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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 1



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KONYAKU HAKI SARETA “KUUKI” NA WATASHI, NARIAGARI NO

DANNA SAMA NI TOTSUGIMASHITA. Volume 1

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"I shall braid your beautiful hair so it won't get tangled in the ocean breeze, Lady Iris!"

"My hair isn't that beautiful..."

"This isn't flattery! Don't you agree, Lord Lucas?"

"D-Don't ask me..."

## LUCAS STOCK

A nouveau riche merchant from the port city of Solatika. A former commoner who lived in poverty and an ambitious man, he asked Iris, the daughter of a marquess, to marry him. He initially wanted to end this as an unconsummated marriage, but....?

## KIKI RUSSETBROWN

The maid of Stock manor. She's an innocent and energetic girl but dislikes aristocrats due to her past trauma.

## IRIS STOCK (FORMERLY KARELIA)

The daughter of an old, downfallen aristocratic household known as the Karelias. Her stepsister stole her fiancé, and she was sent off to marry the rumored nouveau riche, Lucas, to pay off her household's debts.

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







A silver-haired servant is a show of status among the aristocracy, and even the royal family highly seeks a man like me.

I'm Leikzig Kudrya, a good-looking, serious, and honest man who can be both a butler and a bodyguard. Working under a mere new aristocrat such as my lord is proof of his skill and my never-wavering loyalty toward... blah blah blah...

"Where are you looking, and why are you undressed like that, idiot?!"

"Um... er..."

"Leave him be, Iris. If you get wrapped up in his affairs, it'll only tire you out..."

## LEIKZIG KUDRYA

Lucas's butler and bodyguard. He's a beautiful man and is good at his work, but he seems to always have a few tricks up his sleeve, making him seem suspicious.

# Chapter 1

**“LET’S** cancel our engagement, Iris.”

These words were uttered on a mild day in March during afternoon tea. Though the harsh cold of winter was fading, it was still chilly, and the sunlight that streamed through the windows felt comfortably warm to the touch.

Mikhail, the son of Marquess Streltsy, suddenly canceled our engagement while we were having tea at his manor.

“You’re like air. You lack presence, yet you’re always nagging and nitpicking. I’d rather marry your younger sister, Airia. She’s so adorable and draws attention wherever she goes,” he said.

“I’m so sorry, dear sister, but this has already been decided,” Airia said brusquely as she played with her golden curls.









She stood up from her spot on the couch beside me and walked toward the sofa where Mikhail was seated. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her in extra close, and looked at me, disappointed.

“Iris, I heard that you hindered your sister’s social life out of jealousy.”

I opened my mouth to explain, “I—”

“Spare me your excuses,” he cut me off. “You’re her older sister, and yet you resent her happiness. I simply can’t believe you.”

“It’s nothing to fuss about, Lord Mikhail,” Airia said. “Everyone calls my sister ‘a person who lives in Airia’s shadow’ or ‘invisible’ or something of the sort. She was just hurt by all the comments.”

“But that’s no reason to treat you with contempt. Oh, Airia, you’re far too kind!”

Airia grinned triumphantly as Mikhail hugged her. Indeed, I’d restricted her social activities. However, this was because I was desperately trying to teach her manners. She didn’t have the proper etiquette fitting for the daughter of Marquess Karelia, but it seemed like Mikhail thought that I acted out of jealousy. Judging by the way my sister had whined to him about it, I assumed she thought the same. I suddenly remembered what she’d told me in the past.

*“Your fiancé, Lord Mikhail, is a very beautiful man. A dull wallflower like you would just fade under his brilliance.”*

Since then, she’d been treating him as a potential partner. How foolish of me to be so slow to recognize it.

“What’s wrong? You have a grievance to air?” Airia said haughtily as I stayed silent due to my shock. “The royal family approved a marriage between a son of the Streltsy household and a daughter of the Karelia household, did they not? I don’t quite get the details, but Father told me that it wouldn’t be a problem if we sisters switched places as long as a daughter of his got married. Surely this wouldn’t be an issue for you, who cares so much about precedents and manners and the like?”

I let a moment of silence pass before answering, “Indeed. In terms of

documentation, I believe this arrangement wouldn't pose an issue."

"Exactly! Lord Mikhail would be much happier with me than with someone like you, who lacks presence."

"Now, now, don't say that, Airia. She's still my ex-fiancée and future sister-in-law, you know," Mikhail lovingly chided.

She giggled. "I'm soooo sorry!"

Airia, my younger stepsister, was a real beauty. She took after her mother with her bouncy and curly golden tresses, silky-smooth porcelain skin, and ruby red lips. She wore dainty makeup, accentuating her beautiful and soft cheeks. Her smile resembled that of the saints often depicted praying in religious paintings. I was proud of my beautiful little sister.

In comparison, my long, pin-straight black hair went flat down to my waist with little volume, and my eyes were darker than the ocean floor. The flowery dresses I wore didn't suit my sickly pale complexion. It was only natural that Mikhail refused to marry someone like myself. I looked plain and lacked presence or flair.

"Iris, you can go home. I'd like to show my future wife around the house," Mikhail said coldly, shooing me away with a wave of his hand.

"I understand," I replied. I didn't even have time to gather myself. I stood up and tried to leave with as much dignity as possible. "Lord Mikhail, my sister is a bright and cheery girl. I pray that she can continue to smile under your care."

"That goes without saying. Do you think *I'll* make Airia cry?"

After we exchanged our final words, I returned home to the Karelia townhouse. The coachman, who was waiting for me outside by my horse-drawn carriage, looked at me doubtfully when my sister wasn't with me. After I stated the reason, he silently drove the carriage. As I gazed at the fleeting view from my window, I rested my head in my hands.

"...I wonder if she'll be a fitting wife for Lord Mikhail," I muttered.

Mikhail's mother, Marchioness Streltsy, was rather strict with etiquette. As part of my training to become the perfect wife, I was called for a tea party every

month, but not a day went by when my former mother-in-law didn't scold me.

*"Don't try to act seductive; stay plain. The mole by your eye might be taken as a symbol of lasciviousness."*

*"You're dreary enough as it is. At the very least, try to be free flowing like air instead of a ripple in the water."*

*"Make sure you don't tarnish the name of the Karelia household that your late mother did her best to protect."*

Lady Streltsy was strict, but when my late mother died of an illness, she raised me like I was her own. As such, Airia, who came later and was raised more freely by my stepmother, was sure to irritate Lady Streltsy.

"There isn't much time until the wedding. At the very least, I should teach her basic etiquette and make sure she has a healthy relationship with her mother-in-law..." I thought out loud.

While I was trying to sort out the situation, the carriage stopped in front of my house. My father called for me the moment I returned. I apologized before I did anything else.

"I'm terribly sorry, Father." I bowed my head. "I just heard about the engagement from Lord Mikhail. I understand that I've inconvenienced you due to my shortcomings."

"That's all in the past," my father replied, turning around. Surprisingly, he didn't look too disappointed. "Rejoice. There's someone else who wants a flawed woman like you."

"Huh...?" The news came as a great surprise to me.

"It seems like he actually wanted your sister, but you're more than enough for a former commoner."

"You already found me a new husband?"

He threw a piece of paper at me. The letter, written on the most modern typewriter, stated that I was to become a wife. It was already signed and notarized. I read the name of my new husband.

"Baron Lucas Stock..."

As part of my marchioness training, I memorized the names of almost all the long-established aristocrats that owned land. The name “Stock” didn’t ring a bell, and I hadn’t met him at any of the aristocratic parties held in the royal capital. The title of “baron” was also one that I was unfamiliar with; I assumed that he was a new aristocrat who didn’t own any land and only held a title.

“He’s a nouveau riche from the merchant city, Solalitika. He purchased his title with money he made from his business—a lowly man indeed. He asked for your younger sister in exchange for shouldering some of our debt,” my father explained as I stared at the name on the letter.

“W-Well, this is rather sudden... If he asked for my sister, then—”

“Listen well. It’s already been decided. There’s no need for you to understand anything,” my father cut me off. I nodded. “In any case, he asked for Airia, but I’m sure her mother would be crushed if her precious daughter was sent to the rural countryside of Solalitika. Thus, I told him that Airia was engaged to the son of Lord Streltsy and that you, her older sister, were free to go in her stead.”

“You...ruined my engagement because you wanted to keep my sister close at home,” I realized.

“This is all for the family. Bear with it. Fulfill your duties as a daughter of the Karelia family,” my father coldly told me.

I stood there in shock. It took me some time to process the truth. I’d thought it was odd that my engagement, which had been formally approved by the royal family, was canceled so abruptly. Even a switch of sisters was a rare occurrence that typically only happened when one passed away. I realized that this entire series of events had been planned for a while now.

“What will happen to the Karelia name if I get married?” I desperately buried my emotions. “This house only has myself and my sister. If either one of us doesn’t adopt a child, your title and property will be given to the next closest related male.”

My father grinned, flashing his teeth and gums. “Your stepmother is in her thirties. That’s more than enough time to give birth to another child.”

I stood in silence.

“Even if she doesn’t birth a boy, as long as I’m able-bodied, I can plant my seed elsewhere, as much as I’d like.”

A shiver ran up my spine as my biological father wore a vulgar smile in front of me, his daughter. My father had a distant relationship with my mother and inherited the Karelia title and properties via a political marriage with her. In truth, the pride and dignity of our name had died with my mother.

I reread the letter. Solalitika was a merchant city near the ocean. It took about a week by carriage from the royal capital to this port city. Because one had to cross a mountain to reach Solalitika, news from the royal capital wouldn’t reach there. They had a different culture and spoke a different language. My father most likely didn’t want to send my beautiful sister as this former commoner’s bride and decided that I should go in her stead. Airia, who was smitten with Mikhail, couldn’t have hoped for a better outcome.

“Iris, be obedient as usual and marry this former commoner. You lacked presence in the royal capital, anyway. The countryside would be more fitting for a wallflower like you,” my father said.

The Karelia household had been tumbling down ever since my mother died. However, I didn’t expect the situation to be so dire that I had to marry someone to ease some debt.

“Father, I pray that the Karelia household that my mother loved dearly will be secure for many years to come. May I please bring some of my mother’s mementos with me?” I asked.

“Sure, do as you like. He’d like you to come as soon as possible, so I’ll send you to Solalitika immediately. You’ll do this for the Karelia name, won’t you?”

“Of course, Father.”

I left the room. I couldn’t even shed a single tear.



**THE** two weeks leading up to my departure to Solalitika were a blur. I was busy thanking everyone that I was indebted to. Every time I mentioned my future husband’s name, Lucas Stock, I was greeted with shocked faces as they all repeated the same phrases.



“Isn’t that the nouveau riche? I don’t hear good things about him.”

“He’s the rumored new aristocrat—a country bumpkin that bought his way in. He’s pushing his luck.”

These straightforward insults slowly morphed into discussions about his business.

“He apparently got rich by importing Marmaria stone slabs. He’s rather influential.”

While there were mentions of his business and his mines, I couldn’t glean any other information. The conversation would usually close with rumors of his notoriety, based entirely on speculation.

“I heard that it’s awful there. Once you start working at his company, you can never leave. You can’t flee...”

As I listened to these unreliable rumors, I realized why I’d never heard his name before. The aristocrats in the royal capital purposefully avoided him. The ones that I was familiar with all had a noble lineage that went back over a hundred years, embracing tradition. Thus, many didn’t welcome new aristocrats, fearing that it would affect their societal standing in the future, and their eyes narrowed in disdain.

Even my father showed his contempt by protecting my sister from these new aristocrats, sending me in her stead. This kind of pride had blocked me from receiving any information, resulting in my lack of knowledge.

The only confirmed rumor about Lucas Stock was that he had some business with the household of the royal prince, the king’s younger brother. He obtained the title of “baron” so that he could personally meet His Highness.

“If Lucas Stock can entertain the royal prince, I’m sure that he’s at least a rather respectable man,” I muttered to myself with a wry smile. Amongst the rumors, it was the only bit of information that I was certain of. “I’m sure that he’ll soon divorce me. I’m very dull, after all.”

Even so, I wanted to gather as much information about him as possible, and I was determined to show him my utmost respect. Before my departure, I wrote a letter to my mysterious fiancé.

*“I apologize that I’m being sent in my sister’s stead. I lack flair, am very dull, and am told that I have no presence; I’m invisible like air.”*

*Since he requested my sister, I’m sure he wanted a cute wife like her—an energetic, cheerful young woman with beautiful, curly golden hair.*

I peered at a mirror. My black hair was like a curtain of night. My eyes were pitch-black, as though one were peering into the bottom of a well. My only unique characteristic, a mole by my eye, was often noted as looking promiscuous.

“I’m dull and lack presence... I’m like air,” I repeated like a curse.



**IN** the following days, a carriage from Solalitika arrived, ready to bring me to my future husband. The carriage was elegant, new, and seemed tailor-made for a woman. It looked like he specifically bought it to welcome me, and I sensed his kindness. A young, silver-haired man greeted me, representing the servants.

“Pleased to meet you, my lady. Lord Stock has sent me for you. I’m the footman, Leikzig Kudrya.”

“Thank you, Sir Kudrya,” I replied.

“Please call me Leikzig. Everyone at the manor does.”

He had an effeminate, soft-spoken demeanor. He seemed mild-mannered and gave off an air of refinement. Though he had a slight northern kingdom accent, he was still easy to understand.

“Come now, Kiki. Say your greetings,” he said, introducing my new personal maid to me.

“Yes, sir,” she said.

A small-framed maid timidly appeared behind him. She was a delicate woman with her brown, curly hair neatly braided, wearing thick black tights that were unsuitable for spring. Her maid uniform was a bit too large for her, and the apron string around her waist held her attire together.

“Pleased to meet you, my lady. My name is Kiki Russetbrown.”

Perhaps due to her nervousness or anxiety, her expression was stiff, and she wouldn't look me in the eye. She restlessly stared at the hem of her skirt or the ground.

"I'm Iris. The pleasure is all mine."

She must've expected to meet a flowery noblewoman from the royal capital. I was far too plain-looking, and I couldn't blame her for being hesitant.

"Erm... Lady Iris, is this all you're bringing from home?" Kiki asked while glancing around at my bags.

"Yes, this is all."

"May I know where your servants, who'll be accompanying you from the royal capital, are?"

I shook my head apologetically. "No one will be accompanying me. We only have just enough to run our house. I'm sorry, Kiki. I'm sure I'll be troubling you quite a bit."

"That's...not an issue at all." She stared at the ground again before falling silent.

I didn't have any money with me. I only had a few items from my bridal training and my late mother's mementos. I'd basically been sent to an unknown man's place to marry with little more than the clothes on my back. Suddenly, a young man's voice echoed from beyond the carriage.

"I'm so sorry, Sir Leikzig! I'm late!" A tall man with ash-blond hair wearing a thick trench coat approached us. Leikzig glanced at the man coldly.

"Apologize to Lady Iris instead of me," he said.

The tall man laughed. "You're right!"

With a happy expression, he took off his hat, fixed his hair, and brightly smiled at me. "You're Lady Iris, correct? Pleased to meet you! I'm Dazzle!" He bowed. "I apologize for being late. The wheels of the carriage were a little rickety."

Leikzig coughed, cutting the introduction short. "Ahem, Dazzle, don't introduce yourself first. As he's already stated, he will be your coachman. Unfortunately, this is the kind of man that he is. He may be a little unpleasant,

Lady Iris, but I beg for your leniency. I'll be sure to discipline him."

"I'll be in your care," Dazzle said.

Despite his large stature, it was his glittering eyes that left a lasting impression. His unique, bright, amber-colored eyes looked as though the sunset or the light of a lantern was trapped within. I lightly curtsied and greeted him.

"I'll be in your care as well, Dazzle."

I took in the servants that Lord Stock had prepared for me: cool-headed Leikzig, nervous Kiki, who still wouldn't look me in the eye, and Dazzle, who seemed to go at his own pace. They'd be taking care of me from now on.

The Karelia household had mostly servants that were present when my late mother was still around. There weren't many young people. In addition, many were already familiar with the Karelia household's traditions and the formalities of the royal capital. They all strictly adhered to "correct" standards of what a servant should be.

I'd never had to conform to others for the servants to accept me. My duty as a wife started there.



**IT** took a week by carriage to reach the port city of Solalitika, and we stayed overnight in a few towns along the way. Because our kingdom's aristocrats would host high society gatherings in the capital's townhouses until the summer, there were many stagecoaches and freight carriages on the road. I didn't see many aristocratic carriages like the one I rode in, and a floral, fragrant scent filled my nose whenever a flower-selling carriage passed by. The ride was comfortable. I didn't feel at all tired while I was seated. The carriages of the Karelia household were old, and I felt a little apologetic if I even compared the two.

We were blessed with good weather on the first day of our trip, and I glanced at Kiki, who was seated by me. At first, she was against riding in the same carriage as me, but I requested to spend at least half of every day together. We were going to spend time together for many years to come, and I wanted her to get used to me.

I kept my distance at first and didn't force conversation. I simply wanted her to be near me. The next day, she looked a little tired, so I told her that she was free to sleep.

"Oh no, I mustn't sleep in front of you, Lady Iris," she said.

"I don't mind at all. Be at ease and do as you like. We've a long trip ahead of us, and if you get tired, I'd have no one to take care of me. That would be very troubling indeed, so please relax."

"But..."

She refused at first, fighting off her drowsiness, but her anxiety exhausted her, and sleep won in the end. She clutched her knees and dozed off. When we arrived at an inn, she was about to cry as the color drained from her face.

"E-Excuse me, Lady Iris...!" she stammered.

"Excellent timing. I was nodding off a little myself," I replied.

Not reassured, she fell silent with a troubled expression. I stroked the cushioned seats and kept a smile on my face.

"This carriage is very comfortable. Is this the first time you've been on this one, Kiki?" I asked.

She nodded. "If we don't count the test ride for this carriage, it has never been used before."

"Did you fall asleep during your ride to the royal capital?"

"Heavens, no!" She turned beet red and sheepishly admitted, "Actually, I did fall asleep here and there. I got so nervous that I couldn't sleep at night."

She explained that she suffered from mild insomnia.

"I have trouble sleeping in dark places..." she murmured. She didn't go into detail, but her frightened eyes told me that she may have experienced something terrifying in the dark. Did the Stock household have something to do with this?

"B-But since I got hired by Lord Lucas, I'm able to sleep more! I think I'll get better— I mean, I *know* I'll get better, so I hope you understand..." she added

hastily, dispelling any negative thoughts I had about my future husband's household.

"Does the manor provide a good working environment?" I asked.

"Yes!" she responded energetically with a smile. "Lord Lucas is wonderful, and the other servants are also extremely kind to me. I...used to serve in the royal capital under an aristocrat, but I had a horrible experience. I became afraid of people..."

She fiddled with her hands on top of her knees before she gripped her apron tightly.

"But Lord Lucas picked me up and saved me. He said that I was a valuable asset because I knew the mannerisms of the royal capital."

"He knew your true value," I said with a soft smile.

"I'm not much, but he still agreed to hire me with a wonderful wage!"

"He must be your savior."

"Yes. I love Lord Lucas." The moment the words left her lips, her face went pale, and she vigorously shook her head. "No, I mean, I'm not in love with him or anything! I don't view him in that way! Um..."

She truly respected her master. I smiled when she desperately denied her intentions.

"I understand. If you don't mind, would you tell me more about Lord Lucas?"



**SINCE** that day, Kiki and I talked more and more. She was actually a cheerful and talkative girl when you got to know her. Once she got used to me, she started to tell me about Solalitika and Lord Lucas without me having to ask. She told me about the manor and everything she knew, aside from her past.

I was satisfied. Everyone had a past that they didn't wish to divulge, and I was happy to learn that she was cheerful and kind.



**WHEN** we passed the ridge that separated the kingdom from its northern and

southern areas, the roads were less paved. Even in a new carriage, the ride was bumpy.

“This is worse than the outward route.” Kiki worriedly gazed outside.

“I’m sure Dazzle is having a tough time,” I replied.

The carriage came to a halt, and the horses neighed. After it shook a little, Dazzle came over.

“I deeply apologize, Lady Iris!” He bowed low. His ash-blond hair was matted with sweat, and the dirt on his brow dripped down. “I’m sorry for making you wait, my lady. The carriage isn’t in the best of shape.”

“That’s not a problem. Did something break?” I asked.

“The road is a lot muddier than when we left to fetch you. The wheels are sinking into the ground.”

“My, that’s quite the conundrum.”

Dazzle had taken off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. He was covered in mud from the elbow down. He was trying his best in this dire situation.

“Would it be easier to fix the wheels if we got out of the carriage?” I asked.

He laughed and shook his head. “You and Kiki aren’t heavy at all. Please sit back and bear with me for a bit longer.”

I gazed at his back while he walked away.

“What does Lord Lucas look like, I wonder?” I asked Kiki.

She jolted at my question and looked around, averting her gaze.

“Did I say something odd?”

“Erm, well... I wonder...”

Why the shifty-eyed look? She stiffened up whenever Dazzle came near, and I thought that perhaps she feared him for some reason. I continued to ask about my future husband, hoping to take her mind away from whatever was troubling her.

“I haven’t asked how he looks, have I?”



“H-Have you not?”

“What color is his hair? What does he look like? Would you tell me?” I asked, hoping the sheer amount of questions would finally distract her.

“U-Um...” she stammered, carefully choosing her words. “Lord Lucas has glossy blonde hair. It stands out, even from afar. His hair is golden, but it’s not the light yellow that aristocrats of the royal capital often have. It’s more of a yellowish gold. It reminds me of a baby chick.”

“I see. That sounds eye-catching.”

“Yes. He’s very tall as well, so he stands out.”

“Then I’m sure I’ll recognize him immediately. I’m quite excited.”

“I’m...glad to hear that.” She quietly looked away. She was still nervous, but I was glad that she’d gotten a little used to me.

Then the carriage shook and moved smoothly. A breeze came through the window, and fresh air filled the carriage once more.

“Thank goodness we’re moving again,” I said.

“Yes, I’m glad as well.”

Kiki breathed a sigh of relief.



**THAT** day, we stayed in Tesouvius, a large town located on the west and north crossroads that led to Solalitika. Tesouvius had numerous inns, from luxurious ones for royalty and aristocrats to cheaper, more affordable lodgings. The bustling shopping district and streetlights were well-maintained. The town looked like a trading hub—even from my carriage, I could tell that the bazaar in the town square was full of life. It was so fascinating that I forgot how fatigued I felt.

“Oh? That carriage...” I said. A wagon in front of an expensive inn for aristocrats caught my eye. It was a nostalgic sight.

“Do you know that carriage?” Kiki asked.

“I do. It belongs to the household of Viscount Teressa. His eldest daughter,

Lady Erika Teressa, is a Queen's Academy for Girls alumna. We were classmates. She stayed in the dormitories for a few years before her debutante."

I gazed at the carriage from my window. Then I headed toward a different inn. One that Lord Lucas had prepared beforehand.



I was resting in my inn for the night. Kiki, who'd gone outside to offer assistance, hadn't returned.

"She's a bit late, isn't she?" I murmured. When I looked out the window, a man was harassing Kiki just below it. "Something must've happened."

Another aristocrat's servant caught her while she was unloading the carriage. *She did say she experienced something dreadful at the royal capital, didn't she? If a man from that area started talking to her, it would terrify her,* I thought.

I had to help. I opened the door to request aid and bumped into Dazzle.

"Whoops," he said. He'd just gotten out of the shower. Looking refreshed, he hastily pushed his hair back and readjusted his hat. "What's wrong? You seem to be in a hurry," he asked.

"Kiki is in trouble." I glanced at the window.

"Pardon me." He stepped into my room and looked out the opening. He caught sight of Kiki and muttered in a low voice, "Aw, shoot." He turned around. "Lady Iris, please wait here. I'll go and help her."

"Please, wait," I said as he walked past me, stopping his gallant stride. "That man looks familiar."

He turned toward me, surprised. "Pardon?"

"He must be related to Viscount Teressa's household. If so, I'd best come along."

He stared at me for a split second. "Lady Iris, are you sure about this? You might not be regarded as the daughter of a marquess anymore."

I stood in silence. A chill ran through me. For the first time, the atmosphere around him changed. He was serious. Suddenly, his large stature was

intimidating. His glittering, sunset-colored gaze bore through me.

“You have a point. Matters might resolve amicably if you step in.” He smiled. His serious aura dissipated. “Shall we go, then? I’ll protect you.”

Without hesitation, I headed toward Kiki. I shrugged off the chill from earlier and followed closely behind him.



**SERVANTS** dressed in black livery surrounded Kiki. She caught sight of Dazzle and tried to talk, but reconsidered and quickly covered her mouth.

“Lady Iris, Dazzle...” she murmured.

I stepped in front of my coachman. “Pardon me. That girl there is my maid. Is anything the matter?”

“Is that so?” one of the servants said as they all shrugged, exasperated.

I caught a whiff of alcohol and a strong odor of tobacco from the servants. They’d already had a glass at a tavern.

“She bumped into us, you see, and she’s been standing here without offering a word of apology,” a servant said.

“I’m not aware of who you are, madam, but kindly discipline your maid,” said another.

They looked at me with a snicker. Their expressions said it all—they harassed Kiki, knowing she was the maid of the Stock household.

“I apologize for the trouble that my maid has caused,” I said. I kept my back straight, bent my knees, and bowed my head. However, they weren’t satisfied.

“This won’t be resolved with a simple apology. I’m sorry to say, but unlike your lowly maid, we’re from an aristocratic family. Our new livery have been sullied with her filth, and we can’t meet the viscount, our master, like this.”

The servant just used the influence of the Teressa household to harass the new aristocrats. Disappointed, I once again looked at their faces. These men served Viscount Teressa’s only child, Erika. I’d seen them occasionally during my academy years and at socialite parties. Butlers and male servants who worked

within the house were expensive. Though Erika was an only child, one could tell the wealth and power of her household as she had multiple male servants accompany her on a trip.

“Is anything the matter, madam of an unknown household?”

I thought for a moment before answering. “I understand your concerns. How about we part ways and pretend this never happened? Would you kindly accept this arrangement?”

The men looked at me, stunned by my words.

“Pardon me, madam, but I don’t quite understand what you’re saying.”

Kiki looked shocked as well, but I answered them head-on.

“I apologize for my late introduction. My name is Iris Karelia. I went to the same academy as Lady Erika.”

Currently, I was still the daughter of Marquess Karelia. The servants looked at me with knowing and condescending smirks. I’d expected as much, but I’d never experienced such rudeness as the daughter of the Karelia household before. I once again thought about the status that I’d lose by marrying a new aristocrat.

A warm hand rested on my shoulder. Dazzle, keeping his hand hidden, patted me. His warmth reassured me. I knew that he was signaling in the best way that he could that he’d protect me at any cost. Lord Lucas’s servants were kind people. I looked at the men once more, puffing out my chest and standing resolute.

“I borrowed this maid from Baron Stock. I’m still a part of the Karelia household,” I said.

“What are you trying to say, Lady Iris?” a servant said.

I sighed at their ignorance. “Had she truly ‘sullied’ your attire, you’d sue us for the fees, correct? If so, this would go to trial at the royal capital, and it’d be between Viscount Teressa’s household and Marquess Karelia’s household.”

The men looked troubled, understanding the weight of what a trial would entail. “N-No...she just dirtied our suits a little.”

“Had this simply been a matter between Teressa and Karelia, I believe it wouldn’t be much trouble. However, this maid is a servant that the house of Karelia borrowed from the house of Stock. As such, we must show a certain degree of respect toward Lord Stock. Even if it’s just for show, it’s only natural that we take the necessary steps, as Marquess Karelia is part of the Traditional Twelve. I hope this isn’t an issue for you?”

The servants turned pale as they exchanged glances.

I continued, “In addition, it’s the current king himself that encouraged the expansion of the new aristocrats. Should we fight this in the royal capital, the entire kingdom, including His Majesty, would take note of the actions of the Karelia household, a part of the Traditional Twelve, as well as the new aristocrat, who has been formally approved under his reign. It goes without saying, but the household of Viscount Teressa will also be under scrutiny. However, I truly don’t wish to escalate matters to that degree.”

The servants fell silent. I stood my ground. They’d initiated the argument, so they didn’t wish to back down, but they were also panicked, thinking that their actions may have been out of line.

Suddenly, a cheery voice echoed through the air. Dazzle casually stepped between us as he hid Kiki behind him. “Now, now! I’m not quite sure of the small stuff, but why don’t we just call it quits, huh?”

“How dare a mere coachman speak out of turn,” a servant muttered.

“Come now, this is no place to talk. We don’t want to gather a crowd and create a ruckus now, do we?” Dazzle looked around as he tried to appease these excited drunkards. As he’d said, we were gathering quite the crowd. “Besides, my master has put Lady Iris under my care. If his future wife gets into any trouble, I’ll be toast! Please, do it for me! I don’t want to wander the streets! Goodbye!”

He winked at the silent servants, patted Kiki’s and my shoulders, and ushered us into the inn. He escorted us into our room and slammed the door shut behind him.

“We should be good,” he said.

He was quick. While I was still shocked, Kiki cried with gratitude next to me.

“Um... Dazzle, thank you so much!”

“You have my gratitude as well. I appreciate you stepping in,” I said.

He tousled Kiki’s hair and gave me a squinty-eyed smile as I thanked him. “It’s great that you’re brave, my lady, but please don’t give me such a scare. And Kiki, try your best to scream for help next time,” he said.

“Okay!” Kiki replied enthusiastically.

“And thank Lady Iris. Had she not seen you, we might not have made it in time.”

“Waaah! Thank you so much, Lady Iris!” She bowed fervently, her eyes still red.

In any case, I was glad that we were all safe thanks to Dazzle.



**THAT** night, I immediately got to work. I wrote a letter of apology to Erika. Though her servants were in the wrong, it was proper to apologize anyway. She replied, asking to meet me for tea.

*Before you get married in a faraway place, I’d love to chat with you over tea tomorrow. If you don’t mind, please stop by my inn at noon.*

*-Erika*

It was perfect timing. We needed time to polish the carriage before heading over the ridge. The next day, I met Erika at the tearoom of her lodging for afternoon tea.

“I apologize for the rudeness of my servants yesterday. Please forgive me.” She sipped from her white porcelain teacup. Her dress was as pretty as always, decorated with trendy frills. Her long, blonde hair was beautifully woven, fitting for an aristocrat, and it was easy to tell that she’d been treated preciously.

“I apologize for stepping in as well. Do forgive me. However, I’m relieved that I could talk with you again, Erika,” I said.

“But of course. We were classmates, were we not?”

We smiled at each other and had some sweet cake. I wouldn't have much time to talk with a classmate and friend like this in the future, and I was enjoying this moment. Erika was on her way to introduce her fiancé to her great-uncle, Marquess Tillobrady, who was recuperating at his residence. The fact that she was headed toward her country house out of season meant that she was most likely trying to gain the approval of the marquess as soon as possible.

"It seems rest has done my great-uncle well. He's getting better, and I can finally wed my husband," she said.

"That's wonderful to hear," I replied.

"After much time, we're both off to marry."

When we were eighteen, Erika and I were late bloomers compared to our peers. I'd held off on my marriage, waiting until the Karelia household had stabilized, and she held off on hers because she couldn't gain approval regarding the succession of aristocratic titles due to her great-uncle's health. We were both finally ready to bloom.

"However..." she trailed off, looking down. Her neatly trimmed eyebrows furrowed slightly. She glanced at my servants and the carriage, provided by Lord Stock, stationed beyond the terrace. It lacked a crest—barons weren't permitted to use them. She stared at the spot where the crest would've been placed. "It'll get lonely, Iris."

"I know."

She didn't need to voice her thoughts for me to understand. Daughters of aristocrats weren't given a title. Their husband's rank determined their standing. Since I'd be going from the daughter of a marquess to the wife of a baron, we would drift further apart. In our aristocratic society, even close relationships would crumble with the change of status, and one's societal circle would transform accordingly as well. Erika smiled and changed the topic.

"Have you met the baron yet?" she asked.

"Never. Our first meeting will be at his residence."

"Goodness!" Her eyes widened. "You've never even met him at a party, yet

you're leaving the royal capital to marry this unknown man? Oh, I do feel sorry for you. Will you be able to receive letters?"

