

Like a ripple in the water, the people gathered within the hall bowed toward him. He slowly waited for everyone to finish bowing before his ashy-blue eyes gazed down at my former fiancé, still frozen in place with his head lowered.

“Mikhail Streltsy,” His Highness said. “Would you like to be carted away by knights or hold the dignity of being the son of a marquess and head to your punishment of your own accord?”

“Your Highness, I did this for our kingdom!” Mikhail cried, raising his head.

Just then, the marchioness stepped in to protect her son out of desperation.

“Your Highness! My son acted for the future of aristocratic society! I understand that he might’ve gone a step too far, but that is all because I’m a fool for tormenting him!” she pleaded.

Marchioness Streltsy threw herself down to protect her son and wailed with tears flowing from her eyes. Her hair came fluttering down from its tight chignon. I was overwhelmed with a myriad of emotions. I’d heard that the marchioness had suffered a series of stillbirths, and Mikhail was her long-awaited, beloved son. As a marchioness who lived to protect her son, he must’ve meant everything to her.

The third prince quietly gazed at the mother and son.

“Enough,” a cold voice said reproachfully. We turned and saw Marquess Streltsy stepping forward. “Mikhail.”

“Father...”

“While I was gone, you...” He clenched his fists tightly, causing his hands to tremble as he silently glared at his son. He then turned his back on his child, went on one knee before the third prince, and lowered his head. “Your Highness, to take responsibility for this incident, I shall retire from naval service. I entrust the decision of our future to you and surrender my rank.”

“Dear!” the marchioness cried. “Why?! I should be the one to face

punishment! This child has the proud lineage of the Streltsys...”

“To protect the unbroken line of pride and glory that my predecessors have passed onto me, I end everything with my generation.” His head still lowered, the marquess added in a trembling voice, “Because I...left everything in your care, I’ve broken you, haven’t I?”

“No! Nooooo!” Marchioness Streltsy’s shriek echoed throughout the grand hall.

She exploded into tears like a dam had burst. Supported by her husband, the pair made to leave the hall. As though he’d remembered, the marquess turned around and smiled at me.

“Lady Iris—no, Baroness Stock. It seems I’ve caused you to suffer for a long time,” he said.

“Marquess Streltsy...” I murmured.

“Within your undaunted stature, I’ve seen the dignity of a Karelia. I pray that a rainbow will form above the future that you and Baron Stock will build.”

I suppressed all the emotions welling up within me, straightened my back, and bowed to him.

“Let us meet again,” the marquess said.

His son, who’d been left behind, was limply carted away by the knights the third prince had summoned. Amidst the confusion, Leik approached Lucas and me.

“It seems the aristocrats in the faction of the first prince have quietly left,” the butler whispered.

I glanced around. A few faces were, indeed, gone from the hall.

“Has Mikhail been cut off, then?” Lucas whispered beside me.

“That seems to be the case.” Leik nodded.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed my parents and younger sister standing there, astonished.

“Wh-What do we do from here...?” my father muttered.

The third prince directed the merciless gaze of an authoritative figure at my father. “Marquess Karelia,” His Highness said. “You cannot be absolved of all responsibility for this incident.”

“What?!” my father gasped. “P-Pardon my insolence, Your Highness, but I knew nothing of the scandalous deeds of House Streltsy.”

“That may be so, but even without the Streltys, I’ve already heard reports of the state of House Karelia. The fief traditionally given to you since the founding of this kingdom has been passed onto the care of Count Klaus, correct? I’ve also heard that you’ve sold off most of the wealth belonging to the Karelis for generations.”

“Th-That’s...”

His Highness slowly gave a sweeping glance around the room. “I refused to believe it at first, but after being invited here, I understand the situation very well now. Most of the furniture is new and imported. No doubt, thanks to the assistance of Baron Stock, your son-in-law.”

“If I may speak, it’s because we changed the interior to welcome you, Your Highness,” my father said.

“Oh?” His Highness said, raising an eyebrow as he gazed down at my pale father. “I’ve heard that Baron Stock bought back the bookshelves engraved with the Karelia emblem sold off in a chaotic affair to a pawnshop on the city outskirts.”

Lucas quietly bowed when His Highness glanced at him for confirmation. My father grew even paler.

“Unable to provide a word of excuse, I see,” His Highness said. “You’re unsuitable to carry on the Karelia rank and name.”

“What?!” my father gasped.

The third prince turned to me. “Baroness Stock—no, Lady Iris, daughter of Marquess Karelia. As the one who has Karelia blood flowing most strongly in your veins, what do you desire?”

He gave a meaningful smile. I realized I was being tested—my answer here

was vital in making a decision.

“I-Iris! You’re on my side, aren’t you?!” my father implored.

“That’s right! Airia is adorable to you, too, isn’t she?! Please!” my stepmother begged.

They both had tears in their eyes. My younger sister was still touching the bruise on her chest, stunned, and it seemed like she wasn’t all there. I suddenly pitied Airia; our parents—her guardians—were worried more about rank than her body. I looked up at Lucas’s face as he stood beside me. My dear husband nodded, urging me on with his calm, amber eyes. He gently placed a hand on my shoulder. I felt his warmth, conveying that he would leave everything to me and trusted my decision. I bowed deeply to His Highness.

“Your Highness, I desire for the rank of Marquess Karelia to be properly managed and given to one worthy of the title,” I said.

“Does that mean you’d like to give it to your husband?” His Highness asked.

“Don’t be so hasty, Iris!” my father shouted in a frenzy. “You can’t hand the title to some lowly, young nouveau riche!”

“Then you’re no different, are you?” His Highness replied with a hint of amusement. “You married into the Karelias to obtain your title, Lord Karelia. Have you forgotten that? The current laws forbid Lady Iris from inheriting the title, for she is a woman. However, as the woman who has the Karelia blood flowing most strongly in her veins, her husband would undoubtedly be first in line to receive that rank.”

“Iris! Please! I’m begging you! Think about this reasonably!” my father pleaded.

He tried to rush to my side, but the prince’s Royal Guards stopped him. His Highness quietly glanced at my father before turning to me once more.

“What are your thoughts, Lady Iris?” he asked.

“I hope I’m not being too impertinent, but it’s partly my responsibility that the dignity and title of Marquess Karelia couldn’t be protected,” I answered. “In other words, even I am not worthy of such a grand title. I would like to concede

this rank to a suitable man who originates from the house. If you would kindly allow me to nominate someone, I think Count Kaizert Klaus, the current lord in charge of managing the Karelia lands, is most fitting for the title.”

At once, everyone turned toward my uncle and aunt. The third prince raised an eyebrow accompanied by a faint smile.

“Lady Iris, are you sure about this? You’ll be discarding your worth as a Karelia,” His Highness pointed out.

“The name of House Karelia is much too heavy of a burden for me to bear,” I replied. “I’ve heard that the fief has stabilized under the care of Count Klaus, and I believe he is most suitable for the title of Marquess Karelia.”

“I see.”

The third prince stroked his beard pensively as the atmosphere relaxed. Even aristocrats in his faction must’ve had some apprehensions about a former commoner receiving the title of Marquess Karelia, even for a single generation. I was the daughter of the man who caused this grand house to fall to ruin. My uncle, who’d been managing the Karelia lands, seemed to be the most reasonable and fitting person for the role.

“I’m sure you heard all that,” His Highness said. “What say you?”

My uncle stepped forward and gave a deep, gentlemanly bow. “If you do not mind, I would like to take the title. I shall be a temporary measure until a proper successor worthy of taking on the rank of Marquess Karelia appears.”

“That would be best for now,” His Highness nodded. “Now then, why don’t we all applaud the new Marquess Karelia?”

Warm applause filled the room; Lucas and I followed suit and clapped. My uncle looked at us and gave a firm, powerful nod. My parents and Airia were no longer the center of attention.

“Very well! This is a party, is it not? Why don’t we celebrate the birth of the new Marquess Karelia and express our appreciation for the efforts of Baron and Baroness Stock?” His Highness declared while winking at us. “I’m looking forward to seeing how you live this night, Lucas, Lady Iris.”

“That’s quite a tall order,” my husband replied.

“But you can do it, can’t you?” He patted Lucas’s shoulder and walked back into the crowd of aristocrats.

My husband and I looked at each other.

We’d finally finished our primary job.



WE had no time to celebrate our successful mission. I quickly made the necessary preparations for the party to go on. A long night in high society had just begun. The party, which continued well until the early morning of the next day, was managed by me. Neither the ladies nor lords of either household could do anything to help now, and I had to act as the hostess and give out the necessary orders. While I busily ran around, an arm suddenly shot out and pulled me close.

“Lu—” I started, trying to call out my dear’s name.

Before I could finish, he hugged me tightly against his chest. He smelled a little different; the first scent that hit my nose was the aroma of cigars, an item that aristocratic gentlemen often enjoyed and quite different from the smell of tobacco, which Lucas usually used. The scent of alcohol, various perfumes, and colognes then greeted me. For a moment, I thought a different person was holding me, but when I took a deep breath, Lucas’s scent reached my nose and relaxed me.

“We did it,” Lucas whispered excitedly in my ear, still keeping me in his arms. He was usually composed about his work until the end, but he unusually wore his heart on his sleeve today.

“We’re not done just yet,” I said.

“I know, I know.”

I giggled. I felt as though I was admonishing a child, and I found our exchange humorous.

His ears bright red, Lucas said, “Can you blame me? When I see you working so hard, I feel compelled to hug you tightly. Speaking of...” My husband looked

at me, dissatisfied, his eyes half-closed. "Iris, you didn't let any man near you while wearing that outfit, did you?"

