



Author: Miyako Miyano
Illustrator: Hayase Jyun

2

Jeanette the Genius

✦ Defying My Evil Stepmother
by Starting a Business with
My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! ✦



Author: Miyako Miyano
Illustrator: Hayase Jyun

2

Jeanette the Genius

✦ Defying My Evil Stepmother
by Starting a Business with
My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! ✦

Jeanette the Genius

2

+ Defying My Evil Stepmother
by Starting a Business with
My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! +

Author: Miyako Miyano
Illustrator: Hayase Jyun



“Jeanette looks like a
fairy tonight, doesn’t she?”

✦ Jeanette ✦

✦ Claus ✦

Beneath the ballroom’s massive
shining chandelier, Jeanette was clad
in a dress made to resemble a tulip.



Or will she courageously withdraw?

In the blooming tulip market, will Jeanette take the risk and continue?

What will be Jeanette's final decision?

◆Kyuriakris◆

CONTENTS



CHAPTER 1
Roussel Corporation

CHAPTER 2
Spel van Goden

CHAPTER 3
At the End of the Frenzy

CHAPTER 4
That Day

CHAPTER 5
That Title Deed



LAST CHAPTER
A Present From Her

EXTRA CHAPTER
Ariel's Marriage



Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Chapter 1: Roussel Corporation](#)
4. [Chapter 2: Spel van Goden](#)
5. [Chapter 3: At the End of the Frenzy](#)
6. [Chapter 4: That Day](#)
7. [Chapter 5: That Title Deed](#)
8. [Last Chapter: A Present from Her](#)
9. [Extra Chapter: Ariel's Marriage](#)
10. [Afterword](#)
11. [Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)
12. [About J-Novel Club](#)
13. [Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Roussel Corporation

“Um, Lord Claus... What is happening?”

Jeanette and Claus were in the Guivarch estate’s parlor. Claus was sitting on the sofa with a big smile on his face, while Jeanette was perched on his lap. When she had first entered the room, he’d beckoned her closer, but she hadn’t expected him to guide her to sit on his *lap* of all places.

“Hmm? Is there something strange going on?” Claus asked, as though this were all par for the course.

“Strange? Well, yes, I’d say this situation is quite strange...!” Jeanette replied hesitantly. *Could it be that sitting on your fiancé’s lap is totally normal, and I just didn’t know?!*

When it came to business, Jeanette was confident that her knowledge was perfectly solid. However, romance was completely outside of her field of expertise. She always had to ask Sara for advice on these things, but her last ray of hope was nowhere in sight. Instead, the only other person in the room was...

“Goodness... You have some nerve to do this in front of *me*, Claus.” Kyuriakris, Claus’s friend and the first prince of the Pakira Empire, had a tight smile on his face. A vein on his temple was bulging.

Indeed, it was the most dreadful of scenarios: Claus had Jeanette on his lap right before Kyuriakris’s eyes.

“Oh? I thought you’d be used to seeing things like this. Was I wrong?” Claus asked with a leisurely smile, unperturbed by the prince’s gaze.

“Sorry, but I have class,” Kyuriakris responded. “Unlike you, I’ve never behaved in this manner.”

This roundabout criticism didn’t discourage Claus in the slightest. His cheeks flushed faintly, and in a bashful tone of voice, he said, “I see. But you’ll understand it too one day, Kyuri. When a man finds the girl he loves, he doesn’t want to let her go even for a moment.” His handsomely sculpted features were

tinted with red, and his violet eyes were damp with unshed tears. He looked so erotic right now that surely even the goddess of beauty would've grown embarrassed and fled.

Jeanette gulped at the sight. *Lord Claus is so gorgeous when he's being all shy...!*

"I was trying to reproach you, you know. Why did you have to turn this into some lovey-dovey moment?" Kyuriakris muttered, pressing his hand to his forehead. But after a moment, he must've realized his words wouldn't get through to Claus no matter what, and he let out a sigh. "Never mind. Let's just get to the point of today's meeting."

"By all means. You wish to discuss Roussel Corporation with us, don't you?"

The moment Claus said those words, Jeanette's back straightened. Kyuriakris's expression turned serious as well, spurred by Claus's statement.

A few days ago, following many twists and turns, Jeanette had managed to take back Roussel Corporation from her stepmother, Leila. Jeanette was eager to kick things back into action so as not to waste the company's potential. Right when she'd been deliberating on how to do that, Kyuriakris had shown up.

The beautiful, dark-skinned prince's black eyes glittered as he spoke. "I returned Roussel Corporation to Miss Jeanette, just as promised. I'm not demanding a reward for that, but I meant it when I said I want to start a business in this country. I want you to hire me so I can study business at the company."

"Hire you...?" Jeanette echoed, blinking in surprise.

Claus considered something for a moment. "Do you mean you wish to work by Jeanette's side?"

"Naturally," the prince answered with a grin. It was the biggest smile he'd shown all day. "There's no point in me working at the firm otherwise. I want to observe Miss Jeanette's skills from up close. That's the quintessence of the matter."

"What do you think, Jeanette?" Claus inquired, checking in with her.

But of course, the ever-fearless Jeanette immediately responded with “I’m completely on board! In fact, it’d be wonderful to be able to rely on your help, Lord Kyuriakris!”

Kyuriakris was just as hardworking as Claus, and to top it off, he was from Pakira. This was the perfect chance for Jeanette to learn from a new perspective that she hadn’t encountered at Roussel Corporation or Matheson Trading before.

“Right, I thought so,” Claus murmured under his breath with a sigh. “Personally, I’d reject your proposal right away, Kyuri, but Roussel Corporation belongs to Jeanette. This isn’t my decision to make. And I suppose we do owe you for helping us obtain the title deed... Much as it pains me to say this, I’ve no choice but to welcome you to the firm,” he said in resignation.

Kyuriakris smirked with satisfaction. Then, he held out his large hand toward Jeanette. His white teeth were shining, contrasting with his dark skin. “Then it’s settled. Miss Jeanette, I look forward to working with you!”

“Yes! Me too, Lord Kyuriakris!” Jeanette replied, gleefully clasping his hand.

Claus was smiling, but the veins on his temple were bulging.

Incidentally, all of this occurred with Jeanette still seated in Claus’s lap. It would’ve made for a comedic sight to any outsiders, but as there was nobody in the room but the three of them, such notions went unmentioned.

“...and so I look forward to working with you all as a member of Roussel Corporation once more!” Jeanette exclaimed. She was in Roussel Corporation’s main store for the first time in a long while. Before her stood a group of people who’d worked for and supported her father for many years. Most of them were close to her father in age, so rather than seeing them as her employees, Jeanette felt that they were like her second family.

She looked at each of them one by one, overcome with emotion, and then added, “I’m so glad I’ll get to work alongside you all again. I hope you’ll be willing to teach me what you know!”

Her bright voice caused a round of applause to echo within the store.

“Welcome back, Jeanette!” someone cried.

“Of course! I’m thrilled to be here!”

“You got the firm back quicker than expected! I should’ve known you had it in the bag!”

The woman’s cheerful words had Jeanette feeling embarrassed. “That’s because mother’s even kinder than I thought!”

The moment Jeanette said this, the employees suddenly fell completely silent. For a few awkward moments, they exchanged looks with each other.

“Really...?” one of them murmured at last.

“Does she have even a shred of kindness in her...?” someone else chimed in.

“She didn’t think twice about stealing the title deed...”

The whispers continued incessantly, until finally the sound of someone clapping their hands reined them in. Everyone turned to look toward the sound, and spotted a well-dressed man emerging from the back of the store.

Claus, who was standing next to Jeanette, squinted at the sight of him. “Isn’t that...House Roussel’s butler? Does he work for the firm as well?”

Indeed, the man Claus was referring to looked like the splitting image of Gilbert, House Roussel’s steward. His silver-gray hair was perfectly combed, and he had immaculate posture. His light-blue eyes gazed at them calmly as the monocle placed upon one of them glittered in the light.

The man smiled upon hearing Claus’s questions. “Greetings, Count Guivarch. You’re referring to my younger brother.”

“Your brother?” Claus asked with a frown.

Jeanette turned to him with a bounce in her step. “Oh! Have you two never met before?! I’ll introduce you! This is Gideon. He’s always worked as my father’s right-hand man and helped him run the company. He’s also the older twin brother of our butler, Gilbert!”

“They’re twins? No wonder...” Claus muttered.

It was no surprise that he’d been confused at first. Gideon and Gilbert were

identical twins, and though they worked in different places, telling them apart would've been a nigh impossible task for anyone other than Jeanette.

"My brother's told me a lot about you, Count Guivarch. I heard that not only have you been looking after our Lady Jeanette, but that you're also searching for milord," Gideon said with deep emotion.

Claus shook his head. "There's no need to speak so formally. We're basically Jeanette's family. Just call me Claus."

"As you wish."

"All right. Now, there's something I'd like to notify you about," Claus said, turning his attention back to the employees.

They were all members of the Baron Roussel Associatio—er, rather, they were all conspicuously close to the baron, having worked alongside him for many years. They waited eagerly to hear what Claus had to say to them.

Gideon narrowed his eyes. "And what's that...?"

With a merry smile, Claus proclaimed, "I know for a fact that Baron Roussel is alive."

"What?!" Gideon exclaimed.

The other employees followed along, crying out things like "Wow!" and "Thank goodness!"

"Yes! My father's still alive!" Jeanette shouted, her smile the biggest one of them all.

The other day, an urgent letter had arrived from the investigator Claus had hired. Apparently, the investigator had followed the river at the scene of the accident and had arrived at a small village. There, he didn't find the baron, but he *did* find the coachman who had driven his carriage.

The coachman had suffered a bone fracture and wouldn't be able to move around by himself until he was fully healed. He informed the investigator that Baron Roussel had carried him all the way to the village. The baron had then arranged for the villagers to look after the coachman in exchange for all the money and goods he had on him. As for what the baron did afterward...

“It seems like the villagers were in hot water,” Jeanette said.

While the employees exchanged glances, Claus continued the story. “Following a spell of bad harvests and rising taxes, the village was in trouble. But that was when Baron Roussel noticed that the price for which they sold their crops was unusually low.”

The villagers couldn’t read, so Baron Roussel had gone in their stead to the merchant who purchased their crops. There, he’d rattled on in broken Norvian, and in the blink of an eye he’d cajoled the merchant into increasing the prices to more reasonable amounts.

“That problem got resolved quickly, but as it happened, there was even more the village was dealing with...” Claus explained.

Everyone else, Jeanette included, hummed along to his words as though having conjectured something.

“I’m sure father couldn’t bear to just ignore those people...”

“He’s usually extremely rational, but his sympathetic side comes out at the strangest of times,” someone commented.

“But that’s the best part about him,” another one added.

Claus nodded while looking at them. “He went around assisting one person after another, resolving various incidents... And just like that, he ended up traveling up and down all over the empire. The investigator’s desperately retracing his steps as we speak.”

“I’m just glad that he’s okay!” Jeanette said, her cheeks flushed with joy. It was plain that she was smiling from the bottom of her heart, and everyone else couldn’t help but smile at the sight as well.

“Then we’d best get to work while milord is away!”

“Right! He’d be disappointed in us if we didn’t do anything while he was gone.”

“Yes!” Jeanette responded. “I’d like us all to work together to bring Roussel Corporation back into the swing of things! Oh... That’s right. There’s one more thing I’d like to tell you all.”

“There’s more?” The employees looked on curiously as Jeanette turned around to look at Kyuriakris, who’d been standing in the back and refraining from joining the conversation.

“I’d like you all to greet the newest addition to Roussel Corporation!” Jeanette told them. “He’ll only be here for a limited time, but nevertheless, Lord Kyuri will be working with us for a while!”

Kyuriakris took a step forward, and everyone’s breath hitched. The man had slender limbs and dark skin. There was a wildness in his imposing eyebrows, yet at the same time his chiseled features gave a refined impression. His gorgeous, alluring aura made all the young female employees gasp and blush.

“Nice to meet you all. Just call me Kyuri,” he said with a smile.

“Oh?” Gideon, who was among the most insightful of the company’s employees, knitted his brows. “Am I imagining things, or have I seen you somewhere before...?”

“SSurely not!” Jeanette interjected with a start. In reality, Kyuriakris had mentioned earlier that he wanted everyone to treat him normally, so he intended to conceal his true identity. That was why he’d introduced himself as Kyuri. “A-Anyway, please welcome aboard Lord Kyuri!”

The employees gave a round of confused applause.

“Phew... I really have my plate full with leading the company...”

It was evening. Jeanette was in her study, stacking up some documents while muttering to herself. In the past, she used to simply assist her father in his work. But now, she was in charge of all manner of tasks: new project management, funds management for each store, employee management... Of course, Gideon and the other people in charge helped her to some extent, but even just looking over the documents they’d arranged took a lot of time.

The moment Jeanette breathed out a sigh, someone presented her with a cup of tea. But it wasn’t her maid, Sara—it was Claus.

“You must be tired,” he said. “You should take a breather and have some of

the tea Sara made for you.”

“Th-Thank you,” Jeanette responded. *I was so absorbed in my work that I totally forgot Lord Claus was here too...!*

Sara, who was standing by the wall, observed them with a grin.

Claus often visited Jeanette’s office. It wasn’t *daily* per se, but it was very frequent nonetheless. Jeanette didn’t particularly mind, as she often stopped paying attention to her surroundings once she was focused on something, but... *Doesn’t my presence bother Lord Claus?* she wondered as she picked up the teacup. A pleasant aroma wafted from it, and she inhaled it deeply.

“Chamomile tea is supposed to be relaxing and it can warm your body up,” Claus advised.

“And on top of that, it’s very pretty!” Jeanette added. “There are flower petals floating in the tea!”

Indeed, it was just as she’d said. A few chamomile petals bobbed on top of the clear, amber liquid. It was as if there was a small flower field inside the cup, and Jeanette stared at it in fascination.

Claus smiled softly. “In the far east, they have something called ‘flowering tea,’ which looks like a flower is blooming in the tea. I wanted to try replicating the effect, so I added some chamomile petals.”

“I think it’s wonderful! The scent and flavor of the petals is lovely, and they’re also pleasing to the eye. It’s the ideal choice! Oh...! Are you planning to sell this via Matheson Trading?!” Jeanette asked spiritedly.

“Yes,” Claus confirmed with a smile. “I believe this would be a perfect match for Matheson’s clientele.”

Shortly after they’d gotten the title deed back, Jeanette and Claus had discussed their next move. As Kyuriakris had decided Matheson was better off with Jeanette, he’d yielded the company rights to her and Claus, leaving the two firms in their hands. Merging the firms had been an option, but they each had a vastly different clientele. After some deliberation, Jeanette and Claus had decided that Roussel Corporation would focus on producing goods aimed at all people regardless of gender, while Matheson Trading’s products would be

aimed mostly at women.

“That way, we can save on taxes too!” Jeanette exclaimed with a bright grin, giving a thumbs up.

If Ariel or another member of high society were here, they’d probably rebuke Jeanette for having such lowborn thoughts. Claus, however, was different. “Yes, money is important. We need to use all legitimate means to keep costs down,” he said as he nodded with that saintly smile upon his face.

Sara giggled. “The fact that what you two are discussing with such radiant smiles is *taxes* of all things... Nobody would guess that in their wildest dreams.”

“Those in high society believe discussing money is vulgar,” said Claus. “Especially for women.”

Jeanette nodded sagely. She herself had faced plenty of ridicule and laughter whenever she’d discussed business in the past. Not that she cared in the slightest. “Oh, but I feel like Lady Christine wouldn’t mind at all! She’d probably happily chat about it!”

Duchess Christine Pablo was a former princess, and the first woman in high society who had acknowledged Jeanette’s business acumen. In the past, she had backed Jeanette’s Orlonde silk project, and her unrivaled leverage in noble circles had caused the goods to explode in popularity and become a fad. Christine was the benefactor of both Jeanette and Matheson Trading.

“I agree,” said Claus. “I plan to send her this tea as a gift.”

“That’s great! I’m sure she’ll be happy!” Jeanette exclaimed, already picturing the smiling Christine.

The woman was truly a spirited, sunny, and pleasant person. Even if the present were a pill bug, Christine, after a moment of shock, would’ve probably laughed and said, “What a fine pill bug this is!”

Although, her husband, Duke Layton Pablo, was sure to angrily scream, “How dare you send such a thing to my wife?!”

“By the way, have you thought of what you’d like to sell at Roussel Corporation in the upcoming season?” Claus asked Jeanette.

She pondered for a while. “Not yet... But Lord Kyuriakris is arranging something, and I promised to have a meeting with him tomorrow at the office. He said he’ll show me what he has in mind then.”

“Oh...?” Claus murmured with a glint in his eye. “I’m asking just in case, but... Surely you don’t plan to have this meeting with him one-on-one?”

“Nope! Gideon won’t be around, but Sara is coming with me,” Jeanette exclaimed, at which Sara nodded fiercely.

“I’ll protect milady with everything I have, so please rest assured, Lord Claus!” Sara bellowed, vigorously beating her chest.

Jeanette tilted her head. *Protect me? From what...?*

“Then I suppose it’s fine... But... Hmm... I’m still concerned...” Claus, despite Sara’s pledge, seemed unconvinced as he continued muttering under his breath.

“It’s all right, Lord Claus,” Jeanette appealed. “Lord Kyuriakris may be royalty, but I won’t flinch! As a merchant, I’ll be sure to treat him well!”

“That’s not what I mean...”

Isn’t it? Jeanette pondered. *I was sure he was worried that I’d be too timid to work with Lord Kyuriakris properly.*

In the end, Claus mumbled and groaned for the rest of the day until he finally disappeared into his bedroom.

The next day, the meeting occurred in the company president’s office.

“I must say, I saw this coming. But can’t you try to defy my expectations sometimes, Claus?” Kyuriakris asked with an exaggerated sigh as he stared at Claus, who was standing next to Jeanette like a guard dog.

“Sorry, Kyuri, but I couldn’t let this go. Even with Sara here, I have a feeling I’m the only one who could stop you if you tried hitting on Jeanette.” In spite of his claims, Claus didn’t look apologetic in the slightest.

Jeanette wondered if his aloofness would anger Kyuriakris, but the prince only

grinned. “You know me well. If her guard had just been that cute girl, I would’ve made up any excuse to get her to leave.”

“Ugh...” Sara grumbled bitterly at this unexpected scheme. “I regret my own inadequacy...!”

“Don’t worry, Sara,” Claus reassured her. “I was sure he’d try to pull some trick like that. Kyuri, don’t think I’ll hand Jeanette over to you so easily. I know you’re used to getting anything you want.”

“You’re right on the money.”

As the men conversed, Jeanette glanced between them in confusion. *Wait... Is he after me?! she asked herself. Looking back on it, she seemed to recall Kyuriakris’s words right after they’d gotten the title deed back: “When I find someone I’m really interested in, I refuse to be discouraged or give up. I’m going to bring you back with me as my empress.”*

The troubled Jeanette blinked while inwardly shouting, *I do think he said something like that, but...was he actually serious?! She still didn’t fully believe Claus when he told her he loved her, so the thought that Kyuriakris might’ve been interested in her was just preposterous. What should I do...?! Well, first things first...* Jeanette clenched her fists. *Let’s do business!*

“Um!” she exclaimed suddenly, causing the men to turn to her with surprise. “Let’s get back on track! Lord Kyuriakris, what is it that you wanted to show me?”

As if finally remembering what they were here for, Kyuriakris placed the box he’d been holding on the table. He then opened the lid, revealing...

“A flowerpot?” Jeanette inquired.

Indeed, what Kyuriakris pulled out from the box looked like an unglazed flowerpot. Some kind of plant seemed to be peeking out from the earth.

Kyuriakris nodded. “Yes. Here’s my proposal: a tulip flower.”

“Tulip...” Jeanette had heard of it before. It was a rare sight in this country, but it was commonly cultivated in the Pakira Empire, where Kyuriakris was from. The tulip was considered a sacred flower in the empire, and the

emperor's headgear was embroidered with it. The flower itself had large, remarkably vivid and colorful petals, making it a beautiful sight. "I know about tulips, but... Why did you choose this?" Jeanette asked curiously.

It was true that tulips were a rarity in their country. But if it came down to rarity alone, the Pakira Empire had plenty of even rarer articles. Brilliantly colored plain weave fabrics, glasswork with gorgeous patterns painted on it... In fact, when Jeanette had released her line of mosaic lanterns in the past, she'd used Pakira's mosaic lamps as inspiration.

The tulips, in contrast, had no medicinal properties, and had limited uses compared to other plants. Above all, they were *flowers*, so it took time for them to bloom. With only the flowers having any worth, the need to wait around for months for them to bloom made them troublesome to handle as marketable goods.

Kyuriakris smiled leisurely in response to Jeanette's unspoken questions. He picked up the flower's bulb and held it out to everyone as though he were displaying a precious jewel. "Here's some trivia for you. Tulips are very interesting plants. If you plant them using their seeds, they take a ridiculous amount of time to fully grow. But if you use the bulbs instead, you can dramatically reduce that time. On top of that, a single bulb can produce multiple tulip flowers. This way, you can easily increase the number of same-colored tulips you'll get."

Jeanette listened carefully to his explanation. *That does sound convenient. But if that's all...* He might have been a guest of honor, but she wouldn't show deference to him. The fact that her eyes weren't shining proved that she didn't believe this to be a worthy pursuit.

Noticing her unfavorable reaction, Kyuriakris only smirked. "Well, not everything can be explained by words alone. That's why I brought the real thing with me." With that, he snapped his fingers, and a knock on the door immediately followed. It seemed that one of his subordinates had been on standby outside.

Jeanette permitted them. "Please enter."

The door swung open, and a respectful man stepped inside holding...

“Whoa! What beautiful colors!” Jeanette exclaimed.

The man was holding a bouquet made of red, white, yellow, and pink tulips. The petals were so vivid that they almost looked as if they had been dyed. The bouquet’s arrival instantly enriched the room’s ambience. Kyuriakris took the bouquet, and with an alluring smile, reverently held it out toward Jeanette.



“Here you are, mademoiselle. Take this as a sign of my affinity.”

“Kyuri!” Claus stepped forward with a grim look on his face.

“Oh my,” the prince murmured mockingly. “You may be engaged to her, but surely you don’t intend to stop me from giving her some flowers? It’s not even a gift; it’s a sample of the goods.”

“You *would* put it that way!” Claus grumbled, at a loss for words over this sophism.

For her part, Jeanette had already accepted the flowers even before Claus had protested. “Wow! Goodness!!! I can’t believe it! Father did show me a real tulip before, but it wasn’t *this* bright!” she burbled, gently pinching the petals and rigorously inspecting them. “Incredible... They have no color spotting, and they’re all uniform! They’re stunning from every angle!”

“Naturally,” Kyuriakris affirmed. “That’s because these tulips were grown at Pakira’s imperial palace.”

“The palace?” Jeanette echoed with a shiver.

Pakira’s royalty resided in the palace, where they accumulated all manner of riches from across the empire. Their goods superseded the notion of first class, and their market price was fixed. It was obvious, then, that flowers cultivated there would be Pakira’s best.

“Tulips are rare and beautiful,” Kyuriakris continued. “I think that already gives them plenty of worth, but how about when you add Pakira’s crown to the mix? Surely such exceptional flowers would be—”

“Desired by everyone?!” Jeanette shouted, her eyes as wide as if she’d just received a divine revelation. Her sudden vigor caused Kyuriakris to stare at her in shock. After a moment, she gasped. “I... I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt you!”