"They'll take time to arrive, but letters should come just fine. Thank you for your concern. My maid is mindful, and my coachman is loyal and trustworthy."

"I see. That's wonderful to hear. I'd thought you'd be lonely, so that's a little reassuring."

"I'm happy to hear that I'm in your thoughts, even though we've been apart."

She looked down and murmured, "I could never. I couldn't smile so bravely if I were off to marry a new aristocrat whom I'd never met before."

"Erika..."

"I respect your resolve from the bottom of my heart, Iris. It takes a lot to marry for your household." Her sympathetic words sounded genuine. "I'll beg my father and husband to allow us to exchange letters. If Baron Stock gains a connection to the royal capital, we may be able to talk like this again. Whenever you feel down or lonely, please don't hesitate to write to me, even if I can't do much for you."

"Thank you."

She firmly gripped both of my hands to offer encouragement. I squeezed back with a smile. Naturally, the daughter of a traditional aristocrat would act like this.



**TESOUVIUS** was blessed with longer days than the royal capital—I'd returned to my lodging after tea, and it was still bright outside. We didn't need the streetlights to turn on just yet.

Before sunset, I headed to the area where carriages were parked with Kiki. Dazzle was eating a sandwich next to Lord Stock's carriage. He noticed me before I could call out to him and hastily put his sandwich down, stood up, and raised his hat.

"My lady, you'll dirty your clothes out here," he said.

"I appreciate your concern. I'm sorry to barge in while you're eating, but may



I have a word with you later?" I asked.

"We can talk right now. I've only got a bite left. Please give me a moment." He took a big bite, polishing off the last of his sandwich, and wiped his hands clean before readjusting his hat.

"I was just about to return to my room, so you've got excellent timing," he said, putting his tools away. He picked up his toolbox and headed away from the carriages toward a bench. "Over there, my lady." He gestured toward the seat.

I looked up at him. "Why don't you sit with me? Kiki, come sit with us as well."

"But..." he started.

"I'm the one that imposed on you. I'm here to express my gratitude, so it'd be odd if I were the only one seated."

"Gratitude?"

Kiki and I sat next to each other. Dazzle hesitantly sat down as well, keeping some distance between us. When he was seated, I had a better view of his eyes. His amber-colored pupils were as striking as ever. His features were well-defined, and his jawline was strong; his masculine looks only accentuated his eyes, which were glittering like the sun.

"Is there something on my face?" he asked.

"Oh, pardon me." I glanced away before looking at him again. "Thank you for saving us yesterday. I feel like I had only fanned the flames of the argument."

"Oh, is that all?" He wiped his dirty cheek and smiled. "That's nothing to worry about. It's thanks to you that the incident ended without anything else happening. Things would've gotten more complicated had I just stepped in. Besides, I should be the one thanking you, my lady. Thank you for helping Kiki."

Next to me, Kiki struggled to find the right words. She'd truly been treated well at the manor.

"There's no need for you to apologize or thank me. But..." he paused, fingers interlaced on his lap. He carefully chose his words, speaking as though to warn

me. “The town we’ll be heading to is a lot more dangerous. You should be more careful, my lady. You’ll be marrying a former commoner who happened to make it big.”

I was silent for a moment. “I’ll be more mindful of my position.”

He smiled and flashed his teeth as he waved his hand. “Ah, no, I didn’t say that to make you look so sad. It’s just that you’ll need to be firm. You’re diving into a completely different world. You won’t be treated like a princess anymore—you’ll be the wife of a new aristocrat.”

His demeanor shifted again. Dazzle was usually cheery and carefree. The man in front of me didn’t seem like a normal coachman anymore.

“You can still go back. What would you like to do?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” I answered. His pointed words stabbed at my chest.

“My lord told me that should you prefer to head back home, you may.”

Dazzle seemed serious. I was grateful for their concerns, but I shook my head. “I won’t go back. As planned, I’ll become Lord Lucas’s wife.”

“Are you certain? I’m sure you’ve heard nasty rumors about us at the royal capital.”

“The same could be said for me. I’m plain, and I’m often told that I’m like air. Some people even think I’m an evil woman who bullies my beautiful younger sister. Rumors are just rumors. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“I’ve grown rather fond of Kiki. You’re a lovely person as well, Dazzle. I’m interested in Lord Lucas, the man who hired you.”

“I see.”

“Of course, should Lord Lucas be dissatisfied with me and request a divorce, I will comply. I’m aware of my appearance, after all.”

“Appearance?” He shrugged and laughed. “I’m sure my lord won’t send you back just for that.”

Next to him, I realized how long his arms and legs were. Underneath his coat,

which he'd removed, he wore well-sewn, old clothes. It was common practice for servants to receive their master's old clothes, more so if they were sent away from the manor. I wondered if Dazzle's shirt was his master's old clothes.

"I'm so sorry, but may I leave? I'm filthy, and I'd love to wash off before preparing for tomorrow," Dazzle said.

"I'm sorry for taking your time. I'll be in your care tomorrow as well." I turned toward him. "I'd like to thank you for your kind consideration. Please take good care of me in Solalitika, too."



**DAZZLE** gazed at the daughter of the Marquess, brows furrowed, as she walked away. Before parting, she softly smiled, dark eyes slightly squinting against the setting sun.

"A lady kept in a box and sheltered from the outside world, huh," he murmured to himself.

Leikzig, who had kept hidden, suddenly appeared. "Seems like you can't stuff her in a box and ask for a return, though."

"You always phrase things in the scariest way possible."

"The scariest thing is your face, you know. Mercy me, I must remember to speak to the coachman Dazzle with respect."

"Boy, do *you* sound sincere." Dazzle shrugged largely and organized his tools.

"Dazzle, you seemed to have dropped a tool." Leikzig bent down to pick it up and casually brought his face near Dazzle's ear. "They were idiots looking for some entertainment. I presume that they got drunk and decided to taunt a nouveau riche."

"Got it. Carry on."

Leikzig narrowed his bright eyes in understanding before stepping back. The entire exchange ended in moments—no one had seen them close to each other, much less heard their conversation. He looked down at the oil-proof paper in Dazzle's hands, which had contained a sandwich.

"And? What will you do about the woman you've failed to return?" Leikzig

said.

“Eh, guess things will be interesting,” Dazzle replied. He crumpled the paper into a ball and stood up.



**AFTER** two whole days, the long ride was finally coming to an end. We arrived at the seaside merchant city of Solalitika. It wasn't as rural as rumored in the royal capital. It was a bustling town filled with people who had come to the city to work. People, including the middle class and working class, happily went about their afternoon. This was in stark contrast to the royal capital, which had a clear divide between the aristocrats and the poor. The citizens of the merchant city looked well-groomed and cheery as they led a well-balanced life.

Within the carriage, a cool ocean breeze tickled my cheeks. I took in the view: the sunny sky, brick buildings, and the markets selling a variety of items. Minstrels who had unusually colored hair filled the city square. They sang with sonorous voices and strummed their instruments as though they were harmonizing with the cries of the seagulls.

“What a beautiful city,” I murmured. I fell in love with Solalitika at first sight.

“And there's Lord Lucas's Trading Company!” Kiki said energetically as she pointed out various buildings, beaming with pride.

I held my hair out of the way as I looked out the window. A five-story brick building stood next to a large manor and a warehouse that extended to the end of the road.

“Do these buildings all belong to Lord Lucas?” I asked.

“That's not all! There are hotels and restaurants lined up on a different road. Those belong to my lord as well!” Kiki replied.

I was awestruck by the scale of his influence. It was beyond what I'd imagined, as though I were shouldering the heart of an industry that supported this city.

“The magnitude of his business far surpasses what I imagined.”

“Just wait until you see the manor! My lord has specially built a new place for

you, my lady!”

The carriage went up a slope paved with stone, and I arrived at a manor atop a hill. The gates opened to a beautifully maintained garden with blooming flowers. Servants lined up and greeted us. The sheer number of servants would put even an earl to shame.

“H-How amazing,” I murmured. Was the baron extremely wealthy or prone to spending an extravagant amount? Since finances were rough back at home, I was curious.

“Lord Lucas hired us when we had no education or skill. He said that if we gained experience here, we wouldn’t have trouble finding our next job,” Kiki explained next to me.

“I see. I was curious why the servants were so young, but that makes sense.”

“But everyone here loves Lord Lucas, so we can’t leave this city! Of course, we have a few long-tenured servants as well! A majority work at the ocean-side company—the one we just passed by.”

Kiki seemed like a different person than when we first met. She cheerfully chatted with me, and I felt like I gained her trust after the incident at Tesouvius. The more she smiled at me, the more her slender frame bothered me. She hid her body with thick black tights and large maid clothes. I knew that she had a reason to, but the clothes made her look messy and unorganized. I would have to think of a solution later.

The carriage stopped, and I borrowed Leikzig’s arm as I got off. His expression softened slightly.

“Welcome, Lady Iris Karelia.” The lined-up servants greeted me and bowed in unison.

I straightened my back and curtsied deeply. A wave of nervousness rushed over me. Excitement and anxiety gripped my chest; I’d never felt this nervous, even during my debutante. I was about to enter an unfamiliar world.



“**MY** lord requested me to guide you to the drawing room,” Leikzig said.

With Kiki in tow, I followed him deeper into the manor. I went in anxiously. This would be my first meeting with my future husband.

“You’ll be fine. You might be surprised, though,” Kiki whispered behind me.

*I hope so*, I thought as I entered the drawing room. Someone unexpected was waiting for me.

“Dazzle...?” I asked.

He was dressed in a well-fitted suit, awaiting my arrival. A maid had brought a warm, damp towel, which he took from Leikzig’s hands. He rubbed his head with the cloth, and his dusty blonde hair glimmered, shining brightly like a yellow canary. I instantly remembered what Kiki had told me—golden hair that reminded her of a baby chick.

“So, you were Baron Lucas Stock?” I asked.

“Welcome to Solalitika, my reckless, yet fair lady,” he said with a squinting smile.

“I see...”

“Yeah. Are you disappointed?”

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from his amber-colored eyes. They looked like the sunset. Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place. I wasn’t the only one who was unaware of my marriage partner. The same was true for Lord Stock, and he’d disguised himself as Dazzle to ascertain his future wife.

“I’m terribly sorry for being secretive and fooling you,” Leikzig apologized rudely. It was superficial, and he made it abundantly clear that he didn’t feel an ounce of regret.

“In any case, let me reintroduce myself. My name is Lucas Stock. Pleased to meet you.” He furrowed his brows when I stood in silence, wide-eyed. “Hey, you okay?”

“Pardon me. I was at a loss for words. I suppose I’m both surprised and nervous,” I replied.

I’d made quite the blunder with my silence. Dazzle, or Lord Lucas, was a type of man I’d never seen in the royal capital. I couldn’t help but be a little tense. He

was different from Dazzle, who was cheery and friendly despite having a scary face. The man in front of me was like a wolf. *Perhaps this is what prey feels like in front of a predator*, I thought.

I straightened my back and greeted him with a curtsy. "My name is Iris Karelia. Pleased to meet you, Lord Lucas."

"Relax a little. Do you want some alcohol or something?"

"No need, but may I have a glass of water?"

Leikzig nodded and swiftly prepared a glass. Lord Lucas sat on the sofa with a thud and slowly crossed his long legs while gazing at me. "How unfortunate for you. I heard that your younger sister stole your fiancé," he said.

I stayed silent for a moment. "So you're aware."

I was once again surprised. He lived in Solalitika, a faraway city, yet he was aware of matters in the capital. He was different from the ton, which chose to look away from the new aristocrats. I reached for the transparent glass of cold water and brought it to my lips. The faint aroma of mint from the water filled my nose. Lord Lucas smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, as he looked at me with interest.

"Of course, I'd research the woman who'd become my wife. I suppose Lord Karelia didn't want to send your younger sister to someone like me in the countryside."

"I'm truly sorry for our dishonesty. I apologize on behalf of the Karelia household."

"Ah, no, you don't have to be so stiff. I knew all that and chose for you to be my wife. Besides, I lied to you during our trip here, so that makes us even." He took out a letter from his jacket and opened it up. My letter had been neatly folded and stored in his pocket. "I just wanna confirm one thing. You're Lady Iris, the one who sent me this letter, right?"

"Indeed."

"Then I'll welcome you with open arms. Hope we can get along! I'll send a marriage registration to the royal family, so could you sign here?" He smirked as

I struggled to find the right words. “What’s wrong? Where’s the spunk that you had when you told off the servants in Tesouvius?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just...relieved, so it seems I’m at a loss for words.”

“Huh?” He looked at me questioningly.

“My shoulders...” I hastily replied, talking fast out of guilt.

“What’s wrong with your shoulders?”

“Well, your servant, ‘Dazzle,’ had touched my shoulders and entered my room during the trip here. It would be my duty to report this to my future husband. I don’t have to do that anymore, so that’s a relief.”

There were a few seconds of silence.

“A-Are you stupid?!” Lord Lucas stammered, red-faced as his voice cracked. “The daughter of an aristocrat must’ve danced and touched men at social parties before they’re off to marry! Why’re you feeling guilty about your shoulders being touched?!”

Leikzig turned around and coughed, his shoulders trembling. *Is he laughing at us?* I wondered. My cheeks grew hot as I quickly responded.

“I-I’ve never done anything of the sort. By the time I left the women’s academy, I already had a fiancé.”

“Surely you must’ve done something with your former fiancé.”

“With my...former fiancé?”

“You haven’t?”

I fell silent.

“Haven’t you danced with him, or like...something?” His tone became sympathetic.

I put my hand to my mouth and thought back. I was “plain.” “Like air.” I wasn’t to Mikhail’s taste. Our engagement was strongly influenced by his mother, Lady Streltsy. I was a boring, safe candidate and the daughter of a marquess that his nagging mother had picked for him. As his fiancée, I had met Mikhail many times, but I couldn’t remember us ever dancing together.



I was like a wallflower at social parties. Mikhail danced with other women, as was normal for social gatherings. It was only natural that he didn't want to dance with someone as dull as me. His beautiful face attracted many women, after all. After much thought, I finally remembered when he kissed the back of my hand.

"He's touched my hand before as a greeting, but I've done nothing more. As you can see, my appearance leaves much to be desired. I've only had some afternoon tea with my fiancé," I said.

Lord Lucas put his head in one of his hands and laughed loudly. "Seriously? I haven't heard of this. What kind of sheltered, boxed-up woman have I accepted?"

"You've brought her out of the box, so that's good enough, isn't it?" Leikzig said.

"Shut up, Leikzig." He looked exhausted, as if his strength had left him. He couldn't hide his shock.

"I apologize. But I was properly taught how to dance, and I can do the bare minimum," I said.

"That's not the point," he replied.

The next moment, a man wearing a suit entered the room. As though he'd switched personalities, Lord Lucas's expression became serious.

"Sir, I just received word from the port that ships from the Orient are asking for assistance. There's been a delay in securing the necessary carriages for shipments," the man said.

"Noted. I'll be there shortly," Lord Lucas said and stood up. He turned to me. "Lady Iris."

"Yes?"

"Apologies, but as you can see, I have matters to attend to. I know you just arrived, but we can continue this next time."

After he left the room, Leikzig said, "This isn't out of the ordinary. From morning till dusk, he's always working."

"I understand. Would you kindly lead me to my room? I'd like to unpack my belongings," I replied.

"Huh?" Leikzig put his hand to his mouth before continuing, "You may voice your concerns and anger. You can call him a lousy trickster for fooling you this entire time."

"Complaints?" I wore a troubled expression. "But work is very important, is it not? It's only natural that he'd want to ascertain his future wife. I'm a little relieved that Dazzle turned out to be Lord Lucas."

He fell silent.

"Leikzig?" I gently asked.

"Nothing. Indeed, it's as you say. I was wrong, and I hope you won't mention this to my lord. Now, I'll show you to your room."

He changed his attitude and respectfully guided me to a detached building of the manor. I turned to Kiki, who was following closely behind me.

"Have I said something odd?" I asked.

"He's surprised. You're a lot more tolerant than he expected, Lady Iris," Kiki replied. She seemed to be having fun. "We had all been bracing ourselves since we heard that a prideful daughter of a marquess was arriving from the royal capital."

"Oh my."

"To be honest, I was rather fearful of you at first as well. I apologize for making such assumptions."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I thought you were all surprised by how dull and plain I was."

While we talked, the maids awaiting my arrival were unpacking my belongings. Unlike the manor built of brick, the detached building made especially for me was elegant with white walls. Fresh ivy had been planted, and the seasonal flowers cutely decorated the garden. I was sure this adorable building was for a beautiful noblewoman from the royal capital. Too bad someone like myself had entered instead.

“I wonder if Lord Lucas finds me a prideful and troublesome woman to deal with,” I murmured.

“I’m not sure. He told us to keep our backs straight since he was welcoming a woman from a traditional aristocratic household as his wife,” Kiki replied, making a gallant face and mimicking her master. “But there’s nothing to worry about, Lady Iris. As you saw, Lord Lucas isn’t a timid man. No matter whomever you may be, he wouldn’t have batted an eye.”

“You’re right. The same had gone for Dazzle.”

Kiki couldn’t hold in her laughter, and I laughed as well.

“Oh, Lady Iris! Every time I saw his face, I’d almost call out ‘Lord Lucas,’ so I tried not to make eye contact with him!”

I giggled. “He sure can do anything, can’t he?”

“Yes, he’s a wonderful person!” Kiki said firmly with a smile.

Time passed, and the next meeting I had with Lord Lucas was late at night, after dinner.



**BY** the time Lord Lucas had finished his work and taken a bath, the sun had set. He stopped by my room in the detached building. The light from the lantern only accentuated his intensity. His white, open-collar shirt indicated his well-groomed appearance, and it seemed almost odd that a man like him would build this cute room as a way to welcome a marquess’s daughter.

“I’ll say this first. This is a political marriage. The Karelia household and I came to an understanding. I’m sorry, but I’m not here to woo you or make any romantic advances,” he said.

“I understand my position as the daughter of an aristocrat,” I replied.

He looked surprised before quickly recomposing himself. “Fine by me. In general, I won’t step foot in here. I don’t plan on consummating this marriage.”

In this kingdom, once the royal family approved of the marriage between aristocrats, it must be carried out by law. Divorce would never be an option. However, an unconsummated marriage, also known as a *mariage blanc*, was an

exception. A couple wed via a *mariage blanc* wouldn't interact with each other more than necessary, and once they received approval from a notary, they'd have the right to cancel their marriage within the first three years. They could technically become unmarried and restart as a blank slate. Because of this, they could once again join high society gatherings as an unmarried person without damaging their reputation. Lord Lucas built this detached building as a means of committing to this *mariage blanc*.

"As you know, I'm a *nouveau riche* that bought my title. I know nothing about high society. Etiquette. Tradition. Unspoken rules. Thanks to the *mariage blanc*, this won't sully your record, and I even shouldered the debt of your household. In exchange, I want you to teach my servants and me aristocratic etiquette and other useful information," he said.

"So, I'm just here as your etiquette guidebook, then?"

"I'm glad that you're quick to catch on."

I finally understood why he spent so much money to marry the daughter of an aristocrat. I'd thought it was too good to be true. It had been about five years since the current king took the throne and changed the laws. It was impossible to expect new aristocrats to keep track of unspoken rules and traditions that had been around for centuries. This was especially true for Lord Lucas, who lived in the faraway land of Solalitika with almost no connections to aristocratic society.

"I've been under the care of an earl in Solalitika, but he's elderly and doesn't know much about the current situation in the royal capital. Since I'll be expanding my business, it's necessary for me to understand the intricacies of high society and the royal capital," he explained.

"I was rather uncertain of the reasons behind your support and acceptance of me and my family, but now I understand."

He wasn't disappointed in my plain appearance and accepted me as his wife over a letter because he simply needed someone to teach him etiquette. Looks were the least of his concerns.

"I'm sorry if this disappoints you, but frankly, I was fine with either one of you," he said bluntly. "I didn't expect the marquess to actually send one of his

daughters anyway.”

“Huh?” I looked up abruptly. He gazed at me with amusement.

“I asked for your younger sister because I heard that you had a fiancé. That’s it. I never imagined that a daughter of the Karelia family would come to the residence of a nouveau riche baron. I hoped that your father might refer me to a governess in place of his daughter; I never expected him to sell off his child.”

His voice sounded strained. It was full of pity. I couldn’t bear to accept his sympathy, and I hastily cut in.

“I don’t think that I’ve been sold off. I’m here to be your wife.”

“I see.” He smiled and slapped his knees. “I’ve taken a liking to you. You’re probably a lot more interesting than hiring a governess!”

“Thank you.”

“Lady Iris, I’m sure you’ve got numerous complaints, being at the house of a nouveau riche in the faraway land of Solalitika. I won’t do anything to you. I plan to leave this as an unconsummated marriage. If you’d like to leave in three years, please teach me and my servants everything you know by then.”

“Hmmm...”

“What’s wrong? Is there a problem?”

Lord Lucas had put his money and first marriage on the line to purchase the traditions and societal knowledge of the Karelia household. I was honored, but I couldn’t help but feel guilty.

“Are you sure you’re fine with this arrangement?” I asked.

“Yeah. Is this an issue for you?”

“Quite the contrary. I’m not charming and cute like my sister, but I shall try my best to support you, my lord, as your wife. However, I have two requests.”

“Sure, say whatever you like.”

“As I’ll be your wife, please call me ‘Iris.’”

He widened his amber eyes for a second. Then he smiled like a child. “You’re right. I’ll be in your care, Iris.”

My heart thumped when I saw his innocent smile. *He caught me off-guard.*

“You don’t have to call me ‘lord’ or anything, either. Just call me ‘Lucas,’” he said.

“Lord Lucas...”

“You don’t have to add ‘Lord’ to it.”

“Please allow me to call you as such for a bit. I’m not used to anything else.”

“Well, it’s better than just ‘my lord’ or ‘master,’ I guess.” He nodded.

It was rude of me to think, but his fierce appearance greatly contrasted with his childlike smile. This disparity in his demeanor shocked me, and I couldn’t help but find it adorable. Many women would be drawn to this man.

*That’s it, I realized. He must’ve proposed a mariage blanc because he has someone else in his heart.*

“What else is your desire, Iris?” he asked.

I was overstepping my bounds, but I told him my thoughts anyway. “Ah, if this unconsummated marriage is purely out of concern for my well-being, this kindness isn’t necessary.”

“What?”

“I left the royal capital prepared to become your wife. As a Karelia, I couldn’t become your wife on the grounds that we’d part ways in a few years. As your wife, I’ll do my utmost to fulfill that role without being half-baked about it.”

He stared at me with a serious expression. The sofa creaked as he stood up and peered into my face. “Do you understand what you’ve just said?” he asked.







He was so close to me that I could see my reflection in his eyes. His large hand brushed against my jaw before he tilted my chin up. I stiffened. His face looked completely different from Dazzle's. I was at a loss for what to do, but I wanted to gain his trust. I stared into his eyes and went with the flow. Silence.

I wasn't sure how long we stared at each other. Suddenly, he released me from his grasp and sat back on the sofa.

"Idiot, at least resist a little," he complained.

"Um..."

"You don't know what kind of man I am. Don't let me do as I please with that half-baked determination of yours. Jeez."

"If your heart is set on another woman, I truly don't mind..."

"Huh?! Like hell I've got someone! Women try the badger game on me or come after my money. They never stop. So I'm through with them! They're dangerous and a pain to deal with!" he spat while he ruffled his hair. "I-If our marriage was consummated, it'd be deplorable. I wouldn't want to corrupt someone as sheltered as you. I can't take your whole life away from you, and don't try to hand it over to me so easily."

He looked away and covered his mouth. *Is it my imagination, or are his ears red?* I wondered.

"In any case, I understand your honesty and sincerity. We can talk about the unconsummated marriage later." He coughed and regained his cool. He looked at me with a smile—it was filled with kindness again, like it had been earlier. "Welcome, Iris. I'm happy that you're here."

My newlywed life in the city of Solalitika had begun.



I finished the meeting with my wife and returned to my room. As I sunk into my sofa, my butler, Leikzig—Leik for short—entered my room without a sound and peered at my face.

"My lord, will you have wine tonight?" he asked.

“Nah, give me a spirit on the rocks. I’m not in the mood for wine,” I replied.

“As you wish.”

I watched him prepare my drink and sighed while ruffling my hair. “We’ve welcomed quite the lady.”

Iris Karelia wasn’t what I expected. I never would’ve dreamed that an aristocratic lady would actually marry someone like me.

“I planned on asking her to teach me aristocratic manners, etiquette, and rules before sending her home. At the very least, I would’ve asked her to refer me to a governess or something,” I said.

“It’s about time that you settled down, so I suppose it worked out for you, my lord.”

“Shut up. It’d be such a pain to welcome a highborn noblewoman as my wife.”

I’d given her two chances to cancel this marriage: once as Dazzle and another as Lucas Stock. Yet she insisted on becoming my wife. She had the pride of an aristocratic lady but treated her servants like human beings. She allowed Kiki, who had a traumatic past, to open up to her within a few days. In addition, she came to the household of an unknown man, and instead of fleeing, faced her situation head-on and chose to become my wife. Her actions had been entirely unpredictable.

I had more thoughts on the matter, but I didn’t want my butler to tease me. I quietly sighed to myself. She was a lady inside and out, and it was apparent that she was raised with care. Like a painting, her long, straight, black hair had a glossy shine, reminding me of one of my items at work: obsidian. Her thoughtful, dark eyes only accentuated her elegance, making her look like a doll. Her thin frame, pale skin, thin lips, and delicate jawline made her look reserved, further intensifying the beauty mark by her eye and making her alluring. Her unsophisticated hairstyle, old, out-of-style dress and her face without a hint of makeup acted like a veil, hiding her true beauty.

“She’s a beautiful woman, which is great. She’s refined, yet lacks modern style, and is certainly worth polishing. Just your type, isn’t she?” my butler said.

I choked on my drink. The alcohol went down the wrong pipe, and I struggled and coughed as Leik innocently rubbed my back.

“I told you, I’m not after her romantically!” I coughed.

“You may not have been, but this is a stroke of luck. Did anything happen during your meeting with her?”

“Nothing. Be quiet and stop with those gestures.”

Leik chuckled. I was firm that I wasn’t after her in that way, but I couldn’t help but think about my new wife. She was too good for me. Yet, even in front of me, Iris had never voiced a single complaint, hadn’t shown her weariness from the trip, and greeted me with her back straight. I wasn’t raised well. I had no idea how to deal with a precious jewel like her.

“Ugh, what a pain. I can already feel my shoulders getting stiff,” I muttered.

I gulped down the rest of my drink and savored the taste of alcohol. There was no use in worrying about the future. I’d deal with whatever came my way.



I, Airia Karelia, was currently at the residence of my fiancé, Mikhail Streltsy. The sun’s rays were warm and glimmering and made me want to throw off my dress. Within the glass greenhouse, beautiful roses were in full bloom.

*What color would be best for my blonde hair? A confident, brilliant, shocking pink? A passionate red? A yellow with a wonderful gradient to the tips of its petals? All of them would go with my soft, white skin, I thought.*

However, neither the roses nor the dresses could accentuate my beauty enough. The trees rustled, and I heard someone approaching me. My fiancé, Mikhail Streltsy, appeared with his lovely platinum-blond locks. His large, blue eyes sparkled like jewels, and he smiled when he saw me.

“I found you, Airia,” he said.

“Dear me, I must flee again!”

He laughed. “Wait for me.”

I giggled and turned around, fleeing from his grasp as I ran around in the

greenhouse. With a chuckle, Mikhail pursued me. We continued this chase amidst the paradise of roses until he grabbed me by the waist and pulled me close.

“I’ve got you now, my beautiful goddess. I won’t let you go,” he whispered in my ear.

I giggled. “Oh, Mikhail!”

He put some of his weight on me, and we rolled onto the grass of the garden as we laughed. We had our servants wait outside the greenhouse, so we were truly in our own world. My blonde hair spread out on the grass. Mikhail brought a lock to his lips—it felt a little ticklish, though he wasn’t kissing me. I gazed up at the ceiling. Birds flew above the glass building. We hugged in a place where even the birds couldn’t bother us.



**IT** had been a month since I took my older sister’s fiancé away from her. Mikhail was more passionate than I’d thought. He seemed like a gentleman who would hesitate to even hold a lady’s hand, but once we got engaged, he was intense.

Surprised, I couldn’t help but say, “You’re like a totally different person.”

“How could any man stay calm in the presence of a lovely lady like you?” he replied.

He smiled and hugged me tight. Any woman would fall for him, and I couldn’t help but remember my sister’s face. Irritated, I asked, “Did you do this with my sister as well?”

He gave an exaggerated shrug. “Good grief! I haven’t done anything of the sort with Iris. I’ve only taken her hand in greeting, and even then, I only did so when it was absolutely necessary.”

“Really? You haven’t touched my sister anywhere else?”

“There was no need for me to do so. She was a stiff and stubborn woman. I endured my time with her for the Streltsy household, but I’m happy you’ve become my fiancée.”

"I endured my sister bullying me. I was only her stepsister, but I had to stay strong for my mother."

"Oh, Airia. We both endured many hardships as aristocrats for our households. All the more reason for us to become as happy as can be from now on."



*YEP, I should stop reminiscing about the past. Mikhail and I are living in complete bliss. I'm the stepchild, bullied by my prideful older sister, yet her fiancé fell for me. Now we're hopelessly in love! My sister went off to marry some nouveau riche commoner in the countryside to pay off debts, and I'm truly happy.*

"I love you, Airia."

As we lay on the grass, I gazed at the ceiling, and he hugged me tightly. He kissed me many times on the cheek and neck, like a large dog that had run out of patience. He looked adorable.

"You're so beautiful today, too, my goddess," he whispered.

"Oh my," I said, giggling. Tickled, I squirmed as I smiled.

Suddenly, something on the ground between the roses caught my eye. *A crumpled and dirty black clump... Is that a shoe?* I wondered.

"Um, Mikhail, I think there's a shoe over there," I said.

In an instant, he grabbed my chin and forcibly tilted it up toward him.

"M-Mikhail?" I stammered.

"Airia, don't look at anything else. Don't think about anything unnecessary," he murmured as he brought his face close to mine.

*Huh? Wait...* Shocked, I pushed his shoulders away and resisted his advances. He looked at me with surprise.

"Why are you rejecting my kiss?" he asked.

"Well, because we're still just engaged..."

"Is there an issue? We'll be married soon."

“Erm, uh, well...”

I was flattered, but he was coming off a bit too strong. I glanced at his face, and he was looking at me expressionlessly. I shivered at his cold gaze and hastily replied.

“Um, well, it’s not like I dislike your advances or anything.”

After he stared at me coldly for a few more moments, his demeanor shifted, and he smiled at me again.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. You’re just so alluring, Airia, that I couldn’t help myself,” he said with a gentle smile as he stroked my cheek.

*I’m relieved, but that was odd... He was just extremely frightening.*

Mikhail stood up and gave me his hand. I stood up, and he wrapped his arm around my waist and kissed my forehead as though to ease my fear.

“Now then, shall we have some tea? We’ve got a new maid who’s rather skilled at making snacks,” he said.

“How exciting,” I replied.

We stayed close to each other as we walked out of the greenhouse. The maids quietly removed any dirt or grass clinging to us. A maid tried to remove some dirt on Mikhail’s cheek, and he shook her off.

“Don’t touch me. I want Airia to enjoy some tea. Go prepare some immediately.”

“As you wish,” she replied. Her shoulders trembled. She looked around the same age as me and hastily left as though she were fleeing.

*What a rude maid, I thought. Mikhail regularly changed maids, and I was sure that she would be replaced soon. That reminds me... That shoe was a maid’s shoe, wasn’t it?*

“Let’s go, Airia. You must be tired,” he said.

He smiled, grabbed my hand, and led me out of the garden into his manor. His residence was large and beautifully maintained. He had the wealth to employ numerous maids and may have been the most beautiful man in the royal

capital. I was so happy and excited to have him as my fiancé that I forgot about everything else.

*Yeah, who cares about a shoe? My eyes were just playing tricks on me.*

“Wait, Mikhail.” I jogged after him to keep up.