"N-No," I replied.

"Don't show so much skin. I feel restless when I think about other men looking at your body," he said in a sulking manner, looking me up and down. "Evening dress, my foot. Why do you have to be more revealing than usual in front of others? I'm so worried."

"Ah, um, q-quite right..." I said, embarrassed as I hid my bare shoulders with my hands. "But no one's looking at me. I think I'm fine."

"Lies. Everyone's looking at you." He knitted his brows angrily. "Do you know just how much stuff I had to hear from the perverts in gentlemen's clothing?"

"Stuff?"

Did I look odd and unsuitable to be Lucas Stock's wife? I'm sure I don't seem fit for such a handsome and confident man. I placed a hand over my mouth and fell deep into thought.

"Iris," Lucas said. "You're probably thinking about how dull and plain you are, aren't you?"

"I-I suppose so..." I replied.

"It's completely different from what you're imagining."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...you're plenty beautiful. Don't let guys gaze down at you or stand next to you. Hold a fan or something, and mingle with the other women. I'm counting on you."

"A-All right?"

"Those bastards talking about another guy's woman are..."

"Lucas, your words."

"I know, I know." He hugged me tightly, gingerly stroking my dark hair so it wouldn't be disheveled. "Once everything's cleaned up, stay by my side so we can make up for the lost time," Lucas whispered.

“Okay,” I replied.

“Mm-hm.”

Lucas reluctantly released me from his grasp, his gaze sweeter than honey. I couldn't stop my racing heart as I thought about how I was monopolizing him. The stiff expressions he showed to guests, his fearless grin that he often showed under the sun, and his kind, yet reliable smile that he only showed me were all so dear, and all mine.

“I will only be by your side, Lucas.”

“Yeah, I'll never hand you over to anyone else. You're *my* Iris.”

The hectic party came to a close, and in the following days, I grew busy with a few complex affairs I had to handle. It wasn't until one snowy day, a week after the party, that I could finally settle down and spend time with Lucas.



“**WE** have received a report from Solalitika. Here are the documents about maintaining the city's park, along with the inspection of the dock. And here are the periodic reports from the company.”

“The park can wait until my return,” Lucas replied. “Place the documents relating to the dock over here and the reports from the company over here in the usual order.”

“Certainly.”

“Tell Cedric that we've prepared the list of orders from the royal capital. Provide the list of ladies we interviewed here to Coldola. Also, we might visit Viscount Dombagg's residence for a business meeting. Tell Nant to make some time since he's knowledgeable on porcelain.”

“Certainly.”

“Um, Lucas?” I said.

“Hm? What's up?”

“Er, it's a little embarrassing when there are...others...around.”

“We're not doing anything weird, though. We should be fine.”

I was seated between his knees with his arms wrapped around me as he calmly took care of the necessary documents. I felt his comforting warmth on my back as he did as he pleased. We were on the third floor of the old Karelia manor in the former study. The room had been renovated into Lucas's office, and we were seated on a white bench connected to the bay window. It had been my favorite place as a child, and Lucas had added some soft cushions, creating a lovely sofa.

The Karelia manor, which had been lost once my father surrendered his title, was purchased by Lucas through my uncle. My husband bought the home I'd grown up in—I had braced myself, thinking I'd lose this place forever. But it had now become Lucas's manor in the royal capital. He'd planned on financing railways and had been excited to have a manor in the middle of the royal capital.

But it's still embarrassing to be hugged in front of others.

"Anything weird, you say..." I murmured. I felt him kiss the back of my head and let out an odd shriek. "D-Does this not count as weird?"

"Nope. It's totally normal. Yep."

"I-Is it, now?"

"Yep. Isn't it, Leik?" Lucas asked.

"Indeed. Quite normal." The butler gave an approving nod while he did his work.

"I-I see..." I said, unable to fight back against such firm words.

As I relaxed in his warm arms, I thought back to the party. My former fiancé had been punished along with his mother, who aided her son in his wicked deeds. Marquess Streltsy had been penalized as well. Mikhail Streltsy had been involved in human trafficking and used his profits to purchase the drugs he'd used on other women—however, the third prince later told us that it was difficult to pursue anyone else involved in this incident. It wasn't easy to catch the first prince's involvement in this affair. Still, it seemed the first prince would lay low for a while and wait for another chance to strike. It was temporary, but Lucas, His Highness, and His Majesty could spend some days in peace.

“Ah,” I said, gazing outside and noticing the flecks of white dancing in the air. “Lucas... Snow.”

“Huh?” he replied. “You’re right... So, *this* is snow.”

He stared out the window with excitement. The falling speckles of white dyed the sky a pure white as the fleeting, white snowflakes created a blanket over the green garden. Lucas, who had never seen snow before, had sparkles in his eyes like a child. He stopped his work and fixedly stared outside. The servants prevented the snow from fully covering the garden.

“Thank you for rehiring the servants that worked here,” I said.

“It’s best to have those used to this place manage the manor,” Lucas replied. “Much easier, too. Besides, apparently, a lot of servants were attached to this manor.”

“Indeed... I’m happy to have so many people who remember my mother.”

“It’s not just your mother. People want to serve *you* as the mistress of this house. You can be a bit prouder of that.”

He brought me closer, and I felt him smile. His breath tickled my ear. I shifted around when I gasped and noticed I had been leaning on my husband.

“Lucas,” I said.

“Hm?”

“Er, aren’t I heavy? I must’ve been too close to you.”

I tried to get up, but he placed his arms around my waist and locked me in place. I didn’t think he was exerting much strength, but his arms wouldn’t budge an inch.

“You’re not heavy,” he insisted. “And it’s cold. We can be close.”

“Right...” I replied with a nod.

In the end, I entrusted my body to him. Lucas repositioned himself and wrapped his arms around me, interlocking my hands with his so he wouldn’t let me go. His heat warmed my cold fingertips. When I saw my hands over his, I was always surprised to see how much larger his were.

Ever since the fiasco with my former fiancé ended, Lucas started touching me more than before. I usually found him adorable, like a large dog trying to act spoiled, but now and then, I would suddenly grow warm with embarrassment. Since we were a married couple, it likely wasn't odd for us to touch each other. *But...w-w-will I ever get used to this?*

"What's wrong?" Lucas asked.

"N-Nothing at all," I replied.

"I see."

With that, I felt him bury his face by my neck. His face felt so close to mine that my cheeks turned red. Every action he took caused my heart to skip a beat, and I felt quite strange. *Have I already become odd?*

Suddenly, Lucas said seriously, "I'm sorry about your title."

"Huh?" I asked in surprise.

He played with my hair. "If I was an aristocrat worthy of the title, I could've made you into Marchioness Karelia. I was able to use my money to take back the manor, but couldn't do much to reclaim your title."

"Were you worried about that?"

"Of course."

I smiled at his kindness and stroked his hand. "The title of House Karelia felt more like a curse to me. Quite honestly, it feels as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Since my uncle has graciously offered to take the title, I'm certain the rank and the fief will be well. It's a good ending, I believe."

I thought back to my uncle. My father would work within my uncle's fief while treating his gambling addiction. My stepmother had divorced him, and together with my younger sister, the two would start their new lives.

"And...I'd like to stay by your side, Lucas," I added, stroking the hand around my waist as I vocalized my thoughts. "If you were born with their rank and lived as an aristocrat, you wouldn't be Lucas Stock, would you?"

I felt him relax and nuzzle me as he chuckled. "You're right."

“I can leave my stepmother and younger sister in your care because you’re you. I’m counting on you.”

The two ladies, now separated from my father, would work in the factories or farms owned by Lucas. I prayed that they would fix their untidy habits and luxurious lifestyle and finally walk forward, keeping their feet on the ground.

“You can leave that bit to me. I won’t do them harm,” Lucas said.

“Thank you.”

My younger sister, in particular, had been subject to the whims of our parents ever since she was born. She was also a victim of Mikhail’s deeds. As her older sister, I wanted to watch over her and was grateful for Lucas’s offer.

“You’ve done well, Iris,” he whispered as his lips brushed against my ear.

His kiss was gentle but ticklish, and a sweet sensation ran down my back. I almost felt dizzy from it all.

“I wonder if it’s all right to be this happy,” I murmured, unable to help myself. “You took back my manor and cleaned up my household affairs... I feel as though I don’t deserve such happiness.”

I’d even obtained the one thing that I truly wanted. *Is this really okay?*

“Don’t be satisfied with just this,” Lucas said. “I want to make you happier. One day, I’ll take back the wealth that House Karelia had sold off.”

“Please don’t push yourself, all right?”

“It’s more motivating if you’ve got a goal in mind, don’t you think?”

Lucas raised his head and smiled at me. Enchanted by his amber eyes so close to mine, I wished from the bottom of my heart that this moment would last for eternity.

Chapter 4

THIS was the season for various parties in succession, matching the timings of the aristocratic congress. I was busy taking care of several matters myself, and two months passed in the blink of an eye. Lucas had begun muttering that he was tired of the snow by this point.

“I yearn for the bright skies of Solalitika...” he said, burying his face in a thick coat as he left the house.

I laughed as he glared up at the overcast sky. “I understand. The skies here are always cloudy compared to Solalitika.”

With these occasional exchanges, we awaited spring. The greenhouse camellias had started to bloom vibrantly, notifying us that spring was just around the corner.