“It’s fine. It’s proof that you’ve realized the worth of these flowers, yes?”

“Yes! I think they have plenty of value...!” Even as she spoke, Jeanette was already making the calculations in her mind. She was trying to ascertain how much a single tulip bulb would be worth. *High society loves prestige! In that*

case, we might be able to get one digit above the usual price of a tulip... No, maybe even two!

“Kyuri.” Claus, still with a serious countenance, decided to address something. “Even if we sell these bulbs, just how many do you have available?”

“Oh? You’ve been sulking out of jealousy this whole time, but now you’re trying to have a pragmatic conversation with me?”

“That’s right. Before our eyes lies not a golden egg, but a golden bulb. If I weren’t interested, I’d be a failure as a merchant.”

“A merchant? I thought you’re a lord.”

“I’m a lord *and* a merchant. The more income, the better, right?” Claus prompted with a daring laugh.

Kyuriakris’s smile sharpened. “And that’s why you’re my friend. Now, to answer your question... Do you recall the supply of Orlande silk you had previously? I can provide a comparable supply of tulips.”

“That many?!” Jeanette shrieked. As far as she knew, tulips were popular enough to have their own enthusiasts outside the empire, but she’d also heard that it was difficult to secure them in large numbers.

“Who do you think I am?” the prince responded. “Tulip cultivation has always thrived in the Pakira Empire, and I’ve been growing them as a hobby.”

“I see...!” Jeanette nodded. Kyuriakris must’ve had enough tulips to make a viable business out of them. Compared to her or Claus, Kyuriakris likely took his “hobbies” to a much grander scale. *This man could probably send us over an entire mountain’s worth of tulips!* Witnessing the prince’s regal bearing, Jeanette gulped. “I should’ve known...! We’d best decide on a sales strategy without delay! Sara, please summon everyone!”

“Right away!” the maid replied, rushing off to fetch the other workers.

Jeanette crossed her arms. “Now, should we do the unveiling during a ball? Or maybe at one of Duchess Pablo’s salons again...?” she wondered out loud. A ball would’ve had a larger number of guests, but on the other hand, Christine’s salons would’ve been better suited for the guests to have a more thorough

discussion of the goods.

“If we had a limited supply, I’d argue that introducing them at the salon would work best,” Claus said. “But Kyuri, are you confident you can deliver a substantial quantity?”

The other man nodded self-assuredly. “Of course.”

“Then a ball might be the best bet. How about we have you show up in a dress that makes the most of the tulips’ beauty, Jeanette? It might be similar to what we did with the Orlonde silk, but if everything goes well, I’m sure everyone will be enamored with you once more.” Claus looked spellbound as he spoke. It was the most animated he’d been all day.

In contrast, Kyuriakris sighed in exasperation. “You just want to show her off, don’t you?”

“Of course I do! Is there something wrong with that?” Claus snapped, but Kyuriakris just shook his head in resignation.

“No. And I suppose the more flashy you are, the more you’ll draw people’s eyes. But let me tell you one more thing. The tulip flowers aren’t incredible only because of their pretty appearance.”

Really? Jeanette thought, exchanging a look with Claus.

“I’ll explain everything, so listen up,” the prince began, and the other two heeded his words.

As Kyuriakris quietly revealed the secret of the tulips, Jeanette’s green-gray eyes began glimmering.

Chapter 2: Spel van Goden

Beneath the ballroom's massive, shining chandelier, the first thing Duchess Pablo excitedly exclaimed was, "Goodness, Jeanette! What *is* that dress? It's stunning! Look, darling! It looks like a flower!"

"Hmm... It's quite splendid. What sort of flower is it supposed to be?" Duke Pablo inquired. Although he usually didn't show much interest in women's attire, he was looking Jeanette over carefully while stroking his beard.

Tonight, Jeanette was clad in a dress made to resemble a tulip. The yellow satin billowed out just like the velvety petals of a tulip flower. The dress was layered too, giving the impression of numerous petals blooming downward. It looked as though Jeanette was wrapped up in tulips. The design was bold, but thanks to the elegant sheen of the satin, it exuded luxury rather than eccentricity. That was Jeanette's favorite part, as it truly represented the tulip flower's glamor.

Upon hearing the duke's and duchess's remarks, the nearby noblewomen also began whispering in excitement.

"My, they're right!"

"What a wonderful dress!"

"Look! She has flowers pinned to her hair and chest too."

Jeanette grinned—the ladies had keen eyes. She had an ornament with a real, yellow tulip pinned to her hair. Its freshness and the vibrancy of its color made it almost impossible to believe that it was a real flower. The beautiful sight made everyone ooh and aah.

"Thank you very much, Lady Christine, Your Excellency," Jeanette replied bashfully.

"She looks like a fairy tonight, doesn't she?" Claus said, gazing at her as though enchanted. He swiftly clasped her hand and placed a kiss upon it. As his lips touched her skin, he looked up at her with those violet eyes. He was

exuding even more sex appeal than normal, and Jeanette could only gulp at the sight.

“Ah...!” One of the young ladies nearby let out an anguished cry right as she fainted.

“You’ll never find a woman as beautiful as Jeanette even if you scour the entire country—nay, the whole world!” Claus proclaimed. “Don’t you agree, Your Excellency?”

“I see you’re the same as ever, Claus,” Duke Pablo responded with a sour expression.

Christine paid the men no mind, cheerfully addressing Jeanette. “Tell me, are the flowers you’re wearing tulips?” She looked like a young maiden who’d just discovered treasure. Her eyes, which were the same light blue as Bairapa tourmalines, were twinkling brightly.

“Yes! This is the tulip flower,” Jeanette affirmed, pulling out one of the red tulips which were pinned to her chest. These were real too, having been sewn onto the dress. “Here’s one for you, if you’d like!”

“My! What a beautiful gift!” Christine said, joyfully accepting it. Then, mimicking Jeanette, she tried fastening it to her hair.

“It suits you so well!”

A bright red flower bloomed upon the duchess’s hair, which was such a pale blonde that it almost looked see-through. Paired with the hair ornament she already had, the tulip heightened her beauty; her loveliness all but beamed from her. The duke’s mouth fell open as he stared at his wife adoringly.

Christine didn’t seem too happy about it...until she let out a mischievous laugh. “Jeanette, there must be some kind of secret to this flower if you brought it with you. Could it be that this will be your next product?”

Lady Christine is quick on the uptake as usual! Jeanette thought. *She figured out what I’m doing before I even said anything.*

A buzz rippled through the other nobles at the mention of Jeanette’s new product. That was hardly surprising; they all remembered the fad her Orlonde

silk had created in the past. Other noblewomen, eager not to miss out on the latest trend, started gathering around and pestering Jeanette to let them see it too.

Observing them, Christine held the tulip up and ecstatically announced, “I’ve never seen such an exotic flower before. The color is so vivid too! Just looking at it lifts my spirits.”

“It’s called the tulip,” Jeanette explained to everyone. “Thanks to a certain someone, we managed to procure tulips grown in the palace of the Pakira Empire.”

“Oh? The Pakira Empire, you say?” Duke Pablo inquired.

Christine’s eyes widened as well. “Gracious! To think they have such flowers in their palace... If things had gone differently, I wonder if I would’ve gazed at those flowers every day,” she said with an air of nostalgia, looking into the distance.

Lady Christine? At the palace? Jeanette wondered, blinking repeatedly. She had a feeling she’d heard something about that before.

Claus seemed to have recalled it as well. “Now that I think about it, weren’t you originally supposed to marry into the Pakira Empire, Duchess Pablo?”

“Oh, right!” Jeanette’s father had told her that when Christine was a princess, she had once been set to marry the Pakiran emperor. But then Duke Pablo had suddenly stepped into the picture and won the right to Christine’s hand in marriage by resolving some issue that had been a great burden for the empire.

“My, you both know about it?” the duchess asked. “It happened before you were even born.”

“My father told me about it,” said Claus with a smile.

“Same here!” Jeanette added eagerly. “He said it was the love story of the century!”

Christine laughed shyly. “Hee hee! That’s right. Layton achieved a spectacular feat. You’d never guess by looking at him now, hmm?” With that, she reached out to pat Duke Pablo’s protruding belly.

“I... I just gained a little bit of weight,” he grumbled.

“Indeed. You simply changed from a rugged bear into a cute teddy.” Christine giggled, looking truly happy. Her eyes were unmistakably full of love as she gazed at him.

Although the duke cleared his throat in embarrassment, he looked back at her just as tenderly. Even two decades after their marriage, their love for each other hadn’t changed—in fact, it had only grown stronger. It was obvious at a glance.

They’re such a wonderful couple... I’d like to have a marriage as happy as theirs someday. Jeanette was thinking as much when she suddenly realized something. *Huh? If I get married, then it’d be to my fiancé, Claus, right...?*

Two decades from now, their faces would probably be starting to develop wrinkles. They might even have a family of their own. Jeanette pictured the older versions of herself and Claus, standing alongside their children. The image made her face redden, and she pressed both her hands to her cheeks.

“Jeanette? What’s wrong?” Claus asked, peering at her in concern. His eyes were like amethysts, looking at her from behind his silver hair. The slight worry in his gaze only added to his picturesque beauty.

Unable to endure it, Jeanette glanced aside in a fluster. “N-No, it’s nothing!” she squeaked. *If he keeps looking at me like that, I might just faint...!* In fact, she recalled one of the girls had fainted earlier at the sight of Claus. Determined not to become the second case, Jeanette quickly regulated her breathing. “I just got palpitations because of the dazzling harmony between the duke and duchess!” she explained. *I’m not lying...! Probably.*

“Hee hee. Thank you, I’m flattered,” Christine said in good humor.

Jeanette suddenly turned to her. “By the way, could you tell me more about that story someday? My father told me about it when he was drunk, so I’d love to hear it from you directly, Lady Christine!”

“Our story? I don’t mind, but it’s already been twenty years since then, you know? Won’t you get bored?”

“Not at all! I think everyone would love to hear about it. We should adapt it

into a book! Or perhaps a play...?!" Jeanette mused. Unfortunately, she didn't have a talent for story writing, but she could always commission someone who did.

With a serious countenance, she considered the idea of hiring a novelist or a playwright to pen a love story. If things went well, the duke and duchess could even go down in history and their names would be remembered by future generations. *Ahh, that'd be great! Those two are definitely worthy of that! Maybe it'd make for a nice gift for their next wedding anniversary? But I'll have to find a novelist first. I'll ask them to make it as romantic as possible! I believe one of my patrons has a deep knowledge of literature...*

"—nette. Jeanette."

"Wah!!!" Jeanette shrieked when something suddenly blew on her ear. She looked up to find Claus smiling at her in amusement. Christine had a similar look on her face. Jeanette must've once again entered a world of her own without even realizing it. "Ah...! I'm such a...!"

"Don't worry, I'm used to it. Be sure to tell me sometime what got you grinning like that," the duchess said kindly, reassuring the dispirited Jeanette. "Now, pardon the change of the topic, but would you mind telling me more about those tulips? They're gorgeous. Will they be on sale in your store?"

"Of course! Though...for now, we'll be selling the bulbs."

"Bulbs? That's before they bloom, right?"

"Yes!" Jeanette nodded. Noticing that the other nobles were listening again, she knew this was the perfect chance. "Also, they're all endorsed as a product of the Pakiran Imperial Palace. However, we dare not reveal the flowers' colors, so nobody will know which color they are until they bloom. Will they be red, yellow, white, or pink? Or perhaps a different shade altogether? It's something to look forward to!"

Christine looked fascinated by this explanation. "Indeed? It's almost like a lottery. That sounds quite interesting."

"And that's not all!" Jeanette said with a knowing grin.

Tulips were a rarity in this country. Add to that the Pakiran palace's

endorsement, and good sales were practically guaranteed when it came to the nobles who loved nothing more than rare goods that signified power. Being able to boast that the most beautiful flower of the Pakira Empire bloomed in one's own garden was the perfect status symbol.

Being a status symbol was indeed the tulip's forte—but there was more. They had a secret unlike that of any other flower.

Recalling what Kyuriakris had said, Jeanette slowly put the tulip's quintessence into words. "Tulips can mutate."

As soon as she said that, Claus pulled out one of the tulips which had been affixed to his breast pocket. The crowd around them erupted with noise and exclamations at the sight. The duke and duchess also looked startled.

When the flower had been in Claus's pocket, it had looked like a normal yellow tulip. But as he pulled it out, it became clear that its lower half was red, making it a dichromatic flower.

"The two colors are mixed together... What a beautiful combination!" Christine uttered, staring at the flower as if transfixed.

Claus smiled at her and the other ladies watching. Now it was his turn to take the reins. In a low, calm voice, he informed everyone, "Tulips can mutate like this during their growth process."

When the mutation occurred, a tulip would change from one color into multiple. Some looked like the flower Claus was holding, with the top and bottom in different shades, but there were other patterns as well.

"These mutations are not by human design, and what colors appear is entirely up to fate. You could say this phenomenon is a game of the gods."

"A game of the gods? Now that sounds interesting..." said Duke Pablo, his curiosity piqued. He gazed at the tulip intently, as if trying to ascertain its worth.

"These tulips, which we have dubbed 'Spel van Goden,' are an exalted flower cultivated in the Pakiran Imperial Palace," Claus proclaimed, showing the two-tone tulip to the crowd. "On top of that, they mutate. That means you could grow a flower that even the Pakira Empire hasn't laid eyes on before—it would be unique to you. To be able to monopolize a beautiful flower that even the

Imperial Palace doesn't possess... Don't you find that a most alluring prospect?"
He pressed the tulip against his lips as he posed the question.



The gesture was unusually impure for Claus, who never broke his gentlemanly demeanor. His slightly downcast eyes were emanating intense sex appeal. Faint cries echoed around the venue as multiple noblewomen collapsed one after another.

I knew leaving the advertising to Lord Claus was the right call, but...this is very bad for my heart! Jeanette lamented inwardly, tightly gripping the hem of her skirt as she trembled. She was keeping her focus on the tulip he was holding, because if she looked him in the eyes, she'd undoubtedly join the fainting squad.

"C-Claude, I think you'd best tone it down a bit," mumbled Duke Pablo, who for some reason was flushed.

Jeanette glanced around and realized there were other gentlemen who'd turned red and coughed awkwardly to cover it up. It seemed that Claus was powerful enough to affect even other men. *I see... When it comes to beautiful things, people are captivated by them regardless of gender! Just as I'd expect from Lord Claus!*

While Jeanette was enigmatically impressed, Christine giggled. "Tee hee... I'm devoted to Layton, but that was quite the sight. Jeanette, when will these tulips go on sale? I'd like to order heaps of them."

Those words caused the other noblewomen, who'd been staring reverently at Claus, to snap back to their senses. "Oh, me too!"

"Me as well! I'd love to buy them!"

Among the throng of ladies, a viscount hurriedly raised his hand. "We as well! We want to grow them in our garden!"

The demands continued echoing, until Jeanette raised her voice. "Those of you who'd like to buy, please tell me your names! I'd like to avoid disrupting the ball, so please cooperate with me!"

"I can take the orders too, so please calm yourselves," said Claus. He gracefully pulled out a notebook which he'd apparently been hiding somewhere and began writing down the names of prospective customers.

By the time Jeanette and Claus went home, they had a mighty long list of buyers.

In the carriage on their way back, Claus was smiling in satisfaction. "Everything went well this time too. I'm sure Kyuri will be glad to hear it."

"Yes! I have to let him know as soon as possible!"

Despite the fact Kyuriakris was the person behind the tulip idea, he hadn't attended the ball. Jeanette thought it would've been more convincing to have him play the role that Claus had played tonight, but it seemed the prince didn't wish to reveal his identity just yet. So even though Claus had no direct relation to Roussel Corporation, he'd ended up participating in the unveiling of the sale.

"I'll let him know, Jeanette. You don't need to do anything," Claus said, his expression immediately hardening at Jeanette's words.

"Huh? But I'll be seeing Lord Kyuriakris tomorrow at the company, and I'd hate to ask you to do even more for Roussel Corporation..."

"Don't worry! I won't let you two be alone— I mean, if it's for you, I don't mind helping out at all. So I'll come with you to the company tomorrow, all right?" Claus asked. He was smiling, but there was something overwhelming about it.

Does he really want to go all the way to the company just to let Lord Kyuriakris know about the unveiling? Oh, could it be...?! Jeanette realized something with a gasp. It's because he wants to meet with Lord Kyuriakris, isn't it?!

Jeanette was quite thickheaded indeed.

That must be it! Lord Kyuriakris is an important friend of his, after all!

Unlike Jeanette, Claus had a lot of friends within high society. But by observing the way he spoke to Kyuriakris, Jeanette had come to understand something. Although Claus had irreproachable conduct and was kind to everyone, that wasn't his true self. The way he spoke with such vigor when it came to Kyuriakris was proof of that. Claus, extolled as a saint, uttered unpardonably harsh words and insulted Kyuriakris without any reservation. This meant that he had his guard down around the prince.

I think it's wonderful that he has a friend he can trust so much! I need to support them! Jeanette thought, her eyes glimmering with a sense of duty. She nodded energetically. "All right! You've made your feelings perfectly clear! Leave this to me!"

"Right... You're probably misunderstanding something again, but I'm not going to go into it this time."

"Misunderstanding?! Please rest assured! I believe I can read the room a bit better these days!" Jeanette answered confidently.

Claus only smiled ambiguously for a moment. "Now for a change of topic, I noticed your stepfamily didn't show up to the ball."

"Oh, that's true..." Jeanette said. Things had gone favorably today, but she recalled feeling that they'd gone a little *too* favorably, leaving her unsatisfied. "I wonder what the matter is? I know they love balls and tea parties, and they enjoy attending them more than anything... Is it because I've sent them a letter that my father is alive?"

Of course, Jeanette had informed Leila and Ariel that her father, Baron Roussel, had survived the accident. They hadn't responded, but Gilbert had confirmed that he'd shown them the letter.

"Those two... And especially that stepmother of yours—I can't read what she's thinking at all," Claus murmured. After a moment, he added in an even quieter voice, "Well, it's probably nothing good..."

Jeanette, however, was so lost in thought that she didn't hear his words at all. *Mother, Ariel... What on earth happened to them? I'm a little worried...*

Those at House Roussel never would've dreamed that Jeanette had had such a conversation about them.

The sunlight brightly illuminated the sitting room, where Ariel was doing embroidery. On the other side of the diagonal sofa was her mother, Leila. The woman was propping up her chin in her hand, gazing out the window with a dour look on her face. This had recently become her routine, and she'd been acting this way ever since Jeanette had bought back the title deed to Roussel

Corporation.

“The weather’s nice today,” Ariel remarked. “Maybe you could try taking a relaxing walk outside, mother?”

Yet even as the girl waited for several moments, her mother did not reply.

She tried again. “Then how about some shopping? You used to do it all the time, remember?”

“Ugh! That’s enough out of you!” Leila raised her voice in vexation, glaring at her daughter.

Ariel sulkily replied, “Come on, you don’t have to speak to me like that. I’m just worried for you. You’ve been secluding yourself in the house and getting angry... Can’t you just forget that whole thing with Jeanette? We got a lot of money from selling the title deed, so why not use it to entertain yourse—”

Before she could continue, Leila’s eyes sharpened in a way Ariel had never seen before. “Don’t you dare speak that name!” the woman ordered harshly, and Ariel’s shoulders sank. “Gracious! That accursed Jeanette! I bet she’s strutting around high society showing off her victory right about now! Just picturing it infuriates me!”

Watching her mother punch the sofa, Ariel cried, “Mother, stop! That’s just graceless!”

Leila only glared at her again. “Aren’t you frustrated as well?! That girl got her hands on Claus!”

“Of course I am!” Ariel responded indignantly. “I mean, no matter how you look at it, I’m prettier than Jeanette.” With that, the girl stood up with vigor and brushed her fingers through her beautiful golden locks. “Just look at me! I have golden hair and blue eyes, and I inherited your beauty, mother. And unlike that upstart, I have proper noble lineage!” she huffed.

Leila finally smiled. “Exactly. My previous husband is your biological father, which means you have unmistakable blue blood flowing through your veins.”

“Right! Besides, Jeanette doesn’t behave like a lady at all. She doesn’t embroider, dance, or play the piano, and all she ever talks about is money. Her

expression when she talks about business is just gross! I'm basically perfect compared to her, aren't I?"

"You are. You had a flood of suitors in the past too," Leila affirmed.

"Exactly!" Ariel nodded. "And yet..." Suddenly losing her oomph, she sat back down with a bleak expression. *Lord Claus chose my sister...* Recalling that fact made Ariel sigh.

Claus Guivarch was her angel. She still couldn't forget the impression her first meeting with him had left on her. His silver hair shone with a noble luster, and he had clear, mystical violet eyes. The shape of his nose and lips were beautiful, and just his presence alone could've turned any place into paradise.

Oh, Lord Claus...! His mere existence is a miracle!

Indeed, after just one glance at him, Ariel couldn't get the thought of him out of her head. That was why she wanted him to pay attention to her so badly and become *her* fiancé. And when her older stepsister, Jeanette, leisurely took the position of Claus's fiancée, Ariel envied and hated her. She hadn't hesitated to drive Jeanette out of the house by teasing her and kicking her down.

I did everything I could to be the one to take that beautiful man's hand. Yet in the end, Ariel had failed. She'd thought Claus liked her and found her attractive, but that had all been her own misconception. He'd even been aware of how Ariel had secretly slandered Jeanette among noble circles.

Ariel's cheeks burned with shame at the memory. More so than Claus choosing someone else, the fact that he knew of every misdeed she'd committed made her feel the most ashamed she'd ever been in her life. Leila had told her not to be discouraged, but Ariel wasn't as tough as her mother. They might have been related by blood, but they differed in that particular aspect.

Not to mention, Claus's face during the last ball Ariel had attended had said it all. *His expression practically screamed that he's head over heels for my sister, and that he doesn't need anything besides her.*

In the past, Claus had always smiled kindly, yet there had been a certain aloofness to him. His gaze had often looked cold and passionless. Ariel had

found all of that irresistibly attractive and had even believed she'd be the one to light a fire in his eyes someday.

But the way Claus had acted during that ball... He'd gazed at Jeanette so affectionately that it was as if he believed she was the only woman in existence. That had been when Ariel had realized that no matter how hard she tried, she'd never be able to have Claus look at her in the same way. The only person who could've made his eyes shine like that was Jeanette, whom Ariel had thoroughly bullied.

She breathed out a deep sigh. She wasn't even in the mood to continue her embroidery. Instead, she found herself thinking, *But Jeanette never bullied us in return, did she...?*

Ariel and Leila had both hurled verbal abuse at Jeanette, but the girl had always acted kindly toward them. Her stepsister had even brought that lovely, sparkling material for Ariel. She'd smiled while handing the silk to Ariel, and the look in her eyes had been pure and virtuous. If Jeanette had been trying to make a display of her generosity or condescend to them, Ariel was certain she'd have noticed and detested it.

However...

Jeanette gave it to me with pure kindness. It made me think it was silly of me to compete with her so much. I wondered what I've even been trying to do all this time...? Ariel recalled, staring off into the distance. *I'm sure mother wouldn't understand if I tried to tell her that, though.*

Indeed, Leila's fixation on Jeanette was a little abnormal. Unlike in Ariel's case, Jeanette wasn't a romantic rival for Leila, nor had she stolen the object of the woman's affection. Yet Leila seemed to care about it all a great deal more than Ariel herself did.