My plain and nagging older sister was unsuitable for the Streltsy household and Mikhail. She lacked presence and was like air. What was she up to these days? Her black hair and resolute back flashed in my mind. I brushed aside the unhappy memories.

I’m very happy right now.



**A** woman peeked through the windows, gazing at the loving couple from her room. Marchioness Streltsy, the lady of the household, stared at the golden-haired Airia running through the luxurious garden. She sighed loudly, fogging up the glass.

“I can’t do anything about that child. I’d truly wished for Iris to quickly marry my son,” she said.

Ever since her son had changed fiancées, he indulged in debauchery more than ever. He graduated from school at eighteen, and her husband, the Admiral of the Fleet, sent Mikhail to study abroad as a form of discipline. Her son had sailed across the ocean, visited several countries around the continent, and returned home. However, ever since his return, he spent his days fooling around. His strict father didn’t come home often, and, using his eventual inclusion into the Navy as an excuse, he refused to listen to his mother’s orders.

“My lady,” a maid said hesitantly with a gloomy expression. “I’d like to request some time off.”

Lady Streltsy was silent for a moment. “Is this because of Mikhail again?”

The maid stayed silent. She clenched the hems of her skirt and looked about to burst into tears.

“I understand. I’ll give you some money, so you may leave.”

The lady of the house gazed at the maid, who bowed deeply and fled from her



room, before sighing once more. Her son had gone too far playing around with his maids. At this rate, her son would disgrace the Streltsy name. However, he wouldn't listen to her at all.

“Whatever shall I do?” Lady Streltsy murmured, thinking long and hard. In the end, the only solution she could think of was to clean up after her son and snuff out any scandals.

## Chapter 2

**MY** younger sister stole my fiancé, and in the blink of an eye, a new husband in the port city of Solalitika was chosen for me. Before I knew it, a month had passed, and I officially became the wife of Baron Stock. It took another week to sort matters out with the notary who oversaw our marriage. I then made my rounds, greeted my new neighbors, and got involved in other routine duties. I was so busy that the past week felt like a blur.

The servants called the white-walled building that I lived in my “villa,” and Lord Lucas dropped by only when necessary. Even then, we never met alone. His butler, Leikzig, was always by his side. It seemed like the butler was one of the witnesses to oversee our marriage blanc.

“Lord Lucas always has his bases covered. He’s especially careful about relationships with women to avoid trouble,” my maid, Kiki, told me. “I can be at ease here because he’s honest. I’m very grateful, hehe.”

“You must love him very much,” I said.

“I do. If I’m ever reborn, I want Lord Lucas to be my father or brother.”

I gazed at Kiki with a smile, then turned toward the documents. My desk was covered with textbooks and documents from my academy days, a notebook to pen any future plans, and a typewriter.

“I must try my best as well,” I murmured.

In exchange for shouldering my household’s debt, Lord Lucas had requested that I teach the people at his manor aristocratic etiquette and rules. I was relieved that he bought my skills instead of my appearance. I was determined to prove my worth and make him say, “I’m glad I bought this woman.”

My first step was to get familiar with the manor. Every morning, after I made myself presentable, I walked around the manor with Kiki in tow. The cries of the seagulls echoed throughout the hilltop residence, and the whistles of steamboats and the bustling of fishing boats could be heard.

The damp garden mostly contained vegetables. A farm in the back of the manor had livestock such as chickens and cows. The flower garden in the front also had practical plants such as herbs and edible flowers. Lovely roses fully bloomed around my villa. Lord Lucas, in his own way, tried his best to please the daughter of a marquess.

“Good morning, Tom,” I greeted.

“Good morning, my lady,” he mumbled, not meeting my gaze.

“Where did you get these flowers from?”

He paused for a moment. “I doubt you’d know even if I told you.”

The gardener, Tom, was an old man. He left quickly, as though he were trying to hide. He used to be a farmer, but a nobleman forced him to sell the land. He lost his family home and was hired to work here. His land had been passed down for generations—I understood his reluctance to converse with me. I sensed his strong disdain toward nobles like myself and didn’t force a conversation with him.

When I entered the manor, the servants, who were all fulfilling their respective duties, greeted me. All sorts of people worked at Lord Lucas’s manor. Some greeted me with a smile. Others feared my presence or had their guards up, unwilling to be underestimated by a young woman like me. However, no one had any complaints about my marriage with Lord Lucas. The villa that I stayed in was well-maintained and clean. I felt that, with time, I could earn their acceptance.

I walked around, learning the names of every servant. The maids Leigh and Rusk were raised in an orphanage. They worked hard but had a thick accent that was hard to understand. Lee, the one-eyed chef, was from the Orient. He had a vast repertoire of recipes. Supposedly, he could make whatever we desired. The kitchen maids, Daisy and Annea, were daughters of fishermen. Claus was introverted but close to the talkative Soni—both footmen. They all had their own unique characteristics, and I spent every day trying to remember everyone’s faces and roles.

A week later, at breakfast, I reported to my husband that I knew each servant’s name and face. Lord Lucas, who stabbed a sausage with his fork to

stuff his face, stopped and stared at me.

“What’s the point in memorizing their names and faces?” he asked.

“If I’m here to teach everyone etiquette, it’s only natural that I remember their names. Besides, you know every servant, don’t you?” I replied.

He let a beat of silence pass between us. “Do as you like. I’ll leave the small stuff to you.”

The servants were all commoners. None of them were familiar with the culture or lifestyles of the people in the royal capital. If I wished to teach them, I needed to understand their lives, and they needed to open up to me.

Lord Lucas looked away and listened to Leikzig give his daily schedule and reports. Even during breakfast, he was working. Breakfast consisted of freshly baked bread with plenty of butter, a salad, eggs, and sausage. The sausage was stuffed with herbs and tasted fresh. Perfect for breakfast.

I savored it, slowly chewing my food as I watched Lord Lucas eat. He must’ve been putting in a lot of effort—he used his knife and fork gracefully, and his movements looked like textbook examples of proper etiquette.

“Iris, if you find anything odd, don’t hesitate to let me know,” he said with a serious gaze.

I nodded. “I know. I was simply admiring your manners.”

“I-I see,” he stammered. He continued as though he’d remembered something, “Are you gonna wander around the manor today too?”

“Yes.”

“You can do as you like, but stay in the villa during the morning hours. I’ve summoned a dressmaker. They can’t make a dress in a day, but you should purchase a few premade dresses.”

“Clothes? But I’ve already brought some from home. It’s not necessary...” I declined.

“Buy some,” he said firmly. “The weather here’s different from the royal capital. You should choose a few dresses made from lightweight fabric. It would be a good opportunity to let the dressmaker know about recent trends or

dresses that are popular with the capital ton, too.”

*I see, I thought. While I’m purchasing dresses, he wants me to give useful information to the dressmaker.*

“Certainly. Other noblewomen may not be able to do so, but I believe I could provide the dressmaker with the necessary information,” I said.

He cocked his head to one side. “What do you mean?”

“Normally, noblewomen and their daughters do not need to follow trends themselves. Their personal seamstress or the Chief Maid will handpick and provide dresses that are in style. However, I requested my sister’s and stepmother’s dresses, so I had to be aware of the current trends and designs.”

“So, a normal aristocratic woman doesn’t need the knowledge to follow trends?”

“That is correct. A noblewoman must be aware of the type of apparel those around her prefer. For example, she must note the location and the guests at a gathering so that she doesn’t show up in the same outfit as other noblewomen.”

Lord Lucas tipped his coffee cup and sighed deeply. “It looked like you ladies just wore glittering things to show off, but I guess we’ve all got our problems. Noblemen are easier to differentiate since you just need to pay attention to the fabric and material of their suits.”

“One must wear clothes that display their rank or title. Even a hat would tell an aristocrat’s rank, wealth, number of servants, and their position in society,” I explained.

He paused his uncomfortable-looking cutlery etiquette and pointed at me. “So, does your plain dress have any sort of meaning?”

“I...” I paused, and for the first time, I looked down at my clothing. My dress was traditional and old. “I was engaged. Standing out in high society would only make me seem wanton. I was better suited for plain dresses that didn’t stand out, and...”

“And?”

“Unlike Airia, who was complemented by flowery, cute dresses, plain clothes matched my appearance. I’d never thought about dressing myself up extravagantly.”

“I see. Well, if you don’t like what you’re wearing, feel free to exchange your old clothes for new ones.”

“I understand,” I replied, but I wasn’t expecting to purchase any clothes. I was at a loss and wasn’t sure what to choose.

“If you’re not sure, just leave it to the dressmaker. My lord has already requested many clothes that could suit you. He talked the dressmaker’s ear off,” Leikzig added with his usual aloof demeanor.

I stayed silent. The butler jolted as he muttered, “Ugh,” with an expressionless face. It seemed like Lord Lucas had gently kicked him under the table.

Slightly embarrassed, my husband glared at the edge of the table and said, “I haven’t even given you a proper wedding ceremony. At least let me buy you some new clothes.”

We had an unconsummated marriage, but he seemed bothered that we didn’t have a ceremony. I was already grateful that he shouldered my household’s debt; there was no need to be so considerate, but his kindness made me happy. I suddenly remembered one of my concerns.

“Lord Lucas, may I ask the dressmaker about a few things?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

I glanced at Kiki, and she smiled at me when we made eye contact. It was heartwarming, and as usual, she was wearing a dress much too large for her. I was more concerned about her clothes than mine.



**THE** dressmaker was a friendly and energetic woman.

“My husband purchases the cloth, and the employees and I sew. We’re also in charge of Baron Stock’s, the company president’s, clothes,” she said.

She methodically measured my body while cheerfully chattering away. She

was in high spirits, as though her relative had gotten a wife.

“A true noblewoman’s body is different!” she enthused. “Your wrists and waistline are much slimmer than what we have in stock, but you still look feminine! I don’t have anything that fits your size, but I’ll adjust as much as possible! Of course, your made-to-order clothes will be perfect!”

She chose her words carefully, but I paid that no mind. As she praised every part of my body, I couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed while she measured me. I remembered the words that my family and my former mother-in-law told me—I was too round and unsightly, and my neck was too long; clothes didn’t look good on me.

I’d trusted these words and carefully selected dresses that didn’t accentuate my frame, but the moment I saw myself in the apparel that my dressmaker had chosen for me, I was stunned.

“How is it?” she said with a smile from behind the mirror. “Oh, you don’t have to say anything. I can tell that you like it.”

“This dress is beautiful,” I murmured.

“That’s because *you’re* beautiful, my lady.”







I couldn't believe my reflection. The dress was of similar color and design as my old one, but it highlighted my skin tone and black hair. *Were my arms and legs this long?* I wondered.

I stood in front of the mirror in shock, gazing at myself.

"Your skin tone and eyes have more of a cool color scheme, so clothes that match that tone suit you well," she explained next to me.

I let my dressmaker do as she pleased. She brought me gloves, hats, and a few dresses. I was fine with just one, but she was having none of it.

"Please, I insist! You must have more dresses. Your husband requested that I dress you up and make you beautiful!" she said with a smile.

The designs and color schemes were apparently chosen by Lord Lucas, and my face grew warm, both embarrassed and apologetic. Once my purchases were made, I changed topics.

"Could you prepare maid clothes for this residence as well?" I asked.

"Yes! Our factory is in Solalitika, and our women sew the clothes. If the maids have any specific requests, they tend to make those adjustments themselves," she replied.

I glanced at my maid. "Kiki, may I request for your clothes to be adjusted?"

"H-Huh? My clothes?" she stammered, her voice cracking. She'd been helping the dressmaker take my measurements and apologetically waved her hands. "I mustn't! Today is the day that you choose your clothes, Lady Iris."

"No, listen to me. Kiki, you're wearing those maid clothes and black tights to hide your body, aren't you?"

"Um, I..."

"Don't worry. If you want to hide your body, you have every right to. However, I'll have you wear clothes that properly fit. It might help Lord Lucas and his business."

"My lord's business?"

"Indeed. Would you please listen to my selfish request?"

She hesitated before finally bobbing her head in agreement. The dressmaker and I looked at each other and nodded. My dressmaker had wanted to adjust my maid's clothes as well.

"Kiki, would you kindly give her the documents I prepared yesterday?" I asked. I laid out the documents I had on the table—they detailed the time when a daughter of a high-ranking nobleman from the Orient had visited the royal capital. As I explained the diagrams and discussed how to implement them into the maids' clothes, my dressmaker's eyes sparkled with excitement.

I spent the rest of my afternoon hashing out details with her.



I returned home in the afternoon; I had matters to attend to at my manor. Behind the manor a maid cheerfully hung bed sheets. She hummed and did a little dance, so I reached out to her.

"Hey, Kiki," I said.

I was shocked when she turned around. She looked mature, and I had to do a double-take before realizing why she looked taller. Her clothes fit her perfectly.

"Lord Lucas!" she said with an innocent smile.

"Did you adjust your clothes? They look great," I replied.

"Yes. Lady Iris based this design on a skirt-like bottom called a 'hakama.' They're apparently from the Orient, and she requested the dressmaker to sew something similar. I've yet to receive my new maid outfit, but I received the dress pattern, so I sewed it onto my skirt myself!"

She pinched the edge of her new skirt and showed it off to me with a smile. Since she was formerly employed by a nobleman in the royal capital, she was good at sewing and could make the adjustments herself.

"You're good with your hands. Did you sew a bit of your top too?"

"I did. Lady Iris suggested a few alterations that would still hide my body."

Her large clothes had been shirred neatly. They still hid her frame, but they were fitted to her height. The leftover fabric was used to create frills on her apron, further hiding her body.

“I don’t have to worry about my legs standing out, and I feel cool because I don’t have to wear the tights!” she gushed. She couldn’t contain her enthusiasm.

“I’m happy to hear that.”

I patted her head as she balled her hand into a fist and said, “I’ll work harder than ever!”

Kiki had personal issues, so I kept her hidden away. Because she was traumatized during her time in the royal capital, I hesitated to make her a noblewoman’s personal maid. However, she was the only one familiar with refined diction, and I took a leap of faith. I was glad she was moving forward. She was skilled and highly experienced as a maid, so it wasn’t good if she continued to be haunted by her trauma—it would only hold her back. I felt relieved as she walked away.

When I finally entered my manor, something was different. My servants looked a bit more refined.

“Lord Lucas,” my maids said, pinching the hems of their skirts and curtsying. They did it so naturally that I stopped dead in my tracks. “My lord?”

“Where’d you learn that?” I asked.

My maids looked at each other. “Pardon?”

“That greeting. It looks so beautiful and formal.”

“Oh, you mean a curtsy,” one of my maids said with a smile.

“It’s only been a few days since Lady Iris taught this to us. We look a bit more proper, don’t we?” the other added with pride. Their wording and pronunciation were also easier to understand.

“My lady praised me, saying that I learned quicker than those in the royal capital!”

“She also taught us how to speak properly using Kiki as an example.”

“I didn’t even know I was speaking in a dialect!”

“Yeah. I didn’t think that ‘troller’ wouldn’t be understood in the royal capital.

It means a female fisherman here!”

“Or that there was a different way to pronounce ‘Solalitika!’”

The maids cheerfully reported on their lessons to me. It seemed they had fun learning.

“Iris did all that...?” I murmured.

*First, she teaches them something simple, giving them a sense of accomplishment, and praises them for their growth. Then she uses someone familiar as an example to close the gap between herself and the workers and to teach them something new. She’s good,* I thought.

I requested that she teach them etiquette, but I didn’t think she’d easily teach my maids how to speak properly. Was this method used at her academy?

“You think you can get along with Iris?” I asked.

They nodded in earnest. “Yes. I was worried that she’d be a prideful, scary noblewoman, but meeting her eased my nerves.”

“I agree. I tried to help her with daily chores, but she said, ‘I usually do this myself without relying on the maids.’ From getting dressed to bathing, she does it all herself, so she doesn’t cause us any trouble.”

“I see,” I replied.

“She properly arranges us around the manor, brings new tools, and increases efficiency. She said the more efficient we are, the more time we’ll have to rest and attend her lessons.”

Since Iris was the lady of this manor, she took charge as she pleased. I wanted to see how she’d fare when she took the reins, and I planned on adjusting accordingly. I didn’t expect her to excel this much. *In a good way, of course,* I thought.

“Lord Lucas,” one of my maids said.

“Hm?” I replied.

“Are you sure that you’re fine with this arrangement?”

“Huh?”

“Since you’re married, you two should live together.”

“Even if the marriage is unconsummated, society won’t be kind,” the other maid added.

“At this rate, I’ll never hear any rumors about you, Lord Lucas.”

I instantly understood what they were implying, and my cheeks grew hot. “Idiots, don’t worry about unnecessary stuff! Go back to work! Go!”

I hurried away. *They don’t have to gossip about my new wife just because I haven’t gotten close to a woman before. What’s with them?!*

While I scolded them in my head, I realized that Iris had been accepted to the point where my servants could joke around with her. If she was a suspicious woman, my maids would be harsher and report it to me.

“What an odd woman she is,” I murmured as I entered the garden.

I stared at a white rose and its petals, wet with rain from earlier, and was reminded of my new wife’s graceful gestures. She was quiet and always kept her gaze a bit down. *How much has she been working this past month?* I wondered.

I passed through the gardens, and the gardener, Tom, was staring at something. I followed his gaze and saw a new patio chair. It could be folded like a stepladder and was ideal for carrying around. I guessed that Iris had prepared this as well.

*She even impressed Old Man Tom. She’s good.*



**TWO** weeks had passed since I arrived at Lord Lucas’s manor. Per my usual routine and feeling slightly groggy, I was walking around in the early morning when I saw Tom staring at the flowers. He noticed my footsteps and slowly removed his hat. He bowed deeply, and his attitude shocked me awake. He’d never treated me so kindly before.

“My lady, have a look,” he said.

I followed his gaze and saw beautiful, blooming roses illuminated by the rays of the early morning sun. Their red petals glittered with gold light. Tom

extended his thick, wrinkle-covered hand toward the flowers and gently cupped the rose without touching it.

“They’re beautiful,” I murmured.

“These flowers are from a farmer in the south. They grow these during their off-season. Lord Lucas gathers new types of flowers and provides funding so that we can do selective breeding. He does so in hopes that poor farmers can profit and keep their land without it being sold off for dirt cheap by a heartless lord,” Tom said.

He squinted his wrinkly eyes and gazed at me as though he were staring at the sun. He extended his hand toward me, and I took his hand in mine.

“I...lost everything,” he said in a choked voice. He sounded raspy and emotional; I sensed he laid out his entire life in those words. “But Lord Lucas picked me up. I know I’m an old man, and I may not be able to do anything for my young lord. I may not be able to repay him. But I...would like to create a garden that would make him think that he was right to hire me.”

“Tom...”

His eyes glimmered. “I’d like to make a garden that Lord Lucas could brag about to those aristocrats in the royal capital. What would you suggest? I know nothing about fancy aristocratic gardens. I’d like for you to teach me ways to improve.”

When Tom bowed to me deeply, I could’ve been knocked over with a feather.

“Will you allow me to offer you some advice?” I asked.

He smiled softly. “Every morning, you get up early and greet us. You pay close attention to how we work, and you don’t treat us servants as a nameless group. Instead, you treat us as individuals and try your best with each and every one of us. I can’t say this quite well, but I was moved by your earnestness.”

“Thank you. I’d like to do whatever I can to support you in your endeavor to leave something for Lord Lucas.” I nodded firmly. “I shall do whatever it takes to help you. Thank you so much for letting me know your feelings. Let us try our best for our lord.”



**GRADUALLY**, the servants who'd watched me from a distance got used to my presence. They relaxed, opened their hearts, and even confided their concerns to me.

"My lady, I don't want to embarrass Lord Lucas."

"Please give me speaking lessons so that I won't embarrass my lord in the presence of others."

"If we weren't picked up by him, we would never have gotten a proper education."

"Please, my lady!"

Living here, I realized how loved and respected Lord Lucas was. As his wife, it was my duty to listen to their requests so that they could better serve their master. I wrote a letter to a governess that the Karelias had hired in the past. Together, with her husband, she served my household but left when my mother passed away. She agreed immediately and emigrated with her husband to Solalitika.

"Lady Iris, you've grown so wonderfully..."

"If we can be of any help to you, please allow us to assist, my lady."

I had the couple help teach basic etiquette to everyone at the manor and those who worked at the trading company. As I talked it over with them, I remembered the lessons from my time at the women's academy and had people at the manor help me make a classroom. I transformed a few rooms in the manor by lining up desks and chairs like at school and prepared a large blackboard. I made my lessons non-mandatory. People were free to join my class in their spare time or rest if they preferred. Still, many were eager to learn, and before I knew it, they were inviting each other to class. Tom attended lessons only when I was teaching.

"Your voice isn't high-pitched and screechy, so it's easy on the ears," he said.

I was happy to hear that.





**ONE** day, while writing on the blackboard, I glanced up and saw Lord Lucas standing there.

“The atmosphere has changed quite a bit,” he said as he approached me.

“It’s all thanks to everyone’s hard work.”

“Kiki smiles a lot more. She doesn’t cry when she sees a nobleman.”

“Indeed,” I said with a confident nod. “Clothes are like armor that protects one’s body. Different clothes can allow the wearer to feel much more confident about themselves.”

“The same goes for you.” He squinted his eyes at me as though he were looking at something bright. “Those clothes suit you. I guess I made the right choice.”

I was wearing a premade dress I’d purchased and had the dressmaker alter. It was simple and didn’t show too much skin, but it was cut beautifully and showed off my bodyline.

“I knew that white would look good on you since your hair’s beautiful,” he said.

I got embarrassed when he praised me so frankly. I was always on the sidelines, treated like the wallflower I was. I was usually only commended for my posture.

“H-Hey, don’t turn red,” Lord Lucas stammered, his voice cracking. “I only chose clothes for you because, er, as my wife, I need you to wear pretty clothes! I don’t have any ulterior motives.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just not used to being praised.”

“Ugh, don’t apologize!”

I averted my gaze toward the wall in the back of the classroom. A mirror covered the wall so that servants could check their postures and greetings during our lessons. I saw myself standing there, comfortably wearing a new and fashionable dress. I never knew that even I could wear something so beautiful.

“Until now, I only thought that dressing up was a matter of etiquette. I felt like I only needed to wear clothes suitable for certain occasions. But it’s fun to

wear clothes that suit me,” I said while staring at my husband through the mirror.

He gazed back at me through the mirror and ruffled his hair. “I don’t come from an influential family, and I don’t really have a patron either. I was always conscious of my appearance, and I saw that it would also affect the attitudes of my clients and customers. I debated about whether I should dye my hair, but I ended up keeping it as is.”

Through the mirror, I shifted my attention to his head. His bright yellow hair reminded me of a canary. I’d never seen such a vibrant blonde before. Neither Airia nor my former fiancé had striking golden hair.

“Is your hair color common amongst the citizens in Solalitika?” I asked.

“Nah, I apparently inherited this from my father. Speaking of...” he said, abruptly switching topics. “A lot of women at our workplace started to copy Kiki’s skirt. They’re happy because the ocean breeze doesn’t lift their pants. I think you called it a *hakama*.”

“Ah, is that so? I’m so happy to hear that!”

Most women, regardless of rank, were able to sew their own clothes. The adjustments that Kiki made were simple and easy to copy.

“Hey, Iris. Can you think of anyone else that would want to wear a hakama?”

“Well, I believe the countries of the Orient would do so.”

“Huh? But isn’t that where this is from?”

“Indeed. Since this style originates from their country, it’s only natural that they wear a hakama without any qualms. If we use fabric and sewing techniques from our kingdom, they may see it as avant-garde fashion.”

“You think we could imitate their traditional clothes, then sell them back to them?” He didn’t sound skeptical and seemed interested in listening to my thoughts.

“The noblewoman from the Orient said that hakama were traditionally men’s clothing, and women only started wearing them recently. It seems it made women appear tomboyish—that is, energetic, self-assertive, and perhaps even

a little audacious.”

“Audacious, huh...”

“In other words, women that wear hakama are most likely young, progressive, in a position to be able to stand their ground, willing to do so, and like new ideas. Plus, since a noblewoman was wearing it, it’s logical to assume that the attire is slowly being accepted as a type of elegant apparel.”

“Hmmm, so what you’re saying is, I should pitch this item to young, aristocratic women with an assertive nature who like foreign things.”

“Indeed.”

Lord Lucas grasped my intent and put his hand on his jaw, deep in thought. “Maybe I should have a few sewing factories make hakama.”

“I’d advise against that,” I chimed in.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“The ones sewn here are made for working-class women. Convenience may not be the priority of women over there, and women are extremely sensitive to changes in fabric and comfort.”

“I see. So, what if I export fabric, hire seamstresses in their country, make a few test products, and scope out their popularity?”

“That sounds like a great idea to me.”

“And if I could steal their technology, I could mass produce it back here...” Lord Lucas mumbled to himself while I thought about something different. “All right, guess I gotta try it out first. Thanks, Iris,” he said. He seemed satisfied as he stood up and waved one arm while leaving.

“Lord Lucas,” I said behind him, stopping him in his tracks.

“Hm? You’ve got anything else on your mind?”

“I think your hair is fine just the way it is.”

He froze in place before quickly replying, “Huh? My hair? Why?” After more thought, he added, “That was sudden.”

“If I were to make an analogy, your hair is like polished gold. It’s much

brighter than normal blonde hair. It remains bold and vibrant even at night, which fits your honest and frank personality.”

“Hmmm.” He approached me once more. “You shouldn’t be so careless with your words. At night, you say. Does that mean you’d like to meet me at night in a dark place with the lights out?” He took a lock of my hair and brought his face close to mine.

“Um...” I stiffened at his gaze and movements. I was at a loss for words.

Satisfied, he smiled and stepped away from me. “I’m kidding. Later.”

“Um...”

“Hm? Are you gonna praise me again?”

“I’m happy when you come to meet me at night. I don’t get much time to talk to you. If you’d like, I’ll wait for you tonight as well.”

He stayed silent.

“I’m sorry. I guess that wasn’t praise,” I apologized.

He left without a word, but I thought I heard him mutter, “Idiot” on his way out.



**IT** was a bright, sunny morning, reminding me that summer was around the corner.

“It must be boring if you stay cooped up in the manor all day, teaching people. Come on, I’ll show you the outside world,” Lord Lucas said. He started to occasionally drop by and drag me out of work.

Solalitika was a former naval port and was home to the largest dock in the kingdom. The naval base was still used to this day, and Lord Lucas allowed me to tag along for his work. I caught a glimpse of the city and the Stock Trading Company. It looked like a small merchant ship had arrived today, and many sailors, along with businessmen in suits, were hard at work. My husband and I stayed a safe distance away to observe.

“This vessel came from the country of Seigh. Do you know what they’re

unloading onto the docks?” Lord Lucas asked in a loud voice so that he could be heard over the ocean breeze and clamor.

I thought for a moment, put my hand on his shoulder, stood on my tiptoes, and answered in his ear, “Are they Marmaria stone slabs?”

This item, the source of his wealth, was a beautiful silver stone slab with gray undertones. Slabs with several wave-like, marbled patterns were especially sought after by the royal palace. Since we were an island nation and couldn’t produce them, our kingdom heavily relied on the Bearbrooks Trading Company. They were the sole importer of Marmaria stone slabs. However, Lord Lucas found a new route and source for our kingdom.

He raised an eyebrow with interest, surprised that I answered correctly. “Huh. And why’d you think that?”

“Well...” I looked up at the ship. I had a few reasons, but I chose my words carefully. “The ship is slightly smaller than normal cargo ships. Yet, it’s built sturdier than domestic cargo ships, and it’s docked deeper within the port.”

He stayed silent, so I continued with my assessment.

“I’m not knowledgeable about trade, but I’m aware that in the past, even wealthy aristocrats hardly had any Marmaria stone slabs within their residence. One could only occasionally see them at the royal palace. In recent years, these stone slabs have become more accessible. The market used to be monopolized, but you entered it and succeeded. I can only imagine that your methods are rather unique as well. It’s one of your most important products, so you placed your most trustworthy sailors on board, and the ship is purposefully made small so that it would be easier for you to observe the entire ship.”

“You’re around eighty percent correct,” he said happily, patting my shoulder. “That’s more than enough. Theoretically, I could have a slightly larger ship, but it would increase the risk of the slabs cracking. Unlike our competitor, Bearbrooks Company, we don’t import large Marmaria stone slabs. Our slabs are much thinner. Others don’t import them because of how brittle they are. Instead of being greedy and increasing risk, I decided to have a smaller ship so that I could guarantee the slabs would stay whole. You’re absolutely correct about the unique ship and how I place my most trustworthy men to prevent any

information from leaking.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

He winked at me happily. “I gotta get back to work. It’s gonna get a bit busy.”

He waved at the workers, who bowed their heads when they noticed him. Lord Lucas left the port, and I walked faster so I wouldn’t be left behind. Suddenly, a large gust of wind swept me off my feet.

“Ah...” I tottered for a moment. Lord Lucas quickly spun around and steadied me.

“That...was close. You all right?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes. Thank you for your help.”

When I thanked him, he smiled and sounded relieved. “I’ve never seen you almost trip before. I guess that skirt and those shoes aren’t fit for the strong ocean breeze.”

“Yes, but I never expected the breeze to be so strong...”

“I see. I can understand why all the women want to copy Kiki’s skirt. They could have stable footing and don’t need to worry about their skirts whipping up in the wind.”

He took my hand and walked by my side, blocking some of the wind. He was much taller than me, and walking became easier. A man dressed as his employee rushed toward him. He raised one hand in reply.

“Sorry, I gotta go. You can go ahead and rest back at the manor,” he said.

He left me to his servants and headed toward the ship, paying no heed to the strong breeze. I watched him working for a while.



**THE** merchant city of Solalitika had many brick buildings instead of wood to prevent fires. From the carriage window, the city was dark brown, making the blue sky seem more vibrant. Stock Trading Company had a warehouse by the ocean, and from there, it took about ten minutes by carriage to get to the company’s office, located in the heart of the city. The office was also built from

brick and looked rather old. It was as though it had been exposed to the ocean breeze for many years and felt different from the brick buildings in the royal capital.

The company building had a warehouse, an office, and a conference room. There was a structure next to it specifically for welcoming and receiving guests. Neither was built by Lord Lucas. He purchased these buildings, which were formerly naval institutions. I was told that they had a rough appearance at first, but he renovated them into magnificent, modern-looking structures. After I parted ways with my husband, I was led to the building for guests.

“If you don’t mind, may I take a look inside? I’d like to keep it in mind in the future,” I requested.

“Of course, my lady. This way, please,” one of the employees said. I had Kiki accompany me as well.

After some exploration, an employee said, “My lady, our president has returned.”

I was led into a different room with white lace curtains and a view of the ocean. Lord Lucas was standing there, gazing out the window.

He noticed my presence and turned toward me with a kind smile. “Seems like you’ve enjoyed the tour.”

My heart skipped a beat. I felt a slight twinge of pain in my chest when he smiled. I usually met him at night, and the afternoon sun made his canary yellow hair glitter. His suit was brightly colored. The lace curtains, blowing in the wind, left an elegant shadow.

“Sir, should I bring some cake?” an employee asked.

“Please do,” Lord Lucas answered.

The conversation brought me back to my senses. I’d been awestruck by him. I was offered a seat on the guest sofa and sat down. A tea set was brought out. Solalitika was close to Tesouvius, the trade hub, allowing easy access to fresh fruit from nearby farmers. A roll cake, using an entire orange that was currently in season, and tea from a foreign country were prepared. Lord Lucas and I enjoyed some afternoon tea.

The cake was sweet and made with plenty of sugar, while the tea was more bitter than what I drank in the royal capital. The sweetness of the cake and the bitterness of the tea were a lovely combination. As I enjoyed my tea, my husband was staring at me.

“You really seem to enjoy your food,” he said.

I paused to process that comment. “I’m terribly sorry. I was too busy eating.”

“Heh, if the kitchen maid who prepared this cake hears about the face you’re making, I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed.”