It was during this time that I took the opportunity to speak with former Marchioness Streltsy, who was still under house arrest. She now spent her days aiding a naval nursing station under her husband’s jurisdiction. When she stepped into the drawing room, she was clad in a plain dress and wasn’t wearing much makeup, but her gaze was clear and alert as though she’d awoken from whatever plagued her.

“What *was* I doing? I was truly a fool,” she said with a deep sigh, repeatedly voicing her regrets.

It’d been a few months since she was separated from her son, Mikhail Streltsy. She had freed herself from a seemingly brainwashed state and had accepted the weight of her sins.

“The faction of the first prince, striving to maintain order within high society, was nothing more than a sugarcoated motto. They will, once again, try to ruin the peaceful reign of His Majesty,” she said. She clenched my hands with a stern expression. “My son... Mikhail has been arrested. But the first prince’s faction

controls many within the Royal Police. Do be careful.”

“Thank you for your warning,” I said with a nod, squeezing her hands back.

Her elderly face broke into a self-deprecating smile. “I’m truly sorry for what I put you through all these years. I only ever saw you as a replacement for Louisa.”

She pursed her trembling lips as her words turned into sobs. I gently stroked her back, knowing I’d likely never meet her again.



ONCE I saw Lady Streltsy off and returned to the manor, I bumped into Kiki pushing a wagon—she had cleaned up the drawing room for me.

“Good work today!” she said with a smile. “I’ve polished up your gallery room!”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Since the evening of the engagement party, Kiki had grown more cheerful than ever. I had the servants rotate their shifts and take their days off, but after much begging from Kiki and Coldola, I took all the female servants and employees out to tour the royal capital the other day. We visited a popular café, saw a fabulous view from the clock tower, and everyone enjoyed their time on the town. Kiki, who had once feared walking the streets of the royal capital, seemed to enjoy herself as well, and I was happy to see her grow and change.

“Iris, can I have a moment?” Lucas called, walking into the room with Coldola. He approached me while pointing to a name on the document. “I received a message from this guest, but I’m not familiar with them. Do you know them, Iris?”

“Ah, this person is...” I started, telling my husband that this was an old acquaintance of mine.

Coldola and Kiki watched us from a short distance away.

“Did something happen between them?” Coldola asked.

Kiki stood beside her and gave a meaningful smile. “It’s a secret.”

“A secret, huh?”

“Hey, what are you two gossiping about in front of us?” Lucas asked.

Coldola smirked, her eyes half-closed. “You used to be oddly distant toward your wife, but now you’ve become...quite close with her, I see.”

“Huh? I’ve always been like this.”

“Then why are you lovingly stroking her hair even at a time like this?” she pointed out.

“Uh...” Lucas had likely done it unconsciously. He immediately removed his hand from my hair. “Sorry, Iris.”

“Don’t be,” I replied. “I’m quite happy when you touch me. I don’t mind...”

Coldola gave a forced smile. “President, you really dote on the madam. I can hardly believe how prickly you were in the past.”

“I agree! Lord Lucas has changed!” Kiki added with a smile.

The other servants also gazed at us warmly from their various posts.

“Good grief. Don’t tease me,” Lucas replied, the tips of his ears red.

Just then, I realized someone was absent. “Is Leik not here today?” I asked. I expected him to be the first person to tease us, so I glanced around in search of him.

“He’s out on a job today,” Lucas answered.

“I see.”

Since the party, I had seen Leik less and less. He was likely busy tending to his other duties as usual.

I didn’t think much about it, but perhaps I should’ve.



THE passing rain showers had dampened the stone pavement in the back alleys. Leikzig was walking along a narrow path within the residential district. Dressed in a black overcoat and hat, he didn’t make a sound despite wearing leather shoes. He was like a phantom, a shadow, or a sneaky cat. Just as he

tried to turn a corner, he heard a voice.

“I was surprised when I saw you at the party. You were still alive, Hunting Dog John.”

In the narrow path between houses, from within the darkness of a deserted area, a voice called out to Leikzig. He continued walking without stopping.

“Think you’ve got the wrong person,” Leikzig said indifferently.

“Person? No, you’re a dog,” the voice mocked. “Though you’re revered for your assassination skills and attained the nickname ‘Hunting Dog,’ you’re still a dog and nothing more. It doesn’t matter where you flee, John.”

A tall man in tattered clothes appeared in front of Leikzig, barring his path. The man had been bundled in layers, but the butler instantly knew how well-trained his unique movements were. Leikzig gained some distance while the man pulled down his tattered hat, shielding his face. Both his hair and eyes were obscured by the shadows of his hat. In his hand were fresh, vibrant flowers. No one else was present in the alleyway, but even if someone was, from a distance, it only looked like a poor flower merchant trying to make a sale.

“Did you not hear what I said? My name is Leikzig Kudrya. I do not know who this ‘hunting dog’ is. I’d like to head home before the rain starts to fall again.”

“You haven’t changed,” the man in the hat sneered, his curled lips buried under his facial hair. “His Highness has approved the return of hunting dogs. Depending on your work, the other nameless dogs could also be freed.”

Leikzig’s eye twitched. He shrugged and sighed deeply as though he’d lost this exchange. He narrowed his golden eyes and glared at the mysterious man. “I told him that keeping multiple dogs would lead to a collapse in management. You were the ones who chased us away under the guise of ‘setting us free.’ How patronizing. And I’ve no interest in how the other dogs are being treated.”

“While we set you lot free, we’d like to keep the best of the best within our hands...as people,” the man said, his shoulders shaking with his deep, guttural laughter. “It’s unpleasant to call for a traitor like you, but the first prince highly values your abilities. He’s said he could make you into the adoptive son of

House Baycadal. What do you say? As a person without a birth certificate and no other way to survive than to be kept as a nouveau riche's pet, this is a wonderful opportunity for you, isn't it?"

"And if I still refuse?" Leikzig asked, his glare growing sharper.

The mysterious man donning the clothes of a beggar laughed in a deriding manner. He swished some flowers in front of Leikzig's nose, goading and provoking the butler with this enticing offer.

"You'd rather remain a dog than become a *person*?" the man asked. "You've got unusual preferences."

"We're done here. Goodbye," Leikzig said, trying to pass by the man.

"Ah! Your master has invested in a railroad, hasn't he?" the man suddenly added. Leikzig walked on, remaining silent, but the man called after his back. "Hey, John, did you know? In a certain nation, during the auspicious day of the unveiling of a railway, the most prominent figure there died due to a railroad accident."

"You speak of my fellow dogs and offers of becoming human, but in the end, you just want me to return in exchange for Lucas Stock's life."

"Seems like that young man has got more to protect, too."

As the man had expected, his former compatriot stopped in his tracks. The mysterious man grinned while stroking his beard. Leikzig scowled at him, his face filled with disappointment.

"A man as *noble* as the first prince shouldn't cling to a mere dog such as myself, wouldn't you agree? Especially if you're a *dog* too..." he mocked.

The man fell silent before he let out a snarl that expressed his hatred. "Of course. I loathe and resent you, hunting dog. You kicked up sand with your hind legs, abandoning our fallen compatriots and His Highness. What makes you so special?"

"And I feel the same, doggy. Hence, I no longer like risking my life."

The man didn't answer but turned on his heels and gave his final message. "There's a basement two spaces to the west from the previous Lot 16. You best

come tomorrow before the sun sets.”

He melted into the darkness and disappeared. Left behind, Leikzig sighed and looked up at the sky.

“I suppose this is it for me...”

The pitter-patter of droplets fell onto his face as he pushed his bangs up. He narrowed his golden eyes and let out another sigh. The cloudy skies had yet again let the rain fall on him.



A clap of thunder caused Lucas to look up at his office window—it was unlike him to be distracted by the sound of heavy rain. Suddenly, he thought he heard footsteps.

In front of the door, his butler had returned. He was wet from the rain, his silver hair and clothes looking damp and dark. His butler slowly raised his expressionless face. Lucas instinctively reached for the gun in his desk drawer. The two men locked eyes as they pointed the barrel of their guns at each other.

“Leikzig, have you forgotten who your master is?” Lucas asked.

The dog didn’t laugh and kept his gaze expressionless. “I’m returning to my old master.”

“A bit too early for jokes, I think,” Lucas replied. “April Fool’s is still months away.”

“I’m a simple dog and nothing more. I yearn for my old pack, you see.”

“Leik...”

“I shall return that name to you, Lucas Stock. I’ll go by ‘John’ again.” The dog stuck out his tongue, reminding Lucas of his butler, but it was as though the butler had transformed into a different person. “You truly changed when you gained a wife.”

“Do you hate that I’ve changed?” Lucas asked.

“Not at all. I hate your wife, who changed you. I didn’t switch sides to serve a master who smiles sweetly and carries the faint scent of his wife’s powder.”

Leikzig transformed into John as he grinned. “Farewell.”

“Wait, Leik!” Lucas shouted, his gun still pointed at his butler, but the dog left faster than he could react. Lucas rushed out into the corridor, but the long, silver-haired tail was nowhere to be found.

“Leik...” Lucas muttered under his breath as he returned to his office.

He put away his gun and picked up the weapon his butler had placed on his desk without him realizing it. When he pulled the trigger, it made a goofy popping sound as an orange clump popped up. Eight artificial roses were within the gun. They must’ve been forcibly pushed in—their petals were ruined.

Lucas sighed as though his efforts had been in vain and placed the gun back on his desk.

“Later, John.”

The lightning had stopped. Lucas stood by the window. Light rain drizzled over the gloomy garden, its colors dulled in the gloom.