Father will be back soon too, so shouldn't she be more concerned about that? Unable to comprehend her mother's behavior, Ariel let out another sigh.

Right then, someone knocked on the door. The mansion's steward, Gilbert, entered shortly after. "Madam, Lady Jeanette is here," he notified Leila. "She'd like to speak with you, so I brought her to the parlor."

“Jeanette?!” Leila shrieked, springing to her feet.

Sister is here? Ariel wondered, quickly standing up as well. Her mother charged off like a bull, and Ariel hurried after her.

“Hello! It’s been a while!” Jeanette greeted them with a smile once the two women arrived in the parlor. Her expression was bright and cheerful, just the same as when she used to live in the Roussel estate.

She really did come, Ariel thought. Though they’d never used violence, Ariel knew that she and her mother had bullied Jeanette over and over and over again. Any other victim of such treatment—including Ariel herself—would certainly come to hate the sight of her family home. And she wouldn’t have been able to smile at the people who’d bullied her either. *Jeanette really is strange. Or did she come here with a goal in mind?*

Ariel glared at Jeanette suspiciously, but inwardly she was aware of the fact that the other girl had no schemes in mind. After all, her stepsister had always been a straightforward and honest person who wouldn’t try to cause Ariel or her mother any harm. Still, there had been times when something Jeanette had said with good intentions had incidentally exposed her stepfamily’s wrongdoings.

“Why are you here?! This isn’t your home anymore!” Leila declared, lifting her chin haughtily. Her tone of voice was angry yet somewhat victorious at the same time.

Ariel’s brows furrowed. *Am I imagining it, or does mother seem to be enjoying herself?*

“I know, it’s just that I heard you two haven’t been attending any events lately and I wondered why,” Jeanette said with genuine worry.

“You have no right to be concerned about that!” Leila scoffed. “We don’t have all the time in the world to participate in every single event!”

Actually, we have so much free time we don’t know what to do with it... Ariel murmured inwardly.

Leila huffed and puffed and for some reason began speaking in a triumphant

tone of voice. "You've been kicking up a fuss recently, Jeanette, so let me tell you something. Know your place, or you'll regret it! I'll make you understand where you belong!"

Ariel's eyes widened. *Goodness! I was curious why mother was always lost in thought lately, but could it be that she's been thinking of a way to put Jeanette "in her place" this whole time?! Mother really won't let up...* she thought. Ariel herself had already thrown away her fixation on Jeanette.

"Oh... I see! Thank you for the warning!" In her typical fashion, Jeanette seemed to have taken Leila's words as genuine advice. "I'm sorry. It was intrusive of me to have worried about you! If I hear any news about father, I'll be sure to let you know. Ah... And one more thing!" the girl added, clapping her hands as if remembering something. Then, she picked up the rectangular box which had been on the sofa next to her, and placed it on the table.

I wonder what's inside? Ariel thought, moving her face closer toward it curiously. Leila, ever one to be lured by material possessions, fixed her gaze on the box despite her tetchy attitude.

"This is a new product I'll be selling at Roussel Corporation soon," Jeanette explained. "I've been lucky enough to receive plenty of orders, but I brought one of these for you before they sell out."

When she opened the box, Leila excitedly peered inside with glittering eyes. However, a moment later she let out another disappointed puff. "What's this supposed to be? It looks filthy."

Inside the box was a small flowerpot, and something round which resembled a vegetable. *Is that an onion?* That was Ariel's first thought upon seeing it. She'd seen onions before when she went to the kitchen to get some sweets, and this object looked much alike.

"This is a tulip bulb. Have you heard of it before? It's a very beautiful flower!" Jeanette pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket, inside of which was a single flower. Ariel had never seen such a vibrant flower before, and its petals were huge. "This was grown in the Pakiran Imperial Palace! They cultivate some very rare and gorgeous flowers!"

"I don't want it," Leila said flatly, cutting off Jeanette's enthusiastic

explanation. The woman had already lost interest in the bulb and turned her gaze to the window in boredom. “Take that dirty lump of earth with you and go home.”

“Oh... It’s a really lovely flower, but if it doesn’t suit your liking, then fair enough,” Jeanette said, frowning slightly at Leila’s dismissive words as she began cleaning up the box.

At that moment, Ariel blurted out, “I’ll take it.”

Leila scowled upon hearing that, but Jeanette lit up. “Really?!” she asked, her eyes twinkling in the sunlight.

Ariel’s breath hitched when Jeanette looked directly at her with that expression. *Has she always been this pretty...?* Whenever Ariel had seen the other girl before their father’s disappearance, she had always been covered in dust. Jeanette had often helped out with cleaning and chores around the house, and her hair had been disheveled from using some tools and implements for business. On the occasions she had worn makeup, it had always been ridiculously heavy at Leila’s instructions.

When I saw her during the ball, I thought she looked prettier than usual thanks to her dress, but... Although Jeanette hadn’t dressed up or worn any special gown today, she was radiating a beauty that shone from within. Her red curls were glossy, and her large eyes were full of life and vigor. When Ariel looked carefully, she noticed Jeanette’s nose and lips were just as shapely as hers.

O-Oh...? But I’m still prettier, aren’t I? Ariel cleared her throat and pulled herself together to reply. “This doesn’t mean anything, you know? I just have a lot of time, so whether these are some special Pakiran flowers or not, I may as well grow them. Naturally, I’ll have the servants care for them,” she said, making up some excuses out of embarrassment.

“Of course! They are very beautiful, I promise! I’ll instruct Gilbert on how to look after them later,” Jeanette said with a joyful nod.

She is truly eccentric, to be so happy just because I said I’d grow some flowers, Ariel thought with a scowl. Nevertheless, she firmly picked up the flowerpot.

The tulips, which had been dubbed the “game of the gods” and “Spel van Goden,” had sold well shortly after launch, despite the fact that waiting for them to bloom would take some time. High society was abuzz with lively conversation on the topic.

“Did you already get some of those tulips? They say they’re beloved at the Pakiran Imperial Palace.”

“Of course I did. Spel van Goden, yes? Our gardener is tending to them as we speak.”

“Well, ours have already begun to sprout!”

“Preposterous! I heard they’re not supposed to grow that quickly. Are you sure you got them from Roussel Corporation? Perhaps you bought a fake?”

“Gosh!”

Indeed, everyone seemed to be enjoying competing with each other in how well they could grow the flowers before they even bloomed. Jeanette often listened to their lighthearted chatter with a grin on her face.

Right now, she was inside a horse-drawn carriage, and in high spirits she proclaimed, “Everything’s panning out just as you said it would, Lord Kyuri! I hear about the tulips everywhere I go. Some people have even placed preorders for the next batch of bulbs already!”

Kyuriakris looked satisfied as well. “It’s all because tulips are enticing flowers. Rich folk adore rare things, so I knew they’d jump on the bandwagon once we added some value to the tulips.”

“You’re so capable! You said you wanted to learn at Roussel Corporation, but if anything, you’re the one teaching me!”

“That’s not true. I might have come up with the idea for selling tulips, but I’ve learned a lot through the process. To think Claus would’ve done such a thing...” Kyuriakris said with a stifled laugh.

A few days ago, Kyuriakris had also shrewdly attended the ball at which Jeanette and Claus had unveiled the tulips. So as not to be recognized,

however, he'd served as a waiter during the event. The prince had witnessed the way Claus had pressed the tulip to his lips, causing several women to faint.

"That saintly Claus, pulling a pompous stunt like that... You sure tried hard, didn't you?" Kyuriakris asked with amusement.

Claus, who was sitting opposite him, retained his composure. "Say what you want. I only did what Jeanette asked. I'm willing to act as pompous as possible if that's her wish."

"Maybe you should look into an acting career. With your face and performance skills, you're sure to be a hit."

"I'm honored to receive your praise. Anyway, Jeanette, you say there are already orders for the next batch of tulips?"

Jeanette brightened at Claus's inquiry. "Yes! I explained that since harvesttime is short, once the bulbs are sold out, we won't be able to get more until the next season. But many people said they didn't mind and still placed their orders! Surprisingly enough, this might be a good long-term sales prospect."

Generally speaking, when it came to selling flowers, they were priced high in the early days due to their rarity, after which the price collapsed catastrophically. The fact that Jeanette was receiving orders for bulbs which wouldn't arrive until next year was unprecedented.

"That's incredible," Claus affirmed. "It's just a shame that we can't increase our stock through natural means..."

"But I don't want to just sit around and wait! That's why we're going to the port!" Jeanette declared, moving the curtain aside and peeking out of the window. She, Claus, Kyuriakris, and Sara were all in the carriage, heading toward the biggest port in the area, where large cargo ships docked.

Once the vehicle stopped with a rattle, they all disembarked and were greeted with the sight of countless people and packages.

"There are so many people already! Let's hurry along too!" Jeanette urged.

"Yes, milady!" Sara responded.

There was a large number of crates stacked here and there, and groups of men were standing and conversing. A hustle and bustle filled the air, and some people shouted at each other across the harbor. Eventually, those who finished talking piled up the crates onto their carriages and departed. All of the people here were either members of the crews who had transported the cargo, or merchants who had come to pick it up.

Jeanette's group had also arranged for a second carriage with other employees of Roussel Corporation to arrive shortly after theirs to help carry the goods.

"Now then, ours should be..." Kyuriakris trailed off as he led the group through the port. He had arranged for a large shipment from the Pakira Empire. "Ah, there it is." He was looking at a group of men who were obviously foreigners like him, evidenced by their dark-brown skin.

They must've noticed Kyuriakris too, as one of them raised his hand. "Over here, Your Highness!" he called in Pakiran.

The prince responded in kind. "Good work. Is that the whole shipment?"

"Yes! We scraped together as much as we could!"

Kyuriakris opened the lid of one of the crates and glanced inside, then smiled in satisfaction. "A nice selection."

Jeanette, Claus, and Sara curiously peeked in as well. The crate was filled with glossy, light-brown bulbs.

"No matter how many times I see them, they just look like onions to me..." Sara murmured under her breath.

"Hee hee! You're right. One day somebody's going to mistake them for onions and accidentally eat them," Jeanette replied. They had brown skin and were slightly pointed at the tip, so they truly did resemble onions. Alas, they were tulip bulbs.

After discussing something with the Pakiran crew for a while, Kyuriakris pointed toward the crates. "These boxes here are Spel van Goden. The rest are all normal tulips."

“Normal tulips? So they’re not *all* Spel van Goden?” asked Claus.

“We got more orders than I expected, so my stock of those has run out. They may not be as valuable as Spel van Goden, but tulips are tulips. You should still be able to sell them at a good price.”

“I see...” Claus murmured. “I suppose those who won’t be able to get their hands on Spel van Goden would be happy with normal tulips too.”

While they conversed, Sara stared at the bulbs with great intensity. When Jeanette noticed it, she addressed her maid. “What’s wrong? Is something on your mind?”

“I was just thinking... I bet if you *say* these tulips are Spel van Goden, people would believe it and buy them.”

Jeanette’s eyes grew wide at those words. Overhearing this, Kyuriakris and Claus burst out laughing.

“N-No, Sara!” Jeanette exclaimed in a panic. “It’s true that it might be impossible to tell from looks alone which are normal tulips and which were cultivated at the palace, but that would be a fraudulent claim!”

Sara’s eyes were sharper than ever as she responded briskly. “But nobody would know! They look just the same!”

“But look! The Spel van Goden bulbs are slightly smaller, and their color is a little darker,” Jeanette reasoned.

Rather than reconsidering her stance, Sara’s eyes narrowed even more as she glared fixedly at the bulbs. “I think you’re the only one able to see the difference, milady. If you mix the bulbs up, no ordinary person would be able to tell them apart. Besides, even if they’re not from the palace, if you trace their roots, surely they’d all be the same? So we could just give them a similar name and sell them that way!”

“That might be a good ide— No! No, no, no! You can’t say these things, Sara!” Jeanette, who’d been on the verge of thoughtlessly agreeing, frantically shook her head.

Claus, who’d been stifling his laugh this whole time, joined the conversation.

“I didn’t expect you to have such a formidable merchant’s spirit, Sara. That’s a wicked scheme you’ve thought up.”

“I’m not milady’s maid for nothing, you know? Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to handle that toxic stepmother of hers,” Sara declared curtly.

Kyuriakris laughed loudly at her response. “Aren’t you reliable? Just as I’d expect from Miss Jeanette’s own maid.”

“I’m so very honored to receive your praise.”

The prince wiped a tear of laughter from the corner of his eye, and then spoke again. “Making false claims about the products would be unacceptable, as it would be a breach of trust. However, selling them under a different name... Now that’s an idea.”

“But...!” Jeanette called out with mild but firm determination. “Have you already forgotten that we got those other tulips for a purpose other than just profit, Lord Kyuriakris?”

“Ah, you’d be correct.”

“A different purpose?” inquired Claus. “What else could you possibly be after?”

Jeanette’s expression grew intense. “To spread them among the general populace!”

“Huh?” Claus and Sara muttered in unison.

“Well, Spel van Goden is aimed at the upper classes. However...” Jeanette began her explanation.

Presently, the upper classes were using the Spel van Goden tulips as a status symbol. To have them in one’s garden was an assertion of one’s affluence and social standing. Everyone recognized that fact, and Jeanette believed that middle-and working-class people would’ve wanted to adopt that practice by now.

“That’s why I plan to purposely lower the price of the other tulips and make them affordable for ordinary citizens. After all, Roussel Corporation has always been an ally of the working class!” Jeanette proclaimed with a grin.

Claus nodded in acknowledgment, while Sara quickly lowered her head. “My apologies for trying to meddle without proper understanding!”

“It’s all right. It *is* a pretty interesting idea to change their name. I get the feeling I’ll be able to use that idea under different circumstances!” Jeanette replied, beaming. She had no intention of letting such a cunning idea go to waste. “Okay, let’s get these bulbs home! Sara, you’re in charge of leading the loading process.”

“Understood!” Sara said promptly. It wasn’t long before she and the other company employees were piling up the cargo onto the carriages.

“Lady Jeanette,” Gideon, her father’s right-hand man, called out. “The samples of the picture frames you ordered are ready as well. They’ve been delivered to Roussel Corporation, so you can check them yourself later.”

“Really?! I can’t wait!”

“Picture frames? Why did you get those out of nowhere?” asked Claus, tilting his head. Kyuriakris also glanced over, narrowing his eyes inquisitively.

“Tee hee!” Jeanette giggled as the two men stared at her. “I can’t wait to see them! If my hunch turns out correct, I’m sure we’ll be selling those soon too!”

Just as planned, following the sale of the tulips aimed at upper classes, Roussel Corporation began successfully selling cheaper tulips aimed at the middle and working classes. However, one unexpected factor was that other than the target clientele, nobles who hadn’t been able to get their hands on Spel van Goden also began buying the cheaper tulips. As such, the flowers sold out just as quickly as the first release.

The winter passed, welcoming spring. At last, the long-awaited time had come as the tulips bloomed, becoming the town’s hot topic.

“Lady Christine! The tulips in your garden are so colorful, they look like something out of a beautiful painting!” Jeanette exclaimed.

“Thank you. This is the first time we’ve had such an extravagant-looking

garden,” Christine responded with a happy giggle. She had invited Jeanette to one of her salons, and now they were sitting in the garden with a number of other noblewomen, admiring the blooming tulips. “By the way, has anyone visited the Barlier Viscountcy yet? I heard their garden looks amazing.”

One of the noblewomen was quick to come forward, her eyes lighting up. “I have! Their tulips are all pink!”

“All pink? That does sound lovely.”

“They’re not Spel van Goden, but it still takes a lot of time and effort to arrange a garden full of uniform, pink tulips.”

“Oh, I heard that Mr. Edmond deals mostly in pink tulips!” Jeanette spoke up.

Edmond was a merchant Jeanette got along with, and the chairman of Edmond Enterprise. As soon as Jeanette had begun selling tulips, Edmond and the other astute merchants had smelled the opportunity and quickly hopped on the bandwagon. Given that imitating and chasing trends was essential when it came to business, Jeanette had no negative feelings toward them.

Imitating isn’t the most crucial part. What really matters is putting your own spin on it and adding value to it that way, Jeanette thought. Copying products could still yield a decent profit, but adding a special characteristic would increase it all the more.

“Keeping the flowers all of the same color is very stylish too,” Christine proclaimed. “The Barliers weren’t a very prominent family up until now. But lately they’ve been receiving a flood of visit requests thanks to their tulips, and just like that their name has become recognizable.”

The other noblewomen all nodded in agreement. The chatter soon continued.

“It’s not just them! I heard the Pasmars Barony was lucky enough to get a very rare flower in their batch. Even though it’s just a single tulip, many people still request to visit and see it.”

“The Pasmars? Just what kind of flower could it be?”

“It’s quite shocking! They say the flower’s petals are very special! They’re light pink in color, but apparently the petals have soft, white frills around them!”

“Frills? On the petals?!”

And so the lighthearted conversation flowed. Duchess Pablo’s salons were always lively, but today everyone was particularly excited.

“Is that really a tulip, though?” one of the ladies questioned. “Lady Jeanette, what’s your opinion?”

“It’s very rare, but it could be something called the fringed tulip,” Jeanette answered. “The baron was very lucky!”

The other ladies shrieked in excitement at her confirmation. Ostensibly, they were all smiling pleasantly, but Jeanette could tell that their eyes were burning with desire to own such a flower as well.

The only one who remained truly composed was Christine, who spoke up gently. “It sounds like things will get even more exciting by this time next year. You already have reservations for bulbs, don’t you, Jeanette?”

“Yes, and I’m so thankful for that! We’re making every effort to increase our stock, but it’s very competitive. To be honest, the best we can do right now is maintain our current level of sales.”

“Goodness, really?!”

At the ladies’ surprised exclamations, Jeanette nodded. With the arrival of spring, the tulips had become more and more popular. The moment they had bloomed, they’d become the talk of town. Eager to ride the wave, numerous other merchants had begun making their moves. Some tried carrying out large-scale cultivation on their own land, while others hunted around for undeveloped land to use. Yet others attempted to obtain stock from different companies.

Since Kyuriakris was the first prince of Pakira, few were able to outmaneuver him. However, a handful of companies here and there were still managing to inflate the prices.

“In that case, I must do anything I can to get those tulips!” asserted one of the noblewomen. “Lady Jeanette, please secure some bulbs for me on the basis of our friendship!”

“Me too! I don’t want my family to become a laughingstock because we failed to get tulips!”

The ladies all began clinging to the disoriented Jeanette.

“It’s all right! I’ll definitely secure the bulbs for you!” she assured them. “Also, Roussel Corporation will begin selling a certain *something* tomorrow that will go perfectly with the tulips... Please be sure not to miss it!”

“A certain something? What could it be?” asked one of the women as they all tilted their heads in unison.

Jeanette chuckled and replied with “Picture frames!”

The next day, at Roussel Corporation’s main store, Jeanette addressed her employees in a resonant voice. “The time has finally come for these guys to make their debut!” With that, she held up a simple wooden picture frame high up above her head. It was about the size of a book and had no particular patterns or designs on it. It was a plain wooden item.

The only thing that made it unique was the fact it had a detachable stand on the back, meaning the frame could stand up by itself.

“What’s that director of ours up to this time?” Kyuriakris asked, observing the scene in amusement.

Claus, who was standing next to him, smiled triumphantly. “Oh? She still hasn’t told you? She already let me know ahead of time, and I think it’s a pretty good idea.”

Kyuriakris looked irritated upon hearing those boastful words. “I see... Anyway, why are you always hanging around Roussel Corporation? This company has nothing to do with you,” he pointed out in puzzlement.

Claus was openly surprised. “Nothing to do with me? Ridiculous. Roussel Corporation is like a treasure to Jeanette. That’s why I’m also making every effort to watch over my beloved fiancée’s treasure.”

“Right... Then what about your work as a feudal lord and chairman of Matheson Trading?”

“It’s going well too. I always make sure to promptly wrap up anything I need to do myself, and House Guivarch has recently gained plenty of talented personnel thanks to Jeanette’s stepmother. I know I can trust them with most of the work. Luckily, they’re all excellent at what they do,” Claus explained with a content smile.

Around that time, Jeanette raised her arms in the air to make a grand announcement. “Time to open the shop!”

The doors opened in time with the ringing of her cheerful voice, and the people who had been lining up all swarmed inside. Everyone had heard the rumor of a certain item going on sale, and they had been on high alert since early morning.

“Hello! I heard you’re selling something that goes well with tulips. Just what is it?!” one of the clients inquired.

“That object you’re holding—is that the new product?” another prompted.

“Yes,” Jeanette responded. “This is the item in question. Please take a look, everyone!” After drawing the crowd’s attention to the picture frame in her hands, she signaled Sara with her eyes.

The maid, who’d been keeping to the side, stepped forward and presented the flowerpot she’d been hiding. A single red tulip was planted inside.

“What is this...?” someone murmured in confusion.

Jeanette and Sara nodded at each other. First, Jeanette placed the picture frame atop the well-made table in the middle of the store. Then, Sara positioned the flowerpot in a way that made it look like it was inside the frame.

“Hmm? That looks like a painting of the tulip!”

Inside the plain wooden frame stood the vibrant tulip. Just as one of the men in the crowd had said, it looked like an elaborate, three-dimensional painting. The clients began exclaiming in agreement, at which Jeanette nodded.

“As you can see, despite the frame’s simple make, adding a tulip makes it look like a painting on display. And of course, we also have more luxurious frames available for those interested!”

At her words, the company workers all came forward to present the other picture frames. There were white frames which had a sense of cleanliness about them and frames with intricately carved designs. Some were even golden, adding a sense of extravagance. There were all kinds of options for people to choose within their budget.

“Like a painting, huh...? Miss Jeanette thought this through,” Kyuriakris said, sounding impressed.

The customers began noisily checking the price tags. One woman cried, “How incredible! I wonder how this frame would look in my home?!”

“It’s a lot cheaper than I expected!” exclaimed one of the men. “I can afford this one...”

Jeanette smiled in satisfaction. When the tulips had first bloomed, all the artists had begun painting them as if they’d been waiting for this moment. The aristocrats often commissioned portraits with tulips in them, but the most requested painting was a landscape of tulip fields. However, such detailed commissions took time, so for many working class people, they were an unattainable luxury good.

That was why Jeanette had the idea for picture frames. The most basic ones didn’t take long to make, and the possibility of mass production would keep the prices down. That meant that the price would be affordable even to those who’d only managed to get their hands on one bulb. Jeanette had proposed using a real tulip to create the impression of a painting.

She had thought up the frames for those who didn’t have money, but still wanted to enjoy tulips. That was the truth behind this whole idea, and the people happily responded to her thoughtfulness.

“I’ll have one of these frames! No, make it two! I want to give one to my neighbor!”

“Well, I might as well get a slightly fancier one... Since this won’t wilt like a flower, I can use it for a long time!”

“All right!” Jeanette called out. “Please line up in front of the clerk who has the frame you’re interested in. They will attend to you!”

In the end, Roussel Corporation's picture frames sold like hotcakes. From the cheapest to the most luxurious, all sold well. The nobility unanimously bought the extravagant frames, but many of the common folk who wanted to show off also went for the slightly pricier ones.