He smiled happily, and I couldn’t look at him. I looked down, focusing my gaze on the white porcelain teacup. He started to talk about work. He asked me to fact-check the information he had so far in terms of trade routes, international trends, the current popular style or hobbies of the aristocrats in the royal capital, and my friends, among other things.

“What would this aristocrat like if I were to sell them my products?” he asked. Every time he listed a name, I gave a response.

“Their hobby is fishing. They would prefer luxurious fishing gear over practical gear,” I said. He listed another name. “This viscountess adores foreign romantic novels. However, she keeps this a secret, so it’s much wiser to sell it to a maid that she’s close to.”

My father was an irresponsible man, and my sister and stepmother weren’t familiar with high society customs. As such, I took on the role of lady of the house and paid close attention to the other aristocrats and their customs. I was thankful that I had plenty of information to share.

I talked while sipping tea until Lord Lucas suddenly laughed.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Iris, you’re better suited as a secret agent. How much information do you have in that pretty little head of yours?” he said with a chuckle.

“I have no such ability. I only gathered this information because I’m the daughter of a marquess.”

“Even so, you’ve got an amazing memory. I’m glad that you came. I think



you're suited for the work here." He froze as soon as the words left his smiling lips.

"Lord Lucas? Is something the matter?"

"I-I just meant I'm happy because you're convenient and useful. There's no deeper meaning. Got it?"

"Okay."

I looked at him quizzically as he stuffed his cheeks with cake, his face beet-red. I pounced on the opportunity to tell him about one of my wishes.

"Because I've just been married off to Solalitika, I can guarantee I have the most recent information. However, at this rate, my knowledge will become outdated. Thus, when the weather is comfortable, I'd like to host a salon. Would that be okay with you?"

"A salon?" He leaned forward.

I nodded. "Once summer ends, the season's social events will cease, and aristocrats will move from their townhouses to their country houses. Recently, it's been a trend for people to leave a bit earlier in order to find a scenic spot to host a small social gathering. I believe it's only just started to catch on."

Since I'd left for Solalitika, I'd received a few letters from my friends from the women's academy as well as from people who attended my salon back home. If a person of a higher rank wrote to me, it meant that I'd been given permission to offer them invitations. Lord Lucas intently listened to my explanation.

"I'd like to open a salon at Solalitika to make it a tourist spot for aristocrats," I continued. "Many aristocrats still believe that this city only has an old naval base, but the view's lovely, and the food is fresh and delicious. I'm sure your company can gather novelties for potential shoppers, and as you know, Solalitika is famous for its naval base. It would be ideal for history enthusiasts and could become a historical site."

"Could you provide more details? I'd like to hear more. Depending on the situation, I'd like to gather some people from this city to help out."

"Certainly." I nodded firmly in agreement.

He listened with a twinkle in his eye.



**IT** was morning. I woke up and sipped some coffee as I looked down at the garden from my bedroom. It was a misty morning; the sun gave off a gentle glow, illuminating the flowers while Old Man Tom, Kiki, and Iris were taking a walk in the garden. They were enjoying their conversation, and now and then, they all smiled happily. They seemed to have a blossoming friendship. I'd known Old Man Tom for a few years, but I'd never seen him wear such a carefree smile. He looked like a grandfather spending time with his grandchildren. The view was heartwarming.

Iris seemed to be recommending an arch. She looked at the stems of the roses, pointed toward the early morning sky, and made a half-circle motion with her hands. She looked up and noticed me staring, smiled, and lightly waved.





I felt guilty and embarrassed that she caught me staring, but I quickly waved back and turned away from the window. I sat down and sighed.

"A rainbow, huh..." I muttered.

"Rainbows don't form without light. Oh, Iris, my rainbow goddess. Please stay near my light and let off a beautiful seven-colored glow!" Leikzig said in a sonorous voice, approaching me as he did the box step.

*How annoying,* I thought.

"Leave!"

"I don't have a place to return to. My life is dedicated to you, Baron Lucas Stock, my lord."

"Yeah, right. If you have this much energy this early in the morning, prepare my clothes. I'd like more meat in my breakfast today, please."

"Of course."

I shooed away my butler, who gracefully walked away, and gazed at Iris once more. Her white dress stood out in the morning garden like a blooming flower.

"She's beautiful..." I murmured honestly before my butler returned.

Iris was nothing like I expected. I suppose that I was uninformed. I wasn't aware of how helpless and ignorant normal aristocratic women were, and I never dreamed that Iris was a resourceful woman who was more capable than those around her. The competence of aristocratic women was much lower than I'd expected, and Iris was much more skilled than I'd thought.

Ever since she arrived at my manor, the atmosphere had changed in a good way. My servants were all hard workers, but once the lady of the household took charge, they paid more attention to their mannerisms and changed their attitudes. Instead of simply doing as they were told, they had their own goals in mind. Various servants, butlers, and maids started to think about the best way to do their jobs, from tending the garden to maintaining this manor. My chef cooked a wider variety of foods, increasing his potential, and everyone looked more determined. They weren't the only ones changing, however.

*"Welcome back, Lord Lucas."*

She always welcomed me warmly, though I left her alone most of the day. Every time I saw her smile, I relaxed. I was disappointed in myself because I looked forward to meeting Iris after a long, stressful day at work. In truth, I didn't associate with many women because they were a pain. As I'd told Iris, many were just after my money, and I had no need for a relationship with other women.

Iris was a safe bet in all sorts of ways. She was obviously not trying to pull a badger game on me, and I could talk to her without worrying about scandals since she was my wife. Even if I let my guard down, she wouldn't get the wrong idea. *I mean, she wouldn't be wrong, though. I actually...*

"No, we've got an unconsummated marriage," I muttered, putting a lid on my feelings. I felt relaxed around her, but that was all. There was nothing more to it.

"My lord," Leikzig said, staring at me. "Please be careful not to get too involved with her. She's an old blood aristocrat, after all."

"I know. I won't."

I finished the rest of my coffee.



I, Airia Karelia, am so happy that my sister is out of my hair. I switched out all the servants who respected my sister, and the manor was as comfortable as ever. Everything is so nice and convenient now.

I was walking down the hall when I heard a voice behind me.

"Airia, have you prepared the tea party for this afternoon?" my mother asked.

"Of course, Mother. It'll be a much better tea party than what my sister used to prepare," I replied confidently, gazing at my mother, who had changed her dress for the afternoon event.

The salon hosted at the Karelia townhouse was a monthly tea party where numerous aristocrats gathered. I was proud of this custom. My sister had always prepared it until now, and my mother and I never offered any assistance. We weren't interested in the Karelias' traditions or formalities, so it

was only natural that my sister took charge.

*But that's fine. Mother and I are the ones who always show up to these salons, not my sister,* I thought. I was confident that I could host a much better tea party than her.

"She was always so rigid about customs and traditions and the like. The parties were, quite frankly, rather boring. My salons will be far more popular," I told myself, excited.

The maid informed me that a guest had arrived. He was a poet who had been good friends with us since the previous head of the Karelia family. He greeted my mother and me by tipping his hat. *He looks dandy.*

"I've been waiting for you, sir!" I said enthusiastically.

"Hello. It's gotten a bit lonely since Lady Iris has left, but I'm glad to see you're doing well," he replied.

Upon hearing him mention my sister, I frowned. I'd greeted him with a smile, and it irked me to hear him mention her. I fell silent, and my mother casually slipped between us.

"Now, now. Let's have lunch, shall we? We've got rare beef from Garthat today," my mother said, guiding him inside.

I followed them. *Well, whatever. My sister and our debt are both gone. It's a beautiful day for a tea party, with the sunlight peeking through the foliage. I wouldn't want to spoil the mood with thoughts about my dour sister.*

Before we received guests for our afternoon tea, it was customary to have lunch with an artist, whom we invited as our guest. I couldn't suppress my smile.

"I need him to know just how wonderful the Karelia household is and how my sister was holding it all back! Lunch is a perfect place to start," I said.

We began our meal in the dining hall.

"Hm?" the poet said.

"Is anything the matter?" my mother asked.

The moment he brought the hors d'oeuvre to his lips, he blinked with a puzzled look. "Oh, excuse me," he apologized. "Lady Karelia, have you changed your chef?"

"You took just a bite, but nothing gets past you. You're absolutely correct," my mother replied with a happy smile as she bragged. "The chef who'd been with us for quite a while offered his resignation. It was a good opportunity, so I hired a new and skilled chef. He's still young, but he was an apprentice at a famous restaurant in the royal capital."

The poet continued to dine as he talked with us. The chef we fired was an old man who'd been around since my annoying stepsister's biological mother—my father's first wife—and he'd been working for us for a long time. He was like a grumpy artisan and disrespected us, the Karelias, though we were his employer. He was a stupid old fart who always complained about our household making changes for the better.

*"This is a traditional menu that Lady Iris has done her best to protect! I can't allow you to destroy it!"*

*"I received approval from Lady Iris to use these herbs from the garden. I simply cannot make a new menu with this budget without those herbs!"*

*He was always saying, Lady Iris this, Lady Iris that. Argh! It was so annoying! I thought.*

My father was enraged that he disrespected the current mistress of the house and his daughter. He immediately fired the old man, and we hired a new, young chef. The old chef's wage was too high. We were glad that we could hire a better one for cheaper.

My father had laughed, "A hardworking servant who never voices any complaints is the best kind!"

I wholeheartedly agreed with his statement. The new chef always reeked of alcohol, but he was good-looking and kind, so I was happy with this replacement.

In the end, the poet couldn't even finish half of his meal. *It's such a waste, but if he's got a small appetite, I suppose there's no helping it.* My mother and I



guided him to our lovely salon, which faced our garden. The salon was enveloped in the warm afternoon sun, and the light streamed in through the trees, illuminating the room.

“It’s a bit bright,” the poet said, squinting his eyes.

*It’s a lovely room. How could he be so rude?*

“Isn’t it wonderful? We have a great view of the garden from here, so I did away with the old curtains.”

“My, my,” he replied.

My sister had refused to throw away these curtains. Now that she was gone, we replaced them with lightweight lace. She always nagged about how the changes in temperature could negatively affect the furniture, but the salon felt much better without the curtains.

A maid came in and showed the poet the tea canister while opening it.

“These are the tea leaves that will be served today. We ordered these luxurious tea leaves from Citril for you. Don’t they look unusual?” my mother explained with a smile.

The poet, with a puzzled look, stared at my mother and back at the tea canister. *What? Does he want to say something?*

“Would you kindly have any tea that’s suited for today’s piece? I believe I was planning on introducing work by a poet from the country of Cylendarz,” he said.

My mother and I looked at each other.

“Is there a reason to arrange the tea to your poem? This one is much more expensive, and because it’s so unusual, I’m sure everyone will be delighted,” she said.

“I see...”

*Huh?! What’s with him?! Why is he giving us that attitude? We told him that it’s expensive! Why does he look so unsatisfied? He’s so rude, questioning the tea before he’s even tasted it,* I thought angrily.

“Mother, I’ll check up on the snacks in the kitchen. I’m sure they’re being

made,” I said. I excused myself, hoping to calm down. When I got to the kitchen, the chef was sitting there, completely limp. “Hey, what’s going on?! Huh? Alcohol?”

“Heh, I’m just tasting the brandy that’s going to be used for the snacks. I’m working,” the chef said, his face red, as he waved a jug of liquor at me.

*Ugh, even his breath reeks of alcohol. Just how much has he drunk?! He’s got a nice face, so I’ll forgive him, I suppose.*

“Would you like a taste, my lady?”

“N-No, I’m quite all right. Please make haste and finish the snacks. The poet has already finished his meal.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He stood up with a grin and sluggishly headed toward the kitchen.

“Whatever shall I do with him? He’s good-looking and skilled, but he’s so untidy.”

I pouted, but I secretly enjoyed this situation. I was always in the usual boring salon, eating boring snacks, and forced to use proper etiquette. A chef like this would make my day much more interesting.

“My, oh my. I wonder how my boring sister is faring. She might be getting mercilessly bullied by commoners.”



“**LADY** Iris, the vines from the crops you ordered for me the other day are finally growing,” Tom happily told me.

Above the arbor, which was built behind the manor, annuals were slowly growing their glistening vines.

“I’m sure flowers will bloom soon, Lady Iris!” Kiki said with a smile beside me.

I looked up at the sky. It had been two months since I became Iris Stock. I was recently requested to teach etiquette to the employees that worked at my husband’s company.

“Summer’s coming, and more ships will be bustling into the port. It’s the

season where we could score major business deals with aristocrats,” Lord Lucas had said.

“Score major business...” I murmured.

“I’ve got a few women working at my company. They support us and help us with clerical work. Could you teach them, and by extension, the rest of us, about proper etiquette and manners? I need you to hammer it into us.”

“I may not be of much help, and I’m not sure if I could ‘hammer it in,’ but I’ll do my utmost to assist your precious employees so that they can work with pride.”

A few days after we had this conversation, I headed to the Stock Trading Company and memorized each employee’s name and face. I looked into what they wanted to learn and what they lacked before slowly proceeding with my lessons. In contrast to the many young servants at the manor, who made me feel comfortable, the employees at the company were all hardened, as though they’d survived many wars. My training sessions were going smoothly at first, but as expected, not everything was going according to plan.



“**I’LL** never accept that you’re Mr. Stock’s wife!” a woman sharply declared in front of me from across the dining table.

It was before noon, and I was in the cafeteria on the third floor of the company building. Other female employees, fifteen in total, were with me. There wasn’t much work today, and they’d graciously offered me an hour of their time before lunch so that I could give them a simple lesson about table manners.

“Um, Coldola?” I said after her angry outburst. The cafeteria fell silent, and my troubled voice echoed throughout the room.

“The president’s just getting carried away because his company has grown so much,” she said. She glared at me hatefully with her large, brick-colored eyes. “We all worked hard together when he suddenly purchased a title for himself. Then he took you, a frail and helpless woman, for his wife. He’s out of his mind. Madam, if you’d like to leave, don’t let the door hit you on the way out. I’m sure

it won't tarnish your precious household name."

Her female colleague tugged on her sleeve and berated her, "Come on, Coldola. Don't say that. She was handpicked by the president. She's his wife in every way."

Coldola continued to glare at me. "So what? So, she can greet people politely and speak well with a calm expression. That's all she can do. I won't accept someone like her as Lucas's life partner. It would've been better if she was just a decoration with a nice title, but now she's coming to teach us as the mistress of the household? He's mocking us! What's gotten into him?"

She casually called my husband by his name, clacked her cutlery down, and angrily stood up. Her freckled cheeks were red with anger. She whipped her ribbon-tied hair and stormed out.

"L-Lady Iris, are you all right?" Kiki cautiously called out to me while I stared after her in shock.

As though my maid's words had snapped everyone back to reality, the other women looked at me with a smile.

"Madam, please don't worry about it. Um, Coldola's just dedicated to her work."

"Um, well, erm, I really appreciate your table manners lesson! It's super insightful!"

"Thank you so much!"

"Eh heh heh..."

I looked at everyone as they tried to be considerate. "Thank you. We can end our lesson here. We still have time until lunch, so I hope you can review what we just learned."

I stood up and left the cafeteria. Kiki followed me and whispered, "I knew she'd snap at you, my lady."

Kiki's words and the looks on the other female employees were telling. The moment Kiki and I left the room, the women all started to talk at once. I put my back against the wall and eavesdropped.

“Coldola even said she’d marry the president if he proposed to her.”

“Huh?! Was she going out with him?!”

“Like hell. She just thought so. She tends to believe what she wants.”

“But wasn’t she childhood friends with him? She’s still the only one who can scold and talk to the president. I get why she’d get the wrong idea.”

“I wonder what his wife’s gonna do? No one’s as tough as Coldola, but women who work at companies are strong-willed and assertive. Can a naïve priss like her get by?”

“Maybe she’ll cry and head back home. I don’t know the details, but isn’t Karelia kinda famous?”

“Kinda? They’re super famous! They’re a major household that has existed since this kingdom was created, and they get their name from the god of the region! They’re part of the Traditional Twelve!”

“Huh? What’s that? Do aristocrats have ranks?”

“Idiot, this is why the president took an etiquette guidebook for his wife!”

“But to be honest, why would someone like her marry him and come here? Maybe she’s got something going on.”

“She looks quiet, but maybe she’s got some troubles herself.”

“The marriage seems suspicious, too. The president’s super rich now, but didn’t he grow up in a bad environment where he didn’t even know his father?”

“Shhh, who cares about his father? With his face, he must’ve had good genes.”

“Man, I envy his wife. If only I was an aristocrat. Then maybe I could marry the president myself.”

“Aristocrats win just by living.”

They weren’t aware that I was a bankrupt aristocrat who was purchased by Lord Lucas in exchange for shouldering my household’s debt. I was relieved. That meant that neither he nor the servants at the manor talked about the current state of the Karelia household. I looked next to me, and Kiki was about

to burst into tears.

“L-Lady Iris, please don’t pay any attention to them. They’re just gossiping...”

“Thank you. I’m not hurt, so don’t worry, Kiki.”

Rumors and gossip were an important source of information. At the very least, a newcomer like me could gather plenty of information from these conversations. In any case, I had no right to be hurt by their words since I was being ill-mannered myself, eavesdropping on them. It was impossible to prevent gossiping and badmouthing behind someone’s back.

“It’s only natural that I’m unpopular with them. I’ll accept any critique in earnest so that I can improve,” I said.

“Lady Iris, you’re very strong,” Kiki murmured.

I didn’t think I was. In all honesty, these straightforward and transparent rumors were easier to deal with than the numerous masks of the aristocrats, who always hid their true intentions. It was tiresome trying to read their true feelings behind their smiles and gentle mannerisms. I was also used to being directly harassed by my stepmother.

I was the wife of Baron Lucas Stock, the president of Stock Trading Company. The servants at the manor had accepted me, but the women working at the company had yet to approve of my existence. As his wife, it was my duty to earn their trust.

“I should focus on what’s in front of me and work to gain their approval,” I said. I bounced back and headed toward the foreign trade section, where my opinion was being requested.



**AFTER** I met with the employees in foreign trade, I took Kiki and my bodyguard, Leikzig, to the harbor. Near the area, many people were preparing to dock a cargo ship. Everyone looked so busy that no one paid attention to me or my servants. I was happy that they didn’t mind, but the cats noticed our presence as they meowed and gathered around us, hoping for attention.

“There are quite a few cats in this city,” I said.

“Yes. Many cats live around here, hoping for treats to fall off the fishing boats,” Kiki said. She happily crouched down and petted a feline’s jaw.

The cats in the royal capital were mostly house cats purchased to get rid of mice. Our furry friends in Solalitika had some dirt in their fur, but they were in good condition, and some even looked slightly overweight.

Leikzig glanced at them and said coldly, “They’re literal cat burglars. They gather near fishermen, who use their blood, sweat, and tears, working while the sun’s still down, to steal the fish captured with painstaking effort. They’re cunning beasts.”

“You say that, but you’re petting the cats too!” Kiki said.

“Even I’m powerless in front of these vicious beasts. I love petting...”

He caught me gazing at him and narrowed his eyes. His silver hair fluttered in the wind, glittering like steel blades. Recently, Leikzig stayed by my side constantly. I asked if he needed to assist Lord Lucas with work, but he replied, “If something happens to you, my lady, I’ll be crucified. Please allow me to stay with you.”

I gratefully accepted his offer, but I felt like I was being watched. I probably wasn’t wrong about that. I listened to my two servants converse with each other and turned my back, focusing my gaze on the dock. We were in a secluded area, careful not to hinder any workers, as we quietly enjoyed the ocean breeze.

“Indeed. Everyone has been with Lord Lucas through the good times and the bad. It’s only natural that people would consider me a nuisance who appeared out of nowhere,” I said.

“Please don’t say that, Lady Iris!” Kiki, who was petting a cat, suddenly said. She jumped to her feet. “Everyone in the manor loves you!”

“Thank you. But everyone in the manor accepted me so quickly thanks to you. You’ve been by my side since the royal capital.”

“Me?” She looked at me, surprised, and I nodded.

“Indeed. Everyone at the manor loves you like a little sister. I was spared so

much trouble because you approved of me. Thank you.”

“Heh heh, I’m happy to be of service.”

The servants at the manor accepted me as the mistress of the household because Kiki, who had been traumatized by aristocrats from the royal capital, stood by my side. However, the women at the trading company saw me as a troublesome madam. I was building a relationship with them, but the moment Coldola returned from assisting at a factory in the suburbs, the atmosphere changed. She was a key figure among the women. At this rate, I wouldn’t be able to teach etiquette as Lord Lucas had requested. It was essential for me to mend my relationship with her.

“My lady,” Leikzig said, brushing off some cat hair. “You call yourself ‘a nuisance who appeared out of nowhere,’ but you’re making your way into my lord’s heart. You’re like a drop of water slowly spreading out onto a sandy beach. I’m actually quite worried about him.”

“Leikzig?” I murmured.

The next moment, while I was gazing at the ocean, a voice called out from behind. “Hey, Iris!”

Lord Lucas had gotten off the docked ship and elegantly walked down the ramp. His striking yellow hair fluttered in the wind as he took large strides with his long legs. He approached me quickly. His eyes glittered like the sun as he squinted at me and smiled.

“You’re here again? You sure like gazing at the ocean,” he said, loosening his necktie and avoiding the cats as he stood next to me. His body blocked much of the wind. It was immediately easier for me to stay standing.

“This area’s safe, and you’re free to walk around here, but...”

“I’m sorry to make you worry, Lord Lucas.”

“Well, obviously. You’re my wife,” he muttered as he furrowed his brows. He was still reluctant to use the word “wife,” and I couldn’t help but feel apologetic that I wasn’t a beautiful and flowery young lady. He could easily refer to me as his “wife” if I were less dull and plain. “Right. I read the report you gave me about your lessons,” he said.



He was referring to the documents I'd prepared the other day for my training sessions at the trading company. It included what I'd be teaching everyone: manners that the aristocrats preferred, basic education, the difference in polite speech between the royal capital and the dialect of Solalitika, basic table manners, and how to deal with aristocrats should one get into any trouble, among other things.

"It looks simpler and more practical than what you've been teaching the servants at the manor," he said.

"Correct. People will be more inclined to learn if the skill is useful, and I wanted to proceed with practicality in mind." A strong gust of wind blew. I stretched upward and cupped my hand over my mouth so that I could be heard. He silently bent down. "Quite a few people work at the manor, so it wasn't an issue teaching them from the ground up, but the women working the trading company are older than me and have dealt with people from the royal capital before."

"I see." Our faces were close as he squinted and smiled. "You're respecting what they've done so far, and you're being careful not to damage their pride."

"Indeed. If they reject me from the start, I can't teach them anything."

I learned this when I failed to teach my stepmother and sister the norms of high society. My stepmother refused to learn about etiquette and manners fitting for the lady of the Karelia household.

*"Iris, your mother isn't with you anymore. With a flick of my wrist, I could send you to the monastery. Know your place, and don't sound so high and mighty. I'm the mistress of the household, you know,"* my stepmother had said.

My stepmother had gone through her fair share of troubles, but as rude as this may seem, as soon as she became a marchioness, she stopped improving herself. Learning and adapting to the ways of high society humiliated her, as though she were denying her upbringing. I was still young, but I felt responsible for keeping the traditions of the Karelia household passed down by my late mother, and I tried my best to teach her. However, it was difficult for a young lady like myself to teach a woman as old as my stepmother, and the results were poor.

I wouldn't make the same mistake. This time I'd take the proper steps to teach older women. Still, my plan didn't go smoothly with Coldola there.

"I'll be testing a few new methods out and trying my best," I said. I was careful not to say anything unnecessary and shifted my gaze toward the vast horizon. "I know their names and faces, but it'll still take time before I really know them. Everyone is passionate and hardworking, and above all, they respect you, Lord Lucas, as their company president."

I understood their reasoning. They were hardworking and respected their boss, so they were judging to see if I was fit to be his wife. Because Coldola loved the company and the president, she couldn't approve of me.

"Hey, Iris," Lord Lucas said, bending down even closer to my face. His amber-colored eyes grew closer, and he whispered, "You were a little down earlier, weren't you?"

I was surprised by his low voice and instinctively looked at Kiki and Leikzig. The butler was distracting the maid as he gave me a forced smile and winked. I was embarrassed by his kindness, but felt lucky that the loud ocean breeze made it so that Kiki couldn't hear a thing.

"How did you..." I trailed off. *How did you immediately know that I was down?* I couldn't properly voice my thoughts. Lord Lucas flashed a kind smile when my shocked expression proved him correct.

"Idiot, just who do you think I am?"

"Eep!" He patted my head, and I was so surprised that I couldn't suppress my weird shriek. *How long has it been since I've had my head touched? I don't think even my father ever patted me on the head.*

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"U-Um, no, I'm just a bit embarrassed."

"I see." He gave me a final pat on the head and stroked my hair. "If there's anything I can do, let me know. Don't keep everything all bottled up inside. I'm your husband, after all."

I was silent for a moment. "Okay."

My cheeks grew hot at the word “husband.”

“My lord, the coachman is waving his arms. I think you’re about out of time.”

Guided by Leikzig, Lord Lucas patted my shoulders and walked toward the carriage while raising his arm. He was on his way to meet someone from a shipping company—he took time out of his busy day to talk with me.

“Lord Lucas is a kind man,” I murmured as I watched him leave. He walked firmly, and his back looked large; I felt a slight pang in my chest. I called out to my maid. “Shall we go, Kiki? Count Whitewand and his wife are coming to visit us. They’re sensitive, so we’d best be well prepared.”

Little by little, I became responsible for greeting aristocrats who came from the royal capital. Any business matters would be handled by the necessary persons, and I would provide any support needed. Lord Lucas told me not to keep matters bottled up, but he was busy from dawn until dusk. I didn’t want to cause any trouble.

“I must do anything that I can,” I murmured.

I gently slapped my cheeks and walked through the strong ocean breeze as I headed toward my carriage.



I rode to the company building with my carriage and changed into my afternoon dress. It was a hassle, but I followed the decorum of noblewomen in the royal capital, and always changed into a plain, simple dress for the afternoon so that I was ready to greet any surprise guests.

“Excuse me, my lady,” Leikzig said as he entered the room once I was done changing. “Tomorrow, our guests will arrive at a hotel at around noon. I also received word from the manor that preparations for tonight’s dinner party are going smoothly.”

“Thank you for your report,” I said.

The dinner party would be held at Lord Lucas’s manor at the top of the hill, and any business negotiations would be held in this office, located in the urban district. It was confusing to follow, but that was the flow of things.

Kiki, who had helped me get dressed, asked, “Lady Iris, Lord and Lady Whitewand are coming by, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“What kind of people are they?”

“Lord Whitewand has been in the House of Lords for quite a while. He’s well-known in the political world. He’s around fifty years old, and his wife is the vice chairman of a sisterhood called the White Wing Women’s Association. Twice a year, she hosts a conference in the royal capital, in front of the royal palace, promoting reading among women. She’s rather young—around forty years or so.”

“Wow,” Kiki couldn’t hide her surprise. “I don’t know much about stuff like this, but I understand that they’re amazing people. It’s rare that someone with the title of count would come to visit us personally in Solalitika, instead of sending a servant. They must really want to meet you, Lady Iris.”

“I can’t deny that, but their true intentions are most likely to research new aristocrats like Lord Lucas.”

“Huh?! Is he famous in the royal capital?”

Her innocent demeanor always cheered me up. “For better or for worse, Lord Lucas has attracted quite a bit of attention. Those in the know are aware of the new aristocrat. I’m sure interest has only increased since it’s rather known that he took the oldest daughter of the Karelia household, one of the Traditional Twelve, for his wife.”

I was a plain woman who lacked presence, but my family was rather traditional and famous. Any aristocrat would know our name. We’d fallen as aristocrats. Our delay in returning our debts and minor issues with my parents and younger sister had been tolerated due to our household name and history. I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad for our family.

“I’m sure Lord and Lady Whitewand are visiting to keep up with societal news,” I said.

“Huh. I guess aristocrats have too much time on their hands.”

I chuckled when Kiki sounded a little shocked.

“Being well informed leads to taking the initiative in society. That’s one of the jobs of an aristocrat. It is a little odd that such an elderly couple would visit us.”

One of Lord Whitewand’s territories was near Solalitika, a mere half-day by carriage. I assumed that he’d visited his land and decided to drop by Solalitika as well.

With a quizzical look, Kiki tidied up my hair. “What do you do when you play these societal games?”

“Personal connections lead to power. The political world cannot be changed without the help of people, and one can’t protect their household alone. Lord Whitewand should be passing his title to his eldest or second-eldest son soon. For his household, he most likely wants to do what he can while he can still move around, and I’m sure there are still issues regarding concession, titles, and the like.”

Someone knocked on the door. The door opened, and an employee bowed their head while they stood outside my room. “Madam, a person from the Whitewand household has just arrived.”

I gulped.

“Huh?! I thought they were arriving tomorrow!” Kiki cried in panic.

“Who just arrived?” I asked.

“A male butler called Niznik. Before officially meeting us tomorrow, he said he wanted to pay his respects to you,” the employee replied.

“We’re being tested already,” I said.

It was too early to visit, and doing so was bad manners. It was also rather rude for a male aristocrat to meet the mistress of the house without greeting my husband, the master of the house, first. They were underestimating us.

“I was more worried about the butler, Niznik, than Lord and Lady Whitehouse. He’s got quite a few connections with people from the underground masquerade salon. It’s a type of salon where ranks and titles don’t matter,” I said.

Niznik was a butler, but he was also the second son of Baron Clobold. He was famous for being a shrewd man who loved to gossip. By attending exclusive masquerade salons, he interacted with people far above his rank, and it was rumored that he had connections with the palace. It was said that his information-gathering ability and connections were what strengthened Lord Whitewand in the political world.

The Clobolds were extremely close with the Whitewands. They were considered close relatives, and as such, any authority that the Whitewands had positively impacted Niznik's household as well.

"What shall we do?" Leikzig asked me.

"I shall greet him. I must never act humiliated, no matter the situation," I replied. I wrapped a lace stole around my newly changed dress, tied my hair, and used a small pin to hold my hat in place. "Where's Jim from foreign trade? I believe he's in charge of Lord Whitewand."

"He's at the warehouse near the ocean. He'll be here in around fifteen minutes."

"Thank you."

I nodded toward him and left the room. I headed toward the president's office. Anyone who was free had already been gathered. *Leikzig works quickly.*

"Everyone, please help me make the preparations. Prepare the best tea leaves from Blanc and bring brownies as a snack. The chef that I rehired from my household made the baked goods, so it should be fine. Please bring some calm people who won't panic when asked sudden questions. Hm, may I request for Keith, who's been working here for a while, and Doulg, who has a wonderful smile?" I said.

"Madam, I'll go," a voice suddenly said.

I turned around. Coldola stood proudly behind an apologetic Kiki.

"C-Coldola," I murmured. To be frank, she was most unsuited for this meeting.

"I can deal with Whitewand's butler. I've been with Stock Trading Company

from the start, helping Lucas build this company. If it's an important guest, surely it'd make sense for me to attend as well?"

I looked at her face and didn't offer a reply. Kiki pretended to readjust my collar and whispered in my ear. "Coldola is good at dealing with businessmen. She's also been with this company from the start. However, she's quite short-tempered."

I gave Kiki a small nod and faced Coldola. "The butler hasn't come here for a business meeting this time. He's here for a greeting. I shall inform all the employees in charge of the meeting tomorrow about today's matters. Please leave this to me."

"You're only here to teach manners, aren't you? What can *you* do?"

She stepped close to me, and the other employees looked away silently. *I see. No one can say much to her because she's had good results and has worked here from the beginning. It's just as Kiki says.*

This wasn't good. Long-time employees who worked with pride were precious assets to an organization. I experienced this when I managed the Karelia household. When I visited other households, the atmosphere of the servants accurately depicted the skill of the mistress of the household. It seemed she named herself the mistress of this company, and this wouldn't have been a problem had she truly been Lord Lucas's wife or been presented with a similar title.

However, if she was simply a long-time employee who could sway the company with her words, this would cause disorder within the organization. It would ultimately negatively affect Lord Lucas—it was my duty as the woman who was requested by the master of the household to deal with aristocrats to fix her incorrect understanding.

I stayed silent. Coldola inched closer.