SINCE morning, the skies had been hazy, and it drizzled now and then. I was invited to a salon by an alumna who went to the same women’s academy as myself, and after an enjoyable afternoon, I was riding home in the carriage. Kiki had the day off today, so Ray was the maid by my side. I also had the footman, Toggio, accompany me as a guard.

Cold and humid air hung in the carriage, reminding me that we were transitioning from winter to spring. When we turned right, the carriage shook slightly from the stone pavement. I noticed a familiar figure. Outside my window, between the alleyways, was a man waving his hand toward us.

“That’s Leik,” I said. “Could you please stop the carriage?”

We stopped and invited Leik inside, wet from the light rain. He was all smiles.

“Thank you, my lady,” he said. “I thought I’d catch a cold, so you saved me.”

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” I asked.

“It really has.” He smiled coldly before he spoke to the coachman. “Up ahead

is a cargo cart with a broken wheel. Fruit spilled everywhere, so I don't think we can pass. It's best to take a different route using St. Vitas Street."

"Will do," the coachman replied.

The carriage switched directions, the rattling of its wheels echoing through the cabin as an odd silence settled between us. The always talkative Leik was quiet as he sat across from me and stared at my face. It felt like his golden eyes were trying to tell me something. Several moments after the carriage turned, I noticed the lack of people; this was a street I didn't use much.

"Leik," I said.

The butler squinted his eyes. "Is something the matter?"

The shadow cast by his eyelashes fell upon his sharp eyes, his thin lips curled up in an arc across his perfectly symmetrical face. When he wasn't fooling around, he truly was beautiful, like a lifeless, smiling, delicate doll.

"Is this street safe?" I asked.

"Of course. I don't lie," he replied.

Just then, the carriage shook violently and screeched to a stop. A mob rushed toward our vehicle, all wearing black coats and masks to hide their faces.

"What's going on?!" Toggio yelled.

"Leik! You!" Ray cried, glaring at Leik.

Toggio tried to grab the butler, but Leik slipped from his grasp. Quick as a flash, he had an arm around me. A knife pressed against my neck from behind. I gasped in surprise.

"My lady, please don't run," Leik's low voice whispered in my ear. "I don't want to leave a scratch on you."

"Leik..."

I gulped while Ray and Toggio turned pale.

"Why are you doing this, Leik?!" Ray screamed.

The cold tip of the knife pressed into my skin as Leik replied in a low voice, "My master has changed because of his wife here."

“What are you on about?!” Ray asked.

“Snap out of it!” Toggio pleaded.

As I felt the knife’s tip against my skin, I gauged just how tightly Leik was restraining me. Without moving my head, I asked, “Do you hate me for changing Lucas?”

“I do. Very much,” Leik replied in a cheery tone, pressing the knife closer to my throat. “Get off the carriage and come with me.”

“I understand,” I replied, peering at Ray and Toggio, who were frozen in place. “I’ll be fine. Please flee, you two.”

“But!” cried a pale-faced Ray.

Just then, a knife was pointed at her, causing her to gulp nervously.

“Leik!” I said, my voice firm. “You mustn’t threaten them. If you lay a finger on my servants, I’ll get angry.”

“Pardon me,” Leik replied, showing his usual gentle smile. He guided me out of the carriage.

“May I see the carriage off until it leaves this place safely?” I asked.

“If you’d like.”

I glanced at the coachman, encouraging him to leave. He hesitated before he had the horses gallop away at incredible speed. The hoofbeats gradually grew distant as silence fell upon the alleyway. It was so quiet I couldn’t believe I was surrounded by so many people.

“I didn’t think we could get her so easily,” one of the masked men muttered.

Upon closer inspection, I caught a glimpse of silver hair under everyone’s hats. They were all the “dogs” of the first prince.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“We won’t be rough with you, Lady Iris. We simply want to invite you to our master’s social circle,” a woman replied.

I guessed that she was also a dog; her words were polite, but I felt a sense of pressure behind them.

“Don’t worry. I don’t lie,” Leik faintly whispered in my ear.

I gazed into his golden eyes as they squinted meaningfully at me.



I was taken to a famous bar on the street corner, a short walk away. It was a place where noblemen gathered and socialized. It seemed to be closed as the lights on the first floor were out. It was the middle of the day, but the building was dark. I grew dizzy from the smell of the tobacco and alcohol that hung heavy in the humid air. A “dog” who carried a lamp guided me down a staircase toward a basement. Leik was beside me, supporting me by the arm as I descended the steps.

“Thank you,” I said.

He likely didn’t expect to hear a word of gratitude as he widened his eyes with shock. “You can’t say that, my lady. I betrayed you.”

The basement was brightly lit with a dark green billiards table. Deeper within the room, by the wall, was a bar counter. A man with his back toward me was enjoying a game of billiards with numerous “dogs.”

“Long time no see, Iris,” a low voice said. I recognized it very well; it was my former fiancé’s voice. But when he turned around, I had to do everything I could to suppress my screams. He grinned at me as I stood in stunned silence. “Hi. What’s wrong? Why do you look so surprised? Did you forget who I am?” he asked.

“How...could you...” I managed to squeeze out.

Indeed, this man was, without a doubt, Mikhail Streltsy. But his appearance had changed. His long blond hair had been cut short, and his eyebrows and ears had multiple piercings. His skin seemed to be stretched taut over his face, and every time he blinked, his temples twitched grotesquely in tandem. From the neck down, he was in his usual gentlemanly attire, but I was at a loss for words when I saw how much his face had changed.

“I thought you were arrested,” I said.

The corners of his lips curled up to form a smile. “Even if I’m caught, I’ve got

plenty of supporters. Relax. I've got no desire to harm you anymore, and I'll act like a gentleman. Could I get you anything to drink?"

"No, thank you."

"I expected as much."

He gave an exaggerated shrug as a "dog" emerged from the bar and quietly slid him a drink. The glass contained a dark, amber liquid and had something on its rim. *Salt, perhaps?*

"Did you know?" Mikhail asked. "Your name, Iris Stock, is coincidentally the name of a new cocktail. You take an expensive spirit, mix it with some cheap orange juice, and add some rock salt to the rim of your glass. Would you like to have some?"

He'd had a drink like that made without my knowledge and taunted me while licking and drinking from his glass in front of me. I felt so disgusted I could throw up. Still, I acted as calm as I could.

"You're not here to enlighten me on cocktails, are you?" I asked. "Please tell me what your goals are."

"You've grown stronger. In the past, you would've never spoken back to me." He chuckled, his entire face convulsing, as he pushed the glass toward me. "This is your final warning. Birth my child, become my wife, and follow the orders of the first prince, Iris."

"I refuse."

"Don't be such a spoilsport," Mikhail said, taking a step toward me. "His Highness highly values you, for you've inherited the proper bloodline of the Karelias. Did you not notice that he was present when you convicted me at the party?"

I flinched. I'd checked the guest list carefully, but the name of the first prince was absent. He must've blended in with his faction's crowd—the aristocrats who'd left just after we'd announced Mikhail's crimes.

"He must've been disguised as a servant," I deduced.

"That's right," Mikhail said.

“A coachman...perhaps?” I ventured.

“Ah! So, you noticed! Very impressive!”

“The party had numerous aristocrats well-acquainted with the first prince. Even if he disguised himself, he would’ve easily been spotted. Those in his faction might’ve given him away by their deference to his presence in the hall. But a coachman can hide within the carriage and sneak a few peeks inside without drawing much attention.”

Mikhail broke out into a beaming smile of satisfaction, his eyes glittering like a child who’d found treasure. He let loose a loud guffaw.

“As I’d thought, you’re wasted on a mere nouveau riche! You should become my wife. Your noble, priceless bloodline will continue untainted, and we can revitalize high society in accordance with the ideals of the first prince!”

“I’m sorry to say, but no matter how much you try to fool yourself, I doubt your current face will allow you to mingle once more with aristocratic society,” I replied.

He snorted. “Indeed. Unfortunately, even if I escape from prison, I’m forever a social outcast, ostracized from society. But a child between you and me will be accepted by aristocratic society. In fact, they’d be more willing to accept our child than a child from a lowly man like Lucas Stock.”

He downed the rest of his cocktail and smashed the glass on the floor. He continued his spiel, the glass shards crunching beneath his feet.

“Listen well, Iris! Sooner or later, the commoners will infringe upon us! They’ll use money to go against our history and traditions! Our kingdom will turn into a sham—empty and wretched on the inside. Think about the railroad, for instance. Other classes will muddle our good, old cityscape. Imagine a woman as noble as you, giving birth to the child of a man from the streets. The common folk will bastardize our pure, noble blood. Others fear and respect our kingdom, but our beautiful nation is being threatened by a social crisis! A woman as intelligent as you should surely understand the foundation of the Traditional Twelve and the marquesses that founded this kingdom with the first king! We aristocrats must protect that!”

As he grew more excited, his voice grew louder, culminating in a bellow. He fell silent as I quietly opened my mouth.

“For that...” I began, my voice starting to tremble—it wasn’t from fear but rage. “For that, you find it acceptable to traffic the citizens of our kingdom, who have nowhere else to turn?”

He snorted even louder this time. “Did you know? Commoners from agricultural districts flood the royal capital in search of work. The lower class calls the city a giant cemetery. How could the beautiful capital of our kingdom be treated in such a fashion?! Those useless wastes of space don’t even work, die in poverty within the royal capital, and sully our streets! I’m *changing* their sacrifices into ‘useful lives’ according to the first prince’s empyreal ideals!”