"I'm sure this lovely frame will be beautiful in front of my garden! It'll look like a cutout of the scenery. Won't that be wonderful? I can't wait for everyone to see it!"

"I'll put that special tulip that bloomed in our garden into the frame. I bet my wife will love it."

Jeanette smiled as she watched each customer grinning to themselves at the thought of decorating their home with the frames. In business, products ranged from daily necessities to luxury goods, but what Jeanette liked most was selling goods the clients loved. Seeing their smiles was her favorite part.

"I have a prediction: I'll bet you that knockoffs will appear on the market instantly," Kyuriakris told Jeanette impishly.

"I agree. Imitation is easy, after all," Jeanette replied with a nonchalant giggle.

Claus stepped closer to her. "That's to be expected. But however much they try to imitate, I'm sure soon enough you'll think up yet another idea that will usher in a new era," he said, gazing at her with utmost tenderness.

"Th-That's an exaggeration... I mean, the tulips were originally Lord Kyuri's idea," she said humbly, feeling embarrassed.

Claus chuckled. "Indeed? But even though Kyuri brought in the tulips, *you're* the one who guided them to success. And now, you're selling goods which came from within your compassionate heart. You're the only one who could've produced them." As he spoke, he reached out in a fluid motion to grasp a lock of Jeanette's hair, pressing it to his lips.

"Ah?!" Caught off guard, Jeanette's face flushed bright red.

"I love you for who you are from the bottom of my heart. Just like the extendable feather duster you developed for Sara, or the wondrous apron which enchanted everyone at Matheson, your products are always something you made for the sake of another person. Don't you think that shows your

character?”

“Th-Th-Thank you...! I didn’t expect to hear such praise from you, so... My heart...!” Jeanette stammered, petrified.

Kyuriakris looked as if he’d bit into a lemon as he watched them. “There you go again, Claus. I didn’t think you’d try to woo her so boldly right in front of me. Desperate, aren’t you?”

“Well, I suppose I am,” Claus responded, unruffled by the prince’s words. “Perhaps you don’t know, but Jeanette’s thickheadedness isn’t normal. How many times do you think I’ve tried making advances toward her? But to my shock, she hasn’t realized it at all. I don’t care if I come across as desperate at this point.” For all he’d said, he still wasn’t letting go of Jeanette’s hair.

“Um...! B-But...I’d say I kind of got the message recently. I think I’m starting to understand...!” Jeanette claimed, frantically defending herself as her body trembled.

Claus didn’t seem convinced. If anything, his frown deepened. “Not yet, Jeanette. You still don’t understand just how important you are to me or how much I treasure you. Because if you *did*, surely you wouldn’t have shown up in front of me after your bath wearing only your nightgown! You’re not conscious of the fact I’m a man at all, are you?!”

Kyuriakris roared with laughter. “Pfft... Ha ha ha! *What?!* Is that how Miss Jeanette acts around the house?!”

“Huh? W-Was that something I shouldn’t have done?!” Jeanette squeaked. *We all did it back when I lived at the Roussel estate, so I thought it’s normal...!*

Both Leila and Ariel always loitered around in their nightwear after taking their baths. Jeanette had thought nothing of it and acted just the same. Yet it seemed like that was strange. Her cheeks burned with shame. “I’m sorry! I’ll be more mindful next time!” she exclaimed, bowing repeatedly.

Claus gently stopped her. “No, it’s fine. The Guivarch estate is your home. Walking around your own house in your nightgown isn’t in itself a bad thing. Just... You look too vulnerable that way...”

“Hey, Claus,” Kyuriakris spoke up. “I’m asking just in case, but are you sure

Miss Jeanette wasn't trying to seduce you?"

"You wouldn't believe how much I wish that were the case. But sadly, the probability of that is zero."

"Yeah, I thought so! Ha ha ha!" The prince was holding his stomach from laughter. "I see, so that's how it is. Sorry, Claus. I feel like I've finally gotten a taste of your pain!"

S-Seduce?! Could it be that walking in your nightwear in front of a man comes across as seduction?! Jeanette thought. She was completely ignorant when it came to romance or love affairs. Her father had been entirely dedicated to his business, and her stepmother, who should've been the one to impart such knowledge to her, obviously wouldn't have done so.

Ahh, this is so embarrassing! I'll have to swallow my shame and ask Sara about it! Hmm...? But whenever I've run into Lord Claus in my nightgown, hasn't Sara always been with me? I did notice she kept giggling about it, but I don't think she seemed angry...

While Jeanette was recalling such memories, Claus suddenly looked up as though he'd noticed something. "Oh, Jeanette. Duchess Pablo is here."

"What?!" Jeanette hurriedly glanced toward the shop entrance, where she indeed spotted Christine. The woman was curiously surveying the picture frames with an elegant smile. Duke Pablo was by her side too. "Oh no! I'll attend to them!" Jeanette exclaimed, rushing away.

And so the tulips which Kyuriakris had shipped over, along with the picture frames which accommodated all social classes, spread through the country like wildfire. Their reach stretched outside the imperial capital, to both nobles living in remote regions and commoners living in the countryside. Indeed, they were in high demand even at the furthest reaches of the nation.

Even after Roussel Corporation's stock had run out, the other merchants kept bringing in shipments from somewhere, and day by day the country's tulip numbers grew. People were quite literally crazy about them, and the flowers were spreading with such vigor that one could say they were propagating.

Little by little, the tulips' impact started throwing everyone out of gear, and amid the madness, something crept after Jeanette's footsteps, gradually drawing closer.

"What?! Your suppliers pulled out?!" Jeanette shrieked. She was in Roussel Corporation's head office along with Kyuriakris, who had a troubled look on his face. Although he was royalty, he took his work very seriously and there had never been any delays from his side before. Yet today, he'd arrived first thing in the morning and informed her of such a thing.

"Yeah," he replied. "Looks like someone sniffed them out. Those cursed hyenas..."

"I know that everyone's been scrambling for the tulips lately, but for them to reach your suppliers too..." Jeanette whispered.

The more popular the tulips became in this nation, the more the bulb prices rose. On average, a working class family needed to earn at least three million krandells annually to support themselves. While the Spel van Goden tulips aimed at royalty had launched at the price of one hundred thousand krandells, the normal tulips aimed at the lower classes were marketed for five thousand. But since Roussel Corporation's supply kept selling out, others had begun selling both kinds of tulips.

At first, Spel van Goden had doubled in price. When that hadn't been enough, it tripled, and then the price had been marked up all the way to five hundred thousand krandells per bulb. The normal tulips had initially been marked up to fifty thousand krandells, but as there was no shortage of buyers, they eventually skyrocketed to two hundred thousand—even more than the initial price of the Spel van Goden.

In short, Jeanette's competitors were willing to purchase tulips at inflated prices in order to sell them at even higher prices. As a result, the farms cultivating the tulips in Pakira as Kyuriakris's suppliers started to feel dissatisfied. They might have been obliged to assist the imperial family, but they were unhappy that other farms were earning much more than they were despite selling the very same product. Of course, Jeanette and her team had

planned to raise their own prices a little as a countermeasure and compensate their suppliers accordingly, but...

“Double-crossing royalty is already remarkable enough, but trying to rip us off is equally as bad. Now, they’re demanding one million krandells for a single bulb,” Kyuriakris said spitefully.

“A million?! For the wholesale price?! That’s ten times the original retail price!” Jeanette exclaimed. She felt a wave of vertigo hit her, and lifted her hand to her forehead. Originally, she’d thought one hundred thousand krandells was a good market price for the Spel van Goden. But for the suppliers to demand one million?!

“They must believe we can still make a profit at that price. Thankfully, the number of suppliers who pulled out isn’t that high, but even so, I’ve had to raise the purchase price significantly,” Kyuriakris explained. When Jeanette asked him the new wholesale price for regular tulips, he informed her that it was three hundred thousand krandells per bulb—more than twenty times the original price.

“But it’s still cheaper than it could’ve been...” Jeanette said. “Usually, if a supplier finds someone willing to buy from them at a higher price, they switch clients immediately...”

Kyuriakris had a strong hand to play because he was royalty. But Jeanette had heard that for other companies, the quest for tulips was a pure gold-driven brawl. If the supplier was about to sell the bulbs for three hundred thousand krandells each, but someone else showed up offering one million krandells per bulb, naturally they’d choose the latter buyer. That was how merchants stole each other’s suppliers, and then had their own stolen in turn, creating a looping cycle of skyrocketing prices.

Merchants Jeanette was acquainted with, such as Edmond and Gautier, regularly complained about that phenomenon whenever she exchanged information with them.

“Still, for the prices to fluctuate this much in such a short period of time...” she murmured.

“Ever since the investors... No, ever since the resellers caught a whiff of it, the

tide has been changing drastically,” Kyuriakris noted. “They have no intention of cultivating the flowers themselves. They just want to roll out as many bulbs as possible, and all they’re thinking about is their own profit.”

“Yes, that’s how they operate... But the problem is that the bulbs are still selling even at that price. For now, let’s just confirm our own inventory!”

“Yeah, let’s prioritize that.”

Jeanette and Kyuriakris hurriedly pulled out a list of their patrons.

“It’ll be a huge problem if we can’t supply clients who made reservations,” Jeanette fretted. “We’ll have to visit them all and explain about the rising prices too.”

The first people they’d have to notify were definitely Duke and Duchess Pablo. *After that, I’ll visit everyone from the salon, and then the others too...* Jeanette thought. While she was racking her brain to think of how to go about all of that, Kyuriakris suddenly stepped closer to her.

“By the way, Miss Jeanette—or rather, Jeanette...”

“Yes?”

“Claus isn’t here today. How unusual.”

“Ah, right,” she said, glancing up at him from the list. “Lord Claus is out for an inspection, and won’t be back until evening.”

Indeed, Claus had needed to run an inspection today as a feudal lord, and there was no getting out of it. Hence, with great reluctance, he’d been forced to leave Jeanette’s side. She had seen him off to the carriage that morning, and he held on to her hand tightly until the very last second. Then, in a doleful voice, he’d said, *“Jeanette, please promise me that no matter what, you will absolutely not let Kyuriakris be alone with you. I have a bad feeling about it.”*

“Oh?” Kyuriakris looked very amused to hear that. He drew even closer to Jeanette, practically blocking her way.

“Lord Kyuri...?”

He was incredibly tall and had a great physique. Jeanette stiffened at the intimidating air emanating from him. She reflexively took a step back, but there

was a large bookcase behind her, so she had nowhere to run.



Seeing her like this, Kyuriakris smirked like a cat chasing a mouse. “Claus told you all of that, and yet you’ve carelessly found yourself alone with me, hmm?” he said, his dark, narrow eyes creasing with mirth. His grin was terribly alluring—it was as intense as a wild tiger, yet simultaneously filled with sex appeal.

Wah...! This man is like something out of a painting! If Sara were to see him like this, I bet she’d get a nosebleed! Jeanette thought fearfully. Right then, Kyuriakris’s angular hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her closer.

“U-Um! You can’t do that!” she squeaked.

“Why? Because you’re Claus’s fiancée?” Kyuriakris asked. “But I told you, didn’t I? I will not give up, and I’ll bring you back with me to Pakira as my empress. If you’re after someone to blame, then blame Claus for leaving us alone like this,” he said, his face drawing closer to Jeanette’s.

She tried to push him back with all her might and shrieked, “B-But we’re not alone right now!”

Kyuriakris froze at her words, and silence settled over the room. “We’re not alone? What do you— Whoa!” he exclaimed in shock when he noticed Gideon, who was suddenly standing right next to him. The older man was smiling calmly, but his eyes were blazing. “M-Mr. Gideon! When did *you* get here?!”

Gideon, the older twin brother of the butler Gilbert, didn’t even flinch at the proximity of the prince as he fixed his monocle. Then, in a cheerful tone of voice, he announced, “I’ve been in this room from the very beginning.”

Chapter 3: At the End of the Frenzy

“Ariel! Ariel! Where are you?!”

Ariel was squatting down in the garden and working when she heard her mother’s voice calling her name. The woman must’ve been searching for her. Ariel stopped what she was doing and shouted back in the direction of the house. “I’m here, mother!”

Leila hurried outside upon hearing her response. Of course, she had a parasol in her hand so as to avoid the sunlight.

“What is it, mother?” Ariel inquired, rubbing her gloved hands together. A cloud of dust swirled in the air as a result.

Leila looked disgusted. “Ariel! Why do you look like that?! It’s unladylike!”

“Oh!” Ariel looked down at herself in surprise. She had donned a large straw hat to shield herself from the sun, and she’d tied her hair back in a ponytail so as not to dirty it. She’d put an apron over her dress to protect it from the soil, and in her gloved hands she was holding a shovel.

“The tip of your nose is dirty with mud!” Leila complained with disdain.

Ariel quickly wiped it with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry! I just wanted to dig up the bulbs... But look, mother! We got another bulb, just like Gilbert said we would!” Ariel exclaimed, innocently holding out a small plant bulb. Jeanette had given one like this to her in the past.

Shortly after receiving the bulb, Ariel had initially pushed the plant care onto Gilbert. But there was a reason she was digging it up herself now.

Ever since the glass beads incident, rumors had been spreading among high society about how Ariel had bullied Jeanette. Because of that, the number of marriage proposals she was receiving had decreased dramatically. To make matters worse, any time Ariel attended a social event, the other nobles would snicker at her, just like they had once at Jeanette. Usually, such gossip was just the product of the ladies killing time and making things up, but unlike with

Jeanette, everything they said about Ariel was true.

Getting her just deserts had left Ariel feeling ashamed and uncomfortable, and before she knew it, she'd cut herself off from high society.

However, her mother was fuming all day every day at home, making things even more uncomfortable. And eventually, Ariel had gotten bored of embroidery and playing piano. With too much free time on her hands, she'd begun watering the flowers herself. She kept on diligently looking after them with Gilbert's instruction, and the tulips had bloomed quite splendidly indeed.

The flowers ended up being a gentle mix of white and pink—Ariel's favorite color. They were wondrously beautiful.

When they had first bloomed, Ariel was so moved by the sight that she'd just stood there motionlessly, staring at them. The fact that she had raised the flowers with her own hands might've had a strong impact on her.

In the past, she'd always tossed away flowers the second they started showing signs of wilting. Yet when it came to these tulips, she checked every single day to ensure they hadn't been damaged by the wind or insects, painstakingly caring for them. On top of that, if she replanted the bulb she'd just dug up, at Gilbert's advice, she'd be able to see these flowers again next year.

That knowledge made these flowers Ariel's greatest joy to date.

"Huh? That clod's a plant bulb?" Leila questioned huffily. "Planting it will produce even more tulips?"

"Yes! Isn't that wonderful?" Ariel responded, her eyes glittering as she began explaining.

Just digging up the bulb after the tulip bloomed was a no-go. First, the flower had to be plucked, and the bulb dug up, nourished, and fattened up. Gilbert had taught her all of that.

At first, I thought touching soil was gross. But once I actually tried it, it was surprisingly fun, Ariel thought. Still, the first time I did it was mostly out of boredom.

“Hmm...” Leila muttered with disinterest, but Ariel paid this no mind and continued.

“I felt so moved when they first bloomed! It was amazing. It made me think about how plants are alive too. Mother, you should definitely raise them with me next time! I think this could be a nice form of recreation for you.”

“Indeed. I’ll consider it,” Leila replied, plucking the tulip bulb from Ariel’s hand and holding it up.

Ariel was completely convinced that her mother was interested in the bulb as she watched her. However...

“Well, if you’re saying all that, then I’m sure this will grow into a tulip, yes? Good job, Ariel. I’ll be taking this for the sake of the house.”

“Right... Wait, what?” Ariel asked. *Taking it...?* she wondered, and her thoughts came to a sudden halt.

Her mother continued, sounding pleased. “Tulip bulbs seem to be selling at extraordinary prices right now. You got that Spel van Goden kind that Jeanette is selling, yes? It’s quite unbelievable, but even at their lowest, these bulbs are now selling for three hundred thousand krandells. To think that this lump of earth is worth more than a jewel... Laughable, isn’t it?” The woman snickered.

Huh? Mother wants to sell it...?

Having conjectured her mother’s plan, Ariel called out in bewilderment. “Um, mother... That tulip belongs to me, though...”

At the same time as she said those words, Leila purposefully breathed out a deep sigh. A shudder ran through Ariel in response.

When Jeanette had lived with them, Ariel had avoided misfortune by teaming up with her mother to torment the other girl. But Leila had always had a bad temper. Ever since Jeanette had left, Leila had begun venting her anger on Ariel more and more often. Recently, the woman had been especially irritable, and Ariel had been on her best behavior to avoid angering her in any way. Yet now...

As those cold blue eyes glowered at her, Ariel’s shoulders trembled.

“Ariel... Are you talking back to me? Besides, I have to pay to look after you

since you're not getting any marriage proposals! The baron's apparently still alive, but he hasn't come back at all, and our family funds are being held by that infuriating Gilbert! If you want to raise a complaint, then find yourself a rich husband!"

"I'm sorry..." Ariel said dejectedly.

Leila huffed in satisfaction. "That's how it is, so I'll be taking this bulb."

"B-But... Do you really have to sell it? How about my jewels instead? I was really looking forward to seeing this flower bloom again..."

"Ariel."

Her mother's voice was as cool as ice. Ariel felt something in her chest tighten, and a cold sweat broke out on the back of her slender neck.

"If I sell this, then you'll have finally done something useful for this family. Do you understand? I'm going to sell it. Yes?" Leila was smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes at all.

Knowing the woman wouldn't tolerate a refusal, Ariel hung her head. "Y-Yes..."

Indeed, Ariel hadn't been very useful to the family until now. She didn't know how to earn money like Jeanette, and because of her bad reputation, she didn't have many suitors. In fact, previously she hadn't even considered accepting a proposal from anyone but Claus, and she knew that at this rate, she might have a late marriage.

But amid all of that, the little bulb could help her mother.

That's right... I should be happy that my flowers are useful, Ariel thought, staring at the flower bed for a long, long time.

The tulips' prices continued sharply increasing. At first the Spel van Goden went up from 1 million krandells to 1.5 million, and then rose all the way to 2 million. Nobles and merchants alike granted the blooming flowers magnificent names, and though all they had were the bulbs, the price just kept going up. People were chasing after tulips as fervently as if they were stricken with fever.

“What’s with this frenzy...?” grumbled Kyuriakris, holding his head in his hands. He was in the company president’s office together with Jeanette, Claus, Gideon, and the other workers.

The farms that served as Kyuriakris’s suppliers were finally making demands high enough that even the imperial family alone couldn’t meet them. Right now, Roussel Corporation was holding a meeting about how much they could increase the wholesale price they paid suppliers.

“Tulips are an exalted flower in my home, yes. I’m proud of their inherent beauty and worth. But there’s something strange about this sheer mania...” Kyuriakris said with a shake of his head, muttering about how he couldn’t comprehend it.

Next to him, Claus was looking thoughtful with his hand pressed to his chin. “Right now, our nation is the richest it’s ever been. Many of our merchants have become wealthy from the mines and shipping routes. Quite frankly, Baron Roussel was one of them.”

Jeanette and the other company employees nodded at his words.

“The same goes for nobles,” Claus continued. “I don’t know how much profit they make from the right of first refusal they’ve acquired, but I’m certain it’s a lot. On top of that, they have time. That means they’ve all been looking for something to invest their wealth in.”

“And they chose tulips, huh...?” Kyuriakris muttered, and Claus nodded.

I did think the sales were particularly favorable these last few years, including when Roussel Corporation was selling the milk glass products and the Orlande silk... Jeanette thought. It must be because this country is prosperous.

Unlike Claus, Jeanette hadn’t received a proper education in economics. But she understood that the nation was wealthy based on her own experiences. The country was on the cusp of an era one could even dub a golden age, and so everyone was on the hunt for more beautiful and more worthy things that they could engross themselves in.

One of the employees, an older woman one might as well think of as Roussel Corporation’s mother, stepped forward. “I understand the reason behind this

frenzy, but what will we do about the wholesale price? Are we going to keep increasing it without end?" she asked with a sour expression. She had known Jeanette for a long time and often doted on her. "I smell danger!"

"But just look!" one of the men lashed out. "The tulips' prices keep rising without limit. We could drop them now, but what if next year their price goes up ten times? It'll be a heavy loss for us!" He had known Jeanette's father for a long time and had always aimed to improve things for the company.

The two began arguing back and forth, and the other employees soon joined in, creating pandemonium. Jeanette remained silent, however, listening attentively to each of their opinions while deliberating. This went on for a while, until eventually the employees, realizing they were getting nowhere, turned to her.

"What do *you* think, Jeanette?!"

"Yeah, Jeanette's the president! If she makes the decision, the rest of us won't have any complaints."

All their gazes locked on Jeanette. She crossed her arms, and slowly closed her eyes. And then...

This feeling... This is... Jeanette's eyes flew open. Finally, it's another reward, isn't it?!

In truth, she was indescribably excited. It often happened that after business went well, some kind of reward showed up. But to think that this time, it took the form of such an abnormally sharp rise in prices and the scramble for plant bulbs!

This is a brand new type of reward! How should I deal with it?! she pondered, her eyes shining at this unfamiliar kind of reward. Unconsciously, her nostrils flared.

Noticing the way Jeanette had started huffing and puffing wildly through her nose, Claus chuckled. He cast a sideways glance at Kyuriakris, who had question marks floating above his head, before leaning in to whisper to Jeanette. "You're so excited that you're out of breath, Jeanette. Come on, take a deep breath..."

"Huh...? Oh!" Jeanette exclaimed in realization. She looked around to find

that the employees, who had been at each other's throats moments ago, were now looking at her with fond smiles.

"You're the same as ever, Jeanette..."

"Honestly, you're the only one who'd get this excited over such a situation."

"This is so nostalgic... It feels like you've finally come back home, Jeanette," said Gideon with a quiet laugh.

"R-Really...?!" Jeanette murmured in embarrassment as the company's workers gazed at her with smiles on their faces.

The ambience was completely relaxed now, as if the previous arguing had never even happened. Only Kyuriakris was unable to keep up with Jeanette's "reward" idea, and kept blinking repeatedly in confusion.

Claus approached him, looking proud. "Let me fill you in, Kyuri. You see, my Jeanette is never discouraged and doesn't lose her cheerfulness, no matter what happens. That's just the kind of indomitable spirit she possesses."

"Huh?"

"Any kind of predicaments or trials are a reward in her eyes. Just look at how she faces such trials! Her eyes shine like the morning dew on a sprout, and her blushing cheeks are like roses scattered over snow. She looks more valiant and sublime than a war goddess, and more adorable and gorgeous than a goddess of beauty! Don't you think so too...?!"

Jeanette's face flushed as Claus's statements gradually became more and more extreme. *L-Lord Claus! Aren't you praising me a bit too much?! I can hear everything...! How does he even see me?!*

Claus was narrating with tears in his eyes, while Kyuriakris stared at him as if he was seeing a new life-form. "Claus... Just when did you become a poet?"

Claus reddened, snapping back to his senses. "Ahem... What I meant to say is, I and everyone else are very much looking forward to seeing what Jeanette will do next."

Gideon and the other employees nodded in agreement, turning to address the girl.

“You’re the president, Jeanette.”

“We will follow you.”

“Go on, tell us. How should Roussel Corporation proceed from here?”