"If you're not aware, then I shall tell you. We serve snacks from Solalitika to our guests. There's no need for the chef *you* called from the royal capital to provide food. If you prefer snacks from the royal capital, I urge you, madam, to eat them yourself."

I stayed silent.

“What’s wrong? Would you like to say anything? If you’re the mistress of the —”

“This is not the time to argue.” I cut her off and sighed. “Well, Coldola, would you kindly support me? However, I’ll have you listen to my instructions. Should anything go awry today, I shall change the person in charge for tomorrow’s meeting with Lord and Lady Whitewand.”

Satisfied, she huffed and said, “Fine. But know that I warned you.”

“Please be at ease. Should anything happen, I’ll support you.”

Her eyebrows twitched. I could tell that my statement irritated her. This wasn’t the time for arguments, and I could support her easier than my family at home. Coldola loved the company, unlike my father, stepmother, and sister, who couldn’t care less about the Karelia name.



**AFTER** we’d wasted around two minutes arguing, I headed toward the drawing room. A familiar man with his hair cut short was there.

“Lady Stock has arrived.”

He shifted his gaze from the view of Solalitika and turned toward me with a smile. His eyes were droopy, and he had a noticeable beer belly. His face was shiny with grease, and he seemed personable, but his brown-eyed gaze was sharper than a hawk’s. I greeted him first, in accordance with aristocratic etiquette.

“Hello, Lord Niznik. I believe we last met at the royal capital ball. I’m Iris Stock.”

“My, oh my, Lady Stock. It’s certainly been a while, and I’m honored that you’d meet someone such as myself.” He tipped his hat and stretched his back before bowing gracefully. “I’ve been here before, you see, when this area was still a naval base. I heard that Lord Stock had purchased this building and had it renovated. It looks pristine.”

The moment I opened my mouth to respond, Coldola stepped forward.



“Thank you. Those that are aware of the buildings from that period often praise this structure.”

“Oh, are you a servant?” Niznik asked.

“I’m an employee at Stock Trading Company. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Huh. If a woman as young and pretty as you works here, I’m sure that alone would make this company valuable.” He looked at her with a sneer.

“I’m honored by your praise. However, this company has many items that far outshine someone like me. If you’d like, I’d love to give you a tour before Lord and Lady Whitewand’s arrival.”

“I’d be grateful. My master’s rather hard to please, and I wouldn’t want anything unpleasant to be around.”

“If anything is not to your liking, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

She evaded his lecherous stare with a smile and guided him to the room where we had prepared a few products for Lord and Lady Whitewand. She explained every item in great detail.

“This is a Marmaria stone slab we imported from Seigh. It’s a beautiful slab, essential for the walls of an audience room, the tables used by the royal family, or stone gardens. We have our own factory in Seigh, so we can import slabs of any size without a single scratch. This over here is a cloth from the Orient. This silk garment has been processed specially, and it’s said that only the nobles from the Orient are allowed to wear it. After our president’s careful negotiations, we were able to obtain this on the condition that it’d only be sold to the royalty or certain aristocrats,” she said.

As she’d proudly stated earlier, she was eloquent and skilled at convincing buyers to purchase her items. In addition, she was casually using the manners I’d taught the employees the other day to perfection. She was indeed very good at what she did.



“**MY**, I quite enjoyed the tour. Thank you, Miss Coldola.” Niznik smiled as he reached for a handshake.

She took his hand with a smile. Though this was an interaction between a customer and a businesswoman, it was rare for a man to request a handshake from a woman. I planned on telling Coldola later that casually accepting this gesture was improper, but my thoughts were interrupted.

“By the way, I assume you’re Lord Stock’s mistress. Please give him my regards as well,” Niznik suddenly said.

For a split second, Coldola froze. Niznik, satisfied with her response, continued with a smile. “Did you think you were keeping it a secret? If a beautiful and capable woman such as yourself hasn’t been married yet, surely, it’s because you’re his mistress?”

“I-I...” stammered Coldola.

“Not to worry! Lady Stock is the daughter of a marquess. Should a fancy noblewoman marry a common man, it’s only natural that he has a mistress as well that would match his low rank. Just do be careful about successors, all right? Things could get a hair complicated.”

He clasped her shoulders, and her face went from pale to dark red. Her lips trembled with a look of astonishment. She looked humiliated. I jumped to support her. I sneakily tilted my collar and dropped my brooch.

*Clack!* The loud noise startled everyone in the room as they stared at me. I put on a troubled expression and slumped my shoulders.

“Oh, pardon me. I absolutely adore this brooch, but it’s a little heavy. Kiki, would you kindly pick it up for me?” I asked.

“C-Certainly,” she answered. Kiki, who froze, hastily fixed my collar.

I adjusted my position as though to hide Coldola behind me, and I smiled at Niznik. “Good sir, kindly don’t bully Miss Coldola. As you can see, I’m reliant on her, and she’s essential to this company. Calling her a mistress would be rudely undermining her hard work. I’d like to request an apology.”

I smiled, but I stated my intentions clearly. Niznik gave an exaggerated wave.

“You have my deepest apologies, my lady. She was just so beautiful that it would be a waste if she wasn’t married, and I couldn’t help myself,” he replied.

“In any case, Lady Stock, you seem protective of your employees, but aren’t you worried that his workplace has such an alluring woman?”

I chuckled. “If I start to get jealous, there’d be no end, since his workplace is filled with wonderful women. My husband is the one who decides how to live his life, and it’s my duty to support him as his wife. I believe from the bottom of my heart that he’ll always make the best decision, and I shall obey and trust him.”

Niznik shrugged his shoulders and winked at Coldola. “As you can see, a well-bred noblewoman from the royal capital knows her place. You should continue to try your best.”

Coldola gave a forced laugh. She seemed to have calmed down. Her rage had gone elsewhere.

“Kiki, thank you for readjusting my brooch. Heavy jewelry is certainly troublesome, isn’t it?” I said brightly once Kiki stepped away, changing topics. “I’ve heard that an unusual pendant has been popular in the royal capital. Jewelry shops on busy streets are making quite a fuss. Lord Niznik, are you aware of what a shell perfume pendant is?”

He stared at me, surprised, and I continued.

“It’s a small shell pendant that has been specially processed, and it’s been infused with perfume. Women of the ton don’t change their favorite scents, since the perfume would be one of their identifying characteristics, but some fashionable women in the city have started to change their scents. I’ve heard that they wear different perfumes throughout the day.”

The butler’s eyes twinkled with interest. I knew that he’d want to know the details. He’d stated earlier that he’d worked as a naval officer in his younger years. He later returned to the royal capital and was employed as the butler at his relative’s household, the Whitewands.

He’d been stationed away from the capital as a naval officer, and he had connections to underground clubs. From these two points, I extrapolated that, within his network, he had a prostitute or barmaid whom he fancied. If he received information from these women, unusual jewelry from Solalitika would be a good present. The shell perfume pendant would be especially popular with

women who needed to wear various perfumes to please men for their job.

“Tomorrow, we shall welcome Lord and Lady Whitewand, so we won’t have anything available. How would you like to look right now, if you have the time? I have some items prepared in a separate room,” I said.

Coldola gulped, as though she were thinking, “When did you have the time to do that?” I’d prepared these items since I learned that Lord and Lady Whitewand would be arriving in our city. A butler who worked under a nobleman was given a handsome wage, and many indulged in debauchery. It didn’t matter to me which butler Lord Whitewand sent—I’d thought I could sell these items anyway.

“I’m sure you’ll be busy with tonight’s dinner party, but I could show you some items right now. Of course, we can keep these purchases a secret from your lord and lady,” I said.

The look on Niznik’s face said it all—I knew he’d make a purchase.



**NIZNIK** paid a much higher price than I’d imagined and returned to the hotel where Lord and Lady Whitewand were staying. He was going to be busy preparing for the dinner party.

We saw him out, and once we lost sight of him and headed back to the waiting room, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief, their strength leaving their bodies. I expressed my gratitude.

“We made it through with everyone’s help. Thank you,” I said.

“I’m glad we sold some items, madam.”

Tired from the meeting, all but one person seemed calmer. Coldola looked at me in disagreement.

“What do you mean by ‘everyone?’ You did everything yourself,” she snapped.

“That’s not true.” I shook my head firmly. “Without your help, Coldola, we wouldn’t have been able to explain all those items. Jim, who rushed to help; Keith, who hastened the preparations; and Doulg, who’s currently reporting to

the president, all played their roles. If even one of you didn't do your job, we wouldn't have made it through."

"Thank you! I'm honored to receive such high praise, madam!" Jim loudly said, posing comically. Everyone chuckled.

Coldola remained the only one silent. She bowed her head toward me. "I know it's rude of me to say, but I underestimated you, madam. You were chosen by Lucas, and I expected your education, etiquette, and decision-making skills to be simply that of an aristocrat from the royal capital. I apologize."

"Coldola..." I murmured.

"However!" She raised her head and glared at me. "I'll approve of you as the wife of Lucas, but I still don't believe you can give him the family he desires. You're skilled as the mistress of the household, but that's all."

"Just as a mistress of the household? What do you mean?"

Confused, I fell silent. As I cocked my head to one side, she looked at me with glee. Jim nervously tried to calm her down.

"Coldola, you can't keep hurling insults at the madam," he said.

"It's fine. I know that I'll get fired sooner or later. Lucas isn't an idiot, so I'm sure he knows I'm treating his wife like this. Then, before I get fired, I should tell her about Lucas. That's my role as his childhood friend."

Jim, overpowered by her intensity, slumped his shoulders and closed his mouth. I stepped forward. "Coldola, could you tell me one thing?" I asked.

"And what's that?"

"Why do you feel I'm lacking as his wife?"

"Even if I told you, it's not like you could do anything about it."

"Even so, I'd like for you to tell me. I want to be a woman that's fitting for Lord Lucas."

She looked as though she had been hit by a surprise attack—I was sure that she didn't expect me to ask her so bluntly. She glared at me again.

"The president, Lucas, wants a family. He doesn't know what his father looks

like, and he lost his mother when he was young. I'm his childhood friend, so I know what he went through more than anyone and the loneliness he felt. A prissy lady such as yourself, the beloved daughter of the marquess from the royal capital, can't fill that void or even begin to understand it. To think he'd agree to a heartless political marriage with a blue blood. It's not suitable for him."

She mumbled the last few lines to herself. Judging from the gossip I'd overheard, she'd expected a proposal from Lord Lucas. When her hopes were dashed, she started to dislike working at his company. That explained her reckless behavior.

"Coldola..." I started.

"Got a complaint about it? You're free to fire me at any time, you know. I'm sure you hold that power as the mistress of the household."

"I shouldn't be the one to decide such things. That would be up to your manager." I received her acts of desperation and slowly formed my words. "As you say, I may not be familiar with what a family is. Political marriages are a given in high society, and the capability one has working as the lady of a household is valued more than us as a person. In addition, I lost my mother when I was young as well."

Her eyes widened, and I could feel the other employees' gazes as I continued, "My father immediately married a different woman and doted on my younger sister, with whom I have no blood relation. Whether at home or out in society, I've been treated as a dull woman who lacks presence ever since. I'm afraid you might be right that I know nothing about a normal family and can't provide one for him."

"Your mother... I-I'm so sorry..."

"Not to worry. There was no way for you to know how I lived in the royal capital."

Jim butted in, "Now, now! I think you're more than enough for our president, madam!"

"Hey, stop being so rowdy!" Coldola said.

He ignored her remark. “I’m single, and I’d be ecstatic if a cute wife like you was waiting for me at home! I’d be overjoyed if I could be with someone who has a bright smile and a relaxing atmosphere.”

“A cute wife waiting at home with a bright smile?” Coldola repeated, as if trying to find something to nitpick in his words.

“Oh, and if they’re waiting for me with warm stew prepared, it’d be perfect,” Jim finished.

Coldola gasped. “That’s it! Home cooking and warm food! Madam, you’ve never cooked anything before, have you?”

“Now that you mention it...” I replied. As a noblewoman, I’d never stepped foot in the kitchen to personally make a dish. I was reprimanded for even peeking in one, for it was unladylike to do so.

Coldola puffed out her chest victoriously. “Because you can’t provide a warm, homey household as a woman, you’ve failed Lucas as his wife,” she said.

“So, what you’re saying is that I should learn how to cook,” I replied.

“Well, that’s not all, but it’s a start.”

“I understand. Then I shall learn how to cook.”

She looked at me with a confused expression.

“I came here, to Solalitika, as Lord Lucas’s wife. My task was to teach everyone here the etiquette and rules of the royal capital, but I’m also a greenhorn when it comes to the traditions of this city. If cooking for their husbands is normal for the wives of Solalitika, then it’s only natural that I do the same and learn how to cook.”

I was dead serious.



**TIME** passed, and the dinner party ended without a fuss. Lord and Lady Whitewand visited our manor, purchased a few pieces of furniture for their country house, and left Solalitika. They went in the opposite direction of the royal capital, toward their territory. As I’d thought, they visited us because we were close by.

“Good work, Iris,” Lord Lucas said.

“Thank you,” I replied.

Everything had ended, and it was already night. As usual, I was invited to Lord Lucas’s evening drink. Recently, he started to stay for a bit longer at my villa, and I was pleased. I couldn’t drink alcohol, so I sipped grape juice.

“You’re just like a kid,” he chuckled, but he never forced me to ingest any liquor.

I sat by him on the sofa, and as I tipped my glass, he shifted topics. “Hey, I heard that you were planning on making some food for our next staff luncheon.”

“I am.”

“Just what’s going through your mind?” He stared at me seriously. “You’re my wife. You don’t need to receive complaints from employees head-on.”

“So you knew.”

“Of course I do,” he said, sighing largely. Leikzig quietly poured spirit into Lord Lucas’s glass. He gazed at the chunk of ice, glittering under the lights, and took a gulp. “Coldola’s sort of a childhood friend; she’s the only employee that’s known me since I was a kid. Others became sailors, moved far away, or died.”

“I see.”

“I’ll be completely honest here,” he said and paused. “If you, the wife of the company president, dropped by, I thought she would be a little less rowdy.”

“Was she causing you trouble?”

“A little.” He gave a troubled laugh and put his arm around the top of the sofa. He wasn’t touching me directly, but I felt like I was in his arms. “I’ve been relying on her for so many years, but recently, she’s been out of control. But she’s been working here for a while, and she’s more passionate than anyone about her work. I couldn’t just lay her off.”

“You’re a kind man.”

“Heh, not even close. If I were, I would’ve let her go and walk her own path in



life. I didn't want to lose her expertise, so I kept her by my side for far too long. I even caused you trouble."

"I don't think it's any trouble. It's a good opportunity for me to get closer to the employees." I gazed up at his amber eyes and nodded. "The love and respect everyone has for you is something you built. I'm just using your hard work to solidify my standing. It's only natural for me, as your wife, to put in effort so that everyone will trust me even a little. I can start by learning how to cook."

He looked at me in shock before smiling. He gently stroked my hair with his warm, large hands. It felt like he was covering my whole head, and his long fingers glided across my hair as though he were combing it out.

"You look quiet and obedient like a doll, but you're quite stubborn, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm praising you. You're interesting. I'm glad I brought you here; I've never heard of a noblewoman working this hard and thinking for herself."

I suddenly remembered Jim's words, *"I'd be overjoyed if I could be with someone who has a bright smile and a relaxing atmosphere."*

I wasn't good at smiling, but I wanted Lord Lucas to think of me as his family. I looked up at him and consciously formed a smile.

"I'm glad you're happy," I said.

He stayed silent.

"Lord Lucas?"

"Oh, s-sorry, I didn't think you could smile like that."

"Jim had said that he'd be happy to have a wife with a bright smile, so I tried it out. How was it?"

"Huh?!" Lord Lucas loudly said, his voice going up an octave.

*It looks like Leikzig's shoulders are trembling, though his back is turned.*

"H-Have I done something wrong?"

“Don’t make that face anywhere else. Just show it to me.”

Perhaps due to the alcohol, his ears were bright red, and I felt a little embarrassed myself. I shifted my gaze down to my glass. The grape juice tasted a bit sourer and sweeter than usual.



**THE** merchant port city of Solalitika had an entertainment district where sailors and merchants gathered. Near the towpath, the lights of numerous pubs glowed in the night, and the evening was bustling with the clamor from the barmaids and drunken customers. Niznik, who’d just left a pub and entered an alleyway, was surprised when someone clasped his shoulder.

“Good day, Lord Niznik. How do you do?” a voice said.

He was shocked sober as he turned around to see a silver-haired man blending in with the darkness. “You’re...Baron Stock’s butler!”

He’d seen this young, slender man during the dinner party at Lord Stock’s large manor, atop a hill. His sweet, androgynous appearance made even Lady Whitewand blush, and his bearing had no flaws. Niznik remembered being suspicious of the beautiful man.

“The money you bought the pendant with didn’t come from your own pocket, did it?” the silver-haired butler asked

“Wh-What are you talking about?!” Niznik replied.

“I’ve already done my research. I know you’re solely in charge of managing Count Whitewand’s purchased art, and it’d be no trouble for you to tamper with the numbers on the ledger.” His thin lips formed a smile, but his gaze was cold and sharp. “Don’t be so on guard. I’m not a Royal Inspector, and I certainly wasn’t hired by Lord Whitewand. I couldn’t care less about what you aristocrats do. However...”

“What?” Niznik’s voice cracked. He’d gone through his fair share of trouble and was well-connected with underground society, but he couldn’t go against the young man’s steely gaze. This beautiful man was hiding something, and everything about him held an air of danger. The silver-haired butler’s eyes glimmered.

“I’d like you to look into something, Lord Niznik.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Unlike me, you’re well connected with the royal capital’s underground society, are you not?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I’d like some information regarding the eldest son of Lord Streltsy, Mikhail Streltsy.”



I had a month until the employee luncheon. I made a request to our chef, and he graciously lent me a corner of the kitchen where a maid taught me the basics.

“Let’s start with how to hold a knife, my lady,” she said.

“Okay, thank you,” I replied.

It was my first time learning how to cook, and it was surprisingly difficult. The vegetables slipped out of my grasp. I didn’t know how much strength I should put into the knife. I couldn’t crack an egg without getting a bit of the shell in the bowl, and it was hard to mix without spilling. I didn’t think frying or cooking items would be this difficult, either.

It was troublesome enough to do each of these tasks by themselves, but a normal chef would wash the vegetables, cut them, fry them, and garnish them on a plate all in one go. I greatly respected the people who made cooking their profession.

Little by little, I got some time to cook, and I practiced by myself.



**IT** was early in the afternoon. On my way to the guest building, I saw my odd wife struggling to cook alone. My employees secretly watched her from the shadows and whispered to each other.

“Ah, she’s finally able to crack eggs.”

“Oh no, she looks scared by the fire on the stove.”

“It’s good to take notes, but the food’s burning!”

I snuck behind them and put my elbow on the wall. “Hi there.”

Surprised, they suppressed their gasps and shrieks as they shrank back.

“P-President Stock...”

“What are you guys peeping for?” I asked.

“We were worried because it looked dangerous for her...”

“I see. And you’re not gonna help her?”

The women glanced at each other. They couldn’t leave her alone, but they hesitated to help. They didn’t know how to interact with Iris yet. I stared at my wife, struggling by herself.

Iris was clearly raised with the utmost care, like a porcelain doll. Her body exuded the elegance of a blueblood aristocrat—her hair was dark like a curtain of the night, and her veins could be seen through her pale skin. Her wrists, peeking from her sleeves, were thin and frail. However, her powerful gaze told a different story.

At a glance, she didn’t stand out, but her dark, thoughtful eyes were mesmerizing. Her spotless skin had one small beauty mark by her eye, and her long eyelashes cast a shadow over her dark pupils. Her small, sharp nose added to her elegance. She was truly beautiful.

Many noblewomen approached me for my money, so I wasn’t interested in their venerable bloodlines. Some were pretty, but I’d never wanted to know more about any of them until I met my wife.

Iris was oddly unaware of her charm. She wore plain dresses, had a boring hairstyle, and didn’t wear makeup when she first came to me. No wonder she thought she was plain and lacked presence. But her gaze spoke of a strong will, and her glossy black hair showed off her conscientious personality. Those accentuated her more than any jewel ever could.

Since she came to my house, she’d been increasing her brilliance. The amount of work she put in was staggering, and she gained the trust of my servants in the blink of an eye. Even those who lacked formal education had started to

keep their backs straight and say, “How do you do?” She remained an etiquette coach in front of the strong-headed women of my company but was also willing to compromise and stand by them.

“Ow...” Iris mumbled to herself and sucked on the tip of her finger. I hated to see her in pain and was overcome with a desire to hug her from behind. Iris, my wife, had been trying her best to blend in with this city for my sake.

My employees started to whisper again.

“Is the missus trying to cut the carrots? That’s dangerous!”

“If she holds them like that, it’ll slip!”

“Hey, guys,” I said, and everyone turned toward me. “Your wages will go up starting next month.”

“Huh?” they all said, their eyes wide with shock.

“The aristocrats have been buying our items for higher prices ever since Iris came here. The polite language you guys begrudgingly learned from her has won them over, and they stopped lowballing our products.”

“Wait, that’s all it takes?”

“I hate to admit it, but if we can’t even talk formally, they’ll underestimate us.”

“I see... So that’s why the missus taught us the capital’s dialect.”

“We need her, and I’m sure you guys have realized that, too,” I pointed out.

The women, who had just been watching over Iris, changed their attitude little by little.

“She came to an unknown town with barely the clothes on her back to marry a stranger, but she never complains.”

“She’s always kind to us and stays calm in every situation.”

“Even if Coldola says means things to her, she listens to her concerns earnestly.”

“She even saved Coldola.”

“Besides, she came to marry you, our gruff company president. She must be bold.”

“Yeah, you look like a hooligan.”

“You’re good-looking, but kids cry just looking at your face, and timid women are terrified.”

“Enough about me,” I barked. They giggled, and I patted their backs. “All right, get out there and help her for me. In exchange, I won’t reprimand you for ditching work.”

“Eek!”

As the women stumbled into the kitchen, Iris turned around with a look of surprise. “H-Hello?”

“We can teach you, ma’am. What would you like to make?” said one of the women.

“I’m currently practicing how to fry minced food,” Iris said. “I want to ultimately...”

“Then let’s do it together! You’ll be fine!”

“Let’s make some delicious food for the president!” another woman added.

“Okay!” Iris happily nodded, her cheeks flushing pink.

I burned her image into my memory and tackled the mountain of work I had left.

“I’m looking forward to it, Iris,” I murmured. As I thought about my wife, my body felt lighter. I could power through even the most annoying work.

*I’ll admit it. I like Iris. Whatever she may think about me, at the very least, I like her.*

A voice next to me said, “My lord.” My polite yet rude butler shamelessly smiled. I never even noticed his presence.

“Leik,” I said.

“It seems like the lady has gotten to you and made you weak.”

“Not really.”

He chuckled. “I’m glad you found a partner you could open your heart to.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I do, but...” he trailed off, his thin lips curving upward into an arc. “I didn’t think you’d be into her this deeply. I’m a little troubled.”

“What do you mean?”

I looked at him, my eyes narrowed. He sounded emotional and hesitant. It was unlike him. He met my gaze and gave me a flattering smile once more.

“Just as I said. I didn’t think you’d look at a woman that way—an aristocrat whom you met through an unconsummated marriage, I might add,” he said.

He bowed and left silently. I stared at the wall where Leik had just stood.

“I know best that I’m not acting like myself,” I muttered.



**TOMORROW** was the long-awaited staff luncheon. It would be held in the square near the port, and other staff members would bring food as well.

“It’s like a drinking party in the middle of the day. The people of Solalitika like parties, so they’ve been hyping it up,” Lord Lucas said.

According to him, the luncheon had been nicknamed the ‘Welcoming President Stock’s Wife Party.’

“It’s weird to see the star of the party working hard to make the food, huh?” he said.

“If everyone is willing to try a bite, I’ll prepare it with everything I’ve got,” I replied.

“And? Are you fine staying up so late to prepare?”

We were currently in the kitchen of my villa. He was having whiskey on the rocks with some prosciutto as he gazed at my hands. I had finished cutting and frying the ingredients and proceeded to knead them.

“I just need to mix the ground meat and these ingredients I’ve already

prepared for tomorrow, and I should be fine.”

“What are you making?”

I leaned up and whispered my dish in his ear before saying, “Please keep it a secret.”

He looked at me. “That sounds complicated.”

“It is. But it was impossible for me to make the perfect dish, and after some thinking, I decided this dish would best convey what I’d like to tell everyone. This encompasses my failures as well.”

“I see. Good luck.”

He went to the freezer, took out an ice cube, and put it in my mouth. It was cold and delicious. He stared at me, melting the ice cube in my mouth.

“It’s fine if you can’t cook, you know. People have their strong and weak points,” he said.

I finished my ice cube and answered, “There’s a difference between not doing something because I can’t and knowing how to do something even if I don’t do it often. Thanks to this experience, I gained some knowledge about cooking.”

“I see.”

I was silent for a moment. “Lord Lucas.”

“Hm?”

“For the first time in my life, I mustered up the courage to try something new.”

“What do you mean?”

“Until now, I’d thought I was always doing my best for the Karelia name, enduring anything that might come our way. Now, I’ve realized that I’ve been depending on that name as well.”

In front of Lord Lucas, I was oddly able to vocalize my thoughts. Maybe I’d gotten drunk from the scent of the alcohol in his glass. I was enchanted by his gaze and the aroma of the amber-colored whiskey—bitter and a little sweet—just like his eyes.



“Until now, I believed that I needed to endure hardships as a lady and work my hardest for my family. However, continuing this mindset in Solalitika made me feel like a mindless drone,” I said.

I thought about my stepmother and sister, who were back at the Karelia townhouse. My stepmother had become the wife of Marquess Karelia but refused to be called Marchioness Karelia. She rejected the idea of her daughter, Airia, being taught the ways of the aristocracy, and she coddled and doted on her child. My father was the same. Though he married into the Karelia family to keep the traditions alive, he acted freely, like a second-born son. Yet I didn’t know if I was in a position to criticize their actions.

I married a new aristocrat, Baron Stock, and came to Solalitika. Since I became his wife, I had to change. I couldn’t stay the course as an aristocratic lady who knew only about the royal capital and the hardships unique to high society.

“I can no longer be an inconspicuous lady who protects the Karelia household. You took me as your wife, and I’d like to become a woman fitting for you,” I said.

He placed his glass of whiskey on the table with a clack and quietly listened to me. *It’s wonderful that you always carefully listen to me and everyone else.*

“You’ve worked hard to be where you are today, Lord Lucas. You don’t act spoiled about your standing, and you’ve done many things. Purchasing a title, expanding your trade routes, and taking me as your wife. You’re constantly tackling change, and since I’ve become a wife to such a wonderful man, I must challenge, learn, and change myself.” I clenched my fists. “I won’t know if I’m right or wrong unless I try and see the results.”

He reached out and gently stroked my hair. He played with the edges of my long strands and smiled at me.

“Sounds like you’re willing to grow accustomed to Solalitika for me,” he said.

“That’s right. But I’m only just beginning. I may look clumsy or awkward, but I’ll do my best.”

“Hey, Iris,” he said, letting go of my hair and reaching for my cheek. He gently touched the mole near my eye with his pinky, and his gentle caress tickled. *It’s*

*like a sweet bolt of electricity running down my back. What is this feeling?*

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

I stood in shock. “Um, my hands are dirty from cooking.”

My chest squeezed, and my heart thumped as he stared at and touched me. He brought his face close to mine and smiled. “It’s fine if an angel is dirtied by cooking. Even your fingertips look delicious now.”

“You’re quite the charmer.”

I wasn’t sure how to react and averted my gaze toward my hands, getting back to work. I felt his quiet stare.

“Lord Lucas?” I asked.

He gently stroked my cheek. The sweet caress was gone. He looked deep in thought.

“How would...” He paused before he continued, “Iris, how would you feel if I said I was using you?”

“What do you mean?”

He stared at me pensively, and I couldn’t understand why he looked at me so. *Why are you making that face?* I cocked my head to one side.

“This was a *mariage blanc*, and you stated upfront that you wanted me for my household and my etiquette,” I said.

“W-Well, yeah...” he mumbled. “What if I had other motives in mind?”

“Well, if I were to say, I’ve already gone this far, haven’t I?”

“This far?” He furrowed his brows with a troubled expression.

“Whatever reason you may have, it’s a fact that I’ve been having fun every day since I’ve come here. Even if it was built on lies, it’s the truth that my time here has been filled with happiness, so I won’t think negatively of you.”

“I see. If so, that’s fine,” he murmured, silently stepping away from me. “Let’s finish up and get to bed then, huh?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

I stared at him. “D-Do you mean we’d go to bed t-together?”

He was silent for a few seconds before his face turned beet red. “Er...”

“U-Um, Lord...Lucas?”

“Damn it! Hey, d-don’t turn red! I-I’m just saying we should sleep so it won’t affect us tomorrow!”

“O-Oh, yes, I see. You’re right. I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions.”

We silently cleaned up together as the night wore on.



**IT** was a sunny day. Perfect for the staff luncheon. A number of large parasols were placed in the seaside square, and long tables, chairs, and beautiful flowers decorated the area. Each table had a barrel of liquor beside it, and rowdy fishermen started gathering before the party had even begun. Snack stalls and general stores were set up nearby. This party looked much larger than a simple staff luncheon.

Kiki had a different hairstyle and a ribbon in her hair. She looked excited.

“It looks like everyone in Solalitika can join the party,” I said.

“That’s right. Everyone in the city is associated with the Stock Trading Company in some way. It’s called a staff luncheon, but it’s more like a monthly festival in Solalitika!” Kiki replied.

“Oh dear, I wonder if I should serve my food on such a grand stage...”

“Don’t say that! I’m excited to try out your cooking!”

“Thank you.”

I straightened my back and stared at the table with what I prepared. The table was covered by a sheet. *Please, I hope my feelings will be conveyed through my cooking.*



**“HOW** does our food look?” Coldola asked, placing a few dishes in front of

me.

Lovely seafood dishes, made by the employees, lined the table. There was a salad made of seaweed, a clear soup with a bit of sea salt, and whitefish fried whole and garnished with tartar sauce.

Even the male employees had joined in the cooking. They'd made a potato cake resembling baked mashed potatoes from the grated tubers. It was accompanied by a cheese sauce and looked appetizing.

"We offered to buy alcohol for the guy that grated the greatest number of potatoes," Jim said to me cheerfully with a smile.

The male employees were friendlier toward me, but Lord Lucas had said, "Hey, be careful of those guys."

"Our boss is super scary when he's jealous!" Jim exclaimed.

"Is that so?" I asked.

"Yeah. Remember when I talked about wanting a wife who smiled?"

"Ah, yes, that advice."

"He later called me out with a terrifying expression on his face. He said he wouldn't forgive me if I tried to seduce you."

"Oh dear! But you're all so nice and thoughtful toward me!"

"You think so?"

Lord Lucas headed toward us with big strides.

"Ah, crap." Jim slunk away like a scared rabbit.

My husband arrived, and Coldola braced herself as she looked at him. "Sir..."

He glanced at Coldola silently, then put his arm around my shoulders and smiled. "You've made your preparations, haven't you, Iris? Show everyone," he said.

With a look of determination, I said, "Okay. Kiki, would you remove the cloth?"

"Certainly!" She removed the cover from the long table, revealing the

ingredients I had prepared the night before.

I had plates lined up with minced vegetables and meat, minced herbs, spices, and a chunk of dough that I'd kneaded and covered with a damp cloth.

"Are these the fillings and dough for dumplings?" Coldola asked.

I nodded. "Yes. Making the dough and ingredients was the best I could do. Making the wrappers and boiling them is where I always failed."

She muttered, "You've worked hard to come this far."

The other employees gathered around and whispered, sounding confused.

"Isn't this more than enough? She's never even held a knife before."

"But isn't this incomplete? Where do we go from here?"