“And the acts you’ve done to Kiki and the other maids...weren’t for your selfish desires?” I challenged.

“It’s my obligation to physically examine each slave,” he replied with a smirk.

“Just what do you take human dignity for?!” I lunged forward but was stopped as Leik’s knife dug into my throat. A trickle of warm blood ran down my neck. “Leik...” I murmured. I looked up at him, but he gazed down at me with indifference. As I regained my cool, Mikhail shook his head in exasperation.

“I thought you were smart for a woman, but even you get overly emotional, I suppose,” he said with an exaggerated shrug. He stared at me pitifully. “And that’s why a dog caught you off guard. Ah, or maybe it’s more apt to say he bit your hand?”

Leik stood beside me like a shadow. I couldn’t even hear him breathing. It felt like I was being shown the skill of a formerly well-trained dog. Even the current dogs couldn’t completely hide their breathing and their murderous intent. *How long has it been since I’ve set foot in here?*

The fresh blood that dripped down my neck stained the top of my blouse. I was calm enough to feel guilty about causing the servants trouble when they washed my blouse later. I sighed deeply and looked at Mikhail.

“I understand your thoughts very well. Could you tell me one thing?” I asked.

“I’ll answer anything, Iris,” he replied.

“You want me to birth your child, correct?”

“That’s right. Since I’m from House Streltsy, I can surely have you give birth to a child that will satisfy the first prince.”

“Then wouldn’t being forceful about this work against you?” I inquired.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve lost your rank and your place in high society. Even if you force me to give birth to your child, that child will be treated as a commoner without a rank.”

“As long as that child has our noble blood, it shouldn’t be a problem. We can send them to an agreeable aristocrat within the faction of the first prince to be raised as an adopted child.”

“How very curious, then.”

“What is?”

“If I were the first prince, I wouldn’t send myself to a criminal like you, who’s ostracized from society. I’d send a lady like me to a different aristocratic household to fulfill my objective,” I said.

“You talk too much,” Mikhail said, his lips trembling as I’d touched a sore spot. “Iris, you might be smart, but women like you are a dime a dozen. Only your body and Karelia blood are irreplaceable. Once you’re sullied by the nouveau riche and grow in age, losing all your value, it’ll be too late to cry and cling to the first prince. I sense value in a woman like you; you should be grateful and do as I say.”

“Is that so?” I looked away from him and fell silent.

His face bloomed with a satisfied smirk. “As long as you understand. As long as you’re obedient and remain invisible like air, I won’t hurt you.”

“Because I’m a woman who will become the mother to the successor of the Karelia line,” I replied.

“That’s right. You’re an important woman, Iris.”

I stared straight at him. “And if I said that I’ll be obedient, what will you do?”

“There’s a guest room on the higher floors of this bar. You’ll spend an intimate honeymoon with me until your stomach is inflated with my seed.”

“And if I refuse?”

With a smirk, he held his arms wide. “The dogs here won’t let you leave. It’s a pity you’ll no longer be able to go outside, but I’ll cut off a leg or two. In other words, you don’t have a choice.”

“If I’m gone, my husband will search for me.”

“Only if Lucas Stock is still alive.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, satisfied with my reaction. “Scared? Don’t worry, you’ll live. If you listen to me, I won’t treat you horribly.”

He must’ve seen me like a bird caught in his trap. All he had to do was clip my wings and trap me in a cage. I sighed. I was disappointed and felt empty on the inside.

“I suppose I’d never seen you for who you truly were,” I said.

When we were engaged, I never realized his true nature. During our several meetings, I held a spot of respect for him as he proudly spoke of aristocratic society. He was bright, sociable, and had studied abroad. As he spoke confidently, every word that fell from his mouth seemed to sparkle with ideals. I guessed that he’d borrowed some words from the faction of the first prince. Now, as he stood in front of me, I was completely uninterested in him.

It didn’t matter just how beautiful his ideals were or how flowery the words he strung together sounded. Every action he took was impulsive, and he wouldn’t have been able to do a single thing without the backing of someone. And yet, he didn’t hesitate to intimidate and control the weak, trampling on their dignity without feeling even a spoonful of guilt.

Even now, he hadn’t offered a word of apology to Airia or House Karelia for causing trouble. I’d never known that my former fiancé was a man so horrid. I looked down, pretending to be dispirited, while I snuck a glance at the watch hidden behind Leik’s jacket. He had purposefully hung his pocket watch in a

place where it was easy for me to sneak a peek. Once I confirmed the time, I looked at my former fiancé.

“Mikhail, your plan will end in failure,” I said.

“How?” he replied.

“Firstly, even if you abduct me and force me to birth your child, the father will be registered under Lucas Stock, my official husband. You’ve been exiled from aristocratic society and won’t be able to keep your name there. Are you still fine with that?”

“I’ve told you that Lucas Stock is no longer with us.”

“Whether he be alive or dead, I will give birth to my husband’s child.”

“Are you talking about the necessary process? We can just ask the first prince to handle it.”

“Secondly,” I said, raising my second finger and pausing. I was mustering the courage to say the following words. “I love my husband.”

“What are you...”

I tried to smile as calmly and gently as possible as I meaningfully placed a hand over my stomach. “Why do you continue to assume that Lucas and I are in a mariage blanc?”

“Huh?!” Mikhail gasped, his eyes going round. Then he went from red to a pallid blue at an alarming rate. His lips trembling, he said, “Iris, a-are you saying —”

“I won’t let you say you’ve forgotten the mark of protection that he left on me,” I said with a smile.

“I won’t forgive you!” he screamed. “I won’t, Iris! I-I-I-I’ll never forgive such a thing! A K-Karelia’s noble body, savagely defiled by a lowly man?! I refuse to believe that! Have an abortion! Right this instant! An abortion! I won’t forgive you if you give birth to that child! Argh! Simply thinking of that man’s remnants wriggling away in your body is unforgivable! Aghhh!”

Mikhail bellowed and tried to pounce on me, but Leik kicked him without an ounce of hesitation.

“Gah!” Mikhail gasped, the glass shards that he’d crushed stabbing him as he fell. “You... I thought you betrayed them! Didn’t you say you hated Iris?!”

“Oh, I do. Very much so. My lord changed ever since my lady arrived,” Leik said, positioning his arms around me to protect me as he licked the blood that dripped from his finger.

The sliver of blood that ran down my neck and stained my blouse was his—he’d sliced his finger and acted as though he’d cut me.

“Ever since my lady arrived, my lord has become a lot more interesting—ahem, I mean charming,” Leik said. “Because of my lady, I started to wish to stay by their side and serve them for all eternity.”

“You want to serve him because he’s interesting?!” Mikhail shouted. “Hey, you lot! Grab that traitor! Hurry up! He’s a disobedient dog!”

Despite Mikhail’s orders, no one moved an inch.

“You’re as stupid as ever, aren’t you?” Leik said mockingly. “No wonder the first prince cut you off. I told my compatriots here about the *enticing* offer that you gave me. I told them that you planned on giving birth certificates to only a portion of the escaped dogs that you favored. The rest would be released.”

“What?!” Mikhail gasped.

“I may not look it, but I *do* care a bit about my compatriots, you know. If only I’m receiving special treatment, it’s not quite right, is it? I tattled about it to everyone.”

On cue, the “dogs” all removed their masks. Every one of them was stunningly beautiful like Leik, with the same silver hair and gold eyes. Some were men covered in scars, while there were young women who could be mistaken for girls. Men and women of various ages all glared at Mikhail. Leik checked his pocket watch.

“I think it’ll take effect soon,” the butler said. “My fellow compatriots, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Wh-What?! Take effect?! What will?” Mikhail shouted.

Leik smiled. “Oh, it’s a drug you know *very* well. Don’t worry. After you faint,

you won't feel a thing. There's nothing to fear, no matter what *happens* to you."

Mikhail whirled around toward the bar when one of the dogs, a beautiful woman, smiled, her eyes narrowing on him like a wolf locked on its prey. The Iris Stock cocktail she'd prepared for him had been drugged with the substance that Mikhail had continuously used on his victims. When I noticed that Leik had hung his pocket watch in a place that was easy to see, I had my suspicions.

"You were just...buying time until now," I murmured.

"Let us go, my lady," Leik said, trying to lead me out of the basement.

"I-I'm not letting you escape!" Mikhail roared.

Just then, someone appeared from above, blocking our path. Mikhail let out a cry of joy.

"D-D-Did you kill Lucas Stock?!" he asked, clutching onto a billiards table to prop himself up. "Hurry up and kill those two, too!"

I looked up at the man in front of me; he was a tall man dressed in tattered clothes, and dark red blood sullied his garments. His pale, yellow hair was pushed into a hat with a torn brim. *Why can't Mikhail tell who this is?*

"Hah! It doesn't matter just how much you and your stupid dog fight, Iris!" Mikhail bellowed triumphantly. "Your Lucas Stock is no longer of this world!"

"That blood on your blouse... Who did that to you?" the newcomer, covered in blood, inquired in a husky voice.

"This is Leik's blood," I replied. "You seem quite dirty yourself, but are you all right?"

"Yeah, of course."

Mikhail changed his tone the moment he heard our conversation. "You... Who..."

"What, still can't recognize me? We were so friendly at that party."

"Lucas Stock?! But how?!"

"Heh. I guess a *noble* former aristocrat like you can't even remember the

faces of the people you've met." Lucas removed his glasses, revealing his narrowed amber eyes as he continued coldly, "You can't even remember the names and faces of your underlings who risk their lives for you to attack others. No one will follow a man like that. Most of them immediately betrayed you."