While they gazed at her, Jeanette slowly opened her mouth. “Whether we stop or continue... Everyone, won’t you give me a little more time to decide?”

“More time?”

“Yes. For now, there are still too many unknown variables, and I’ll need more evidence before I make a decision. Of course, we can’t afford to just sit and wait, but...”

“You’re right,” Kyuriakris muttered. “Should I prolong the negotiations, then? That should be manageable for me.”

“Yes, please! I’ll come to a conclusion in the meantime!” Jeanette responded vigorously, and everyone nodded at her words.

“Oho ho ho!” Leila’s laugh echoed inside the Roussel estate.

Ariel listened to it with a bored expression. It’d been a long time since her mother had been in such a good mood.

“To think we sold that tiny bulb for five hundred thousand krandells!” the woman exclaimed. “You did well, Ariel!”

Ariel didn’t know to whom Leila had sold the bulb, but it seemed like she’d gotten a good deal on it. Indeed, for a plant bulb to sell for five hundred thousand krandells was unheard of, but Ariel couldn’t pretend to be happy about it. “I see. That’s nice,” she replied with disinterest.

Leila picked up on this, and approached her. She placed both hands on her daughter’s shoulders, and murmured in a coaxing tone, “Listen, Ariel. I want you to ask Jeanette for a ‘favor’ and get more bulbs out of her. They sell for an even better price before they’re raised, you know? I’m certain that girl’s saved up plenty of them.”

Ariel pouted and shrugged off Leila’s hands. To her, the implication that tulip

bulbs could be sold for a higher price before being raised meant that the bulb she had put all her efforts into growing and then handed over for the good of the house was worthless.

“No,” she replied. “If you want them, how about you ask Jeanette yourself?”

“My, what are you sulking for? Jeanette has always given us anything we wanted, no?” Leila countered, her long, bright red nail running down Ariel’s cheek slowly. Ariel lowered her head to avoid her mother’s gaze.

Indeed, when Jeanette had lived with them, the two women had often asked her for all kinds of “favours.” Anything they wanted, they would get, no matter how expensive it might’ve been. They’d offered Jeanette no reward nor even a word of thanks.

So why did Ariel feel so reluctant to do it now?

It’s not just because mother’s making a fool out of me and my bulb...

Ariel’s life had changed drastically these past few months. Before, she had lived like any other rich, young noblewoman. She’d worn new dresses, adorned herself with pricey jewels, and attended dazzling balls. The gentlemen had flattered her with their attention, but the only one her heart desired, Claus, had never even glanced at her. As retaliation, Ariel had spread slander about the unattractive Jeanette and pushed her around.

Right when Jeanette had left the house, Claus had gone with her, and Ariel had stopped attending high society events. The only people in the house had been the ever-irritable Leila and a few servants who timidly and fearfully tried to appease the women. Since Ariel couldn’t attend balls, all that was left for her to do was embroidery and watering the flowers in the garden. This way of life was very quiet, and provided her with lots of opportunities to think...

A few months ago, while Ariel was watering the Spel van Goden bulb Jeanette had recently given to her, Gilbert had approached her out of nowhere. “Oh? You’re very quiet today, milady.” Ariel looked up at him, noticing that his light-blue eyes—one covered by a monocle—were unusually warm today as he smiled at her. “Just the other day, you were kicking up a fuss about how bored you were with all your free time and how you wanted to go out. Whatever caused your change of heart?”

“Nothing, really... I just realized something,” she had replied.

“Oh? And what might that be?”

Ariel hadn’t answered that question. The silence had been filled only by the sound of the water sprinkling over the sprout. Right as Gilbert was about to give up and walk away, Ariel had spoken up.

“Father is fine, isn’t he? So when he comes back, do you think the house will become lively again like in the past?”

Gilbert’s eyes had widened at her murmured words. “Do you mean in the same way when Lady Jeanette was here?”

Ariel had considered his inquiry for a while, before nodding softly.

“In that case, I don’t think things will be the same even once milord returns. He’s a sprightly man, but he tends to be absent-minded. The one who always illuminated this house like the sun was Lady Jeanette herself.”

Once upon a time, Ariel would’ve scoffed at his words. She would’ve certainly said something like, “How is she like the sun? She’s just noisy and graceless.”

But now, Ariel did no such thing. After spending so much time alone with her mother, she had finally noticed something despite herself.

Without Jeanette, the Roussel estate had become strangely desolate. *No matter the kind of absurd things she’d say, Jeanette always had that foolish smile on her face. Father has a loud voice too, so when you put them together, it was truly so boisterous...*

Leila had always looked down on her husband and stepdaughter, calling them vulgar. In front of the baron, she had always acted sweet, but as soon as he was out of sight, she’d ostentatiously whisper to Ariel, “This is why I hate upstarts. They’re so unrefined!”

I admit, sister was always such a loud eyesore, and the way she wouldn’t stop talking about business was gross, Ariel thought. But...no matter what, she was always smiling brightly, and she’d get me such exciting things so often...

If Ariel had said she wanted a cute hair ornament, Jeanette would show up with a beautiful ornament embedded with gemstones in the shape of a

butterfly. If Ariel had said she wanted a state-of-the-art dress, Jeanette would bring her a gown she'd custom-ordered from an up-and-coming tailor. If Ariel had said she wanted to eat something delicious, Jeanette would obtain a rare recipe for a foreign dish and have the house chef make it.

Whatever absurd requests Leila and Ariel made of Jeanette, the girl had always fulfilled them as if by magic, never breaking her smile.

Back then, this had been so par for the course that Ariel had never thought anything of it. But once she'd lost it, she had noticed something for the first time: just how much Jeanette had always *spoiled* her and how much Ariel had relied on her.

Even when her requests were so selfish that Ariel couldn't share them with her mother, she had known she could tell Jeanette. Then, draped in the lovely things Jeanette had given her, Ariel would attend balls. And as a way of entertaining herself and avoiding becoming a victim herself, she had begun spreading bad rumors about her stepsister. But Jeanette had stayed with her through it all, and without her, none of that would've ever been possible.

I thought I was the one helping Jeanette, but I was wrong. We depended on her for everything.

The proof of that lay in the fact that ever since Jeanette had left them, she'd been thriving and shining brightly in the world of high society. In contrast to that, Leila was always raising her voice and scolding the newly hired servants, finding fault with everything.

"Jeanette..." Ariel had whispered, quiet as a mouse. "She was loud and graceless, and always ran around all over the place. But when she was here, things were lively...and I think I had fun because of that."

Ariel had always enjoyed wondering what Jeanette would bring for them next and how the girl would surprise them this time. She had also finally realized how much Jeanette might've helped her emotionally by never being discouraged or losing her smile.

Gilbert had grinned. "Indeed. I don't think this family was flourishing because a wealthy baron was its head. I believe that it was because milord and Lady Jeanette were so cheerful that so many people flocked here."

Ariel had continued silently watering the sprout while listening to the steward's words...

"In the past, Jeanette always gave us anything we wanted," Ariel told Leila. "And you see, mother, I no longer wish to live my life relying on my sister." With that, she gently removed Leila's hand from her cheek.

The woman instantly flew into a rage. "Wh-What are you saying?! And what's so wrong with doing that in the first place?! She's our family, so we can rely on her a little!"

"Family? Mother... Have you forgotten what we did to her?"

"I...!"

"Jeanette is doing well for herself now. She's the one who made the tulips so popular too. Meanwhile, at our house, nothing changes no matter how much time passes. Isn't it time for us to start facing forward too, mother?" Ariel inquired, staring at Leila fixedly.

The woman had blonde hair and blue eyes just like Ariel's. Even in the opinion of high society, her beauty hadn't faded at all yet. But those blue eyes of hers were dull and muddy. They were very different from Jeanette's clear eyes, which Ariel had gazed into the last time they spoke.

Ariel thought she had made a sound argument, and that this was why Leila avoided her gaze. But in the next moment, her mother let out a shriek while covering her face. "Ariel... How cruel of you! I see you've forgotten all about how much I struggled to raise you after your father passed away! I gave up everything and married that baron for your sake, and now here you are, bullying me!" she screeched in a shrill voice, as though the world itself were ending.

"W-Wait, mother...!" Ariel sputtered, shocked to see Leila in this state. *I forgot that she's the type of person to scream whenever things become inconvenient for her!*

A few servants had appeared here and there at the sound of the screaming, peering at them to see what was happening.

“I can’t believe you, Ariel! You can’t even get a few plant bulbs for your own mother?! You’re completely heartless! You don’t care about me at all, do you?!” Leila continued, her voice only getting more shrill.

Based on my past experience, once mother gets like this, she’ll refuse to budge until her wish is fulfilled... Ariel let out a resigned sigh. “All right. I’ll get the bulbs from Jeanette, so don’t say things like that...!”

At her words, Leila’s usual smile finally returned.

Around the same time, Jeanette was in the company president’s office, having a staring contest with the various documents lined up atop her desk. They laid out in minute detail the price fluctuations of the tulips ever since they first went on sale.

Looking everything over, this really is the only time such an abnormal price increase has occurred. While the prices of all other flowers would always crash around this point in the fad’s life cycle, tulip prices only keep rising... Jeanette thought with a troubled look on her face. She turned her gaze toward the sofa, where Claus and Kyuriakris were sitting with similar expressions, focusing on their own documents in turn.

“What do you two think about this?” she asked them. “Should we keep pushing it or back off?”

The two men exchanged a glance. Both of them looked conflicted. The first to speak was Kyuriakris, who said, “I think we should keep going. If we drop it now, everything we’ve built up will have been for nothing. The tulips’ price is high, but I believe that’s just because they are so inherently valuable. Getting cold feet now means all the gold and honor will go to someone else. Is that really fine with you?”

So Lord Kyuriakris is for continuing, Jeanette concluded while contemplating the matter. Indeed, it was just as the prince had said. If they gave up on the tulips now, then all the effort she, Claus, and Kyuriakris, who’d worked so hard to connect their two countries, had put into this venture would have been like a bubble on the water—that is, it would’ve come to nothing.

“I’m of the opposite opinion,” Claus said cautiously, as if he were trying to be careful with his words. He gauged the other two’s reaction before continuing. “I understand your point, Kyuri, but pushing on like this will be dangerous. However beautiful and valuable tulips might be, at the end of the day, they’re just flowers. For a single tulip’s price to exceed the annual income of a skilled craftsman is just abnormal.”

“But this craze is a business opportunity!” Kyuriakris argued accusingly. “Business is a clash of greed. You and Jeanette cooperated to whet the people’s appetite, and now their maelstrom of greed is greater than ever before. Refusing to run and instead seizing the opportunity is exactly what a merchant should do, right?”

In response to the prince’s agitated and somewhat provocative words, Claus’s expression hardened. “Kyuri, do you really believe this is a business opportunity? You must not confuse opportunity with mere gambling.”

“Oh? It’s obvious the prices are rising, yet you’d call this gambling?”

“From my point of view, yes, because there’s no reality in which tulips should be *this* highly priced,” Claus responded, and the two men glared at each other silently. It seemed like there were sparks flying in the air from the intensity of their eye contact.

“Claus, I thought you were a calm and composed man, but I didn’t know you were a *coward*.”

“My, what a coincidence. I thought you were a brave and daring man, but perhaps I should revise my opinion of you as someone careless and frivolous?”

“Oh?” Kyuriakris drawled, a vein bulging on his temple.

“Ummm...! Please calm down, you two!” Jeanette interjected upon sensing things were becoming dangerous. “Thank you for sharing your opinions with me—I think they’re both worthwhile! I’ll definitely reference them going forward!” she exclaimed, vigorously bowing over and over.

In response, Kyuriakris breathed a deep sigh. Then, his large, dark arm reached for Jeanette, wrapping around her shoulders as he pulled her closer.

“Wah!” Jeanette was on the verge of falling over and stretched out her arms.

Her hands landed on Kyuriakris's powerful chest.

There was a loud clatter as Claus instantly became furious and sprang to his feet. "Kyuri! Let her go!"

But Kyuriakris ignored those words completely. Instead of letting Jeanette go, he only pulled her even closer. He was smirking fearlessly as though wanting to show off to Claus. "Ah, my bad. The blood rushed to my head a bit there. I wanted to calm down and assuage my anger, and before I knew it, my arm had reached for her. I believe they call this anger management?" he taunted Claus, while bringing his face close enough to sniff Jeanette's hair.

"U-Um, Lord Kyuri! Please, let's wrap the joke up here!" Jeanette insisted, trying to push Kyuriakris away with all her might. Yet the man didn't even budge; he was very strong.

But a lone figure stood in his way—Claus.

"Kyuri." Claus's voice was lower and more terrifying than ever before. His countenance was calm, but there was a glint in his eyes as fierce as that of a hawk. His hand clamped tightly around Kyuriakris's wrist. "I told you before. Even if it's you, I won't forgive you if you do anything to Jeanette. Let go of her right now."

Kyuriakris only smirked in response. For a while, the men tensely stared at each other, until the prince suddenly released Jeanette. "No need to get so worked up. It's not like I want to have a serious fight with you either. But you know, Claus, you're stronger than I expected." With that, the man raised his hand. There was an obvious red mark around his wrist where Claus had seized him.

"A-Are you okay, Lord Kyuri?!" Jeanette asked. "Do you need medical treatment...?!"

"I'm fine. This little thing will fix itself up in no time. But isn't Claus one scary man? To think he'd be able to get so violent with his own friend..." Kyuriakris joked, laughing.

"I did what I had to, and I won't apologize for it," Claus snapped back. "If you put your hands on Jeanette, be ready for the consequences."

“Ha ha! You’re right. I have no right to complain if I try putting my hands on someone else’s fiancée. But that’s exactly what makes her worth taking.”

“Kyuri...! People like you are just...!”

Right at that moment, there was a knock on the door. Soon enough, Gideon entered the room. “Apologies for the interruption.”

“No problem. Did something happen?” Jeanette inquired.

Gideon hesitated slightly before responding. “Well... You have a guest, Lady Jeanette.”

“A guest? Who could it be?” she wondered out loud. *Maybe it’s Lady Christine? Or the other merchants?*

While she pondered, Gideon smoothly stepped aside to reveal Jeanette’s younger sister, Ariel.

“Ariel?” Jeanette asked with surprise, not having expected to see her stepsister. But a moment later, her face lit up with a smile and she approached the other girl. “What’s going on? This is the first time you’ve visited!”

Up until now, Ariel had completely avoided Roussel Corporation. None of their goods, which were mainly aimed at the general populace, were of interest to her, and she’d always found the idea of doing business vile.

“Right... Well... There’s something I’d like to discuss with you, Jeanette,” Ariel mumbled.

Jeanette knitted her brows. *Huh...? What’s wrong with Ariel? She usually speaks very clearly, but today she’s slurring her words. I wonder if she’s feeling unwell?*

Not to mention, Ariel’s attire was very different from usual. The girl had always liked pink and went out of her way to wear different kinds of pink gowns. Her fixation on the color went from her hair ornaments all the way down to the tips of her shoes, and her appearance was always soft and sweet.

But right now...it’s almost like she’s become a different person, Jeanette thought.

Ariel’s clothes were still pink, but they looked a little worn down, as if she’d

been wearing the same outfit many times over. That was also very unusual for her, as she always handed her clothes down to her maid after wearing them just once.

Her hair, which normally would've been meticulously curled, was loosely tied up in a way that was barely acceptable for one of her status. Though she wasn't exactly grungy, her appearance was plain to a point that was unthinkable for someone like her, who was typically very fussy about how she looked.

Jeanette glanced over her shoulder, where Claus and Kyuriakris had approached as well, curious to see what was going on. "Sorry, but would it be okay if Ariel and I speak privately for a moment?" she inquired, and the men nodded before silently exiting the room.

Once the two girls were alone, Jeanette led Ariel over to the sofa. They both sat down, and she poured her stepsister some light-pink tea. "So what did you want to discuss? Did something happen to mother? Or to you...?!" Jeanette asked fearfully.

Whenever they met in the past, Ariel would always loudly shout, "Sister! There's something I want you to get me!" But right now, that girl was nowhere to be seen. Ever since she'd first entered the room, Ariel had been silent. Seeing her stepsister acting so well-behaved for the first time only heightened Jeanette's anxiety.

Perhaps sensing Jeanette's agitation, Ariel looked a bit embarrassed and finally spoke up. "N-No, it's nothing that serious... It's just that mother was being so annoying, asking me to get more bulbs..."

"You mean tulip bulbs?"

"Yes..." Ariel replied, pouting and turning to look the other way in shame.

Jeanette blinked a few times. *Did she just come to get bulbs? That's strange. I thought she'd ask for something bigger than that.* After all, the last time Jeanette had visited them, Leila had laughed the plant bulbs off. So why did she suddenly...?

"Ah!" Jeanette exclaimed quietly as the realization hit her. *Oh, I see! High society's in a tulip mania, so mother must want them now as well!*

Indeed, Leila and Ariel had always been fond of following trends. When Jeanette had still lived with them, they'd asked her to get them the latest state-of-the-art goods countless times.

"Sorry... This isn't the right season, so we don't have any bulbs right now," Jeanette explained. *But I'm sure Ariel will be angry to hear that. Hmm, how should I handle this...?*

Her stepfamily had never taken "no" for an answer. If for whatever reason Jeanette hadn't been able to get something for them, they'd simply attributed it to her incompetence.

However, this time something unexpected happened once again.

"I see... If this isn't the season, then I suppose there's nothing to be done about it..." Ariel said. For some reason, rather than being angry, she just nodded in understanding.

"Um, Ariel... Are you really feeling okay?" Jeanette asked, placing her hand on Ariel's forehead out of worry.

"Hey, stop it! I'm fine!"

Finally hearing Ariel sound like her usual self, Jeanette felt relief wash over her.

Having realized that Jeanette was trying to assess her current state, Ariel tried to hide her embarrassment and brusquely muttered, "I hate that I had to come here, but mother said I have to get the bulbs no matter what."

Jeanette nodded along to her stepsister's explanation. "That must be because the tulip mania has reached even beyond high society and spread across the whole nation! They're difficult to obtain, but they're just so beautiful, so I understand wanting to have them around as decoratio—"

"That's not it," Ariel interjected.

"Huh? Am I wrong?"

Seeing Jeanette's astonishment, Ariel scoffed. "You don't understand, do you? Mother isn't interested in the tulips themselves. She just wants to resell them to earn money."

“Resell...?”

“Yes. She claims they’re extremely profitable, and she even sold the one you gave us previously. A mere plant bulb went for five hundred thousand krandells—foolish, isn’t it?” Ariel looked vexed, yet at the same time her voice sounded slightly hurt. “And I agree that the flowers are very beautiful. But for people to be contending for them this much? And even going as far as stealing? It’s abnormal.”

Wow! For Ariel to say that stealing’s abnormal... She’s really changed a lot since the last time I saw her!

Indeed, thievery was quite common. There were so many people stealing fully grown tulips that many households had to hire security guards who specialized in tulip flower fields. However, when Jeanette had lived in the Roussel estate, *Ariel* had been the one stealing her hair ornaments. Jeanette was convinced that Ariel didn’t care about such things, and yet...

Ariel must’ve noticed the look in Jeanette’s eyes. Her cheeks flushed. “I... I know right from wrong! Of course, I never should’ve done those things in the first place, but...” the girl mumbled incoherently as she made awkward excuses.

Jeanette smiled at her. “Hee hee! It’s okay, Ariel. I’m glad you have the right idea! So can you apologize to me?”

“What?” Ariel looked shocked. Her expression practically screamed, “I have to apologize *now*?!”

As her older sister, I have to guide her onto the right path! Jeanette thought. “Even if it’s all in the past, bad things are still bad! So go on!” she said, encouraging the other girl.

Ariel’s face hardened. Grumbling under her breath, she cast her gaze aside, and spoke in an incredibly quiet voice. “Um... I... I’m sorry...for everything...”

“All right! I forgive you!” Jeanette announced, clapping her hands together to signal the end of this topic.

“Huh? Is that really enough?”

“Hmm? Of course! You did apologize, after all. We can let bygones be

bygones. Oh, but I'll be very glad if you return my things to me!" Jeanette said, adding that they were items which held a lot of dear memories for her. Uncharacteristically, Ariel only nodded in assent. "Now, as I said earlier, I don't have tulip bulbs in stock right now. I won't be able to get any, even if it's for you and mother."

Upon hearing the explanation again, this time Ariel shook her head, looking rather refreshed all of a sudden. "It's fine. I can just explain to mother that they're out of season now, right?"

"Right! Also, I don't recommend reselling tulips from now on. I think it'll be risky for amateurs to get involved in it."

"All right. I'll tell her that as well," Ariel said with another nod as she stood up.

Jeanette did the same and walked with her to the door. Just as her stepsister was about to leave, Jeanette called out to her. "Ariel."

"What?"

"The tulip you grew... Did it have a nice color?"

Ariel came to a halt, and then grinned in an unladylike manner. "Yes. It was a lovely pink," she responded.



“Jeanette, are you okay?” Claus asked. He’d approached Jeanette with a concerned expression right after Ariel had left. “Did she harass you? Are you hurt anywhere?” He clasped her hand, scrupulously interrogating her.

“I’m okay! And Ariel isn’t a violent person. Also...she’s changed a lot,” Jeanette replied, giggling at the memory of her stepsister’s grin right before she left.

Ariel, who’d always been cocksure, had matured and mellowed out quite a bit since Jeanette had last seen her. *I’m sure she raised the tulip I gave her by herself. Her hands looked a little more suntanned than usual. And there was a tiny bit of dirt under her nails.*

Growing tulips was simple enough that even ordinary people who weren’t gardeners could do it. That was another one of the tulip’s secrets, and Ariel might’ve changed because she raised the flower with her own hands.

“It was a lovely pink.” Ariel had looked truly happy when she’d said those words, and her smile had been utterly carefree.

Hee hee! Flowers are really amazing, to make Ariel smile in such a way, Jeanette thought. *She never smiled like that before, no matter how many gemstones I gave her.*

“Miss Ariel really must’ve changed, for you to make that face. Just what kind of magic spell did you use?” Claus asked with amusement as he watched Jeanette giggling.

Right then, something dawned on Jeanette. “Oh, right! Lord Claus, there’s one thing I’ve been curious about.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll let Lord Kyuriakris know later too, but...” Jeanette began whispering something into Claus’s ear.

“I see...” he murmured, his eyes narrowing. “If that’s your decision, I won’t protest. We’ll have to inform everyone else too.”

“Yes!”

With that, the two of them headed to the store where the others were.

Leila placed her spoils of war on the table with a purposefully loud clatter. Ariel, who was in the living room getting on with her embroidery, glanced questioningly at the woman.

“Hee hee... Look, Ariel,” her mother said. “You mentioned you don’t want to rely on Jeanette anymore, yes? That’s why I earned this with my own hands.”

Leila opened the bag that she’d put on the table. Ariel peered inside, only to see a mound of glittering gold coins. Her eyes widened. “With your own hands...? What did you do, mother?” The girl didn’t sound impressed, but rather worried that Leila had once again been swindled.

“Don’t you underestimate me! Nobody swindled me this time!” Leila objected, and then started explaining.

Tulips had become so popular that they were now a get-rich-quick business scheme. Leila had been secretly making every effort to jump on the bandwagon. She’d been hustling to and fro around town. She had even paid some informants and uncovered the auctions that took place in taverns.