"Those from the manor, the company, and the other employees have all helped me come this far. However, I couldn't boil or fry the dumplings well, and I couldn't cook them alone. As Coldola said, I've got a long way to go before I can become a wife that provides a warm meal." I paused and looked at everyone gathered around. "I have a request. Would you make these dumplings with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dumplings vary based on household or region. Some stuff their dumplings with different fillings, while others are particular about how they're cooked. They even have different names based on countries. The employees of the Stock Trading Company are from around the world. Some are from Solalitika or faraway areas of this kingdom, while others have come from foreign regions. I've prepared oil, pots, and steamers and gathered all the spices and ingredients I could think of."

Everyone looked down at the table. Next to me, Kiki showed the employees pots and oil with a smile.

"Would you all make your favorite dumplings so that we can eat and compare? I'd like to be taught all sorts of regional variants, and I'm sure ingredients are missing. If you would kindly let me know, I'll keep that in mind for next time."

Before I knew it, even skilled cooks had gathered around me, looking at the fillings with interest.

“I see. You haven’t made the wrappers so that we could adjust the thickness to our liking,” one said.

“Hm, then maybe I’ll make a thin wrapper,” a woman murmured.

“Hey, could I add some seasonings to the fillings too?”

“Of course! I’ve prepared bowls, gloves, and cooking supplies,” I said. Looking at the ingredients sparked their imaginations. They peppered me with questions.

“May I just fry the wrapper, missus?”

“I’m lazy, so can I make a ball of meat and boil that?”

I smiled. “Those are all lovely methods!”

The square had transformed into a dumpling-making party, and everyone made dumplings in all shapes and sizes. There were round ones, tightly squeezed ones, and dumplings with thick wrappers where two circles of dough were layered on top of each other and the edges pressed down firmly with a fork. Even those who didn’t cook saw the experienced chefs and joined in. The smell of food being fried and boiled filled the air. Every variation looked delicious.

I only prepared the ingredients for the dumplings. Since that wasn’t enough to satisfy their appetites, they ate the food that Coldola and the other women had prepared.

“Coldola!” A drunk female employee yelled, getting close to her. “The sweet and sour sauce from the salad goes with Joshua’s dumplings perfectly!”

“Hey! I got it! I’ll eat it, so don’t push me!” Coldola said as she brought the food to her mouth. She didn’t seem dissatisfied with the taste, and I felt relieved. She was grumpy at first, but the atmosphere of the party swept her away, and she started to giggle and have fun. “Maybe I’ll make some too. Where I’m from, we crease our dumplings in a particular way.”

The drunk fishermen, seeing the fun in the square, stood up.

“You guys are having a good time, eh? I don’t know how to make food from my hometown, but I could sing you a song,” a fisherman said.

“Oh, go for it!”

The muscular men stood up and tapped a rhythm with their feet as they sang loudly. The other employees locked shoulders and sang along. The people making the dumplings excitedly exchanged recipes. I went around the square and introduced myself to each attendee.



**AS** I finished my rounds and returned to my place, Coldola was standing alone, away from the hustle and bustle.

“Coldola,” I said.

She stood silently before shifting her gaze toward me. I brought her a plate of dumplings that I’d fried with the help of the people around me.

“These are fresh dumplings that I just fried. If you don’t mind, would you please try one?” I asked.

She hesitated, then quietly took a fork and ate. She huffed from the steam of the hot dumplings, but she chewed with great care. She gulped down some water and muttered, “It looks a bit funny, but it was delicious.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“It’s impressive that you could do this much in just a month. I can only cook because I worked at a diner when I was a kid.” She fell silent and sighed deeply. “Looks like your plan was a great success, Lady Stock.”

“Thank you, but I was only able to do this thanks to everyone’s assistance.” I looked toward the lively square. “The people here, including myself, are from different cities, ages, ranks, genders, religions, and beliefs. We all have our own way of thinking, yet we all gathered here with the same goal: to liven up the Stock Trading Company and Solalitika.”

“We’re like the dumplings. Even if food is made differently by various people, it’s always made in hopes of creating delicious food for others to enjoy.”

“That’s right!”

Coldola said exactly what I wanted to convey through the food. I gazed down at the one remaining dumpling on the plate in my hands.

“There are many things that I can’t do alone. However, I was able to make these dumplings thanks to everyone’s help. By accepting help when I need it and growing as a person, I’d like to liven up the Stock Trading Company with everyone else.”

I placed the plate on a nearby barrel and turned toward her once more. I stared into her large, strong-willed eyes, straightened my back, and slowly curtsied.

“Lady Stock...”

“Coldola, I know that as a newcomer, I have a lot to learn. If you don’t mind, would you please remain at Stock Trading Company and continue to support us?”

Her determined eyes wavered. Emotions overwhelmed her that she couldn’t possibly vocalize. I didn’t know what kind of feelings she held for Lord Lucas, and perhaps they had dated in the past. She said harsh words and stated that he needed a warm family because she treasured him and looked after him. It was their past. I didn’t know it and couldn’t step into it. There was nothing more I could say to her, and I waited for her answer with bated breath.

She remained silent for a while, then lowered her eyebrows and smiled. “I’ve lost completely, Lady Stock,” she said.

“Coldola...”

“I’ll approve of you. I’m sure you can make Lucas happy. But I’ll leave Stock Trading Company. I was rude to you and even tested you. I’m a horrible woman.”

“That’s not true! Thanks to you, I learned how to cook and grew as a person. Please don’t quit the company.”

“With Whitewand’s butler and today as well, you prevented me from being seen as a mean person, didn’t you? You’ve done your best to protect me, but I’m not embarrassed as an employee. I’m embarrassed as a woman.” She shook her head and stepped away.



“Coldola!” I called after her.

A large hand rested on my shoulder. “You done talking, Iris?”

I felt the warmth of his hand, his long fingers, and his bittersweet aroma. My heart throbbed violently.

“Lord Lucas...” I murmured.

“Hey, Coldola. Don’t go quitting by yourself!” He took out a letter from his pocket. I assumed this was her letter of resignation, and Coldola, who turned around, looked as though she was about to cry at any moment.

“Just let me resign. I’ve acted disgracefully, and I’m embarrassed. I can no longer work under you,” she said.

“Like hell!” He sighed deeply. “So, you’re gonna look away from your ugly side and run? Are you gonna quit your next job, using your love life as an excuse? Didn’t you say you hated it when people complained about working women quitting because of their relationship problems? Are you gonna do the same thing?”

She gulped.

“There’s no way I’ll let you quit so easily and tarnish the reputation of other women working at my company.”

“But I... I...”

“Are you a kid or what?” He patted my shoulder. “You wanted Iris to change as the mistress of the household, but you won’t let yourself change and grow. She’s gone this far to have you approve of her, you know.”

“Gh...” Coldola grunted.

He grabbed my wrist and raised my arm. With his teeth, he removed my glove. Then he undid the buttons on my cuffs near my wrists.

“L-Lord Lucas?!” I gasped. I didn’t even have time to resist before he swiftly exposed my hands and arm. Coldola stared in shock—my fingers and arms, which I’d kept concealed, were covered in bandages and burn marks. It looked horrible.

“Lady Stock, your hands...” she murmured.

“My wife likes to act tough, you see,” Lord Lucas said, putting his lips on my fingertips. “Her hands are covered in cuts and burns, but she smiles in front of everyone like nothing’s wrong.”





“Uninjured hands are the pride and joy of a lady, are they not? Why?” Coldola gasped.

“She’s an aristocratic lady who’s never held anything heavy. She obviously won’t be able to make dumplings so easily. She’s stupidly honest and earnestly worked hard so that you could eat her food,” he said.

She stared at my hands as Lord Lucas continued, “She works hard teaching etiquette to the employees, but she doesn’t even have any experience as a governess. She’s been looking at ways to efficiently teach others in a way where we naturally pick up on mannerisms and etiquette. She works hard in the shadows without telling anyone about it.”

“Please stop, Lord Lucas,” I said, unable to keep quiet.

He released my hand and neatly redid the buttons of my cuffs. After he put the gloves back on my hand, he looked at me and apologized. “Sorry. I know you’ve got your pride and dislike telling others about your hardships and efforts, but some things won’t get across unless you say them. Now’s the time to speak up.” He turned toward a stunned Coldola again. “Coldola, you asked for Iris to change as my wife, and she’s done her best to answer those requests. But what about you? Are you unwilling to change and grow as the company starts to transform? Are you gonna throw away all your hard work and results because of this silly incident?”

“I...” she murmured.

“You’re not the type of woman who quits. You’re a strong, reliable woman who yells and fights back when jerks make fun of and frustrate you. I understand that the workplace has become uncomfortable for you. So, how about working at the new sewing factory?”

“A new factory?”

Even I hadn’t heard of this. He narrowed his amber-colored eyes and smiled his fearless smile. “I was finally able to purchase the farm in northern Solalitika. We’d struggled with that for two years, but thanks to Count Whitewand, we were able to proceed within a few days. Our notary, Sirius, is taking the final steps right now.”

“Congratulations, Lord Lucas,” I said.

He clasped my shoulders and turned toward Coldola. “We’ve already sent out job offers, and seamstresses from the countryside have already gathered, so it’ll get busy soon. I wanted to ask you, a longtime employee, to teach and manage them.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks. “Can I...still work at this company?”

“Of course. Who do you think hired you in the first place?”

“Thank you both...”

As though all her strength had drained from her body, she collapsed and sobbed. I asked Kiki to bring Coldola’s closest friends to calm her down. It was best if her friends, who’d always been by her side, wiped her tears.



“**BY** the way, Iris,” Lord Lucas said.

“Yes?”

“I swear to you that Coldola and I don’t have that sort of relationship.”

We’d returned to the party, and I was sipping on my juice as Lord Lucas looked at me solemnly. I smiled.

“I don’t mind.”

“Ugh! But *I* do!” He ruffled his hair. “I don’t want you to think I’m a man who lays a hand on his employees. That’s just asking for trouble.”

“If you say so, I shall believe you.”

“Really? Trust me, okay?” He looked at me with doubt.

For quite a while after that, perhaps because he was drunk, he told me that he had nothing going on past or present with Coldola. *You don’t have to worry. Whatever past you may have, I think you’re a wonderful person. I don’t doubt you at all, and I trust your words.*

I said, “I believe you,” for around the fifth time when he mumbled to himself.

“You’re oddly understanding, so I just want to be sure you know...”

Suddenly, Leikzig appeared out of nowhere. *How long has he been here?*

“Do you think he’s that resourceful, my lady?” he whispered.

“Resourceful?”

“There’s no way a clumsy man like him could be a womanizer. In fact, I’ve been supporting him so much from the background to make sure that he isn’t getting caught by some suspicious woman. Dear me, dear me.”

“You jerk,” Lord Lucas said.

“He’s right!” a woman suddenly shouted.

“C-Coldola?” I stammered.

Coldola, who’d just been drunk crying, suddenly grabbed my shoulder firmly. She held a large jug of alcohol in her other hand, and her face and neck were red. It seemed she was using alcohol to drown her sorrows.

“I’m warning you, Lucas is super unresourceful and clumsy!” she said.

“O-Okay?”

“Even if he’s with a female employee until late at night or drinking at a pub by the river for work, he just doesn’t trust women! He has his guard up at all times!”

“I-I see.”

“That’s why I got the wrong idea, you know? I was like, ‘If he’s saving himself for someone, it must be me!’ Like, he’s so—”

“Okay, okay, calm down, Coldola! Come on, let’s go!” The rest of the women cut Coldola off midsentence and dragged her away.

“Huh? C’mon, let me talk a bit more! Wouldn’t you feel sorry for the missus if she was worried about his relationships?” Coldola wailed.

A woman giggled. “I’m sorry, excuse us.”

“Here you go, drink some water!” Another woman said to Coldola.

She came and left like a whirlwind, and I couldn’t hide my surprise. Leikzig and Kiki smiled and shrugged their shoulders.

“Please don’t worry, Lady Iris. I’m sure she’ll be fine tomorrow,” Kiki said.

“I hope so,” I said.

As Coldola was whisked away, I envied her. She was upfront with her emotions and stood tall and proud without being timid. She was beloved by her coworkers and had so many things I lacked.

“I’m relieved she’ll continue to be good friends with me,” I said, turning to Lord Lucas as he silently munched on an apple. He wasn’t eating the sliced fruit, but a whole one I’d left as a potential ingredient.

*Crunch.* He chomped on the apple in silence, and though he noticed my stares, he didn’t look at me.

“Um, would you like some water?” I asked.

I reached for a pitcher on the table, but he grabbed it and gulped the water down in one go. As I stared at his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, he continued to drink. The pitcher was emptied in a flash, and he slammed it down onto the wooden table.

“Lord Lucas?” I asked.

His eyes half closed, he looked at me with a complex expression. He looked angry, ashamed, irritated, and agitated at the same time. He was red from his ears to his neck. I worriedly glanced at Leikzig. The butler had the same aloof smile on his face, implying that Lord Lucas would be okay.

“Um, Lord Lucas,” I said.

“What?”

“Whatever relationship you had in the past and whatever relationship you may have in the future, I’ll accept it all.”

“I said, I—”

“I know. Even so.”

He gave me a dejected look as he waited for me to continue. My mind went blank as he got close to me and stared at my face. Had this atmosphere gotten me drunk as well?



“I...” I started quietly, struggling to form my words. “I’d be happy if you didn’t have anyone special until now.”

After he gazed at me with his amber eyes, he gave me a goofy smile.

“Then I guess it’s settled,” he said.



**IT** was night. I left my bedroom, and Leikzig quietly appeared near me. He gave me a look, and we headed to an open room. A jug of water was already prepared, and I sat on the sofa and had a glass.

Timing his report, he put his face close to mine and whispered, “As you thought, Lord Streltsy’s prodigal son has been left to his own devices. While Lord Streltsy, the Admiral of the Fleet, is away, busy with work, his son uses the connections he gained from studying abroad to do as he pleases.”

“I see,” I said.

He stepped away and nodded. “Lady Streltsy is purposefully keeping her eyes closed on this matter. I doubt she even knows just how much her son has done.”

“I knew it. They must be in the faction of the eldest prince. In any case, continue your investigations.”

“My lord.”

“Hm?”

“How would you go about explaining this to my lady?”

“I’ll say everything once we gather evidence. Keep quiet until then.”

“It sounds like you’ve made up your mind. Has anything happened recently to make you feel this way?”

“Not really. I’m just trusting her. I know she isn’t a woman who will go into hysterics over something like this.”

“Trust. I see,” he repeated my word with dark eyes and pursed his lips.



A few days later, on a sunny afternoon, Lord Lucas made time and invited me for afternoon tea. I was led to a chic oceanside café in the city with a beautiful view of the calm water. A gentle breeze made my hair and the hems of my skirt flutter as we sat on a two-person rattan chair. We gazed at the ocean.

“Lord Lucas?” I asked. I noticed that he was staring at me. His long legs were comfortably crossed as he propped his elbow on the armrest. His amber gaze was sharp as usual, but he looked relaxed.

*His bright yellow hair looks lovely as always. What a beautiful color.*

“Is something the matter?” I asked him, my head cocked to one side as he remained silent.

He removed my gloves with his teeth silently, a gesture he always made.

“D-Don’t do that with your mouth,” I stammered.

“It’s faster than using my hands. Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“No, but...”

I was embarrassed, but I always was when he did this. I let him do as he pleased, and he checked my hands before breathing a sigh of relief.

“It seems like your wounds are finally healing,” he said.

“You saw them last night and this morning.”

“I can’t see the smaller injuries unless we’re under bright light. I wouldn’t be able to stand it if these left a mark.”

“But they’re my hands.”

“It’s *because* they’re your hands.” Red-faced, he pushed my hands back toward me. “Don’t go to the kitchens anymore, okay?”

“Certainly, if that’s your wish.”

He fell silent.

“Lord Lucas?”

“Listen, er, you can do as you like. I’m just saying don’t enter the kitchen if you feel responsible as my wife. If you like cooking, you can do what you want.”

“Okay.”

“But be careful, and don’t get hurt.”

“Okay.”

I giggled, feeling like a child being scolded by an adult. At the same time, he was treating me as precious, and my chest grew warmer. I was secretly asking the chef at the manor about Lord Lucas’s favorite foods and learning simple recipes. Foods that were easy to make, such as sandwiches with meat, vegetables, sauce, and jam that needed a bit of simmering.

*Will he be surprised, I wonder?* To surprise him, it was a must to keep my hands uninjured. He’d quickly notice if there was a wound on my body.

“What? What’s so funny?” He glared at me, his ears red as I giggled. He was tall and intense, but when he made expressions like that, he looked like a little boy.

“It’s nothing. But...” I trailed off.

“But?”

I looked up at the sky. A strong, refreshing summer breeze blew from the ocean. My body and mind felt like they were floating as the restless winds brushed against my cheeks. I looked into his eyes. *Just like the sun.* I smiled.

“I’m happy you treat me so dearly,” I said.

He brought me close in reply, but he had a grave look on his face. “I wonder if I’m a suitable man for you.”

“Lord Lucas?”

I heard the adorable, carefree cries of the gulls in the distance.

## Chapter 3

**THOUGH** Lord Lucas and I lived in separate buildings, we always had breakfast together. I looked forward to it every morning. Because he was a busy man, we would often next meet after midnight. Sometimes, breakfast was the only time we met.

Breakfast at Stock Manor was grand. There was freshly baked bread, salad, some kind of meat dish, soup, butter, and milk. More than enough to go around. At first, I thought they were going to such lengths to welcome me, but eating a hearty breakfast was the norm here.

The bread and scrambled eggs were warm and fluffy, while the vegetables and herbs, freshly picked this morning, were juicy and crunchy. I munched on a piping hot sausage and drank cold soup, which was a bit tangy. I was filled with happiness first thing in the morning. Lord Lucas looked at me in wonder.

“How can you eat so elegantly while making everything seem so delicious?” he asked. When I realized he was watching me, I got nervous. I fell silent and turned red, which made him flush red in turn. “Wh-Why are you blushing?”

“Um, er, sorry. I just couldn’t...”

“Nah, uh, sorry, Iris. I was staring too much,” he replied, looking away.

He’d changed recently. He would look at me relaxed one moment, then wear a pensive expression the next. *Is something bothering him? It worries me.*

He cleared his throat and switched topics. “Did you read through the letter?”

“Yes. You mean the one regarding the dinner party invitation from Count Garner, correct?”

“The day has finally arrived.”

“It has indeed.”

We nodded at each other solemnly.



**THE** merchant port city of Solalitika didn't belong to any aristocrat. It was a free city built by merchants who practiced autonomy. It used to be a poor fishing village, and ancient texts referred to it as Sola. History changed for Sola around a century ago. Tensions were high between our kingdom and a group of islands in the west. The royal family took direct control of Sola, and since the city stood on the frontlines, military institutions were built.

This was the birth of the naval base, Solalitika. However, even though the base was created, we avoided going to war and resolved matters amicably. The port couldn't be used as a base to practice naval activities, and as it degraded into ruins, a group of merchants purchased the city. After some technological reform, ships could safely sail to faraway lands, and this free, autonomous city became a hub for merchant ships.

The building for Stock Trading Company, the warehouse, and the nearby buildings my husband possessed were all former military institutions. Solalitika wasn't owned by aristocrats, but in exchange, Count Garner oversaw the city, allowing Solalitika to remain free. We had been recently invited to the count's dinner party.

"I was once taken in by the Garner family, so I'm indebted to them," Lord Lucas said last night when he handed me the invitation.

Lord Garner was above us in rank, and this was his way of saying we were allowed to visit him. In high society, one can only visit a higher-ranked aristocrat after receiving an invitation. It was also a chance for me to officially present myself as Lady Stock, wife of the baron, Lord Lucas Stock.

The customs were complicated, but I hadn't yet held a wedding party to announce our union. It wasn't unusual in our country to have unconsummated marriages and return to a blank slate once the time was up. Hence, many didn't host a party immediately upon marrying. This was especially true for us. Since there was a vast difference in rank between Lord Lucas and me, it was the norm to host a party at the end of our white marriage. My younger sister was going to marry a man of the same rank, and since they'd met many times before at social gatherings, I assumed they would throw a party once they married.

In any case, this would be the first time that I'd officially present myself as Lady Stock, but that wasn't the only reason we were hesitant. The invitation stated that a ball would be hosted before the dinner as a form of social gathering.

"A ball," Lord Lucas and I murmured together quietly.

My husband, a former commoner, had never experienced a ball before, and ever since I graduated from the women's academy, I was an engaged wallflower. It wasn't an understatement to say this would be a first for both of us.

A ball was one of the most basic forms of social gathering for aristocrats. It was an important opportunity to find a marriage partner, and it was a given that one had experience dancing. Even after marrying, couples would still attend balls together. These social gatherings didn't end because of marriage.

"...Guess we just gotta train," Lord Lucas said.

"We'd need to learn this skill sooner or later," I replied.

We nodded at each other. As I reached for my fork to resume breakfast, I happened to look at his hands. Lost in thought, he grabbed bread with his hands, sandwiched some salad, meat, and egg in between, and moved it toward his large mouth. I was surprised. I'd never seen him do that before. Our eyes met.

"Ah," he said, his eyes wide.

"Um, Lord Lucas?" I gingerly asked.

He stayed silent.

"Were you eating sandwiches for breakfast before I arrived?"

He had an awkward expression, and I knew that I was correct. He was eating properly to match me. Still, his way of eating looked delicious.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Huh?"

I reached out, grabbed some bread and fillings as well, and munched on my

sandwich. My hands got a little dirty, but it was easier to eat, and this method made food delicious in its own way.

“You...” he murmured as he looked at me in awe.

I licked my fingers. “Even I know what sandwiches are, and I eat them as well. If this is more comfortable for you, it’s fine for you to eat like this during breakfast.”

He continued to stare, his eyes wide with shock.

“It’s true that I came here to teach everyone manners, but I don’t mean to be so strict during your personal time. Mornings are busy, and I’d like you to eat as you like instead of acting so reserved,” I said.

“Iris...”

“We’re married, are we not? We’re spending time together as a family, so please relax.”

“S-Sure.”

Overwhelmed, he nodded. His expression was so dear and precious to me that if he were a small child, I would’ve wanted to stroke his head. Leikzig coughed.

“Ahem, it’s good how you two are staring so passionately at each other in the morning, but...” our butler trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken.

Lord Lucas finished the rest of his food in two bites and stood up. “Iris, we’ll start practicing tonight,” he said and left the room.



**NIGHT** arrived in no time. After I waited in the hall for Lord Lucas to return home early, we started our dance lesson. He sounded completely clueless, but he at least knew the basic steps. After we finished a few basic motions, I looked up at his relaxed face.

“Did you learn from someone?” I asked.

“I learned the bare minimum by myself, while working for Count Garner. From there, Leikzig taught me. He basically knows everything.”

Lord Lucas wasn't used to leading the dance but had a good sense of rhythm and was a quick learner. A two-week crash course seemed like enough time for us to dance together at a ball.

"At this rate, I'm sure you will dance beautifully in no time. Let's do our best together," I praised, taking his hand. I offered a suggestion. "I'll try doing the man's part once. That way, you can get a feel for how a woman should move. That should provide some insight."

"You know the guy's role, too?" he asked, surprised.

I smiled. "When I attended dance parties at my academy, I always took on the male role. Even though I'm plain, dull, and lack presence, it has its uses."

Families of women who attended dance parties praised me because I made their daughters stand out. Women, especially aristocrats at my academy, wanted to attract attention and look pretty. I was popular in the male role because of my plainness. I remembered feeling comfortable in the role.

"Now then. Would you put your hand around my waist?" I asked.

"...Okay."

I breathed in and put my hand around his, taking on the male role. I led the dance, and while he looked awkward, he kept up. The memories of teaching my juniors, who danced just as awkwardly, flooded my mind, and I started to have fun. It did, however, take some stamina since my partner wasn't a delicate lady.

We danced to one song, and since this was about our limit, I slowly came to a stop. He released his arms, still in awe.

"Did you get a feel of how a woman dances?" I asked.

"Yeah. You let the man control the flow of the dance and kinda just go with it. It was my first time, but honestly, your lead really made it easy for me."

"I'm happy to hear that." I was pleased to receive praise. "Thank you. Now, why don't you try to lead me?"

I once again put my arms around him when I suddenly felt hot. His hand felt warmer than before. Puzzled, I looked up to see him gazing down at me. He stared, deep in thought, as though he were trying to restrain something welling



up from deep within. He continued to look intensely at me with his mysterious eyes. They were so passionate. It was as though his eyes bore a hole through me while I anxiously worried if I'd angered him. I could feel my chest growing warmer as well. I turned my attention to the difference in our temperatures and how we were touching each other. I gradually grew embarrassed.

"Are we not gonna dance?" he asked.

"W-We will."

I snapped back to reality and proceeded with the dance lesson. However, I wasn't able to maintain my cool from earlier. My cheeks heated, and I could only hope I wouldn't trip over my feet. The echoing sound of our heels clacking in the dance hall felt oddly loud, and my mind went blank as I glanced at the ceiling far above me. I was so embarrassed by the strong arms around my waist that I felt like I was about to cry.

*This is odd. All I've done is realize it's the first time we've ever gotten this close.*

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine. Let us continue."

*Was dancing always this embarrassing?* I attended balls, as was the norm, but I was always a wallflower. I respected my sister, who could talk and dance with numerous partners as she was loved by many. I could no longer stand on the sidelines. I had to get used to dancing.

"Hey, Iris. Iris?"

I gasped and was snapped out of my daze. Lord Lucas looked at me with concern. He carefully hunched his shoulders and stroked my back. Unlike his earlier passionate stares, he seemed genuinely worried. I felt a little ashamed when he acted so kind.

"I'm so sorry. I was lost in my thoughts," I said.

"Your thoughts?" he asked, sounding stunned. He smiled. "Sounds like you're calm and composed."

His body vibrated from his chuckles. *This is bad for my heart.* It was just a

dance, a social activity often conducted by a man and a woman. Being this close to my husband made me so anxious.

“That’s not true,” I replied.

“What’re you thinking about?”

“Nothing much. Come now, shall we dance once more?”

I hastily grabbed his hand and danced. I couldn’t look at his face anymore, and we couldn’t match our rhythm. My legs got entangled, and I went down with a gasp. Lord Lucas, trying to protect me, fell as well. I opened my eyes and saw him gazing down at me, his back toward the ceiling.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, but I was met with silence. “Lord Lucas?”

I could see my surprised face reflected in his beautiful eyes. As I stared, his face came closer.

“Are you okay, Iris?” he whispered in a raspy tone as he stroked my hair.

“I am.” I nodded.

He was quiet, then sighed deeply before raising his voice. “I know you guys are there, Leikzig and Kiki.”

Surprised, I got up. The two were peeking through a half-open door. Leikzig had covered Kiki’s mouth, and she was staring at us, her face beet red.

Our butler sighed deeply, as though he were troubled. “I kept her quiet so that you guys could continue. Why must you do this, my lord?”

“U-Um, I’m so sorry, Lady Iris!” Kiki said.

“Go on, shoo. Leave,” Lord Lucas said, sending the two away. He stood up and lent me his hand.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Sure.”

I couldn’t look at his face, and we stood around and dawdled.

“Let’s continue tomorrow,” he said, bringing our lesson to a close.



**MY** butler was already waiting for me in my bedroom, under indirect lighting. I sat down on my bed, and he chuckled.

“I suppose this will end as an unconsummated marriage when pigs fly,” he said.

“Shut up.”

“All right, all right.”

Leik was an unusual man with silver hair and golden eyes. He was a beautiful man but an extreme womanizer, and he became a pet or freeloader for aristocratic women while he gathered intelligence or conducted the dirty deeds of the aristocracy. He was called a dog.

So how did I meet this dog, you ask? An aristocrat, who called me a young, cheeky nouveau riche, ordered Leik to kill me. After a series of incidents, he lost his workplace, and I hired him as my secretary. It's said that one should fight fire with fire, and to prevent any other dangerous situations, I kept some fire nearby. As I'd expected, he was a capable man and would judge the women who came near me. Often, he'd say harsh words like 'That woman's just like me,' or 'She's just an idiot,' and while he'd irritate me at times, he was essential to my household.

My butler, his silver hair glittering under the light, said, “What will you do about the fair lady? Will you end this as a *mariage blanc*, or will you settle and take her as your lifelong partner?”

“Who knows?” I said with a shrug. “She's just defenseless; I doubt she even sees me as a man.”

“As a man.” Leik widened his eyes in an exaggerated manner. “Oh my, I didn't think you'd ever say those words, my lord.”

“Huh?”

“You'd usually say something like, ‘They're such a pain.’”

*Shoot*, I thought, but it was too late. I'd accidentally voiced my actual thoughts, and I instinctively put my hand over my mouth. Leik chuckled, his lightly colored hair swaying.

“You’re worried my lady doesn’t care about you, and you hesitate. That’s rather cute of you to say.”

“Shut up. I’m gonna sleep.”

I climbed into bed, and someone tapped my nightstand. Leik’s shadow loomed over me as he narrowed his golden eyes like a beast.

“Then shall I make a move on her?” he asked.

I shot up. Leik smiled sweetly, his golden eyes forming an arc as his mouth twisted upward. An ugly rage built up within me.

“If you ever look at her with those intentions...” I started.

He sighed. “Why are you so angry? As a woman, she’s definitely not my type.” He innocently raised both hands in the air as if to surrender.

“Then what’s your purpose?”

“She’s a beneficial woman to you. If you’re not planning on doing anything to her, I can seduce her in your stead so that she’ll never have to leave. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Are you an idiot?”

“Please rest easy. I’m only suggesting this out of my loyalty to you.”

After I glared at him for a bit, I slumped my shoulders, feeling foolish. I gave him a cold smile as I gazed up at my cool-headed, superficially polite, rude butler.

“You seem confident. I doubt she’d get seduced that easily,” I said.

“Indeed. Even with my face and tricks, she may be a tough one to crack.”

“Exactly.” I smiled with confidence, but Leik remained stone-faced.

“But I believe this is much better than watching you fall for her.”

“Huh?”

“If you just thought she was another ‘troublesome woman,’ I would’ve been more than happy to see you two marry; it would’ve been convenient. However, you’re much too attracted to her.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is coming from your butler, who’s protected his master through countless awful women and remains so innocently loyal to you that the royal family would sob with joy.”

“Get to the point.”

“Does she truly understand what it means to become your wife?” His sharp, golden gaze turned to me, his silver hair glittering in the moonlight. He looked like a blade that took on the shape of a human. “It’s not as though you have a stable position like an aristocrat. I’m not even sure you’ll be able to live this lavishly in a few years. You made all your wealth in one generation, and you’ve got plenty of enemies to boot.

“Who knows if you can hold your position and you only have a patron because you both have a similar goal in mind. History and traditions will continue to stab you in the back, and now we’ve got a woman, coming from a line of bluebloods who have fallen on hard times, sold to you for money. Whatever her situation may be, she’s still from the Traditional Twelve and was raised as the daughter of a marquess. Does she truly understand what she’s getting into?”

Leik looked at me seriously, and I was overcome by his intensity. He continued, his voice shaking, “You said earlier that you weren’t sure if she was looking at you as a man. I cannot stand by and watch you enter a relationship that makes you so uncertain. A faraway country compared a husband and wife to a pair of birds that fly together for eternity. You’re a very compassionate and kind person. Should you marry her, I’m confident you’ll trust and treasure her as you lend her one of your wings. But I’m not sure if Iris Karelia can truly stick by your side through anything. Can she fly *and* fall with you, should the worst happen?” He said everything in one breath and sighed deeply. “I truly apologize. I’ve gotten a little emotional.”

As though he wanted something to cool him off, he headed toward a bucket of ice and shaved off a chunk with an ice pick. His back, turned toward me, lacked his usual mocking demeanor. He put the ice into a glass, poured some amber-colored liquor on top, added more water than usual, and quietly stirred

the cold drink.

He handed me the beverage and said, as though he were in pain, “If you’re truly drawn to the lady, you must steel yourself, Lord Lucas. Even if she were to one day betray you, you must be prepared to remain calm and collected.”

I quietly brought the glass to my lips. He only poured me a bit of alcohol, but it affected me more than usual.



**IT** took us around two days by horse to get to our destination from Solalitika. Lord Garner’s residence was in a valley surrounded by mountains and was the only path to Solalitika. Lord and Lady Garner mostly stayed in their country house and only went to the royal capital during the social season. Social gatherings were handled by his son’s family, and the count was mostly retired.