"Wh-What?!"

"Oh, don't worry. I'll let them speak to their hearts' content about the actions of those in the first prince's faction."

"A-A-Agh..."

Mikhail tried to stand and desperately clutched the billiards table for support, but his legs were trembling, and he fell onto the floor. His eyes started to roll back into his head. It seemed he was doing everything he could to prevent himself from fainting, but he could only let out a few groans.

Bam! Bam! From above, loud thuds accompanied an object being smashed as numerous footsteps tried to make their way inside. Lucas looked up at the ceiling.

"Ah, they're finally here," he said.

In mere moments, the navy-blue suits of the Royal Police flooded into the basement. All the "dogs" were nowhere to be seen. The Royal Police proceeded to apprehend Mikhail.

Amidst the ensuing chaos, Lucas whispered in my ear, "The faction of the first prince controls the high-ranking officials of the Royal Police. Only after you were abducted and I was attacked did they finally agree to act and storm in here without ignoring the fuss."

"I see..." I replied.

"It's best if you two leave," Leik said. "I'm sure the police will arrive at the manor to discuss further details."

"I understand. Let's hurry," I said, glancing at Mikhail, restrained by the police, one final time.

His vacuous gaze fixed on me as his lips moved. I couldn't hear his voice, but I guessed he was cursing me.

“Iris, let’s go,” Lucas said, taking me by the hand and bringing me close. He grabbed me by the chin, our lips touching for only a brief moment.

“Ah...” I gasped.

“Don’t look at him. You’ve got no obligation to keep him within your sights,” Lucas said.

My husband swiftly picked me up and walked up the stairs and outside. The hazy skies were now a bright blue as he carried me into the carriage.

“Hey, Leik,” Lucas said, setting me down on a seat before he turned to the smiling butler. “Don’t peek inside.”

“I know, I know,” Leik replied nonchalantly. He closed the carriage door.

“Iris,” Lucas said, removing his torn hat as he kneeled in front of me. His proud, confident demeanor from moments ago was nowhere to be seen as he checked my body worriedly. “Are you hurt? Did he touch you anywhere?” he asked.

“Y-You can sit in your seat, Lucas,” I stammered.

“Like hell. I’ll be so worried and restless until I can check if you’re really okay.”

His large hands brazenly glided across my body, making me feel embarrassed and ticklish, but when I saw the pained look on his face, I couldn’t tell him to stop.

“All right...” I relented.

Once he carefully inspected my body and saw that I was uninjured and my clothes were still tidy, he gazed at me with all seriousness, his eyes piercing through me.

“Then you’re fine?” Lucas asked.

“I am,” I replied with a nod.

He ran his fingers through his dull hair covered with powder and let out a large sigh. I could practically see the tension leaving his shoulders.

“As long as you’re safe...” he said. “I’m sorry for making you experience something terrifying again.”

“Leik was with me, so I had nothing to fear,” I replied.

“It was terrifying for you until you realized he was *acting* like he betrayed you, no?”

“He will *never* betray you, Lucas. So, I knew he was acting from the start.”

“Do you trust him that much?”

“I do. We’ve overcome several predicaments together.”

I recalled the time Leik and I had spent in the rose garden when he divulged his innermost thoughts. A man like him, who protected me while risking his life when I was separated from Lucas at the royal capital, had certainly well-earned my trust. Lucas looked grim as he grabbed my hands and lowered his head.

“I’ll tell you my reasons later, but I’m sorry about all this,” he said. “In the end, I used you as bait to capture Mikhail.”

“Lucas...”

When my husband looked so remorseful, a warm and gentle feeling filled me. He apologized for putting me in danger, but when I saw his tattered clothes soiled with blood, I knew he was in far more peril than I had been. He’d guided us all to put an end to this event. *He could be prouder of his accomplishments but doesn’t care about being victorious. He’s apologizing because he’s more worried about me. He doesn’t need to be so bothered.*

I felt my heart grow full.

“Lucas,” I said.

As he remained kneeling, I quietly wrapped my arms around him and brought him close.

“Iris...”

I brought his head to my chest, stroking his dull yellow hair and back. The grayish powder that temporarily dyed his hair stuck to my gloves—as I stroked his hair, the strands started to regain their lovely, canary-yellow sheen. It was a vibrant color that I loved, more brilliant than the sunset.

“Since I married you, I’ve always been prepared for my fair share of troubles.

Please don't make that expression," I said.

"Your preparations and my responsibility for dragging you into trouble are separate matters," Lucas's voice was muffled since his face was buried in my chest.

"Goodness... Please let me share your troubles."

"Don't hug me too tightly. I can't breathe..."

As he looked up for air, even his ears were bright red. His pained expression was gone, causing me to smile in relief. Lucas widened his amber eyes before he lowered his eyebrows and offered me a squinty-eyed smile.

"I'm no match for you," he said. "As my wife, I'm sure you'll continue to face more trials and tribulations, so you'd better be prepared."

"Of course," I replied. "I'm looking forward to it, you see."

"Why?"

I took his left hand with both of mine and brought it to my face. After I lovingly gazed down at his hand, marred with scratches and dirt, I gently planted a kiss on his ring finger—much like the mark on my ring finger that he'd left months ago before we parted ways for the royal capital.



“We’ll be matching, won’t we, Lucas?” I asked.

I couldn’t possibly bite him back. I raised my face and noticed him frozen there, his mouth open and eyes wide. I snapped back to my senses, pushed his hand back toward him, and turned away.

“Ah, I suppose...that was a bit too bold of me,” I said, covering my face.

There were a few moments of silence before Lucas let out a hearty laugh.

“Heh! I didn’t think you’d do it back to me!”

“Please forget it,” I pleaded.

“You were cool as a knight. Even if I were a woman, I would’ve fallen for you.”

“Forget it, Lucas.”

“No way. I never, *ever* will.”

“My goodness...”

In high spirits, my husband brought me close, removed the glove on my left hand, and gave a flurry of kisses on my finger.

“Wait, Lucas... They can see us from the window...” I murmured.

“We’re not doing anything that we need to hide. Unless...you want me to.”

“U-Um...”

“You’re prepared, aren’t you? My most beloved person in the world.”

He mischievously narrowed his eyes, rendering me incapable of responding. In a flash, he closed the curtains. I let him have his way with me because he seemed to be enjoying this moment so much.



KIKI restlessly waited for the return of her master and mistress. When she finally heard the carriage enter the gates, she flew out of the door to greet them. Leikzig, who was sitting next to the coachman, gracefully leaped down.

“Leik!” Kiki cried. “How are Lady Iris and Lord Lucas?!”

The silver-haired butler placed a finger over his lips, signaling the maid to be

silent. “Shhh. I don’t think they’ll be out for a while. We should leave them be.”

“They’re both safe, aren’t they?”

Leik smiled and winked at an anxious Kiki. “They’re totally safe and excited, and we’re totally troubled by their antics,” he said.

“T-Totally troubled?”

“Please prepare the baths, a change of clothes, and their meals.”

“All right! I’ll be off!”

Kiki energetically rushed back inside the manor. Leik and the coachman silently exchanged a glance and a forced smile.



ONCE I had cleaned myself in the bath, the Royal Police and the third prince visited our manor. I thought I should greet them, but Lucas wouldn’t let me appear in front of the guests. He would have none of it as he pushed me into the bedroom and kissed my forehead.

“You don’t need to force yourself to come out,” Lucas said. “You just got kidnapped, you know. Leik and I will handle this, so you should act spoiled and eat something sweet. Relax.”

While I was tempted to protest, my tense nerves had eased up, and the exhaustion and fear had arrived quite a while after the fact. I took him up on his kind offer and rested. Within a few seconds, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, it was early the next morning. Lucas was sleeping beside me, and I was in his arms. I later heard the guests had stayed well into the late hours of the night. He likely knew that if I went out, I would get stuck in a lengthy discussion.

A week later, when the dust had settled on the incident, Lucas and Leik told me everything that had occurred. Lucas and I sat on the sofa of the newly renovated office, and Leik served us. Ray and Toggio, who had been with me when we were attacked, were in the room as well. I’d caused them much worry, too.

According to Lucas and Leik, once that fated party was over, the butler had

been busily acting alone in the royal capital to encourage those in the first prince's faction to reach out to him. As they'd expected, one of Leik's former colleagues had approached Leik to get him to betray his master. And so, the butler pretended to do just that while communicating with his other former compatriots who acted under the faction of the first prince. They were all successfully converted to Lucas's side. In any case, the third prince and Lucas expected Mikhail to escape prison sooner or later.

"And if he was gonna escape, I wanted to crush him before he laid low and became difficult to catch. I used Leik and the other dogs to lure Mikhail out and put an end to all this, but..." Lucas trailed off, furrowing his brows as he munched on a scone.

Mikhail's behavior was unexpected. After he fled from prison, he acted erratically all alone, trying to redeem himself, and suddenly attacked my carriage.

Leik poured me another cup of tea and added, "The day you were attacked, my lady, I was observing Mikhail's movements. When he learned that your carriage would pass by his base, he immediately prepared to attack you."

"Seemed like it was a close call," Lucas said.

"Indeed. I only had two courses of action. The first was to enter my lady's carriage as her ally and evade the attack entirely. However, Mikhail would notice and pin me as a traitor. My connection with the other dogs would be severed as well. I wanted to definitively end Mikhail and decrease the power of the first prince. For that..."