Due to low production rates and other circumstances, the tulips available at these auctions weren’t connected to Jeanette’s business. These auctions also had a great variety of flowers. On a lucky day, one might find the popular parrot flower there or even the Rembrandt flower, which had been named after a famous painter.

“What? I don’t really understand, but doesn’t that sound dangerous?” Ariel questioned. “If what you say is true, then you can’t buy the bulbs from there, right?”

“You don’t understand!” Leila laughed at her daughter’s fear. “It’s not dangerous. Yes, I can’t get bulbs from there, but it’s just as Jeanette said, isn’t it? There are no bulbs in this season. That’s why I had a bill of exchange issued. Once the season is right, anyone can go there and obtain the tulip bulbs through that bill. That’s how everyone is trying to secure even just a few bulbs early.” The woman chuckled triumphantly as she spoke.

She had hired two bodyguards and even dressed herself as a merchant to go to the shady tavern in order to get the document.

“And then I sold the bill to another noblewoman. This is the money I got from the sale,” she concluded, patting the mound of gold.

Only now did Ariel’s eyes start glimmering with admiration. “You exchanged the bill for money?!”

“That’s the state of high society right now. You may not know, but everyone’s obsessively searching for rare tulips. So what do you think? I’ve done pretty well, haven’t I?”

Leila had dug up the information, located an auction, bid on the bill, and then sold it to another noblewoman for money. Having followed through on everything by herself, she was overflowing with self-confidence and satisfaction. Even her daughter was impressed.

“That’s amazing! To think you’d be able to pull that off, mother...!”

“Hee hee! When I’m serious about something, little things like this are child’s play,” Leila proclaimed. “If Jeanette can do it, then obviously so can I, yes?”

“I’m not so sure about that... I’m not good with numbers. But mother, didn’t you say before that Jeanette is vulgar for doing business?” Ariel inquired, giving Leila a puzzled look.

The woman sighed. “It had to be done, vulgar or not. Or are you telling me to back off and watch as Jeanette has a good time? I feel incredibly refreshed after snatching her profits, you know!”

“Refreshed...? Mother, why do you hate her so much?”

Gazing into her daughter’s eyes, which were the same color as her own, Leila fell silent for a moment. “I don’t have a reason. I hate what I hate, and that’s all there is to it.”

That’s right, there’s no special reason, Leila thought. I just hate her carefree attitude and how conceited she is in believing she can resolve everything by herself.

Back when Leila had been cast out of her house following her first husband’s

death, she'd come close to resorting to prostitution to survive. If she hadn't been lucky enough to run into the drunk Baron Roussel, then she and Ariel might both have been prostitutes now. Leila wasn't the only one threatened by such a fate—every other woman in high society was too.

Women who were cast out of their families were simply that weak. But when it came to Jeanette...

Leila's lips hardened into a line. *She's the only one... It's unfair! She's vulgar and the furthest thing from a lady, and yet she's the only one who can survive without a man's protection?! Does she even realize why we have to put up with those men on a daily basis?! That she was the only one able to get away from that... Just seeing it makes me seethe!*

Outsider observers would classify what Leila was doing as expressing jealousy or venting her anger. However, Leila still hadn't realized that.

The woman clenched her fists so hard that her fingertips grew white. Then she gallantly lifted her head. "Anyway, just look at this, Ariel! Anything that girl can do, I can do as well! I'll keep palming off those tulips to the rest of high society and amass a great fortune! And you: instead of playing around in the dirt all the time, how about you finally find yourself a husband?!"

Ariel pouted and looked away. "I don't think I need to. Father will be back eventually, so I can start thinking about it then."

Goodness, this girl! Leila shouted inwardly. *She's still trying to go after Claus, isn't she?!*

Ariel might've claimed that she was embarrassed over the bad reputation she'd gained, but in reality, Leila knew her daughter still hadn't given up on Claus. Her beautiful child had so many admirers, yet the one the girl wanted hadn't chosen her.

Besides, the baron returning is the problem here! I was sure he was dead. To think he's still alive... If he finds out what happened with Jeanette and the house after he comes back, I might face another divorce.

The man was careless and mild mannered, but there was no mistaking the fact that he cared for his daughter Jeanette greatly. If he knew that his beloved

daughter had left, and that things at the house were stormy because the servants had gone too...

Leila shuddered at the thought. *At the very least, I have to get the house back to how it used to be! And for that, I need money. This petty change isn't nearly enough!* Glaring at the bag of gold on the table, she began devising a way of getting even more funds.

She had an informant on her side, and she had also found a generous patron. If push came to shove, she could drop the Roussel Corporation name, and she had plenty of her own cards to play.

"Mother," Ariel spoke up. "Just so you know, Jeanette advised against reselling the tulips right now because it's risky."

"I'm not reselling! I'm *investing*! That means I'm not going to sell anything right away, but wait for the prices to go up!" Leila roared, after which she began preparing to head out to another auction.

I can do it... If it's me, I can definitely do it! That's right, Leila. Believe in yourself! If Jeanette can, then so can I. I'll get my old life back!

Indeed, things were working out for Leila. She'd get bills of exchange for tulips at a bargain price during auctions and sell them to the nobility via her connections. With the money she earned, she'd buy even more bills. If the budget went overboard, she'd get a little assistance from her patron and pay it back the next day.

This happened several times over, and for a while, Leila was truly doing well. Until that day when the market suddenly collapsed.

Chapter 4: That Day

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

Jeanette and Claus were taking their breakfast when the sound of heavy footsteps echoed outside in the hallway. Seconds later, Kyuriakris burst through the door. "Listen to me!" he exclaimed.

"It's not all *that* unusual for you to barge in uninvited, but why are you making that face?" Claus asked, startled.

In a fluster, Jeanette hurriedly swallowed the food that had been in her mouth. "Good morning, Lord Kyuriakris! What's wrong?"

Kyuriakris's breathing was ragged, perhaps because he'd run all the way here. He inhaled deeply to calm himself down. Without any preamble, he announced, "The tulip buyers have disappeared from the market."

Jeanette's and Claus's expressions changed upon hearing those words. With a serious look on his face, Claus inquired, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," responded the prince.

"As I thought," Jeanette muttered under her breath. "That means this is the beginning of the great price crash, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Kyuriakris confirmed. "Right now, there's a crowd of people in the marketplace, screaming and waving their bills of exchange."

"What on earth happened? Please tell us," Claus urged.

Kyuriakris shook his head as he began explaining. He had been keeping an eye on the tulip market outside of Roussel Corporation. Tulips were often sold without the involvement of the usual marketplace or merchants, mostly traded around during tavern auctions. These auctions were always bursting with people and enthusiasm, but this morning, the situation had suddenly changed.

"Yesterday, everything still seemed normal at a glance. But as the time passed, I started to have a bad feeling. It was a very small feeling, almost like a

gentle breeze brushing against your cheeks. Eventually, I realized I felt that way because nobody was buying the bills anymore, except for the purpose of reselling them. By then, the market was in a state of great panic.”

“But why have the buyers suddenly disappeared?” Claus questioned. “What’s the cause of that?”

Jeanette strained her ears in anticipation of the reply, but Kyuriakris once more shook his head. “I can’t be certain of anything,” he replied. “There are a bunch of rumors about it. Some say the biggest tulip fanatics have gone bankrupt or that all the customers have fallen gravely ill or that the banks have declared they won’t make any loans for tulips... It’s difficult to tell what is the truth among all this gossip. There’s only one thing I know for sure.” Kyuriakris gazed at the other two with a grave expression. “The tulip market has collapsed.”

There was a moment of silence.

Finally, Claus exhaled deeply and leaned back against his chair. “That was a close one... If we hadn’t pulled out of the market just like you decided, Jeanette, then Roussel Corporation would no doubt be swimming in debt right now... In fact, it might’ve completely gone under.”

Jeanette exhaled as well, feeling relieved. “Y-Yes, that was truly dangerous. I was paying close attention to how things would turn out, but for the day to come so quickly...” She trailed off, her heart pounding at the thought that they just barely avoided a crisis...

On that day when Jeanette had summoned every employee of Roussel Corporation for a meeting, she gazed at each of their faces in turn before speaking up. “Roussel Corporation will no longer accept any further price increases for tulips.”

Her announcement caused a stir among the crowd. Claus and Kyuriakris, who were standing near her, remained silent as they listened.

“To be honest, even I don’t know how this decision will turn out. If the prices keep increasing endlessly, then we’ll miss out on the tulip market altogether. It’s possible that we’ll lose a huge business opportunity.” Jeanette’s calm voice

carried across the room, bearing a note of dignity. All the employees fell silent, focusing on her.

“If that’s your decision, then I won’t object. But can you tell us why?” one of the older workers asked, and the others nodded.

Jeanette nodded as well. “I have three reasons. First, everyone is just too obsessed with the tulips.”

The one who had started the tulip fad was none other than Jeanette herself, together with Claus. Jeanette had been pleased with the tulips’ great success, but she was also concerned that the scope of the enterprise was too large when compared to her previous business idea of Orlonde silk.

When Ariel had visited, she’d mentioned how foolish it was for a mere plant bulb to sell for five hundred thousand krandells. But now, the price had increased even further, and the bulbs were selling for a ridiculous three million krandells.

That’s the average annual wage of a skilled artisan, Jeanette thought. *It’s definitely way too inflated.* Back when she was selling Orlonde silk, there were also instances of resales and cornering the market, but not on this scale. *Yet this is how far it’s gone this time...*

Jeanette lifted her head. “Secondly, some people have started claiming that tulips are a get-rich-quick scheme.”

Both Orlonde silk and tulips had inherent value. However, the Orlonde silk’s value had been stable, or at least had never changed by a huge margin. Meanwhile, some investors had speculated that the tulip’s worth would increase, and they’d overwhelmed the market. That had been when Jeanette had first sensed that the tulips had gone over their true value.

“And lastly...my stepmother knows about this,” Jeanette declared. That had been what Ariel had told her when she’d visited. Leila was buying the tulip bulbs as speculation.

“Your stepmother... You’re talking about Lady Leila, yes?” Gideon inquired. “Unlike her husband, Lady Leila is of pure noble blood, and I believe she’s not at all versed in the realm of business...”

“Yes. That’s exactly why I think it is dangerous,” Jeanette asserted.

Leila didn’t have business knowledge, yet now she was getting involved with it. Jeanette doubted that the woman had seriously decided to study business. If even a person like her thought that tulips were profitable and was participating in the trade... Jeanette believed this meant that only the selling price of the tulips was being abnormally inflated, all while the buyers were being left out of the loop regarding the tulip’s market value.

Kyuriakris, who’d been listening attentively, murmured, “I see... So you’re saying that only the sellers are being enthusiastic.”

Jeanette nodded. “Yes. I’m sure in the beginning, both sellers and buyers were equally enthused. But what if that enthusiasm suddenly cooled off? Or what if someone gave the others a wake-up call?”

“Right. Duke Pablo is very serious about that, so I’m sure he wouldn’t hesitate to speak up...”

When it came to the tulips’ prices increasing, Duke Pablo had accepted it to a certain degree. But once a tulip’s retail price was the same as a house, someone like him could’ve questioned whether a mere flower was truly worth that much. Considering how influential he was, his words might’ve opened the other aristocrats’ eyes, just like it happened in “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” It was a reasonable possibility.

Upon hearing Jeanette’s explanation, the other employees began exclaiming things like “Right, that makes sense,” and “I see...”

“Sounds like that really was a close one...” said one of them. “The company may have narrowly escaped going bust thanks to you, Jeanette.”

“Right... Also, I want to take responsibility as the person who first began selling the tulips and see with my own eyes where the tulip market goes from here,” Jeanette declared...

And so, since the day the buyers vanished, the bulb prices continued crashing calamitously. They decreased so quickly that it was as if they were falling off a precipice. By the second day of no willing buyers, the price came down by a

third. The day after that, it was half of the previous day's. People were scrambling all over the place to try and sell their bills of exchange, and the market was in a state of chaos.

Jeanette and the others were at the Guivarch estate, holding a discussion with the merchants they had good relations with, such as Edmond and Gautier. They had initially invested lots of capital into the tulips, but at Jeanette's advice, they had managed to avoid taking a fatal blow during the crash. Nonetheless, they still faced considerable losses.

"I heard the one who suffered the most lost as much as fifty million krandells..." said one of the merchants. "I think his name is Barthelemy? I'm sure they'll take him to court for nonpayment."

"Barthelemy? That swindler?" Jeanette asked. He was the man who'd sold her stepfamily glass beads while claiming they were jewels.

"Yeah, that's the one. I was surprised to hear he was still active in this country. He should've run while he had the chance."

"Well, that's why you shouldn't do wrong," responded another merchant. "On the other hand, I also heard of a poor family who made a lot of money by selling tulips they grew themselves."

"In a way, you could say this is all divine providence."

"The good are blessed..."

"And the wicked punished, huh?"

The merchants nodded in agreement, some of them sighing, others remaining somberly silent.

One concluded, "Just like a bubble on the water, everything simply burst and vanished..."

Eventually, the merchants dispersed. Claus went to see them off, and soon came back to the room and earnestly said, "You really did make the right decision. Thanks to you, Roussel Corporation is practically unharmed. That's my Jeanette..." He smiled softly.

But when he noticed Kyuriakris standing silently nearby, he addressed him. “Uh, by the way, Kyuri... What happened was inevitable. And it’s almost impossible to realize it when you’re wrapped up in that kind of mania.”

Kyuriakris’s face only hardened. “Stop it. I don’t want your concern; it only makes me feel more miserable. I’d rather be agitated,” he grumbled, sighing. “This has all made me realize I’ve still got a long way to go. Business really is a tricky thing... But if you think I’m depressed over this, you’re wrong. In fact, by being with Jeanette, I managed to experience failure without incurring losses. Wouldn’t you say that luck was on my side?”

In response to those intrepid words, Claus laughed. “Ha ha! So that’s how it is. As usual, your ability to get back on your feet is incredible, Kyuri.”

“Exactly. I got to see all of this because I’m a member of Roussel Corporation right now. That’s why I believe I should mimic the chairwoman’s perseverance.”

Jeanette didn’t really know what he was talking about, but she surmised he was praising her, and nodded. “It’s important to keep facing forward! Being down is just a waste of time!”

“Still, that was a blind spot for me,” Kyuriakris continued. “And I never thought you’d interpret your stepmother’s actions that way. You could basically make this into a fable.”

“That was all thanks to Ariel,” Jeanette said. “I realized it when I heard my mother was buying the bulbs as speculation, and when Ariel mentioned that the tulips are ‘merely flowers.’ If it wasn’t for the contrast between the two of them, I would’ve likely remained wrapped up in the mania myself.” Her own words reminded her of her stepsister. “With that said... I wonder if mother is all right?”

Claus crossed his arms, wondering the same. “She would’ve had the money she got for the title deed at her disposal... Even if she blew through all of it, she shouldn’t have incurred any further losses. So long as she didn’t take out any loans, at least.”

As soon as he said that, both he and Jeanette suddenly felt a chill.

“Surely not...” he muttered.

“Surely not, indeed...” Jeanette whispered and exchanged a worried look with Claus.

“Ughhh!!! Just what is going on?!” Leila’s screeches reverberated around the room. At the same time, violent clangs and clatters rang through the air as she threw things at random, the shattered fragments scattering all over the place.

“M-Mother, calm down! This is dangerous!”

“Milady, over here! You might get hurt if something comes flying your way. Please hide somewhere safe!” Gilbert urged as he frantically tried to guide Ariel to cover. The two helped each other as they ran away in a panic from the rampaging Leila.

“Why?! Why?! *Why?! Just yesterday the price was still fantastic, but today this is nothing but a worthless slip of paper! That informant deceived me!!!*”

“Nobody deceived you,” Gilbert called out. “This is the path you chose for yourself.”

“Exactly, mother,” Ariel added. “Jeanette even warned us about how risky it was.”

“Shut up!!!”

A cushion whizzed by Ariel, who let out a shriek. A whirl of feathers followed in its wake, scattering across the floor.

“You’re only saying such carefree things because you don’t understand anything!” Leila screamed. “Do you realize just how much money I had to borrow from my patron to get this slip of paper?! And now I can’t repay him!!!”

“Huh...? Mother, are you in debt...?” Ariel asked, instantly turning pale. She had been convinced that her mother was using the money they’d obtained from selling Roussel Corporation’s title deed, but apparently that wasn’t all.

Next to her, the usually composed Gilbert also paled. He wasn’t putting on an act; he was genuinely shocked. “Madam... Just how much and from whom have you borrowed?!” he demanded, grasping Leila by the shoulder.

The woman’s eyes grew wide with incredulity, and she began hitting him. “I’m

not telling you anything! You won't let me have the family funds no matter what, will you?! So just get out!"

"But...!"

"Are you defying my orders?! I can fire you on the spot! We're doomed as it is, anyway. I don't care if you're gone!"

"Ugh...!" Even Gilbert was forced to pull back at such words.

After he vacated the room, Ariel approached her mother instead. The woman had a hollow look in her eyes. "Mother, please tell me... How much did you borrow?"

Leila paused. "I... I borrowed—"

When Ariel heard the amount of money and the lender's name, her throat seized with a high-pitched sound.

Her mother had borrowed from Marquis Ballardur...also known as the "senile, lustful marquis." He had enough wealth to rival even Duke Pablo, and although he was over sixty years old, his sexual appetite had never died down, earning him his nickname. Worse yet, all of his marriages and relationships with his lovers had been short-lived, and there were rumors about how there was something *abnormal* about him beyond his lechery.

"M-Mother... You borrowed from *him*?! How are you going to repay him?!" Ariel fretted, clinging to the woman. "Even if we wanted to use our house as collateral, we can't do it without father!"

Leila didn't answer.

"Surely..." Ariel muttered. "Surely you're not considering selling *me* off as collateral, are you...?"

"Of course not! You're my one and only adorable daughter. But if I don't do something, I won't be able to repay the loan. That leaves only one way..."

Don't tell me... Ariel thought, growing petrified.

Leila's beautiful lips quirked up into a smirk. "There *is* one other girl in House Roussel, after all..."

Jeanette had been very busy ever since the tulip market crashed. Taking responsibility for starting the tulip sales, she loaned money at zero interest to aid people who had taken losses, and did whatever she could to lend them her assistance.

In the middle of all of that, Claus, who should've been away on business as a feudal lord, suddenly burst into her office, breathless. "Jeanette! We found your father's whereabouts!"

"Really?!" Jeanette exclaimed, springing to her feet.

Claus clasped her hand tightly, his expression overcome with joy. "It took a long time to follow his trail, but guess where we found him?" Without waiting for her reply, he burst into laughter. "In Voltaire's Imperial Palace, of all places! It appears that he's been corralled by the emperor."

"'Corralled by the emperor'?! " Jeanette parroted him, her eyes widening at these unexpected words. *Did I mishear that?!*

It was true that her father had always been good at sneaking his way into people's hearts, and important figures often took a liking to him. But for him to wheedle even the emperor?!

"I had my suspicions because of how long it was taking to find him, but this is just so in character," Claus went on. "The emperor likes him so much he refuses to let him leave and keeps making it difficult for him."

Apparently, the emperor told Jeanette's father things like "I'll give you anything, so please stay in this country!" and "I'll let your whole family live in the palace, so please don't leave!" The emperor was treating the baron as if he were some beautiful siren. However, the baron was an old man over the age of fifty. He had a splendid potbelly, and he was balding.

"What on earth did my father do to the emperor?!" Jeanette wondered. *I hope he didn't give the emperor some suspicious drug?!* Despite how preposterous the idea was, she couldn't help picturing it.

"According to the investigator's report, the emperor refers to your father as his 'twin soul,'" Claus explained.

Jeanette's breath hitched; the term had much more weight than anything she'd imagined.

Claus laughed. "At any rate, I can't wait to hear all about it from your father when he comes home!"

"Yes!" Jeanette agreed. *We've been separated for a long time, but he's finally coming back...!* She had never lost faith that her father had survived, but knowing he'd be returning at last caused her expression to relax into a joyful smile. There were so many things she wanted to tell him and so many things she wanted to ask him about in turn.

Smiling in the same way, Claus observed the beaming girl. "When he comes back, let's hold our wedding ceremony, Jeanette," he said, his violet eyes gleaming with delight and excitement.

I-It's finally that time...! Enticed by his words, Jeanette blushed. In the past, she had visited the Guivarch estate to ask Claus to break off their engagement. Instead, the man had said they'd get married once Jeanette's father returned. That had just been a verbal promise, but now the baron was truly coming back.

"R-Right...!" Jeanette responded. *Thinking about it has made me all embarrassed!*

Although she lived in House Guivarch's mansion at present, she still felt a little like a guest staying over. However, once she and Claus were married, she'd become Countess Guivarch in name and in reality. The servants would refer to her accordingly or else call her "madam," and naturally, she'd share a room with Claus.

Sharing a room with him...! But yes, I suppose that's the point of becoming Countess Guivarch, isn't it?! The more Jeanette thought about it, the more embarrassed she felt.

"Are you all right? You're bright red," Claus said, gazing at her with concern. Even with that expression, it seemed like his face was shining.

"Oh! U-Um...!" Jeanette mumbled.

"Did you get shy at the idea of us getting married? How adorable." Claus chuckled, his slender fingers reaching out for Jeanette's cheek.

“Ah!!!” As soon as he touched her, she shuddered. That only heightened her embarrassment, and she hung her head while her cheeks grew even redder.

“I’m really happy. To think you’d blush this much... It looks like my feelings have finally gotten through to you.”

“Y-Yes! Um, I won’t wander around in my nightgown anymore!”

Claus laughed loudly. “Right, that’s good,” he said with a sudden glint in his eye. “Because I might not be able to hold back next time. Just like this...” With that, he lifted Jeanette’s chin.

A soft, sweet scent enveloped her, and in the next moment, something gently pressed against her lips—*Claus’s* lips.

Jeanette was too surprised to even let out a sound. The kiss was as gentle as a peck from a little bird, and Claus pulled back right after. But instead of drawing away entirely, he pressed his forehead to hers.

“Sorry. I couldn’t stop myself,” he told her, as if he were repenting. His voice was shockingly erotic, and his hot breath made Jeanette shiver.

Th-That was a kiss, wasn’t it?! Jeanette’s face flushed as the realization dawned on her. She was at a loss for words and could only stand there trembling.

Seeing her like this caused Claus to chuckle. “Don’t look at me like that, Jeanette. You’re being so cute that I might take you back to my room with me right this second.”

“L-L-Lord Claus!” she stammered loudly. “Are you drunk?!”

He laughed again. “I’m not. But I might have gotten a little carried away by my feelings. After all, your father will be returning and then we can finally get married. I couldn’t be happier.” He spoke with such clarity that Jeanette could tell he was glad from the bottom of his heart.

Lord Claus... He really is happy about it, isn’t he? As she thought about it again, her heart throbbed. *I don’t think anyone will ever be as happy to be with me as he is...*

Jeanette tightened her fists, and in a shaky voice said, “M-Me too! Um... I’m

really glad that you'll be my husband, Lord Claus...!"

In all honesty, she still didn't understand *why* Claus had chosen her. But she had finally realized that the feelings he held for her were true.

Jeanette grew bashful after voicing her thoughts, while Claus stared at her in bewilderment. After a few seconds, he covered his face and looked up at the heavens. "That you'd say such a thing... Jeanette, are you trying to provoke me?!"

"What?! I'm sorry! Did I say something rude again?!"