We rode through a valley surrounded by two mountains and passed through fresh verdure. The crisp, refreshing mountain breeze cooled off our carriage, warmed by the early summer sun.

Lord Lucas and I sat next to each other. His elbow was on the windowsill while he looked out listlessly. He seemed anxious and was quieter than normal. He wasn’t wearing his usual suit and had dressed in a formal tailcoat. The attire was darker than his daily wear, accentuating his long limbs.

“Are you nervous?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he answered instinctively, his eyes wandering around. He then smiled as though he were mocking himself and shrugged his shoulders. “There’s no use acting tough in front of you, is there? It’s complicated. I’m attending a ball with my wife at a place where I used to work as a servant. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel a bit accomplished since I have a title and made my way up. Still, I’ve got so many memories at that manor.”

“You’ll be fine. I’m by your side,” I said. His eyes widened, and I nodded. “You’re the one who used to work as a servant and the one who stayed up late every night to work on his dancing. You’ve worked hard and earnestly tackled anything that came your way. There’s nothing for you to be embarrassed or uncertain about.”

“Iris,” he said, hesitating before he continued. “Do you remember what you said when you first came here? You said that you would like to remain married to me.”

“I did.”

“Do you have any regrets saying that? I’m a former commoner, and I don’t even remember my father’s face. I used to sleep on the floor. Isn’t it unpleasant for you to be the wife of a nouveau riche?”

I’d never heard Lord Lucas sound so weak. He was always confident, strong, and invulnerable while kindly taking care of others and remaining attentive. He was clumsy, trying to hide his kindness when it was on display. The man in front of me wasn’t Baron Lucas Stock, but a man who lived earnestly.

“You’re not a self-conceited aristocratic woman. You have pride in the history and traditions you’ve carried on, and you’ve got dignity from the bottom of your heart as the daughter of a marquess. I’ve been thinking about the weight of the situation when you married me. I know it’s too late, but I feel bad for doing this to you,” he said.

“Lord Lucas...”

The carriage shook as we turned a corner, and the sunset made his yellow hair glow. The man with hair so bright was looking at me wistfully. I took his hands on his lap and gently enveloped them in mine.

“Iris...”

When we were doing our dance lessons, I started to naturally take his hands. I stroked his long fingers and traced the scars left on his palm. His chiseled jaw and tall nose bridge were beautiful, but I liked his hands, covered in scars from the hardships that he’d faced. When I touched his large hands, which were so dear to me, I felt calm and warm inside.

“If...I had married into a traditional aristocratic family, I’m sure I wouldn’t have ever gotten to know you like this. I would’ve vaguely heard rumors about you and your achievements, and I’d act like I knew everything about you. You’d become a piece of information, and I would’ve never known how wonderful you are,” I said.

He chuckled. “Wouldn’t it have been better that way?”

I firmly shook my head. “Please don’t say that. I wouldn’t want to go back to a life where I would’ve never known you.” I squeezed his hands tightly as if to quash the shadow cast over this man, who was like the sun. “I’m happy with my current life. I respect you, and my life is full of excitement. I discover so many new things every day. I lack presence. I’m dull and plain, and I feel apologetic that someone like me became your wife...”

I meant to cheer him up, but I slowly started to understand my position, and my voice gradually became quieter. As if to escape from his gaze, I looked down at the hems of my dress.

“Heh,” he said with a chuckle. “You’re so funny. What use is there if you become down when you’re trying to cheer me up?” With a laugh, he firmly clasped my shoulders and gently patted them. I became flustered.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“Thank you. Heh, I shouldn’t be so down when my wife’s cheering me up, should I?”

“You’re a wonderful person. I don’t regret marrying you, so—”

“Don’t say anything more, or I’ll kiss you.”

“Huh?”

The carriage wheels suddenly gave off a different sound, indicating we’d finally gotten onto a paved street. Lord Lucas stroked my head once, then looked out the window.

“This is Count Garner’s house. I’ll be relying on you today, Iris,” he said.

I snapped back to reality when he patted my shoulder, and I nodded. The ball was about to begin.



**COUNT** Garner’s manor was an old, symmetrical building. From the decorations on his bay window to the stone walls, it was a typical aristocratic country house brimming with history. The vast garden was well-maintained, and beautiful flowerbeds filled with roses lined both sides of the stone



pavement at the entrance. Our carriage passed through fragrant greenery and aromatic flowers, stopping to let us disembark in front of the manor. We stepped through the brilliant double doors into the entrance hall.

Lord and Lady Garner, who were both in their seventies, greeted us. The moment Lady Garner saw Lord Lucas, her gray eyes widened brightly.

“Welcome, Lucas,” she said.

“It’s certainly been a while, my lady,” he said, greeting them in a charming voice that they could easily hear. I channeled my nervousness into a smile.

“You must be the daughter of Lord Karelia,” Lady Garner said to me.

I introduced myself. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Iris.”

“I can’t believe a lady from the Traditional Twelve has come to Solalitika. I’m ecstatic. Please continue to support our Lucas.”

From her mannerisms, I had a good guess about how my husband was treated. In contrast to the talkative lady, the count was a slender man who seemed more sensitive. He had his wife do most of the talking while he gazed at us in silence.



**TIME** passed, and due to our hosts’ age, the ball was a simple one. We danced the basic waltz to a few songs, and then it was over—it ended without a hitch. Lord Lucas and I looked at each other and breathed a collective sigh of relief. Had this been a ball filled with young, single men and women, I doubted it would’ve gone this smoothly.

Other aristocrats arrived for the dinner party, increasing the total number of guests. In the end, including our host, a few major aristocratic families stationed south of the royal capital near Solalitika were present. It was an extravagant party filled with fancily dressed people.

Lord Lucas became a baron in his generation, meaning he was given one of the last seats in terms of order. Even so, Lady Garner introduced us to the others with a smile and tried to include us in conversations.

“Over there is Baron Stock. He used to work under us,” she said.

“Oh?” The aristocrats turned their attention toward him.

“I’m sure you are all aware of Westmierden, the city of coals. We put Lucas in charge of that city, and he stabilized their work and greatly decreased the number of accidents. I believe he was still in his teens at the time,” she explained.

Gasps and voices of awe came from around the table. Lord Lucas gave a reserved shrug. “I grew up in that city, so I was knowledgeable about the causes of accidents and how much we relied on the skills and technology of the veteran miners.”

“What did you do, specifically?” asked one of the titled guests.

“The former person in charge laid off skilled workers to decrease labor costs and increase profit. However, there aren’t any manuals inside the mines. We relied heavily on the expertise, teamwork, and instincts of skilled workers. So, even if it meant paying them a higher wage, I hired skilled workers and stabilized the working environment, preventing them from going to other regions. In addition, due to the labor cuts, the mines weren’t cleaned well, leading to, in the worst cases, dust explosions. I heard from an expert about working environments in foreign lands that a single explosion could easily destroy a mountain.”

The aristocrats looked at each other in shock. If increasing efficiency temporarily led to the destruction of the mountain, it was meaningless.

“I worked on improving that, and I was a buffer between the stubborn skilled workers and the newbies, who lacked the expertise. I made sure the environment they were working in was safe, and that led to increased efficiency and providing a stable source of coal to everyone throughout the country,” he finished.

“Indeed, it might be important to visit a working environment in person to manage it efficiently,” an aristocrat said.

“Only a former commoner would have that viewpoint. Simply magnificent,” said another.

Lady Garner seemed prouder of Lord Lucas’s achievements than the man

himself. "Lucas has become a wonderful man. He's a former servant of our household, and we're proud of his accomplishments."

It felt disrespectful of me to think so, but Lady Garner's comments rubbed me the wrong way. She was praising him from the bottom of her heart and doing it unconsciously, but it seemed like she still thought of him as her servant. The other aristocrats also treated him a bit differently. My husband impressively answered any questions that came his way calmly. This was the world he was fighting, and as I sat beside him, I understood why he looked nervous inside the carriage. He felt guilty for bringing me since I would be seen as the wife of a nouveau riche.

*You don't have to worry about any of that.* I reached for his knee under the table, letting him know I was on his side.

Lady Garner reminisced about her past. "Thinking back, Lucas stood out back then too. My dear, do you remember when Her Majesty, the mother of the current queen, came to visit?"

"I'd never forget," Lord Garner replied.

His wife smiled. "When Her Majesty visited our humble abode, her illness took a turn for the worse, and she was in critical condition. The one who presented her with medicine, shaking off anyone around him, was none other than Lucas, our servant."

"I was but a child blinded by my sense of justice. I apologize for the inconvenience caused back then," Lord Lucas said with a smile and a shrug.

The aristocrats started looking at him differently, affected by the lady's words.

"I didn't know such a thing happened. Had Her Majesty not recovered, the royal family may not have become this stable," said one man.

"You saved the country. We should pay our respects to Lord Stock's courageous actions," said another.

"Cheers."

Everyone raised their glasses and cheered, praising him. Lady Garner,

watching this unfold, seemed to be in high spirits. They truly were acting as his patrons. After a quick celebration, Lord Garner, who had remained quiet this entire time, opened his mouth.

“Speaking of, Lady Stock,” he said.

“Yes?” I responded.

“You seem surprised by my wife’s story, but did you not hear about it from your husband?”

A cold sweat ran down my back. I was plain and mostly expressionless, so no one had ever analyzed my face before.

“Well...” I internally regretted my blunder. I chose my words carefully. “I’d heard Her Majesty fell critically ill when she visited a certain district, but I wasn’t aware that it happened at this household, and I certainly didn’t know that my husband had saved her.” I forced an embarrassed smile. “I must know more about my husband as his wife. Should anyone here recognize my lack of knowledge, I request that you continue to encourage me to strive.”

“Quite right. You were suddenly sent off to marry, after all. I’m sure you’ll get used to your husband as time goes on,” Lady Garner said with a graceful smile.

The other aristocratic ladies smiled as well.

“That reminds me of when I was sent off to marry. Until my husband requested a dance at a social party, I couldn’t even look gentlemen in the eye. Once you marry, you’re inevitably called to more social gatherings. You’ll get used to it,” said a lady.

“There may be many hardships for a daughter of the Karelias to live in a city far from the capital, but you have a much longer life ahead of you when you marry,” said another.

I smiled, grateful for the kind words, but I understood the true meaning wrapped under their sweet demeanor. Unlike the citizens of Solalitika, word had reached these ladies about the downfall of the Karelias. It was clear to them that my sudden marriage, which had occurred without any social parties, was monetarily related. At the same time, they were telling me that I’d have a rough time as the wife of a new aristocrat.

In high society, women attained their ranks through their father or husband. It was painfully apparent that they sympathized with me since I married a man of lower rank. Their reaction was only natural. They looked at me with pity.

Even so, I looked at the husband next to me and smiled. Lord Lucas's honey-colored eyes widened for a split second.

"Thank you for your kind words. I was anxious before I got married, but my husband is kind to me, and I find joy every day. I'm looking forward to the future he will bring us," I said.

"My, how admirable," a lady replied.

"If you've got yourself a young wife that goes to this extent for you, you must work hard to repay her, mustn't you?" a gentleman commented.

My attitude was well received. As I breathed a sigh of relief, Lady Garner looked about to burst into tears.

"Lucas, you've got yourself such a wonderful wife. You must be happy," she said.

"Thank you, my lady," Lord Lucas replied with a forced smile when his name was called so casually.

Lady Garner, possibly becoming too comfortable, talked about unnecessary matters, "Ever since I hired you, I knew you'd do well. I feel sorry about what happened with your mother, but you used that as your strength to save Her Majesty."

I reacted instinctively. When she paused to catch her breath, I quickly said, "By the way, Lady Garner, I heard that the eldest royal princess will become engaged quite soon." Even to me, this was an unnatural segue.

However, her eyes twinkled, interested in my story. "Oh my, is that so? Could you tell me more, my dear?"

The other aristocrats, also interested in this discussion, joined in.

"According to the rumors, her fiancé was the youngest son of three brothers from the northern region," a gentleman said.

"She's finally back from studying abroad, is she?" a lady said.

Talk of the royal family became extremely popular. Of course, it was much more important than the struggles of some new aristocrat. Once the topic had changed, I calmed down and listened in on the conversation while analyzing the relationships between these aristocrats. I was done butting in. It was my turn to blend in and become like air.

The dinner party continued with talks about the royal palace, incidents that occurred during this year's social gatherings, legislation, up-and-coming musicians, and other topics. There was no end to the subjects of discussion.

I offered some replies, laughed when everyone else did, and put on a serious expression like everyone else, matching my surroundings, when I suddenly felt a sharp gaze. Lord Garner stared straight at me as though he were judging my character.



**THE** dinner party ended, and the gentlemen were engaged in a pleasant chat. The ladies had their own talk, and I excused myself, hoping to breathe in some fresh air. I stepped out onto the terrace.

"It's quite chilly," I murmured, surprised by the cold air. The glittering full moon illuminated the garden and mountains. With a shawl around me, I gazed up at the moon when footsteps approached.

"Count Garner," I said with a curtsy.

He stood next to me and stared at the moon as well. Then he shifted his sharp gaze toward me. "You didn't want to hear about your husband's past," he said, referring to the time I hastily switched subjects.

I nodded. "Yes. I haven't heard anything from my husband, so it wasn't right for me to listen."

"Are you uninterested because you plan to end this as an unconsummated marriage?"

As usual, I couldn't read his expression. I didn't understand his intentions, but it was no use overthinking it in front of this man. He was much older and more experienced than me.

I firmly shook my head. “No, I shall stay by his side if my husband allows.”

“Then why do you not question his past? I’m sure you’ll both try for a child one day,” he said. “Surely you must want to know what kind of bloodline Baron Stock comes from or where your husband originates. You must be curious, as a noblewoman from an old family.”

“Should I need to know, I trust that my husband will tell me one day. If he doesn’t want to talk, then I don’t need to know about it.”

“Even if it may defile the Karelia bloodline?” His sharp words rejected my smile. “Should the Karelia household not find a suitable male relative to inherit the title, there’s a good chance that your child will be selected. Do you, as a woman hailing from the long-standing Karelia lineage, part of the Traditional Twelve, truly understand the meaning of defiling your bloodline with a humble man’s blood?”

“Lord Garner...”

I finally understood the meaning behind his sharp gaze. I was the descendant of one of the Traditional Twelve noble families, which appeared in tales about the creation of this kingdom. He felt it was a sheer act of folly to mix a former commoner’s blood with my noble bloodline. He wanted to know if I was truly satisfied with my choice. I was able to answer his question without hesitation. I straightened my back and faced the white-haired gentleman with earnestness.

“I’m happy to hear your concerns. I’m very grateful that there are still people who respect the blood of the Karelia line,” I said.

He stayed silent. Since I’d gone to marry a new aristocrat in Solalitika, he must’ve been aware of how my family treated me. Indeed, the pride of the Karelia household had already been lost. I took a deep breath and looked up at the moon.

“I married out of the Karelia family into Baron Stock’s family. Supporting and raising the Stock household will also become my pride as the daughter of Marquess Karelia. Even if my child doesn’t succeed the Karelia name because of it, it is my greatest desire to have children with my dear husband.”

“You’re quite selfless. Or is this reckless youth?” he said quietly. “I heard that

you were a Karelia, but you're quite a peculiar lady."

He raised one arm in a casual wave and left my side. "Tonight was a good night. I shall be the one to visit Solalitika next time."



**THE** dinner party ended, and we stayed in our host's guest room. After I took a bath and changed, I saw Lord Lucas sleeping on the sofa. His legs were hanging off the edge. It looked cramped, but he was deep asleep.

"He should just sleep on the bed..." I quietly said.

He had his head held high moments ago, but it seemed his strength had left his body.

"He must be tired."

He slightly opened his eyes at my words, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me toward him. He gently parted my long hair while he gazed up at me and stroked my cheek, looking drunk and tired.

"Lord Lucas," I murmured.

He cupped my cheek and stroked his thumb near the edge of my right eye. The moment I realized that he was touching my mole, he parted his lips and spoke incoherently, as though he were slightly delirious.

"The truth is at the end of the voyage. For adventurers who fight against the raging sea and head for land, the glimmer of the North Star shall guide the way."

"Lord Lucas?" I asked.

The words originated in a different country. *Where have I heard this before...* I wracked my brain and remembered this was a verse from a poem from a small maritime country called Lapisasther. I didn't know the details of the poem, but I remembered learning it at the academy.

He pulled my head close and said sleepily, "Lend me your lap."

"Ah, okay."

I sat on the sofa, and he rested his head on my lap like nothing was wrong. He



fell asleep, and after a while, he rolled over and his face hit my stomach. Surprised, he got up.

“Are you awake?” I asked.

“Wait, I, huh? What? Why?” He sounded confused.

“You requested a lap pillow, so I complied, is all.”

Dumbfounded, he buried his head in the sofa. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. We’re married, after all.”

I enjoyed looking down at my husband, so he didn’t need to be so flustered. I looked at the room and noticed the reason for his red face.

“This bedroom...” I murmured.

Of course, because we were married, we were given one bedroom for the two of us. I realized it was the first time Lord Lucas had seen me in my nightgown. I was dressed so casually. My hair wasn’t even tied, and I’d lent him my lap. *How I’d love to be able to scream and shout right now.* I understood what I’d done and put my hand over my mouth as if to suppress the feelings welling up within me. I suspected he had the same thoughts as he stood up and pointed toward the bed.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa. You sleep over there,” he ordered.

“I-I mustn’t! Your legs were hanging off the sofa, so I doubt you can get a good night’s rest. I believe you should take the bed.”

“There’s no way I’m letting a lady give me the bed. Please, just take the offer!”

“Th-Then how about we sleep on it together?”

“H-Huh?! You’re kidding! Our first time sleeping together is gonna be at someone else’s house?! That’s awful!”

“Um, the bed is quite large, so if we both sleep on opposite ends, I believe it wouldn’t count.”

“What? So then what counts as sleeping together?”

“I’m...not sure. I’ve only been told that, erm, it’s when I entrust everything to

my husband.”

“Wha—?! Are you even hearing yourself, you idiot?! Just shut up and go to bed!”

“If I sleep on the bed, you must as well! I can’t let my exhausted husband sleep on the sofa with his legs hanging off!”



**AFTER** much argument, we slept on opposite sides of the bed. I was grateful that our host had provided such a huge mattress, and I blankly stared at the ceiling, tired.

“You still awake?” Lord Lucas asked.

“Yes.” I turned toward him. His face, resting on the pillow, was the same height as mine. I’d thought this when he was resting on my lap, but it felt unusual when my tall husband wasn’t looking down at me.

“Did I say something weird while I was sleeping earlier?”

“You did mumble some words from a poem from Lapisasther.”

“I see.” He smiled calmly and stretched his hand toward me. He gently touched my cheek with his long fingers and traced my mole. “Apparently, my dad was born there. My mom used to hum the poem to herself.”

“It must be memorable to you.”

“Yeah. It’s the only trace...I have...of my dad.”

He must’ve been exhausted since his speech slowed. His hand still on my cheek, he closed his eyes, and I could hear his steady breathing. I held his hand and intertwined our fingers. It might’ve been bold of me, but I wanted to hold his hand.

“Good night, Lord Lucas,” I said, closing my eyes.



**SOMETHING** warm touched me. It was a comforting warmth. It reminded me of the time I slept while hugging a stray dog in our neighborhood as a kid. It felt like sleeping in a sunny spot near a stream—I was lying on the soft grass, the

warm sunny rays on my body. It smelled nice, so I drew the thing close to me in my arms. It was soft to the touch, and I enjoyed how comfortable it was while still half asleep.

The thing within my arms felt like a body. I felt it breathing and grasping my fingers. It nuzzled close to me and stopped moving.

I was at a loss for words. My eyes flew open with shock. In front of me was a small head with long, black, silky hair, flowing gracefully like a stream. In my arms was a soft body with a small frame. Her slender fingers were intertwined with mine. Her warm breath tickled my chest, and I slowly, carefully, pulled away from her. I peered at her face and saw my wife sleeping comfortably.





I was shocked, but I suppressed my cries. *God, I want to be praised for being quiet here. Seriously. Okay, what should I do? If I wake her up, she might be shocked, too. I don't even know what face to make. For whatever reason, she ended up sleeping in my arms.* I made sure I was wearing my clothes and underwear. *Phew, we're safe. I'm clothed.*

*Calm down. I just have to sneak away, tidy myself up, and ask Kiki to take care of the rest.* I carefully slipped my arm from her head and released her fingers from my hand, one by one.

"Mmm..." she murmured.

Her breathing changed. My heart jumped out of my chest. Her skin, always carefully concealed by her collar, and her hair, which flowed onto her body, shone under the morning sun. It wasn't good for my heart. I finally separated myself from her and breathed a sigh of relief. *We should be okay now.*

Suddenly, I noticed a slightly damp stray hair around her thin neck. It wasn't even hot, but Iris was sweating a little. *Why?* The next moment, I realized she wasn't breathing steadily anymore. Her lips were squeezed shut, and it looked like she was purposefully closing her eyes.

"Have you...been awake?" I asked.

She opened her dark eyes, looking guilty as she stared at me. "Good morning."

"I'm gonna go, so I'll call Kiki."

I swiftly left the room and decided to let Kiki handle the rest.



**EVER** since the dinner party, my work as the wife of an aristocrat gradually increased. I started to receive letters from the aristocratic ladies who'd attended the dinner, and I invited them to my salon.

It went without saying that Solalitika wasn't easily accessible like the townhouses near the royal capital. Still, I exchanged letters, and more people started to visit us while they were touring Solalitika. I continued to teach everyone etiquette, and I also worked as a baroness. My life was fun and

satisfying.

“I’m amazed that you find this all fun, Lady Iris,” Kiki said with amazement. She sat next to me, studying how to write, while I was writing a letter.

“Is that so?” I asked. “It’s much more fun than when I was living in the royal capital. The servants here are hardworking and reliable, and teaching etiquette lessons is a good review for me.”

Back at home, I handled our debt returns and social gatherings in lieu of my stepmother as the mistress of the household. I even educated my younger sister and did whatever I could to help. It was mentally draining, and due to my constant headaches, the food tasted bad. At Solalitika, I’d had lovely food from the morning on and enjoyed my meals. Lord Lucas always commented on how eagerly I ate, and I couldn’t deny that ever since I came here, I looked forward to the meals.

I put my fountain pen down, and once I confirmed that the ink was dry, I inserted the letters into envelopes.

“Every day has been so much fun ever since I arrived in Solalitika. I love teaching you, Kiki, and...”

“Lord Lucas?” she said with a smile. She beat me to it, and I struggled to find words.

“Yes...”

“You’ve gotten much friendlier with him. Of course, both of you were always on good terms, but recently, when he comes home, he stays in your villa until morning.”

“...We’re just talking.”

“As a servant that loves both you and Lord Lucas very much, I’m extremely happy to see you both get along so well! Ah, speak of the devil.”

Kiki looked out the window and spoke energetically. I looked down, and he was coming toward us. I gathered my letters and stood up. Whenever I thought about him, my heart would skip a beat.

As I tidied myself, I murmured, “I’m sure he only sees me as an etiquette

teacher.”

I suppressed the impertinent feelings in my heart and headed to him.



**TODAY**, I was wearing a white dress lined with black. It was a simple yet dignified garment. There weren't many frills or laces, but it used plenty of fabric, making it comfortable and airy. It was a dress I had made to order the other day, and it was my first time wearing it outside. Lord Lucas, who was waiting for me near a carriage, looked at me, pleased.

“You look good in that,” he said. He was wearing a clean shirt and jacket in bright colors, which differed from his normal work attire. The clothes complemented his canary yellow hair, and he looked like he came straight out of a painting of the sun.

“Thank you.” I suppressed my loud heartbeat when he smiled.

He always praised me. That made me so happy. I felt like I was special to him whenever we met. My heart was filled with joy.

We rode the carriage into the city. Lively music was layered with the sound of the wheels hitting the stone pavement. Unlit streetlights and trees that lined the roads, the windows of terraced houses that faced the street, and other structures were decorated with flowers and ornaments. It seemed like a small festival.

“Is there some sort of celebration today?” I asked, glancing around.

“A large ship stopped at this port yesterday, so bards and minstrels are performing at the square. There's also a bazaar in the park,” Lord Lucas explained.

“Ah, so that's why you seemed so busy.”

Recently, he'd come home late, so our talks would often occur in the middle of the night. Should our conversation last, he'd stay at my villa, and we'd have breakfast together. He'd started to do this more frequently.

I remembered the feeling of my husband's hair when he'd just woken up and hadn't arranged it. He even brought an extra bed to my villa and was rather



defenseless in the mornings. *He looks like a young child, and—*

“Iris? You okay?” he asked, his head cocked to one side.

“Hm? Y-Yes!” I replied, snapping out of my daze. He’d stepped out of the carriage and offered his hand.

“There’s a lot of people here today, so just hold onto my hand.”

“Okay,” I accepted his offer.

He walked in silence. I followed him under the sunny sky, its rays shining onto the brick city. There were flower vendors, fruit vendors, secondhand clothes stores, antique shops, artists, fortune tellers, and other vendors in the city. I’d get lost if I let go of my husband’s hand, but I noticed that Leikzig still managed to follow us. I was impressed. He and Kiki were behind us as usual, a short distance away.

“Hey, boss! Have some fun today!” a man called from afar.

I couldn’t see him from the crowd, but Lord Lucas smiled and waved in reply. Even among the crowd, my tall husband with canary yellow hair stood out, and many people called out to him.

The owner of a hotdog stand reached out to my husband while handling a few customers. “You on a date today, man?”

“Idiot, don’t bother me if you can tell. How’s business?” Lord Lucas replied.

“You really did me a solid when you lent me some help. I’m so busy that I might run out before noon.”

“Oh yeah? Just ask Layce from the warehouse. You might be able to get some stock for the night rush.”

After they parted ways, a few girls selling flowers gathered around.

“Sir, you seem awfully dressed up today. Are you on a date?” a girl asked.

“Your wife’s so pretty! Pleased to meet you!” said another.

The girls looked younger than Kiki and were dressed in casual attire. Their baskets were filled with flowers, and they greeted me with a sparkle in their eyes. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Hello,” I said. I patted their heads. My husband seemed to be enjoying himself.

“What, are you guys gonna force some items on me?” he said.

“I can give you some flowers for one bronze coin,” a girl replied.

“Mm-hm. Since it’s you,” said the other.

“Don’t say that, silly. You gotta sell ’em for a good price,” he replied. He smiled kindly and took a single anemone from them. He gave them a few bronze coins, and we parted ways. “If you’re caught up with some weirdo again, feel free to use my name any time,” he called after them.

“Okay!” a girl replied.

“Have fun on your date,” said the other.

After they left, he gazed at the flower, not knowing what to do with it, before putting it in my hair.

“All right, this should do it,” he said. I was so happy that I struggled to find words. With a troubled look, he asked, “Do you not like it?”

“No, I’m just so happy,” I said.

“I see.”

He squeezed my hand. His yellow hair glimmered under the sun. Embarrassed, I couldn’t look at his face. The flower gave off a strong scent, and just looking at his back made me overjoyed.



**WE** cut through the crowd and entered the square. The trees around the area gently swayed in the ocean breeze, and the park looked well-maintained. Unlike the aristocratic gardens in the royal capital, men and women of all ages and social statuses gathered and conversed freely here.

“Is this the famous Solalitika Public Park?” I asked.

“As studious as ever, eh? See that big old river over there?” He pointed to an area beyond the park. “There’s a lotta pubs near that canal. You could even call it a sort of red-light district, and the scenery is awful. High crime rate, too. But

we can't just get rid of that area since a lot of money flows through. Some people make a living there, but it's not really good to have it too blatantly obvious within the city, you know?"

He glanced around. "This city is filled with houses for workers, stores, and warehouses. There isn't much greenery."

"Indeed." I was always at the manor atop a hill, so I never took much notice, but the city lacked the greenery that the aristocrats in the royal capital had with their gardens.

"The younger brother of His Majesty is apparently planning on making more ports with trade in mind, like Solalitika. As part of their plan, they made a public park here to investigate how it affects crime rates and the health of the citizens."

"If I remember correctly, His Highness is employed at the Royal Medicinal Institution." A realization hit me. "Were you involved in the creation of this park?"

"Of course." He nodded proudly, like a child who'd been praised. "You must be tired. Let's go listen to some music."

He put his hand on my back and guided me toward a bench under the shade. While he did that, I felt people staring at him from afar. Did they think such a plain wife was unfitting for a man like him? I suddenly became conscious of their gazes. I grew embarrassed and focused on the warmth of his hand on my back.

A woman's strong voice sang in tune to a flute and violin in the square. The song, woven with unfamiliar words, was a new experience for me and soothed me.

"What is this song?" I asked.

"They're singing a cover of a famous sailor's song."

We sat together on a bench, and Lord Lucas crossed his legs comfortably. He was gazing at the vast ocean beyond the park. The sea was calm and as blue as the sky—the horizon seemed to stretch on endlessly.

“It’s a tragic love song about a precious princess and a sailor. His love for her burns throughout their voyage, but he has to send her to a different country. Even in songs, love between two people of different ranks isn’t so sweet.”

He sounded sentimental, and I looked up at his face. His amber eyes, glowing with brilliance under the shade, looked at me kindly as he squinted. He put his hand over mine, and the hustle and bustle of the square suddenly seemed distant.

“Lord Lucas,” I said.

“Hm?”

“Earlier, a lot of people came up to you. The way they adored you made you appear so bright.”

He laughed, his mirth reaching his shaking shoulders. “Nah, that’s nothing to write home about. I’m sure you’re surprised by how rowdy and rude they are.”

“Quite honestly, I was a bit jealous.”

“Huh?”

“Your way of speaking, smile, and attitude were all something I’d never seen before. I thought there were still sides to you that I didn’t know.”

“That’s what you were thinking about?”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s rather insolent of me.”

“Insolent? Not at all...”

The song ended, and thunderous applause and whistling filled the square before they moved on to the next song. We sat on the bench in silence. The breeze lifted the hems of my skirt, and I instinctively pressed down. The silence was comfortable, but it made me a little nervous. It was an odd feeling. Like I was going to float away.

“Hey, Iris,” Lord Lucas said, staring at the ocean. “That night, you made it so that you wouldn’t hear about my past, didn’t you?”

“That night?”

“You don’t have to act clueless. At the dinner party with Count Garner, his

wife almost talked about my past.”

“I...”

“What do you wanna do? If you wanna hear it, I can tell you.”

As he looked at me, squinting his eyes, I mulled over his question. I finally shook my head. “I don’t know. I’d like to know, but at the same time, I’m not sure if I should casually step into an important part of your heart.”

“You’re my wife, but you still act so reserved.”

He let out a carefree laugh, and my heart skipped a beat. My cheeks grew warm, and he started talking about his past as though he were reminiscing.

“I lost my mother to the same illness that fell upon the former Queen. I was twelve. She used to be a nun until she met my father and gave birth to me. They raised me in Westmierden, a city known for its coals, and she became a wife to a miner.” He rearranged his fingers on his lap. “As I said at the dinner party, that city used to have an awful working environment. I did everything I could to push for reform. I was forceful at times, but I was put in charge of that city as a kid and worked to improve it.”

“You didn’t want future generations to suffer like you and your mother.”

“It was more like revenge. I didn’t have anything that grand in mind,” he said with a shrug before continuing. “I’ve got no memory of my dad. The only information I have about him is from the glittering stories my mother told me at night in this old rowhouse where we lived. We were poor, and her memories were viewed through rose-colored glasses. Maybe she didn’t want to tell me that my father was a good-for-nothing scumbag to protect me, but in any case, my first and true motive behind going out to sea was my dad.” The wind made his yellow hair flutter, and his eyes had a fiery passion within. “I’m looking for a person who knows my dad.”

“Lord Lucas...”

“He has the same name as me—Lucas. His hair is bright yellow like mine, and he was apparently tall, so I might be the spitting image of him. The only clue I have is the poem in Lapisasther and myself.”

I thought back to when I first came here and talked with my husband. He stated that he cared about appearances as a merchant, but at the same time, he also gave a clue about his true feelings.