"You entered my carriage as my enemy," I finished.

When faced with Mikhail's plan, Leik immediately fought off all the dogs still in the first prince's faction. The ones by Mikhail's side were the dogs that had betrayed His Highness. With that in mind, they secured the premises of the base and chose to abduct me. I was already familiar with the rest of this story.

"I'm so thankful that you chose to believe me back then, my lady," Leik said.

"When I asked if the street was really safe, you stated that it was and that you wouldn't lie," I replied. "I trust you, of course."

“Ah, how wonderful, my lady!”

Ray and Toggio glared at Leik.

“I was really frightened, you know!” Ray wailed.

“Sure, I can agree to this now that I’ve heard your reasons, but it gave me such a scare,” Toggio agreed.

“Now, now. And besides, the two of you calmly requested aid from my lord and His Highness. That was a huge help,” Leik replied.

“Well, I’ve heard the Royal Police couldn’t be trusted,” Toggio said with his chest puffed out.

I glanced at him before I turned to Lucas, chewing away on his scone. “Did you have Kiki take a day off because there was a chance that she’d face Mikhail?” I asked.

“Yep, that’s right,” Lucas said, his brows furrowed as he finished his pastry and licked the crumbs off his fingers. “I didn’t know where spies were lurking, so Leik and I continued to act like we parted ways. I know I dragged Ray and Toggio into this and made you go through a terrifying experience, Iris...”

“No apologizing, Lucas,” I said.

My kind husband blinked several times.

“I was with Leik, so I had nothing to fear. And since speaking with my former fiancé, I think I can properly part ways with my past,” I reasoned. “I think this was for the best.”

Ray and Toggio nodded in agreement.

“As a maid of House Stock, I’m quite used to rowdy affairs,” Ray said.

“Yep,” Toggio added. “When you picked me up from the streets, you—”

“Ah! Ahem! Ahem! Let’s stop that, yeah? Don’t talk about the past in front of Iris,” Lucas said, cutting Toggio off. Then he began laughing so hard his shoulders shook with his mirth. “Good grief, my wife and servants are all very impressive people.”

Happiness filled Lucas’s face as he used his chin to gesture to the table. “You

guys should take a seat too. Have a bite. These are all traditional aristocratic tea snacks of the royal capital. Lee recently learned how to make these.”

Before I knew it, the drawing room turned into a calm tea party. Lucas and I exchanged glances and smiled.

“Let’s go home to Solalitika,” he said.

“Let’s,” I replied.

I would part ways with my life in the royal capital until the next aristocratic congress session.

Epilogue

AS my second spring in Solalitika arrived, I received a letter from Airia and her supervisor. The contents differed drastically from prior missives and warmed my heart with relief. Clumsy as it was, her letters showed signs of growth.

Airia was working at one of Lucas's sewing factories southeast of the royal capital. Instead of educating her as a lady, I thought it was best for her to learn a skill and mingle with the rest of society so she could learn how to live while working. Since girls of similar age from around the kingdom would gather at the factory, I thought it was a good way to stimulate her because she'd start without any friends.

She couldn't blend in with the crowd at first, but now she could do the bare minimum and had gotten used to living in the dorms. If she could grow and become independent, I would feel a lot better as her older sister.

Mikhail had been arrested again. Lucas tracked him for a while, but my former fiancé had been cut off by the first prince's faction and expunged from high society. Lucas told me nothing further about him after that. The dogs who had betrayed the first prince's faction would work on Lucas's merchant vessels until matters died down.

"My silver hair doesn't stand out overseas, so it's much easier."

"If I ever return home, I'd have to dye my hair, but I feel free and happier."

And with that, they left the port with a bit of pep in their step.

Just as I was thinking that everything had settled down, one afternoon, Lucas invited me to see the ocean.

I changed into a less formal, light dress with a flap collar and followed him. He led me to an unmaintained beach away from the port. In contrast to the rowdy parts of the harbor, the sea here was calm and quiet, away from all the people.

The spring breeze brushed against the surface of the water, and the emerald

sea was so clear and beautiful that I could see the depths even from a carriage. The fine grains of sand made a beautiful shore as the crabs and waterfowl left their footprints behind.

“No one comes here, so even if you show your legs a little, no one will see,” Lucas said, leading me ahead.

I descended the stairs from the stone-paved road and took off my shoes. When he pulled me ahead, I gingerly stepped into the water.

“Eep!” I cried, the cold waves washing over my bare feet.

“Is this the first time you’ve entered the ocean?” Lucas asked.

He’d already removed his shoes and rolled up his pants. He seemed used to this as I clung onto him with both hands, excitedly feeling the waves on my feet.

“Yes,” I replied. “Recently, some aristocratic ladies have started going into the ocean as an outing, but I’ve never...”

While he supported me, I couldn’t help but be surprised by the sensation of my feet in the water. Lucas laughed at me with delight. Every time the waves came in, the sand glided between my toes, and my ankles felt comfortably cold.

“The bottom of my feet feels a little ticklish,” I observed.

“There are seashells around here. You could get hurt if you step on them, so be careful,” he replied.

“I see. Ah, look, a crab.”

I gazed at my feet and saw a crab scuttling around. I slowly got used to the water and stared below the surface, making out shellfish, seaweed, small fish, and rocky terrain.

“So beautiful,” I murmured, the words tumbling out of my mouth.

The skies and ocean continued endlessly, and the ship that sailed in the distance was nothing more than a small dot. I took a deep breath, getting a taste of how vast the world was. When I turned to Lucas beside me, he was gazing at me with squinted eyes.

“You’re amazing, Lucas,” I said. “You know about the lands beyond this sea.

You must be seeing a different world than I am.”

He was so brilliant in my eyes as I again gazed at the horizon. I quietly lost myself in my thoughts. *Just what kind of man is Lucas’s father? Why did he come to this kingdom? What caused Lucas to be born and end up holding my hands like this?* Had even a single cog gone awry, we may have never met.

“Iris?” Lucas called as I fell silent.

I was about to say that it was nothing when something scuttled across my feet.

“Eek!” I reflexively pulled my foot away and lost my balance.

I tugged Lucas down with me, and we both fell into the shallow water. We were soaked and quietly stared at each other in shock.

“Iris, are you okay?” he asked.

“I am. I-I’m sorry I got you wet...”

“Ha ha ha! This is the second time we’ve tripped together!”

My husband rolled up his drenched sleeves as he let out a hearty laugh. I felt guilty, but when he laughed, happiness filled my heart, and I giggled with him.

“Goodness, even our faces are wet.” I wiped away the sea spray.

Suddenly, Lucas’s face neared mine. Before I knew it, his lips brushed against my own. He licked his lips as he chuckled.

“Salty,” he said.

“I’d guess as much,” I replied.

I saw myself reflected in his amber eyes. He was so beautiful that my heart panged with guilt—I was monopolizing his gaze. Lucas stared at me for a while before he grimaced and spoke out loud to himself.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you back then,” he said. “If I were to kiss you in front of others, it should’ve been during a better moment.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“During your abduction.”

“Ah...” I thought back and remembered that it may have been the first time we’d kissed in front of others.

“I wanted to show the world that you’re mine, Iris,” he said sulkily like a child.

“I think they know that very well,” I replied with a smile.

“You think so?”

“Of course. Since...”

I trailed off, realizing I’d said a bold lie back then. *Lucas wasn’t there, and it was to unnerve my former fiancé, but I can’t believe I said it...*

“Hm? What’s wrong?” my husband asked quizzically.

“Er...” I replied, falling silent.

Lucas looked at me sternly, clasp my shoulders and peering into my face. Feeling bashful, I couldn’t meet his eyes, but my attitude worried him even more.

“Did he do something?” Lucas asked. “Did he force you to say something? Tell me.”

“I-I-I, um, well...it’s very, quite...shameless...”

“Shameless?!”

His voice carried a hint of anger. When I finally looked at him, his amber eyes had a fiery glare to them. *Oh no... If I keep hiding it, I’ll only make him worry.*

“Um, well, I told my former fiancé he shouldn’t assume you and I were still in a marriage blanc... That’s all,” I managed to say.

Lucas was silent for a moment before he said, “Huh?”

“I-I’m sorry. I know it was quite shameless of me! You’ve been so gentlemanly with me, and yet I implied...”

I was so embarrassed that I tried to look away, but he grabbed my chin. Before I knew it, he placed his lips over mine. His amber eyes were so close to mine as he gazed at me, and I shut my eyes, unable to hide my embarrassment.

“Heh...” Lucas murmured.

His kiss was a little rough as the salty taste of the sea slowly melted away. After he released me, I gingerly opened my eyes and saw Lucas, his face and ears red, while he sighed deeply and caressed my face.

“Lucas?” I asked.

“Those were the best words you could’ve said to him. But give me a break... I- It took me a year to finally...kiss you, you know...”

“I-I apologize for my irresponsible remarks. I didn’t even receive your consent to say them. Other than my former fiancé, only ‘dogs’ were around, so I don’t think rumors will spread.”

Lucas fixedly stared at me before he clicked his tongue and extended his hand. “It might be spring, but you can still catch a cold. And I won’t be able to resist the temptation much longer. Let’s go.”

“Temptation?” I asked.

“Don’t think about it. It’s nothing.”

“A-All right...”

He pulled my left hand and helped me stand. We continued to hold hands as we walked barefoot along the beach. When I stopped and turned around, I saw our two sets of footprints in a straight line behind us. The waves were shimmering under the afternoon sun.

“Iris?” Lucas said.