"No, that's not what I mean." With that, Claus pulled the flustered Jeanette closer in an almost rough manner, and embraced her.

"L-Lord Claus?!" Jeanette squeaked in a panic. His arms were holding her tightly, preventing her escape.

"Stay still. If you don't, I really might take you to bed with me. Just let me hold you like this until I calm down..."

"R-Right!!!"

Claus's voice sounded like he was at his limit, and Jeanette could feel the heat of his body through their clothes. His rapid heartbeats mixed with her own, as if they had become a singular person. *This is so embarrassing...but I'm kind of happy...* Jeanette thought. Claus's chest was firm, but being in his arms felt comfortable and reassuring. Right as Jeanette decided to entrust herself to him and relax...

"Sorry to interrupt, but can I borrow a stamp?" Kyuriakris asked sullenly.

Jeanette quickly tried to step away from Claus, but he continued holding her tightly. He sighed. "Kyuri, have you heard the word 'tactless' before? I wish you'd read the room better."

"Unfortunately for you, we're in the middle of a workday. Riiiiight, Miss Chairwoman?"

Hearing the emphasis in his words, Jeanette nodded. "E-Exactly, Lord Claus! We must get back to work!"

Finally, Claus reluctantly released her. "Right. I guess this is as much as I can

get away with. For now, anyway. Time to get back to work...”

Th-That was a close call! I almost lost my senses! Jeanette had been on the verge of giving in to Claus, despite the fact she was at work. Such indecency was unbecoming of a merchant, and she slapped her own cheeks to scold herself.

“But I’m not leaving you two alone,” Claus went on. “You might fall into his clutches...”

At the sound of his worried voice, someone peered into the room from behind the door. “It’s okay, Lord Claus! I’m here!” Sara entered the room.

“As am I, audacious though it may be to say,” Gideon said, following after her. “Actually, the two of us have been standing outside the door this whole time.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt anything, so I stopped him from entering!” Sara clarified, giving a huge thumbs up as her nostrils flared.

“Whaaat?! Really?! Don’t tell me you saw everything...!” Jeanette cried.

“Don’t worry! When I realized what was happening, I quickly closed the door, so we only heard your conversation.”

“Oh no...!” That was embarrassing enough on its own. Jeanette’s face flushed as red as a tomato.

“It’s all right. We only heard very little,” Gideon assured her.

It was hard to say whether their words were helping or not, but Jeanette slowly went back to work while listening to their encouragement.

In the end, Claus had returned to the Guivarch estate. Jeanette had gotten through a lot of her work, and right as things were slowing down, Gideon approached her with a perplexed expression. “Jeanette, you have a guest.”

“A guest? Who is it?”

“Well... It’s Ariel.”

“Ariel?” Jeanette’s eyes grew wide. “I wonder if something happened? Oh, but this is perfect timing.” She had been meaning to inform her stepfamily about her father, and she was curious whether Leila was doing well. She started

to request that Ariel be let in immediately and that Sara prepare tea. “Sara, could you please make some tea? And Gideon, please bring Ariel—”

“Actually... Ariel said she wishes to speak with you outside. It seems she doesn’t wish for your conversation to be overheard,” Gideon said.

“Outside?” Jeanette echoed, exchanging a look with Sara. *Why is that? And why does it matter if someone overhears us? Could it be that something happened to mother after all...?*

“Milady, I will accompany you!” Sara declared, resolutely approaching Jeanette.

“No, it’s fine,” Jeanette responded, gently reining the maid in. “If Ariel doesn’t want anyone else to hear this, then I’ll go by myself.”

“But for her to ask you something like this out of nowhere... Isn’t it suspicious?!”

Seeing Sara act as if she were dealing with someone of dubious character, Jeanette laughed. “It’s just Ariel. I don’t think she’ll kill me, so it’s fine.”

“The range of things you’re willing to allow is way too big!!! Please be on your guard for anything else she might do!”

Eventually, Jeanette managed to persuade the vigilant Sara to let her go and stepped outside by herself. She surveyed her surroundings and spotted Ariel standing on a street corner a considerable distance away.

“Ariel, what is it?” Jeanette asked as she approached her.

For some reason, Ariel jolted at the sound of her voice. She seemed unwell, and she was so pale that she looked on the verge of collapsing. “Jeanette...”

“Are you okay? You don’t look well. Oh no, are you sick?!” Jeanette fretted with concern.

The trembling Ariel shook her head. “I... I’m fine.”

She doesn’t seem fine at all! Jeanette thought, stepping closer to her stepsister.

As she did, Ariel very quietly whispered, “Sister, I’m sorry...”

Right at that moment, several men emerged from the alleyway and grabbed Jeanette, putting her in a full nelson hold.

“Ah?!” Before Jeanette could make any other sound, one of the men clamped his hand over her mouth, and they began dragging her into the darkness.

Why would you do this, Ariel?! Jeanette thought in a panic, but her voice was muffled and she couldn't say a word. Ariel! Tell me! Ariel...!!!

Soon enough, the men forced her into a carriage that stopped by, bound her hands and legs, put a blindfold over her eyes, and gagged her mouth. From what Jeanette could tell, the men boarded the carriage along with Ariel.

But Ariel didn't utter a single word, and the coach rattled into movement.

The carriage kept going, though Jeanette didn't know where. Eventually, it came to a halt, and the men violently dragged her out. Someone pushed her hard enough that she fell, but her skin came in contact not with soil, but a wooden floor. One of her hands had gotten free, and she hurriedly ripped off the blindfold to assess her situation.

It seemed the men had brought her into some dilapidated house. The room was full of dust, and spiders nested in the corners. The furniture was so ragged that it looked like it'd crumble at the slightest touch.

Jeanette continued glancing around while removing her gag, and her eyes widened when she noticed who was standing in the room. “Mother?!”

“It's been a while, Jeanette.” Leila crossed her arms, staring down at Jeanette triumphantly. Ariel was next to her, uncomfortably looking away from Jeanette.

I thought this was just Ariel's doing, but mother was involved too! Thinking things through, Jeanette tightly gripped the pouch by her waist. Inside were her emergency crime-prevention balls, the Itchy Eyes Meal and the Knurl of Endless Sneezing, but of course she couldn't throw them at her stepfamily.

“Um... What's going on?” she asked. Even Jeanette, who was used to her stepmother's “rewards,” couldn't connect the dots this time. She couldn't think of a reason for them to abduct her either.

Leila sneered. “Jeanette, you need a change of clothes,” she said, glancing pointedly at Ariel. The girl sighed and spread out the clothes they must’ve arranged prior to this.

Ariel held out a pure white lace gown.

“Is this...a wedding dress?” Jeanette blinked, for the dress didn’t suit this tattered cabin’s atmosphere at all. *Why would they...? Oh! Could this be an early present for my and Claus’s wedd—*

“Don’t get the wrong idea now. This is not for your and Claus’s wedding,” Leila clarified flatly, as if having read Jeanette’s thoughts.

Jeanette frowned dejectedly. “Oh, I see...”

“That said, it *is* yours to wear,” Leila added, running her finger down the dress with obvious amusement. “You see... Someone did a huge favor for me. I want to pay him back, so I need you to cooperate.”

Something clicked in Jeanette’s mind at those words. “Mother... You fell into debt after what happened with the tulips a few days ago, didn’t you?!”

“Can you not say such things out loud?!” Leila screeched, her face hardening in an instant. When she realized she’d let herself be provoked, she cleared her throat. “Ahem... The person I mentioned said that I don’t need to pay him back monetarily. Rather, he wants my daughter as a bride. You’re the perfect pick for that, aren’t you, Jeanette?”

I see, so that’s why mother brought me here, Jeanette thought as she nodded in understanding. “By the way, just who is this man? And how much money did you borrow from him?”

“The one you will be marrying is Marquis Balladur.”

Marquis Balladur? I’ve heard rumors about him. According to Jeanette’s information network, the marquis was over sixty years old and had a taste for young women. He spent all his days locked in his bedroom and left all the land management to his son. Jeanette had seen him from a distance a few times. He had muddy, cloudy eyes, as if he were always drunk. Once, she had attempted to greet him, but Claus swiftly stopped her with a smile on his face.

“I don’t owe him much money at all,” Leila claimed. But the amount she then uttered was enough for a skilled artisan to live on for a decade.

That’s much more than I thought! Yet even though the amount was high, Jeanette would’ve been able to pay it off right away. However...

I can’t just settle this matter by paying it on her behalf...

When it came to the usual rewards, Jeanette would’ve exclaimed, “I’ll use my connections!” and skipped away while humming. But no matter how she looked at this situation, it was merely a debt. If she were to shoulder it for her stepmother, the woman would get a taste for it and just run off to get into more debt.

So...what is the correct answer to this reward? Jeanette ummed and ahed for a while, then suddenly lifted her head. “Oh! Then how about this: I’ll shoulder the debt, and in exchange, you can work at Roussel Corporation until you’ve earned the money back.”

“No,” Leila responded, shooting her idea down bluntly and leaving Jeanette dejected again. “Me, work at Roussel Corporation? What an unfunny joke you’ve thought up.”

“It wasn’t a joke...” Jeanette said. *Mother participated in the tulip speculation, so I was sure she’d become interested in business...*

While Jeanette was feeling disappointed, Ariel, who hadn’t said a word until now, unassumingly turned to face Leila. “Mother...” Her expression was filled with fear and hesitation.

Jeanette had never seen Ariel look like that. The same must’ve been true for Leila, who gazed at her daughter in confusion.

“Marquis Ballardur is really scary, right? Sending Jeanette off to someone like him... It’s too much.”

“Gracious! What are you talking about, Ariel?!” Leila spluttered. Once more, both she and Jeanette looked surprised. “I already told you so many times! That man wants young women. If not Jeanette, then *you’ll* be the one sent off to marry him! You don’t want that, do you?!”

Ariel trembled at her mother's threat, but nevertheless objected. "I know... But Jeanette doesn't want this either! She even warned you not to get involved with the tulips before!"

"You... Just whose side are you on?!"

"Yours, of course! But I think you're going too far this time!"

Jeanette watched in disbelief as Leila and Ariel quarreled before her very eyes. *Is Ariel trying to stand up for me...?*

Until now, no matter how hard Jeanette tried to befriend Ariel and held her hand out to her, the other girl had never taken it. Ariel was in love with Claus, and her feelings for him made her resent Jeanette. Yet that same Ariel was now getting into a fight with her own biological mother to protect Jeanette.

I did think she's been acting strange for a while, but just what happened to her after I left the house?!

All Jeanette had heard was that Ariel hadn't been attending high society events at all recently, but she seemed like a completely different person than before.

"Is that right?!" Leila screamed. "And if Jeanette won't become the bride, then who do you think it will be?!"

"I...!"

As the argument escalated, Jeanette opened her mouth to timidly interject. "Hold on, you two... Things are getting a bit out of hand, so how about we go back home and think this through? It's already gotten dark outside..."

"Huh?! What are you saying?! You'll be going to the marquis's mansion after this!" Leila screeched, angrily enough that her spittle went flying everywhere.

Jeanette looked troubled. "You say that, but since it's two against one, you're at a disadvantage here, mother..."

Leila's face stiffened. "You... So what if you two are conspiring against me?! I can order the thugs outside to come in here and forcibly change your clothes!"

The woman seemed intent on going through with her threat. Jeanette reached for her crime prevention balls with a conflicted frown. "If my prediction

is correct, this is about the time Lord Claus should be arriving...”

As if on cue, there was a clamor outside. Some disturbing bangs and whacks rang through the air, and then the door burst open.

“Jeanette!!!”

Together with a cloud of dust, a frantic Claus entered. His hair was disheveled and his bloodshot eyes swiftly scanned the room. The second he spotted Jeanette, his face lit up. A moment later, he was hugging her tightly. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re all right...! My heart almost stopped when I heard you had been abducted!”

“S-Sorry! I was hoping to get back home peacefully before you could get worried...” Jeanette said, unable to move from how tightly he was holding her.

“Milady!” Sara shouted, flying into the room as well.

In truth, Jeanette had gone out to meet Ariel knowing that Claus would come for her if anything happened. After all, back when she and Sara had first left the Roussel estate and begun searching for an inn, Claus had been shaken. He had told Jeanette, *“You’re going to have an escort twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year.”*

Of course, the embarrassed Jeanette had tried negotiating on the matter. In the end, they’d agreed that she’d have an escort if Claus had to leave her side even for a little bit, which seemed to have appeased him.

That was why when Jeanette had been abducted, she was sure someone had sent a homing pigeon to Claus, as the guards always carried a small bird around with them.

“Ah, your cheeks are dirty. To think you’d be brought to such a dingy place... Are you hurt anywhere? Are you in pain? You didn’t twist your foot, did you?” Claus was looking at Jeanette as if Leila and Ariel weren’t even there, worriedly checking her condition.

“N-No, I’m fine! I’m totally okay. Having you look at me like that is really embarrassing...!”

Unable to ignore even the smallest of wounds, Claus glared at her hand. “You

have a scratch right there..." he murmured, and then turned to Leila and Ariel sharply. Unlike when he'd been looking at Jeanette, his eyes were now glinting coolly enough that his glower was almost lethal. "Madam Leila... No. *Leila.*"

The way he slowly called her name caused everyone to freeze. His eyes were even sharper than an eagle's, and his breath was even icier than Jack Frost's. Leila jolted. She had finally realized that she'd incurred Claus's wrath.

Step by step, Claus slowly approached her. "I have restrained myself a number of times before now. If even the victim, Jeanette, forgave you, then I believed I had no right to be angry with you." His voice was calm, yet there was a note of rage bleeding through which he couldn't conceal.

The fury radiating from Claus burned the skin of those around him. Even Jeanette had become frightened, reflexively hugging Sara.

"But this time, you have truly crossed a line," Claus declared, glaring at Leila harshly in a way Jeanette had never seen before. Even the king of the underworld couldn't be as terrifying as Claus was right now.

Leila was quivering, her face pale. "Wh-What do you mean...? I just wanted to ask Jeanette for something..."

"Your excuses are futile," Claus responded as coldly as though his words were a spear of ice. "Unfortunately for you, I already know everything. You owe a huge debt to Marquis Ballardur, and you decided to sell Jeanette to pay him back. Am I wrong?"

Lord Claus already got the information! Jeanette thought. When the tulip market crashed, she had confided in Claus about her fears concerning Leila. He had simply listened in silence, but it seemed that he'd secretly decided to thoroughly investigate the matter.

"Sorry, but I've already contacted the marquis," Claus continued. "I told him that Jeanette has nothing to do with this, and that if he tries to do anything to her, he won't get away with it."

He's already spoken to Marquis Ballardur?! H-He really works fast! As expected of Lord Claus...! It looked like Claus had been a step ahead of Jeanette and had already taken care of the matter. While she was busy being impressed with his

skills, Claus went on.

“To be honest, I’d like to make it so that you’ll never be able to walk under the sun again...” His frightening words made all the women tremble.

Jeanette and Sara hugged each other tighter. *Waaah!!! N-Never walk under the sun again?! Jeanette squealed inwardly. Just what is he going to do?!*

Ariel’s face had gone completely vacant in fear, and she was shivering all over.

“You see, I don’t want to become a criminal just yet. But let me tell you one thing.” Stepping forward, Claus spoke with a fire blazing in his violet eyes.



“Don’t you ever come near Jeanette again. And you can look forward to receiving a little *present* from me.”

“Eeek!” Leila shrieked and collapsed on the spot. She had lost her nerve.

Claus glanced at Ariel, and after a moment he looked away as though nothing had happened. He turned to Jeanette instead, with his usual kind smile. “Sorry for scaring you. Now, let’s go back. I’m really glad nothing happened to you.”

“Milady, are you okay?! Please hold on to my hand!” Sara urged.

With the two of them guarding her, Jeanette vacated the dilapidated house. But she lingered by the door, glancing over her shoulder at Leila, who was still slumped on the ground in a stupor. Ariel was next to the woman, her head hanging low in dejected silence.

Lord Claus saved me, but what about Ariel? And what are those two going to do now? At this rate, Ariel may have no choice but to sell her body... Jeanette’s face flushed when the term came to mind. She remembered how upset she had once been that the other noblemen had mocked Claus by claiming he was selling himself.

Unable to hold back, Jeanette found herself calling out. “A-Ariel! You don’t need to sacrifice yourself! Come on, let’s think of a solution together!”

Ariel directed her surprised gaze at Jeanette. A moment later, she suddenly smiled. It was an ephemeral smile of both loneliness and joy blended together. “Thank you, Jeanette... But it’s okay. The time has come for me to take responsibility for what I’ve done.” The girl looked startlingly beautiful as she said this, yet also painfully sad.

Is Ariel...truly prepared to sell her body? Jeanette thought with panic. “No! Mother should be the one to pay back her own debt! There’s no need for you to sacrifice yourself! I’ll lend you both the money, so—!”

Yet Ariel only shook her head.

Jeanette opened her mouth to continue, but Claus gently grabbed her shoulder to stop her. “Let’s just go back for now, Jeanette. Then we can look for a way to resolve this together.”

Jeanette glanced at Ariel once more. Leila was still dumbstruck, so she was unable to converse any further. And Ariel had already given up, so Jeanette felt that she wouldn't be able to have a constructive talk with her stepsister either.

"All right... Let's go," she agreed.

Outside, the guards assigned to tail Jeanette had tied up the thugs who'd kidnapped her and were taking them away. Throwing them a sidelong glance, Jeanette climbed aboard the carriage. Soon enough, it rattled off.

Sara was enraged, her countenance overflowing with disgruntlement. "Lady Ariel is one thing, but should you really have let Lady Leila off the hook so easily, Lord Claus?! That woman can just go to the brothel and get her money that way! That's her just deserts!"

"Sara!" Jeanette exclaimed, shocked that Sara would say something so outrageous. She had forgotten that despite the maid's appearance, she held a number of radical beliefs.

While Sara huffed and puffed through her nose, Claus slowly nodded. "I don't plan to leave it there, of course. I just think there's a more suitable person to be dishing out her punishment than I."

"A more suitable person?" Jeanette echoed. Nobody came to mind, and both she and Sara tilted their heads in confusion.

That night, the Roussel estate was utterly silent, as though an all-night vigil were being held. When Ariel and Leila had gotten back, neither of them had said a word. An oppressive air gripped the room, and the concerned Gilbert, who had no idea what had happened, came over to check on them multiple times.

"What are we going to do?" Ariel asked softly.

Pressing her hand to her temple, Leila responded with a grim look on her face. "If I'd just stuffed Jeanette into a carriage before Claus showed up, everything would've worked out. But because *you* stopped me...!"

"Didn't you hear what Lord Claus said, mother? He'd already warned Marquis

Balladur. Even if you'd sent Jeanette off to his estate, she would've been turned away at the gate."

"Then what am I supposed to do?! I don't have the sort of money to pay him back! Or are you suggesting you'll go to him in Jeanette's place?!"

Ariel gasped at her mother's words. Leila did the same.

"That's right..." said the woman. "Will you go, Ariel?! Baron Roussel still hasn't come back, but if he does, I can't just tell him about the debt as soon as he walks through the door! So please, think of this as saving your mother! What do you say? A marquis outranks Claus too!"

Indeed, when it came to peerage, Marquis Balladur stood higher than Count Guivarch. But this would've only mattered if the marquis had been a respectable character for a woman to marry. One could only imagine what kind of terrible fate awaited Ariel if she married into House Balladur.

But I'm sure mother already knows that... Ariel cast her eyes down. She exhaled slowly, and then said, "All right. I'll marry Marquis Balladur."

"Thank you, Ariel! You're such a good girl!" Leila cried with tears in her eyes, squeezing Ariel in her arms.

Ariel didn't bother protesting and just closed her eyes. *I had a feeling things would turn out like this from the start. It's all because I joined mother in bullying Jeanette this whole time... Now, the time for payment has come.*

Once it had been decided that Ariel would marry into House Balladur, the talks proceeded smoothly. Perhaps as a form of atonement, Leila asked Gilbert to arrange for a gorgeous wedding dress for Ariel. However, looking at it didn't bring Ariel any joy.

There was no light in her eyes as she said, "Thank you, mother." It was the best she could manage.

Somehow, this doesn't feel like a marriage at all, she thought. When she was younger, she had pictured her future wedding according to her mother's tales: full of flowers, lights, and sparkles. Yet in the present reality, she didn't even know what her future husband looked like. He was old enough to be her father

and was infamous for his insatiable lust. She couldn't imagine a shiny future awaiting her at all.

The days passed in a gray blur, but that was actually a good thing. Everything would end once she was married. The marquis would play with her, and in the worst-case scenario, she might even lose her life.

But there's no changing it now.

A tiny part of her had held a sliver of hope that perhaps Baron Roussel would return before the time of her repayment came. Yet no such miraculous solution appeared, and at last the day of her departure arrived.

On that same day, Jeanette and Claus were standing outside House Roussel's gate, having come to see Ariel off. Leila was openly irritated by this, but Claus must've truly frightened her during the previous incident, because she kept quiet and opted for completely ignoring their presence. Recalling the way Claus had looked back then made even Ariel shiver. Leila, who'd been the direct recipient of his fury, likely couldn't even look him in the eyes.

"Ariel, are you really sure about this? There's still time. I can cover the debt," Jeanette said with a worried expression as she tightly gripped Ariel's hands.

"No, it's fine. I wouldn't be able to pay you back," Ariel said. This was the conclusion she came to after thinking everything over many times. Because Jeanette was so kind, Ariel knew she wouldn't complain even if Ariel couldn't pay her back over the course of her life. But that would've been wrong. *If you borrow something, you have to pay it back. The same goes for what my mother did.*

On the other hand, Leila still felt resentment toward Jeanette. A look that screamed, "If you have that kind of money, just hand it over rather than lending it to us!" was written all over her face. But she wasn't brave enough to express the thought out loud.

Of course, that was because the smiling Claus was standing by Jeanette's side. The glance he had cast at Leila earlier wasn't pleasant in the slightest. She must've known that if she tried to say anything, Claus would come after her mercilessly.

“Ariel... If anything happens, write me a letter! I’ll be waiting to hear from you!” Jeanette said, the tears in her eyes almost looking overblown.

Ariel giggled. It’d been a long time since she’d been able to laugh like this. “You really are good-natured until the very end, sister. Even though I bullied you so much...”

“That doesn’t count as bullying! To me, those were all rewards!”

“Rewards? I have no idea what you mean. Gross!” Ariel scoffed, making Jeanette moan in disappointment. Seeing that, Ariel giggled again.

This might be my last chance to meet with her... At that thought, her next words came to her easily. “I hope you and Lord Claus will be happy together. Not that I approve of your relationship or anything. It’s just that I’m about to become a marchioness, you know? I thought I ought to show you some grace, that’s all.”

“Ariel...” The teary Jeanette hung her head. “I was really happy when you stood up for me back then. Truth is, I’ve always wanted us to get along.”

Hearing that made Ariel remember the day when she had first met Jeanette. When Leila had first brought Ariel over to the Roussel estate, Jeanette had come flying out with a bright, hopeful smile on her face. For a second, Ariel had thought they’d get along, but one look at her mother had made her breath hitch. The way Leila had stared at the baron’s biological child had been unmistakably filled with hatred.