“That’s why you didn’t want to dye your hair,” I said.

“Yeah. If I found his grave, I wanted to give him the ring my mother held onto until she died.”

He took out a small bag from his jacket pocket and put a scratched-up ring on my palm. In an instant, I felt the hardships he’d gone through. The ring was irregular and distorted. It was slightly dirty and fitted with a polished amber stone.

“Funny, isn’t it? This is her wedding ring, but the stone is made of cheap amber. I’m sure my dad wasn’t well off,” he said brightly with a shrug. “My mother only went through suffering and hardships for this man and me. She always wanted to see my father again. I at least...want to give him her ring so they can be together in their last moments.”

He pocketed the ring again.

“But, you know, it’s like trying to find a pebble in the sea,” he said.

“But if we don’t look for it, we shall never find it.”

“Iris...”

“There must be some meaning in the journey that it brings along as well. That’s what life is about.”

“You’re right.”

As we talked, I failed to notice Leikzig’s cold gaze, watching us from afar.



**SUMMER** was quickly approaching. I woke up every day at the same time, but the morning sun was already shining down on me. The warm ocean breeze formed droplets of morning dew on the plants in our garden. Tom notified me that the edible roses had bloomed, and I spent my morning harvesting some. I said I could do it alone, but Kiki and Tom assisted me.

From beyond the roses, Tom, carrying a basket, called out to me. “My lady, I can carry these to the kitchen.”

“Ah, thank you,” I said.

Ever since the incident with Coldola, I’d taken a liking to cooking. Occasionally, when I had the time, I would ask the kitchen maids to teach me some dishes. Cooking was still difficult for me, and I couldn’t make food efficiently.

“My lady, you seem to be able to do anything you like, but cooking isn’t your forte,” a kitchen maid said, astonished.

I couldn’t forget the surprised look on her face. Still, I recently made some good jam.

“I’ve heard that rose petal jam is delicious,” I said.

The roses I’d just picked were slightly pink and meant for jam. I could tell these flowers were lovingly raised by Tom as their strong, sweet aroma enveloped my body. As I mindlessly picked the roses, I noticed I’d reached for the white ones.

“If I remember correctly, white roses aren’t for eating,” I murmured.

It seemed I’d finished plucking edible roses. When I turned on my heel to leave, I noticed someone beyond the hedge of flowers. He looked ill-matched for the garden.

“Leikzig,” I said.







He took a single orange rose.

“Good morning, my lady,” he said.

He took a bite out of the flower, its petals shining as brilliantly as the sun, while he stared at me. It seemed Kiki and Tom were not coming back yet.

“They still have some matters to attend to,” he said, reading my mind. “I’m sure they are being asked for help from the kitchen. I don’t think they’re in a rush either, since I’ve already told them that I’d be by your side.”

I was sure they would never leave me alone, no matter how urgent a request was. However, since Leikzig was here, they trusted him to assist me.

“What business do you have with me, Leikzig?”

The lukewarm breeze suddenly felt cold, and my butler’s cold lips took another bite of the orange flower.

“My lady, are you truly prepared to stick by my lord’s side?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Exactly what I just said. I came to warn you that if you aren’t planning on being by my lord’s side for life, even in the grave, it would be best for both of you if you headed home. Even if this means returning to the cold-hearted Karelia household, it would be the wisest decision for both you and my master’s happiness.”

I stared into his sharp gaze, and a shiver ran down my spine.

“You...must be aware of the current state of the Karelia family,” I said.

“I am. I was requested directly by my lord to look into you, after all. I know about your stepmother’s affair, her partner and city of origin, how long they’ve been doing so, your father’s gambling addiction, and the conduct of your sister, to whom you have no blood relation. I even know about your former fiancé.”

I couldn’t hide my shock.

“Indeed, I most likely know about things that even you may not be aware of, my lady.”

He no longer spoke like a citizen of Solalitika. His speech and mannerisms

were from the royal capital, and more specifically, the servants of the royal palace. It seemed he'd purposefully learned the Solalitikan dialect to hide this fact. I was around ten steps away from him, but it felt as though he had a knife to my throat. His intensity made me feel like I would be torn to shreds at any moment. He swept his icy hair to one side.

"My lady, are you aware of why my lord chose the Karelia family out of all the noble families?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Should he simply have wanted an aristocrat, he had many downfallen families to choose from. Why do you think he chose you, the daughter of the Karelia household, riddled with debt?"

"I..." I desperately tried to think of a reason. Thoughts about the Karelias' history, their social circle, and my husband's interests swirled in my mind.

Leikzig, who saw that I couldn't think of an answer, narrowed his golden eyes in mockery. "My lord was ordered by the brother of His Majesty to investigate the household of your fiancé, the Streltsys. There was also a necessity to sneak into the center of the social circles."

Stunned, I was at a loss for words, but he continued eloquently.

"I'm sure you're aware that the royal palace will undergo renovations next year. Currently, the Marmaria stone slabs they use for construction are purchased from Bearbrooks Trading Company, their old friends. However, based on the results of this investigation, the royal family stated that they would consider bringing their business to the Stock Trading Company."

Any aristocrat familiar with the royal family knew about Bearbrooks Trading Company. The royal palace, which valued traditions, would never purchase products from the Stock Trading Company, which didn't have much history or customs.

"Should this become official, my lord shall earn a lifetime of wealth and honor in one go." He smiled only with his thin lips as they curled up into an arc. "You've been used for that reason, my lady."

"Used, you say..."

“He’s a nouveau riche that made all his wealth in one generation. Did you truly believe he’d take a sheltered aristocrat for a wife with no strings attached and become your prince in shining armor?”

He leered at me. His usual, aloof self was gone.

“You must be shocked. However, this is who the baron, Lord Stock, really is. He’s a new aristocrat. He’s different from the traditional ones, who sap sustenance from the citizens of their land,” he said.

He fell silent, waiting for my response. I breathed deeply to clear my head and looked him in the eye.

“I’d like to ask a few questions, Leikzig.”

“Ask away.”

“Why did you warn me now?” I threw my first question at him. “You surely could’ve told me much sooner, or even when we planned on turning this into a real marriage. You must have a reason for telling me now, don’t you?”

“That’s simple—it’s because he’s attracted to you,” he spat, as though he loathed disclosing this information. “My lord is a compassionate man. At the same time, he didn’t have a special someone. Had you been a boring trophy wife who couldn’t weasel her way into his heart, I would’ve been more than happy to welcome you. It was about time that he settled down. That would’ve made matters easier for me as his butler. But you changed him. You’re trying to worm your way into his heart when no one had ever been able to do so before.”

“Leikzig...”

“Surely, you’ve noticed by now. Lord Lucas is in a different position from the aristocrats who live without a care in the world.” The butler gave an exaggerated shrug. “He works himself to the bone, looks toward the future, and wears himself down for his company. He’ll continue to do so, living desperately for his work. He even has a rank now, increasing expenses, and has thrown himself into an even more difficult world. However, no matter how hard he works, a nouveau riche can fall at any time. Reality is harsh, but it is what it is.”

A dark shadow fell over his eyes. Out of all the servants, Leikzig had been the

closest to my husband, and he must've seen his master's trials and tribulations up close more than anyone. From Leikzig's eyes, I sensed the efforts and loneliness of Lord Lucas. The butler once again looked at me sharply, as though he were challenging me. His golden eyes reminded me of a beast's.

"Should Lucas Stock ever fall into the depths of the abyss, could you sip the dirty water alongside him?" he asked.

He stepped toward me, crushing the withered rose petals on the ground under his foot. "Do you have the resolve? Could you swear you'd fly alongside your husband through happiness and strife? If you can't, please go home before it's too late for him."

His words felt more like a scream from the top of his lungs than a question. I heard his true thoughts and his wish to protect Lord Lucas. I couldn't help but giggle. He narrowed his golden eyes, irritated.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry. I just thought that you truly love your master."

He looked slightly troubled. Perhaps he expected me to be daunted or confused. "What are you..."

"Ahem. Leikzig, just so we're clear," I started, straightening my back. "As I said when I first came here to marry, as the daughter of an aristocrat, I understand that I'm an item for households to connect themselves with each other. Even if you reveal to me that I was treated with a cunning scheme in mind, I'm not particularly angry or surprised about it. I'm sure it's normal, however, for the common people to marry out of love and create an ideal, warm, cheery family that would lead to happiness."

As I spoke, I remembered Coldola's words and Jim, who dreamily talked about an ideal household. Aristocratic daughters loved romance. I saw girls at my academy expressing their passionate love for their partners. On the other hand, many had given up on having a passionate relationship with their marriage partner because their bond was needed by society. Of course, I hadn't thought that true love didn't exist in life either. Thus, when Coldola and Jim talked about a loving couple as though that was the norm, it came as a huge shock to me. I was so surprised that I felt like a door had opened to an entirely different world.

I shifted my gaze downward and thought about Lord Lucas. To be able to meet and marry him, even as a marriage blanc, was the happiest event of my life. I smiled at Leikzig.

“The person who taught me to be happy—who taught someone like me, who lacked presence and was treated like air, meant to be a woman that simply bound two houses—to be Iris, was none other than Lord Lucas. That truth won’t change, will it?”

I cocked my head to one side, and he flinched. “You said yourself that Lord Lucas is a compassionate man. What’s wrong with a compassionate man trying to do a calculated marriage so that he can support all of you under him? Though I was only an object to his scheme, he treated me so kindly. As such, I’m attracted to him as well. If I’m becoming more important to him, as you say—though I feel like you’re overestimating me—as long as he doesn’t wish to separate from me, I’d like to stay by his side from now on.”

I took a step toward him, and he gulped. “You’re his family. You’re testing me so that your precious family member won’t get hurt or feel lonely.” He stayed silent. “I’m relieved to see he has someone who protects him so earnestly. If you deem me untrustworthy in the future and you believe that I’ll do him harm, you may dispose of me without hesitation.”

“Can I take this as your true thoughts and not superficial words?”

“Certainly.”

“Women always say that when it’s convenient.”

“It’s rather unfair to blame it on women when the going gets tough. We’re on the same team, are we not?” I smiled. “Like you, who still needed me to teach etiquette though you had connections to the royal capital yourself, I can’t protect Lord Lucas by myself. Why don’t we work together for him from now on? If you find me useless or a nuisance, you may do with me as you wish. However...”

“However?”

“Should you stray off the right path as Lord Lucas’s butler, surely you’d need someone to correct you too.”

He widened his eyes and, for the first time, smiled naturally. His icy, unexpressive face was filled with emotion. “You’re quite the woman, my lady.” He sighed deeply and ran his hand through his hair. “In the beginning, I tried to stop him. No matter what the circumstance, the crappiest thing to do was to have an aristocrat for a wife. But it seems you may be able to lead him in the right direction and stay by his side.”

He crinkled his golden eyes and smiled at me. His expression was gentle and fleeting, like watching the snow melt under the sunny sky. I saw Leikzig’s true smile for the first time in my life.

He took another bite of the rose in his hand and asked me teasingly, “My lady, are you sure this flower can be made into delicious jam? It tastes awful. I won’t forgive you if you feed my master horrendous food.”

“But of course, Leik. That rose isn’t edible.”

“Huh?”

A different kind of silence ran between us.



I asked Kiki to inform Lord Lucas that I was going to have breakfast with Leik today.

“With me?” the butler asked.

“Indeed. Thinking back, I’ve talked with Lord Lucas, Kiki, and the other servants plenty of times, but I never had a proper conversation with you. If you don’t mind, could we talk for a bit?”

He looked a little perturbed, but since the servant swiftly prepared breakfast at the arbor in the garden, he sat down with me, going with the flow.

“My lady, I’m just an abandoned dog,” he muttered, taking a bite of a baguette. “I was given a one-way ticket to death to kill my master, but I was moved by his kindness.”

“I’ve heard that those with high rank, closest to succeeding the throne, hired such people. Are you the rumored—”

“Yes, I’m their dog. Woof woof,” he said without changing his tone. He had a

voracious appetite as he devoured his meal. Looking at him, a lot of my questions melted away.

It was only natural that Leikzig didn't speak in a Solalitikan dialect. He had the ability to oversee everything as Lord Lucas's butler. It made sense why there weren't many guards when they first came to fetch me in the royal capital and how the issues of the Karelia household, which we'd kept hidden, were known by my husband. A former dog would've been able to do all of this.

"I've only heard rumors, but I didn't think they were true," I murmured.

"I'm not sure what you've heard of me, but I'm really just a stray dog," he said with a smile. "Dogs are disposable assassins that the royal palace uses when opposing factions have a dispute. I was raised to kill others. It was all I was taught. I've got nothing else, so I'm just a lovable, disposable doggy."

"And you aimed for Lord Lucas's life."

"No comment on the 'lovable' bit, eh?" He frowned with dissatisfaction. "I was the dog of His Highness, the older brother of His Majesty. He was trying to drag my master down."

"The older brother... He was strongly against alleviating restrictions on granting titles to commoners," I said.

"Correct. Anyone who wants to kill my master has similar thoughts in mind."

The former king had three sons. The current king was his second son, who was originally second in line to the throne. However, the previous king had requested that the second son take the crown instead of his first son. There were two possible reasons for this.

First, the eldest son continuously vocalized problematic statements, such as hinting at using military force in foreign affairs. Second, he had a radical mindset of maintaining the aristocracy only through hereditary means. The wealthy in the House of Representatives and the aristocrats who profited off them couldn't support his ideas. As a side note, the current king and his younger brother had carried out policies that showed they somewhat accepted allowing the common folk to gain an aristocratic title.

While it was terrifying to think that the older brother of His Majesty carried



out an assassination attempt against my husband, this operation was in line with his previous actions.

“My master has close ties with the younger brother of His Majesty. They’ve been working together to stabilize the power of the current king. The reason he can continue to work as a nouveau riche, despite his young age and lack of relatives, is because of the support from His Highness. Woof,” the butler explained.

No matter how hard one may work or live life honestly and earnestly, one required connections, rank, and societal circles to protect them from possible malicious deeds or jealousy. I was saved countless times thanks to my title as the daughter of Marquess Karelia. Lord Lucas was like a nail that stuck out, so it was reassuring to hear that His Highness the Third Prince and His Majesty stood behind him.

Leikzig continued, “My former master, an aristocrat whose boss’s boss’s boss was His Majesty’s eldest brother, ordered me to take the life of a young man who didn’t know his place. But I was moved by my lord’s kindness and failed my mission. He saved me when I was about to be killed and even gave me the name Leikzig Kudrya.”

“I had no idea.”

He looked at me with a serious expression. “My lady, your former fiancé, Mikhail Streltsy, is a dangerous man surrounded by grim rumors. The older brother of the king has some power over the Royal Police, so Mikhail’s misdeeds are still hidden away, but if you ever associate with him as his relative, please keep this in mind—something major might occur.”

“I understand.” I assumed he didn’t divulge the details because he felt it wasn’t time for me to be informed. I firmly nodded to put his mind at ease. “If you ever feel that there must be something that I should know, please don’t hesitate to confide in me. I may not be much, but if there’s anything I can do, I shall,” I said.

“My lady...”

“I’d like to protect my household as well. I’ve been through tough times, but they’re still my precious family. I hope we can work together to protect Lord

Lucas going forward too.”

He smiled, his silver hair fluttering in the end. His expression was so gentle that I could only stare in admiration.

“It seems I’ve underestimated my lord,” he said.

“Leikzig?”

“He’s chosen a wonderful woman, whom he can entrust his life to, as his wife.”



**AFTER** our meal, I reported it to my husband.

“Whatever shall I do if I get punished?” Leikzig said as he cried crocodile tears.

However, his praiseworthy apology was met with one sentence, dispelling any fears of his resignation. “Idiot, I knew you were gonna confront Iris soon,” Lord Lucas said. “Besides, you should be well aware that you’re not the only fighter in this manor.”

Leikzig looked unusually surprised. “Did you have someone guard Lady Iris when she was alone?”

“Heh, seems like you’re losing touch.”

Lord Lucas stood up and took out a small crossbow from a shelf. He narrowed his eyes at his butler. “You know that I have a view of the entire garden from my bedroom, don’t you?”

In other words, my husband had seen everything from the scope of his crossbow. His way of observing the situation was far more terrifying than I’d imagined. Leikzig fell silent, and Lord Lucas narrowed his eyes once more.

“So? Do you wanna get shot once, for old times’ sake?” my husband asked.

“Well, if that’s what you wish, my lord,” replied the butler.

“Huh?”

“Don’t hold back. If you don’t mind, could you aim for a stiff area? I’d like for you to shoot without hesitation.”

“I never said I’d do that! Do you know how much my work would stagnate without you? I won’t shoot and free you from this suffering!”

My husband raised his voice as his butler tried to wipe tears away from his dry face with his handkerchief. Seeing the two on such good terms made me smile. Behind the handkerchief, Leikzig winked and grinned at me. It seemed we’d be able to maintain a good partnership from now on.



**TIME** passed after the ruckus with Leikzig, and Lord Lucas and I were gazing up at the night sky while we were seated on the balcony. The hustle and bustle of the city died down, and we could hear the endless sound of the waves on the dark horizon. The stars were pretty, and as I stared at the sky, a shooting star flew across it twice. The ice in my husband’s glass clinked.

“I’ve married quite the woman,” he said. I realized that he was looking at me, his amber eyes giving off a soft glow under the light. “You far exceed my expectations in everything you do, but you’re so earnest that I can’t leave you alone. Sometimes, you’re so stubborn that even Leik can’t win against you. You’re truly full of surprises.”

“You’re the first person who’s ever praised me so,” I said.

“Really, now? I guess the people in the royal capital don’t have a good eye. I’m sure many have realized they’ve suffered a huge loss now that you’re gone.”

“I’m really not that commendable. I’m—”

“A dull, plain person who lacks presence and is like air?”

He mimicked my self-deprecating comments with a chuckle. Embarrassed, my cheeks grew warm, but a happy, sweet feeling lingered in my chest. No matter how busy he was, he always came home at night to spend time with me. He was busy during the day, cutting through the wind with his reliable strides, and he seemed more relaxed at night. Having witnessed both of his sides, I felt that he was a wonderful person.

In the beginning, I did my best to teach etiquette as a means to repay our family’s debt. Before I knew it, my feelings changed to wanting to support him as his wife. *Even thinking that I’m a suitable woman for him is rather impudent*

*of me.*

“Lord Lucas,” I said.

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry for always acting out of line.”

“You’re not. If I were to use your words, your consideration is like air. You make it seem natural, but you’re very thoughtful, and it’s been a great help.”

He stared straight at me while praising me. My ears grew hot. He turned to me with a serious expression. His hair fluttered in the ocean breeze, so bright and yellow even at night. His hair had already become a familiar sight. I would feel a little lonely if I couldn’t catch a glimpse of it during my day.

“Iris, I’m truly happy that you decided to walk alongside me and become a breath of fresh air to our city. You made it seem like it was expected of you.”

“No, I’m just...”

“You’re not ‘just’ a woman to me, Iris. I can’t live without you. I don’t care if you find yourself lacking presence. I love you.” He spoke confidently, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his strong gaze.

“Lord Lucas, I...”

“Drop the ‘lord’ part already. I want you to see me as someone special to you, Iris.” He gave me an embarrassed shrug. “I know it’s selfish of me since I asked to maintain a more distant relationship.”

“That’s not true. I think I have a better understanding of your situation now than when I first arrived. You’ve got your company, the manor, and the future of the city on your back. With so much to protect, it’s only natural to be wary.”

He smiled. “You understand why I’m so selfish, huh?”

Lord Lucas would never show it, but he’d gone through many hardships. He lost his mother—his only relative—and was picked up by an aristocrat. From there, he desperately learned the ways of the world, worked his way up, grabbed any opportunities he could, and made his own wealth. He started a company that could offer a helping hand to those in a similar situation. His unrefined attitude and sharp glares were proof that he lived to protect his

friends. To further strengthen himself, he purchased me to teach etiquette. *He's...*

"Lucas," I said.

"Hm?"

When I called his name, he gazed at me sweetly. Being stared at by him made me happy and embarrassed at the same time—he was just so dear to me.

"Just like how you found value in everyone here and hired them to give them a place to belong, polishing them into full-fledged workers, you picked me up from a downfallen household, found value in me, and made me happy." Unable to suppress my emotions, I asked him, "I'm a dull and plain woman. I lack presence and have been told that I'm like air. Can I truly stay by your side?"

He acted before he spoke. He stood up and hugged me tightly, enveloping me in his arms while I was seated. I was so shocked that I couldn't speak.

"Iris," he whispered in my ear. A sweet, tingling sensation ran down my back, and I clutched his elbow. He intertwined his fingers with mine, and as we stayed close, a torrent of words gushed from his mouth.

"I've been thinking about this for a while, but why do you call yourself dull or plain?" he asked.

"Huh? Um..."

"When I saw your long, black hair flowing onto the sheets, when I glimpse your slender neck whenever I'm behind you, and whenever I'm on the other end of your intoxicating dark gaze, and when I... Argh! You should realize how much you've been driving me crazy!!"

"E-Erm, uh..."

"Seriously, you're beautiful. The guys at the company are getting spoiled because you keep being so friendly with them. Do you know how irritated I get when they get near, trying to ogle you? I mean, it's just how you are, so you don't have to worry about changing your attitude or anything, but at the very least, you should realize that you attract a lot of people. If you're bothered by any of the stares, let me know immediately."

“O-Okay.”

“I had Leik act as your guard because I was worried about you. I know he could take on anything, and no one would want to lay a finger on you with him around. Anyway, what I want to say is that you’re beautiful. So much so that I worry about you when we’re apart.”

“Erm, c-calm down, Lucas.”

“I just...want you to realize how alluring and charming you are.”

“I’ll try my best.”

He gently knocked his forehead onto mine and fell silent after pouting. I was confused by the sudden turn of events, but as I slowly processed what had just happened, my face slowly grew warmer. He’d said a lot of things.

“Um, I believe you’re praising me a bit too much, Lucas.”

“What? You don’t trust my judgment? I’m being underestimated.”

“That’s not what I mean, but...”

Our faces were still close, and he gently stroked the mole by my eye.

“Iris, did you know that on a faraway island, if a sailor has a woman with a mole by their eye as their wife, it’s said that it’ll bring him good luck? If you’ve got the first star of the evening by your side, you wouldn’t be lost at sea, apparently.”

As though he were looking at something so precious, Lucas kissed my mole. My body jolted with surprise, and he chuckled. I felt about ready to cry. My mole was always seen as a symbol of lasciviousness. I never dreamed I’d meet someone who would praise my beauty mark. His amber eyes shimmered like jewels, and they looked prettier than the full moon.

“Besides,” Lucas said, stroking my hair and removing my hair ornament. He combed my long hair and smiled as though he were mocking himself. “I should be the one asking that question. Are you sure you’re fine with me? I’m a shallow man who purchased you for selfish reasons. My life isn’t stable. I could fall at any time.”

I could see my red face reflected in his eyes. Gazing at him, I couldn’t suppress

my smile. I gently released my hands from his grip and held his face.

“Lucas, you’re a man who made his wealth in one generation through hard work and effort. I respect and love you. Should you fall to the ground on your knees or be pushed down by hardships, I trust that you could stand back up on your feet. Please, keep me by your side.”

Midway through my words, he hugged me tightly.







He looked down at me, his back toward the night sky. The light illuminated his glittering eyes and bright hair, shining like the moon. I put my arms around him as though I were trying to hug a full moon, and pressed against his warm body.

“Lucas, I love you,” I said.

“Don’t say that now,” he said, his cracked voice slightly rising. “If I answer, ‘me too,’ I’d seem like a sly dog who only says those words when it’s convenient.”

His arms stayed wrapped around me as he spoke. I couldn’t help but find him cute. I felt odd for thinking so, but I was happy from the bottom of my heart that I became his wife.

This feeling wouldn’t change, no matter what the future held.

## Epilogue

**IT** was already autumn, but Solalitika was still warm. While I was writing a few letters in the manor, I noticed Kiki, possibly enticed by the warm afternoon sun, slowly drifting off to sleep. The sight was wholesome and adorable, so I let her be. By the time I finished writing and sealing three letters, she was fast asleep on the chair.

“I suppose it can’t be helped on such a beautiful day,” I whispered.

I couldn’t suppress my smile when I saw her sleeping face. Kiki looked much healthier than when I’d first met her, and her smiles were more cheerful than ever before.

The other day, Erika, the daughter of Viscount Teressa and the friend I met on my way to Solalitika, visited the manor. I was impressed by Kiki’s abilities and support. Erika had remembered my maid, and she was shocked by the difference in demeanor. When she saw my husband, Lucas, however, she didn’t recognize him as the coachman Dazzle because they looked so different.

While Erika and I had tea, she said wholeheartedly, “I can tell that you’ve been hard at work as the mistress of this household, Iris. Your maid seems so happy to serve you.”

“I’ve only done what was necessary. I live in comfort in an unknown region thanks to my thoughtful husband,” I replied.

“You’ve changed as well, Iris.” She looked at me kindly. “Whenever you talk about your husband, you make a face I’ve never seen before. We’ve known each other since our academy years, but I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I-Is that so?” I stammered, putting a hand on my cheek.

She chuckled. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you? You’ve fallen for that dignified man.”

I nodded honestly in response to her blunt statement. I was also proud that

an old aristocrat had called my husband ‘dignified.’

“Yes. He’s the only man for me in this world. He’s very dear to me.”



“**IRIS**, there you are,” Lucas said as he entered the room.

I continued writing next to my maid, and he peered at her sleeping face.

With a tired look, he raised an eyebrow. “Jeez, she looks so comfortable sleeping there.”

Watching him force a smile without scolding her made me happy. We spoke in hushed tones to avoid waking Kiki.

“It’s rather rare for you to be here at this hour, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I’m ditching a little. If I don’t take a break every now and then, I’ll always be working.”

“I see. Welcome home, Lucas. I know you’ve been working hard.”

He stared at me, his eyes filled with kindness, and stroked my hair. “How about you?” he asked, sounding a little raspy. “Are you sure you’re not pushing yourself too hard?”

I smiled and nodded. “Thanks to you, I’m having fun every day.”

“Have you got any complaints or issues?”

“None at all. You’re by my side, after all.”

I could see my reflection in his eyes as he stroked the mole by my eye. I felt a little embarrassed and shy.

“Iris, um, er, I just wanna talk about the manor...”

“The manor?”

“Uh, like, how we currently live in separate buildings,” he said, his face turning red as he started to mumble. “I feel like we don’t have to live separately anymore, but, uh, what do you, uh, think?”

“W-Well...”

“I-I’m just saying, we’re spending more time together and stuff, so yeah...” He

ran his hand through his hair. “It seems like, you know, we might not end this as an unconsummated marriage after all. B-But hey, if you don’t want to, you can forget this whole thing. See ya.”

“Ah, please wait!” I tugged on his sleeve and shook my head. “I’ve actually... been thinking about the same thing for a while. Since you seem so busy, it would be great if I could...spend some more time with you.”

“...Got it.”

He tilted my chin up and brought his face close to mine. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his amber gaze and his long, golden eyelashes.

“Lucas...”

I knew Kiki had been feigning sleep for quite a while. Still, as Lucas’s face approached mine, I closed my eyelids.



I was enjoying my life and living in happiness. Suddenly, like a thunderclap through the sunny skies, I got a letter from my sister.

*“Sister, help me! At this rate, the Karelia household will fall into ruin.”*

**End of Volume 1**



## Digital Bonus: Like Two Auspicious Birds Flying Together

**MANY** gulls and cats were near the port, but the gardens of the manor were also filled with numerous small animals. Hedgehogs and hares, like those in the gardens of the royal capital, could be spotted on Lucas's property as well. Magpies with shrill cries flapped their blue and white wings as they made their nests.

"Ah, magpies," I remarked.

"It's nesting season, so it'll get lively." Kiki gazed at a couple of magpies pecking at each other's wings. She came with me into the garden. "They look beautiful, but their cries are rough on the ears. When they suddenly pop out while I'm cleaning, they take me by surprise."

"Indeed, their cries are sharper than I'd imagined. They're often depicted as talkative birds in fairy tales as well."

"Ah, magpies?" Lee, the chef, said. He happened to pass by. "In my hometown, magpies are auspicious birds—a sign of good luck. They symbolize good partnerships and compatible couples."

"Is that so?" I replied.

Lee was from the Orient. He often casually taught us the unusual customs, cultures, and foods of different regions.

"Yes, if I remember correctly, they also signify marriage and love. They're popular among young women. I'm not quite sure about the origins of those beliefs, though."

After he dropped this tidbit, he continued on his way. I gazed at the back of the untalkative chef.

"Good partners," Kiki murmured, looking at the magpies. "Do you think they symbolize marriage because they're always together?"

“I wonder.” I shifted my gaze toward the birds. “It is interesting that birds symbolize different things to different regions and people.”

While I looked at the friendly birds sitting next to each other, I suddenly felt bright yellow hair brush against my cheeks. I knew it was in my head—Lucas was working at the port. To conceal my loneliness, I put my fingers over the mole by my eye.

Lucas always praised this mark. Just touching it with my fingers made me remember his kind gaze and my chest tightened.

“Kiki, do you think it’s a good day to go down to the ocean?” I asked, staring at the sea. My hair fluttered in the wind.

“Today is a lovely day, so I’m sure it’ll be beautiful,” she replied.

The lukewarm breeze brushed my neck, and I was reminded of Lucas’s large, warm hands. We were only apart during the day, but I was eager for his glittering, sunset-colored eyes to fall on me at night. *Would I be able to catch a glimpse of his back while he’s hard at work in his white shirt?* Trying to suppress and hide my thoughts, I left the garden and entered the manor.

I could no longer feel the ocean breeze normally. Whenever the strong wind touched me, the image of that man, who was hard at work on a large boat, wouldn’t leave my mind.

“Lucas,” I murmured.

My black hair, the mole by my eye, the scent of the ocean breeze, and the beautiful sunset all changed meaning when I met him. Outside the window, the magpies flew away.

“Birds that symbolize a couple...”

Like the magpie, I wanted to be a wife that could fly by his side.

*Just looking at these birds reminds me of you.*

## Afterword

**HELLO**, my name is Makino Maebaru. I love udon.

Thank you for picking up *The Invisible Wallflower Marries an Upstart Aristocrat After Getting Dumped for Her Sister!*

In this story, I added my favorite tropes, including aristocrats, in-your-face moments, a gap between sisters, and others. As I was hashing it out with my editor, they praised me and said, “A nouveau riche! A hero with a bit of a bad streak is kinda rare and fun!” That’s when I first realized I wasn’t going for the cliché tropes like I thought!

Lucas might seem intimidating at first, but he’s actually super nice and a nouveau riche. Alongside him is a quiet, plain beauty with black hair who came from a fallen aristocratic household. They live in a cheery merchant city with a port where the sea is calm, and lovely red brick buildings decorate the area.

This is straight from my preferences. It’s a little embarrassing. But I graciously received an offer to make this into a book, and I’m extremely happy.

In volume 2, Lucas and Iris, now with a requited love, will face troubles from Iris’s ex-fiancé and her household, the Karelias. How will they overcome insane speculations, and how will their love grow? I hope you’re excited for the next installment. Most of this will be newly written, so I’ll work hard and write to the best of my ability!

This might be made into a manga, so please look forward to it!

Lastly, I’d like to thank everyone who was involved in the process of making this book. When I first started posting this on the website, *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, I received so much encouragement from readers. I wasn’t used to writing at first, so I know that my sentences were a little awkward, but my editor was patient with me and supported me every step of the way.

I’d also like to thank Momiji Tsubakidani, who provided me with the character designs. The character designs were so cute that I felt like crying every time I



received them. The moment I realized Murasaki Shido would illustrate the images, I decided that Leikzig would have silver hair because they portrayed silver hair so beautifully. Thank you to my proofreaders, designers, and everyone else who was involved in this process.

I apologize for getting a little personal here, but I'd like to thank my family, friends, and especially T, who's from Maebaru (my penname was made out of respect for this person). Thank you to my grandmother, who always cheered on my novel writing, and my friend Bon. I truly cannot thank them enough. Thank you so much.

I'd be happy if you stuck around for volume 2!

From a lucky day in February 2022







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