“Nothing,” I replied, shaking my head with a smile.

We again walked forward together, feeling the ticklish sand under our feet.

“I was just taking in how happy I am,” I said.

“I get it,” Lucas replied. “Will you stay by my side from now on?”

“If you will allow me, I shall happily do so.”

Like a brace of partridges, we enjoyed our time of peaceful happiness together, by each other’s side. We never doubted that we could always live like this, our hands interlocked with each other.

Digital Bonus Chapter: The Thoughts of a Hunting Dog

“**IF** I’m gone, my husband will search for me.”

“Only if Lucas Stock is still alive.”

Iris sucked in a sharp breath in Leik’s arms. How long had it been since this farce started? *How pitiful*, Leik thought, directing a look of disappointment toward Mikhail Streltsy, who was barking in front of him. The butler was eager to finish this farce and clean up the mountain of duties he had so he could relax.

“What’s wrong?” Mikhail asked. “Scared? Don’t worry, you’ll live. If you listen to me, I won’t treat you horribly.”

The more talkative the man was, the more apparent it was that he feared the fragile lady in front of him. It was as clear as day that he was afraid of Iris Stock. The smallest dog barks the loudest and bares his fangs the most.

Isolated and helpless, Iris had been dragged into the basement, restrained, and had a knife pressed to her throat. *Just how large and terrifying does that idiotic oaf view her?* Leikzig looked at Iris, his master’s wife, in his arms. She didn’t seem at all daunted and instead sighed.

“Mikhail, your plan will end in failure,” she said.

She can act confident and composed. Not even her hands are trembling; impressive. But Leikzig knew how nervous she was; the finger he had pressed against her neck felt the rapid pulsations of her heart. *She’s acting tough.*

The butler internally gave a forced smile toward his mistress, who was energetically fighting back. He was glad that she wasn’t the type to cry, tremble, or be confused during these situations. Hence, he wanted to serve her. A gutless, weak woman wasn’t suitable to be Lucas Stock’s wife.

Even if Mikhail was caught and convicted here, danger would constantly chase Baroness Stock. The wife of a young, new aristocrat who stood out like a sore thumb would be a prime target for abductions and assassinations. Leikzig, himself, could be killed at any moment.

In the worst-case scenario, should the master die before fulfilling his goal, the lands and assets of the Stock Trading Company would go entirely to his wife and would fall under her control. That responsibility came with marrying a nouveau riche baron who made his wealth in a single generation. Hence, Leikzig had tried to threaten and appraise her before his master completely fell for the lady. *But, of course, my fears were utterly baseless. There was no need for my apprehensions.*

Leikzig looked at Iris favorably. That was different from what he felt toward his master. Iris was a necessary part of the house, and he held genuine respect for her. Despite being born as an aristocratic lady, her body weak and frail, she had honed her pride and dignity, polishing it into a sharp blade for her to use. She was delicate, evanescent, virtuous, and beautiful. It was akin to the light of his master that brilliantly shone through the skies as he was born in poverty and worked his way up, creating a fortress of glass. Indeed, these two suited each other quite well, and the butler was willing to become a dog or a blade for them.

Blood dripped from Leikzig's finger, dyeing Iris's blouse red. For a lady like her, he was more than willing to spill his blood.

"I've told you that Lucas Stock is no longer with us," Mikhail said.

"Whether he be alive or dead, I will give birth to my husband's child," Iris answered.

"Are you talking about the necessary process? We can just ask the first prince to handle it."

As Mikhail barked, Leikzig stared at the scene as if watching a boring play. He thought back to the first time he'd met Lucas. Back then, Lucas Stock had a heavier accent, looked scarier, and had a tense air around him. He was dangerous, resembling a darker, more evil type of man that one would rather not encounter instead of a merchant. He seemed like the kind of guy who would gather individuals who looked just as menacing and take care of assassins of his own accord. *And yet, he's so pure and innocent that he struggles to lay a finger on the dear wife that he finally obtained.*

It was adorable. The more Leikzig thought about Iris, the more he realized she

was Lucas's type. The lady was straight and honest to the point it was worrying; she was like an unattainable flower with a powerful heart and spirit. Yet her limbs were so pale and frail, and her small mouth and head invoked a desire to protect her. In contrast to her appearance, she would never back away without a fight and never cried. She seemed quiet, but she was unexpectedly strong-willed and stubborn. There was never a person like her around Lucas Stock. She was the absolute perfect, ideal person for him.

What would've happened if her younger sister had married into House Stock as initially planned? *It'd be impossible. She'd be sent back before she even arrived in Solalitika.* Or would he have allowed her to come to Solalitika, only to use her as a pawn to negotiate for a governess to be sent in her place as she wouldn't be able to endure her time there? *No, I don't think my lord could stand a woman like her for any period of time. He would've chased her away and requested a different person.* Leikzig's master was a handsome man—precisely because Lucas was handsome, he could tell when women were simply after his looks and wealth. If this was a customer, he might've tried to conduct some business, but in general, he disliked those after his appearance.

Leikzig brought himself back to reality; Mikhail was still trying to bite Iris.

"Secondly," Iris said, raising her second finger and pausing. The butler felt her breathing grow erratic as she hesitated before brightly declaring, "I love my husband."

Mikhail looked stunned, while Leikzig felt excited. *This is getting interesting.*

"What are you..." the oaf gasped.

Iris deliberately tried to sound cheery. "Why do you continue to assume that Lucas and I are in a marriage blanc?"

"Huh?" Mikhail said in astonishment as he froze. It was as though someone had splashed cold water on his face. In the next moment, he grew pale and started to tremble. "Iris, a-are you saying—"

"I won't let you say you've forgotten the mark of protection that he left on me."

Ah, now I see what she's getting at! Leikzig thought while Mikhail let out an

agonizing scream. Iris was acting pregnant, and Leikzig did everything to stop himself from laughing. *My stomach hurts! Ha ha ha! My lady! That statement gave me quite a shock!*

Of course, the butler knew she was lying. While the happy couple spent their nights in the same bedroom, had she been pregnant, it would've been a virgin birth. Lucas may have looked and acted vulgar, but he was pure and honest to a fault. That hadn't changed since Leikzig aimed for his master's life as a hunting dog. Time and time again, Lucas chased away the beautiful people sent in to kill him. Ultimately, Leikzig had been dispatched to finish the job.

Iris's ears were red, likely embarrassed by her bold claims, and Mikhail sounded utterly deranged.

"I won't forgive you!" he screamed. "I won't, Iris! I-I-I-I'll never forgive such a thing! A K-Karelia's noble body, savagely defiled by a lowly man?!"

His face was a deep scarlet as he shook his head and bellowed, leaving no vestige of the handsome man he once was. Leikzig remained vigilant while he tried his best to hide his laughter.

"Have an abortion! Right this instant! An abortion! I won't forgive you if you give birth to that child!" Mikhail shouted.

Are you still not here? Your wife is in a tight spot! Hello? Leik remained nonchalant as ever, tired of this foolish sham. His master was surely facing his assailants by now, but Leik possessed baseless confidence that his master would be safe. *I won't forgive the man being killed by some small fry when even a hunting dog couldn't finish him.*

Just as Leik was internally muttering his complaints, he noticed a different sound on the floor above. *Ah.* Before his mind could react, his bored body felt reinvigorated with excitement. *You've finally arrived, my lord.* Neither Mikhail nor the other dogs noticed. To him, it was a different sound than random passersby, carriages, and the footsteps of mice. The air shook as the butler felt the door open.

The dogs, finally noticing this presence, glanced at each other in surprise. These simple footsteps told Leikzig the shoes that his master wore, just how tired he was, and even his mood. The butler's master suppressed his excitement

as he took every step, like a beast prowling for its prey, approaching his wife. Each step caused Leik's heart to thud with elation. Like a beast waiting for his master—if he had a tail, he would've surely wagged it with delight.

“Simply thinking of that man's remnants wriggling away in your body is unforgivable!” Mikhail shrieked.

Your imagination is disgusting. Just shut up already. The butler tried to listen to his master's long-awaited footsteps, but Mikhail's voice drowned it out. Leikzig clicked his tongue and lowered his stance.

“Aghhh!” Mikhail bellowed, pouncing on Iris.

At that moment, Leik chose to protect Iris. *All right, all right, shut up already! This is the end!* In lieu of his tail, he whirled his right leg around and kicked a frenzied Mikhail away.

“Gah!”

Leik repositioned his arms to firmly shield Iris. She looked up at him quietly.

For a brief moment, her dark eyes narrowed with a sense of trust as they met his. Her lips formed a faint smile, and as her nerves eased, she trembled ever so slightly. Their gazes crossed for only a split second, but Leik could understand her thoughts. Iris was a normal daughter of high society—she couldn't tell if her husband was close yet. Leikzig flashed a smile, indicating that she should be at ease. *This was scary, wasn't it? Your beloved person will come soon.*

“You... I thought you betrayed them! Didn't you say you hated Iris?!” Mikhail roared.

The noisy small fry continued to snarl. Leikzig licked the blood that dripped down his hand and tugged the corners of his mouth upward.

“Oh, I do. Very much so. My lord changed ever since my lady arrived,” he answered.

The butler then firmly placed his arms around his master's precious, *precious* treasure.

There were only a few seconds left before *he* arrived. The end credits would roll soon.



Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By **Hiironoame**

Illust **Misumi**

Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?



Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

By **Syuu**

Illust **Muni**

Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By **Satsuki Otonashi** Illust **MiRea**

High Society Is Rough For Assassins!

A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!



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