Her mother had then whispered to Ariel: *“Listen. No matter what, you cannot lose to that girl. You’re much more beautiful than she is.”*

This had been the first time Ariel had ever seen such a terrifying look on her mother’s face, and she could only nod in response. From that day, she had found herself thinking, *Mother must be right. This girl is my enemy!*

But looking back on it now, Ariel realized there had never been any reason for her to team up with her mother and be hostile toward Jeanette. *If I’d just been a little stronger, maybe I could’ve become true sisters with her.* They could’ve spent their days as children together, holding hands and laughing.

Such days would never come now. Yet Ariel couldn’t stop herself from

picturing them for a moment. “Jeanette, I’m sorry. I...”

What should I say, after all this time? No matter what, it’ll all just sound like excuses...

Ariel wanted to continue, but the words got stuck in her throat.

Jeanette’s warm hands squeezed Ariel’s. “I still don’t think it’s too late, Ariel. So please, write to me! Every single day! And I’ll write to you too!”

Ariel glanced up, and Jeanette was smiling her usual, carefree, boundlessly cheerful smile. Her greenish-gray eyes gazed at Ariel warmly. She seemed to be saying, “It’s okay. I understand even if you don’t say it.”

“Every day?” Ariel repeated. “It’d be so vile to receive that many letters!”

“O-Oh, right! Sorry! Then once every two... No, how about once every three days?!” Jeanette proposed frantically.

“Once per week,” Ariel murmured. “That much I can do.”

“Really?!” Jeanette lit up.

Ariel cast her gaze aside as if to escape. “B-But it might be too much of a bother, so don’t expect anything!”

“Okay! I’ll be waiting all the time! But are you sure you won’t want to write every day?!”

“I’m sure,” Ariel replied, laughing. *Jeanette truly never becomes discouraged.*

At that moment, the coachman spoke up mildly. “If we don’t depart soon, it’ll be dark by the time we arrive.”

“All right... I’m coming,” said Ariel. The time was finally here. She freed her hands from Jeanette’s grasp and began climbing aboard the carriage.

“Ariel...” The one who called out to her this time was Leila. She looked troubled, and for some reason, she seemed on the verge of tears. Perhaps she was finally grappling with her guilt.

But to Ariel, it didn’t mean anything now. No matter how guilty her mother felt, it wouldn’t change the fact that she had sold off her daughter.

“Mother, sister. I’m off,” Ariel said simply, closing the carriage door. “Let’s

go,” she told the driver.

As the vehicle began moving, Leila screamed Ariel’s name. However, Ariel didn’t respond and only continued facing forward in silence.

Jeanette and Claus watched fixedly as the carriage faded away into the distance. Leila vacantly slumped to the ground. She didn’t cry, nor did she seem relieved that her debt was paid off. She simply stared after the disappearing carriage.

“She’s gone...” Jeanette whispered, then felt a weight around her shoulders. Claus had embraced her. She looked up at him, and in a worried tone of voice asked, “Is this really okay? Ariel will be married to Marquis Balladur... Well, I suppose I should say the *new* Marquis Balladur.”

Claus slowly nodded. “Yes. The previous marquis was another matter, but his son, the new marquis, is an upstanding man in most respects—aside from being a hardcore misogynist—so it’s a gamble as to whether their marriage will go well.”

In truth, shortly before Leila had abducted Jeanette, the lecherous Marquis Balladur had had a heart attack in his bedroom and died. The one to succeed him as the new Marquis Balladur was his son. The son had been carrying out all the noble responsibilities in his father’s place for years anyway, so the father had been marquis in name only.

On top of that, the son’s personality was the exact opposite of his lecherous father’s, as he loathed women. Annoyed at the thought that even more women would compete for his attention upon learning he was the new marquis, he still hadn’t announced his father’s death. All this to say, Ariel’s new husband wasn’t the lustful old man but rather his son.

Based on how Leila and Ariel had acted today, it seemed like they still weren’t aware of the truth. Jeanette hadn’t said anything because Claus had argued that the new marquis was still just as eccentric as his father, so he didn’t want to give Ariel a false sense of relief.

“By the way... You said he’s a hardcore misogynist, so then why did he accept

a bride in place of the debt repayment?” Jeanette asked curiously. From what Claus had told her about the new marquis, she wouldn’t have been surprised to hear him say, “I want my money back no matter what. I don’t care if you have to sell your organs to do it.”

“Well...” Claus smiled dryly, looking slightly exasperated. “Since he’s the marquis, you’d expect there to be lots of women vying for him and his fortune, right? So he wanted a wife in name only—a woman-repellent, you could say. That’s why the idea of taking Ariel as collateral was appealing to him. Also, when he heard how bad her reputation is, he deemed that it was fine because he wouldn’t have to feel bad about ignoring such a wicked woman and having a marriage blanc...”

“Um... He sounds like a pretty difficult person...” Jeanette said with a groan. He might’ve been better than his senile, lustful father, but it didn’t sound like he and Ariel would have a typical happy marriage.

“I can’t deny that he’s quirky. However, he doesn’t drink alcohol or gamble, and he’s an honest man,” Claus reassured her. “Though whether he’ll be to Miss Ariel’s liking is another matter entirely.”

Jeanette nodded. In high society, marriages based on true love between the nobles, like that of Duke and Duchess Pablo, were rare. Ariel and the new marquis weren’t far apart in age, and the fact that he was an earnest person was a big plus.

“Besides... I think it’s best for Miss Ariel to keep some distance from Leila,” Claus added, narrowing his eyes at Leila, who was rooted to her spot on the ground. “She was poisoning Ariel. The way she tried to make her daughter complicit in kidnapping you...and then sold Ariel off to pay her debts... It’s not something you’d expect a mother to do to her own child.”

That was something Jeanette had been wondering about for a long time. Though she had no right to interfere with her stepmother’s actions, Jeanette was certain that her father would’ve never asked her to help kidnap someone or tried to coerce her into complicity. He wouldn’t have plotted an abduction in the first place.

“You could say this was perfect timing. Miss Ariel is leaving the nest, and she

will finally be apart from Leila,” Claus concluded.

“Right... Now all I can do is pray that the marquis will be a good marriage partner for Ariel,” Jeanette wished softly, turning to look in the direction where the carriage had vanished.

A few days later, Jeanette was in Roussel Corporation’s office, busy dealing with the cleanup of the tulip incident. Everything was still chaotic following the sudden crash, and she had a ton of work to do. One such task involved dealing with one of the farming families who’d refused to trade with her following the tulip price increases. The farmers had contracted with another company who offered a higher price, but the company went bankrupt and they never received a single krandell, so they had once again turned to Roussel Corporation for help. Because of their desperation, she’d be able to obtain the goods at a lower price than before.

Usually, Jeanette would’ve cheerfully set about finalizing the deal, but today her pen kept stopping on the page over and over. She sighed deeply, finding it hard to finish the work.

Kyuriakris was nearby sorting out some documents, and he cast her a confused glance. “You’re not usually the type to sigh like that. What’s got you so troubled? Is someone trying to make you a bad deal?”

“No, it’s nothing major like that,” Jeanette replied hurriedly. In reality, she wasn’t thinking about the tulips or the farmers, but Ariel.

It’s not even been a week since Ariel’s marriage, so I know there’s no way a letter would come this soon, but... Jeanette couldn’t stop herself from constantly asking if any letters had arrived regardless. She had been keeping an eye on the situation after consulting with Claus, but she couldn’t help wondering if she’d made the right choice.

I agree that it’s a good thing for her to get some distance from mother, but was it really fine to leave her with that man? Maybe there was a better person out there...

The new marquis, using the debt repayment as a pretext, was happy to take

Ariel in because it was convenient for him. Jeanette didn't know him personally, and the more she heard about him, the more worried she was about his character.

Ahh, I wish Ariel would write me a letter already! Or maybe I should send one first? But if I do, I bet she'll say I'm gross...!

"—ey. Hey, Jeanette!"

No, but Ariel's gotten kinder lately. She only acts that way because she's embarrassed, so she might actually be happy to hear from me...

"Jeanette!"

"Ah?!" The startled Jeanette looked up at the sound of her name being shouted into her ear. Realizing that Kyuriakris was incredibly close to her, she became even more panicked. At some point, he had wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Y-You're too close, Lord Kyuriakris!" she exclaimed, trying to push him away.

Kyuriakris didn't even budge. Rather, he was daring enough to pull her even closer. "You shouldn't let your guard down around me. Do you even know how many times I tried calling for you?"

"I'm sorry! I was lost in thought!" Jeanette responded, putting all her strength into her hands to push him away.

But Kyuriakris just clasped those hands. "No, I'm not letting this chance pass me by. Maybe you've already forgotten, but I haven't given up on you at all just yet," he whispered with a glint in his irises. His black eyes narrowed like those of a ferocious predator who was toying with his prey.

Oh no! He's serious about this...!

"If you want someone to blame, you can blame Claus for leaving me alone with your defenseless little self," Kyuriakris told her.

"That's absurd!" Jeanette squeaked.

Right at that moment, someone announced, "Unfortunately, I *am* here."

"Ow, ow, ow!" Kyuriakris exclaimed while suddenly letting Jeanette go.

She quickly checked to see what was going on, only to see a smiling Claus mercilessly pulling Kyuriakris by the ear.

“Good grief... You really let down your guard, huh?” Claus said with a sigh, still not letting up.

“Ow! Stop it! My ear!”

“I only did this because you wouldn’t have let her go otherwise. You forced my hand,” Claus asserted nonchalantly, and only after dragging Kyuriakris a good distance away from Jeanette did he finally let go. Then, he turned to Jeanette with a serious look on his face. “Anyway, Jeanette. We need to go home right now.”

“Huh? Right now?” Jeanette asked. It was rare for Claus to say such a thing. He did stick by her side often, watching her with a smile, and aligned his breaks with hers. But he’d never tried to stop her from working.

That means this must be really important!

“All right!” she agreed, getting up and leaving Roussel Corporation, hand in hand with Claus.

They arrived at the Guivarch estate. When the door swung open, the first thing Jeanette saw was...

“Father?!”

...a pair of gray-greenish eyes just like hers and a balding head. Indeed, sitting in the living room was Jeanette’s father, whom she hadn’t seen in months.

“Ah, Jeanette! It’s been a while!” he exclaimed. His tone of voice was so lighthearted and casual, it was as if he hadn’t been missing for nearly a year. The man’s tanned face had a sharper look to it than before, and his body was in shape. His once chubby stomach had noticeably flattened.

The baron’s appearance was a testament to how rough his long journey had been. Jeanette’s eyes brimmed with tears at the sight. “Father!!!” she cried, leaping into his arms.

“Oof! I see you’re the same as ever, Jeanette—as sprightly as a boar!” he

responded with a hearty laugh.

The scent and warmth enveloping her were exactly the same as she remembered, and Jeanette felt more of her tears welling up. “Father...! Father...!”

I always believed that he was alive.

I’m so glad to see him again.

I’m relieved he’s back safe and sound.

But Jeanette couldn’t put her feelings into words, and only kept sobbing and crying out for him.

The baron’s large hands softly patted her head. “I see you were really worried for me. But as you can see, I’m doing just fine.”

Her father’s low, kind, familiar voice rang in her ears soothingly.

“Right...!” Overwhelmed with joy, she could only nod. *Right! After all, he’s the man who got hit by lightning thrice and survived!*

Although Claus had informed her that her father was fine, seeing him with her own eyes brought an entirely different level of relief. She pulled away from him and glanced at Claus, who was watching them with a truly happy smile.

Noticing this, the baron spoke up. “Thank you, Claus. Because of how things had gone, I had given up hope of ever returning to my homeland, but you found me and made it possible for me to come back. You helped me out a lot.”

“What are you saying, Sir Roussel? You’re the one who’s helped me so much in my life. What I did pales in comparison,” Claus said, and the two men shared a firm hug.

Jeanette’s heart was filled with joy as she witnessed their reunion.

After much rejoicing, her father broke the ice. “Now, Claus has informed me about the recent goings-on, but I see that Roussel Corporation has changed a lot while I’ve been gone.”

Jeanette nodded silently. Since her father had first gone missing, Jeanette had left the house and obtained Roussel Corporation’s title deed, Leila had fallen

into debt, and Ariel had been married off. Even as his daughter, Jeanette couldn't tell what the baron thought of all these incidents.

"First of all, Jeanette..." he began.

"Y-Yes?"

His large hand once again patted her head. "I heard you've been working hard while I've been away. Thank you for protecting the company from Leila. It happened a bit sooner than I planned, but Roussel Corporation belongs to you now. From here on out, you, together with Claus and everyone at the firm, can walk down whichever path you choose."

"All right!" Jeanette said with a vigorous nod. She had been working as the company's acting president, but from now she'd be the official chairwoman. But then a thought occurred to her. "Father, if I take over the firm, what will *you* do?"

"What, isn't it obvious? I'm going to retire and take it easy. Anyway, the emperor has already been bugging me about coming back to spend time with him, even though I only *just* returned home... What a slave driver."

Indeed, it seemed Voltaire's emperor had truly taken a liking to the baron.

"Just what did you do for him to like you so much, father?" Jeanette asked him.

"I didn't do anything special. I just happened to save him in the nick of time when he was attacked by a bear."

"A bear?!"

Jeanette and Claus exchanged a wide-eyed look.

"Well, it's not like I was alone," the baron went on. "It was just a stroke of good luck. But it's a long story, so I'll tell you another time!"

Nooo! I want to hear about it now, father! Jeanette protested inwardly. She wanted to say it out loud, but decided not to bother her father too much when he'd only just returned, so she swallowed her words.

Once the baron had ensured that Jeanette, Claus, and Roussel Corporation were all fine, he left for the Roussel estate, where Leila resided.

As the sun slowly went down, Leila stood in the dimly lit room, staring vacantly at an empty sofa. Usually, Ariel, her one and only daughter, would be sitting there. Ever since the girl had found out that there were bad rumors spreading about her in high society, she'd stopped attending public events. Instead, she'd sit here and embroider, or diligently water the plants in the garden.

Leila had been irritated with Ariel and had watched her while stewing in anger.

"You're fleeing high society just because of a few bad rumors? That's utterly pathetic! Just look at Jeanette! She had such an awful reputation because of you, but she still attended balls like it was no big deal!"

"She's a special case! Don't lump me in with such shameless creatures like her!"

"Then stop being so hung up on Claus already and find yourself another husband!"

Such shouting matches already seemed like a thing of the distant past to Leila. *Has this room always been so big...?* she wondered while slowly looking around the living room. She had never noticed how large it was before, because the Roussel father-daughter duo used to always run around and make a ruckus. But now, the empty room was deathly silent.

Everyone left one by one, and I'm all alone. First my husband, then his daughter Jeanette, and finally my Ariel... Reminiscing about it caused Leila to space out again. *But she had to be married off. There was no other way.*

After all, Leila hadn't had the money to pay off her debt, and she couldn't rely on Jeanette because she couldn't guarantee how the girl's methods would affect her. The only two choices Leila had had left were going to work at a brothel together with Ariel or marrying Ariel off to Marquis Balladur. Rather than having them both fall into ruin, having her daughter marry a high-ranked noble was the better option, even if it wasn't ideal.

Not to mention, the daughter of an upstart baron wouldn't have normally

been able to marry a marquis. In a way, it was like gold digging.

Yet even as she thought that, Leila's mood didn't improve. She continued standing absently in the dim sitting room, when suddenly a loud clamor resounded somewhere within the mansion. Wondering what was going on, Leila glanced at the door right as it flew open.

"I'm baaack!"

A foolishly loud, vulgar voice echoed within the room. Leila only knew of one man to whom it could belong.

"Clement! W-Welcome back...!"

Her husband and the rightful head of the house, Clement Roussel, was standing before her. Leila quickly rushed over to greet his slightly thinner self. In front of him, she was able to play the role of a good, wise wife and mother.

"I'm so glad you're back safely! Jeanette left while you were gone, and Ariel got married... I was so lonely by myself!" she cried with exaggeration, hugging him.

Clement gently hugged her back. "I've put you through a lot, huh? Claus told me all about it."

Leila's eyebrows twitched at the mention of that name. She didn't want to hear about Claus because he was aware of all of her wrongdoings. "M-My, I wonder what he told you...?" she inquired, batting her eyelashes at him.

Her husband smiled in good humor. "Oh, this and that. Like how Jeanette moved to the Guivarch residence for the sake of her marriage. And how you handed over Roussel Corporation's title deed to her. And of course, I heard all about Ariel's marriage too! She married a marquis, right? That's incredible, Leila!" His expression was bright and cheerful, as though he'd truly only heard good things.

O-Oh? I guess he didn't find out about the details? Did Claus not explain everything? But why?

On the outside, Claus seemed like an upright saint of great integrity. But on the inside, he was filled with a shocking amount of darkness. If he hadn't told

Clement everything, he had probably done so for a reason. With that on her mind, Leila stared at her husband's face, trying to read him.

"All this talk of marriage is making me nostalgic," he went on. "Do you remember our first meeting, Leila?"

Our first meeting? Leila frowned at this sudden change of topic. The baron had never brought this up before. *Maybe he's feeling sentimental from coming home after such a long time away? I suppose I can humor him for now.* All the better if Clement forgot about what he'd been discussing with Claus.

Leila put on a fake smile to play along. "Yes, how nostalgic. How many years has it been already?" For the sake of keeping up with the conversation, she thought back to their first meeting.

One night a few years ago, she had been walking down the path of certain doom. She had been headed to a high-class brothel. She'd had no other choice. Her previous husband's family had cast her out, and her birth family had abandoned her as well. Her erstwhile in-laws hadn't wanted to keep Ariel since she was a girl, so if Leila didn't find someplace for them to live, they'd both starve to death.

Leila hadn't wanted to go to a brothel, but fortunately, she was a beautiful woman. Deciding it was better than starvation, she had made the bitter choice. But on the way, she had stumbled across the drunk baron, rolling around in the street.

"When I opened my eyes, I was on the ground with you taking care of me," Clement reminisced.

"Indeed. Goodness, it was hard to endure the stares of the passersby, you know?"

In reality, Leila had wanted to walk away from the drunk man. But when she'd noticed that he was clad in high-quality attire, she had hurried over to his side. And the outcome of that decision was their eventual marriage. *With my beauty, I had a feeling I could do it,* Leila thought with a triumphant giggle.

In a serious tone of voice, Clement continued. "Yes, it's very nostalgic. By the end of the day, you had drowned your sorrows as well, and you were even

drunker than I. You screamed and cried and threw up... You were a mess.”

“I...” Leila glanced away awkwardly. She had wanted to forget those awful memories.

“But you were incredible back then. You were so angry with your stingy in-laws that you said things like ‘I’m beautiful, so of course I’m going to spend lots of money! It was their fault for taking me as a bride if they weren’t prepared for that!’”

“D-Did I, now...?”

The baron’s words were true. When the others asked about the beginning of their romance, they only told them the first half of the story: that Leila had found the drunk Clement passed out on the street and nursed him. Leila had asked Clement to keep the latter half a secret. Somehow, Claus had found out about it, and in the past had threatened to out her if she kept conspiring against Jeanette.

“Most incredible of all was your care for Ariel,” Clement said wistfully. “‘Please!’ you said, ‘I don’t want Ariel to be a prostitute! I don’t care what becomes of me, but I want to protect her even if it costs me my life!’ It was the first time a woman had pulled on my lapels with such strength. I’d never seen someone look so ghoulish before either.”

“My, how embarrassing... Did I really say that?” Leila replied, tilting her head. *I was drunk, so my memories from that time are hazy.* She feigned ignorance, relieved that the topic was getting further and further away from Claus.

Clement nodded repeatedly. “You did. I remember it well. The reason I took you in as my wife was because I was taken with your strength of character, as both a woman and a mother.”

“Goodness...” Leila took this opportunity to blush.

Clement kept going. “That was why I didn’t mind the fact you didn’t like me in the slightest.”

“Right... Huh?” She looked up at him with surprise. *The topic has suddenly changed, hasn’t it?*

He gazed back at her intently. His usually cheerful countenance didn't have an ounce of laughter to it now. "I always wondered whether I should caution you about how you treated Jeanette. But I tolerated it so long as Jeanette herself was amused by it."

"Huh...? What...?" *Jeanette? Why is the conversation shifting in that direction?*

"But what you did this time is the one thing I cannot accept." Clement's eyes narrowed, his pupils shaking with suspicion. "You tried sending Jeanette off as a sacrifice, didn't you?"

"I... That's...!" Leila's mouth gaped. She was shaken to her core.

"And you really *did* send Ariel off as a sacrifice," the baron added, his eyes glinting sharply.

He was aware of everything, after all. His cheerful reminiscing had all been a ploy to gradually corner Leila. The moment Leila realized that, everything seemed to slow down. Clement's cool, emotionless gaze pierced her. He was looking at her like a judge about to issue a verdict.

"I could put up with you making a fool out of me. And I knew that Claus was protecting Jeanette, so I was willing to tolerate how you treated her. But you betrayed the one person you should *never* have betrayed—Ariel. Am I wrong?"

"I..."

"Leila. Let me ask you again. Isn't Ariel your precious daughter, whom you were willing to protect with your life? Are you truly fine with sending her off to someone infamously senile and lecherous just to pay off your own debt?"

The baron didn't shout or get agitated; he only addressed her in a low, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"You know how much hardship Claus went through because of people claiming he was selling himself, don't you? So why did you do the very same thing to your own daughter? Why couldn't you find it in yourself to say, 'I'll protect Ariel no matter what'? What a shame, Leila." Clement patted her shoulder. "I overlooked the way you bullied Jeanette because I didn't want Ariel to end up homeless. But now that she's gone, I no longer have to worry. Leila, I

want you to leave this house. We're divorcing."

Divorce. That single word blared in Leila's ears.

Clement began walking out of the room. She hurried after him, outstretching her arm toward his back. "W-Wait, Clement...! I'm sorry! Forgive me...!"

With his hand wrapped around the doorknob, Clement paused and slowly shook his head. "No, Leila. It's not me to whom you should be apologizing. It's Jeanette and Ariel. And...Ariel might not forgive you even if you tell her you're sorry. But I wouldn't blame her, after what you did to her."

The door shut mercilessly, and with that Clement had made his rejection unmistakable.

Leila collapsed with a thud, her hands falling against the floor. It was at that moment that she realized how she had sacrificed something so precious to her. And the fact that Ariel, whom she had sold off, would never smile at her again. Large teardrops hit the floor one after another. Unable to bear it any longer, Leila wailed.

"Ah... Ahhh... AHHH!!! Clement! Jeanette! Ariel!"

She cried out the names of those who had once been her family and who would never smile at her again.

Chapter 5: That Title Deed

“Oh? What a rare sight. You usually only stay up this late for work.”

The startled Jeanette glanced up at the sound of Claus’s voice. “Ah, I’m just thinking about some things...” she replied, tightening her grip on the mug of hot milk in her hands. Sara had prepared it for her a short while ago.

For some reason, Jeanette had been feeling restless and anxious all day. Uncharacteristically, she had decided to finish her work early and had been trying to relax in the living room, but it wasn’t really working.

Noticing the state she was in, Claus sat down next to her. “Are you still worried about your father? Or...maybe about Ariel?”

Jeanette’s eyes widened, but then she let out a resigned sigh. “You really see through everything, Lord Claus...”

“I’ve been watching you for many years now, you know? It wasn’t for nothing. Besides, you’re very easy to read.”

“What? Really?!” she asked in a panic, while Claus chuckled at her. Jeanette turned her eyes to Sara, who nodded as though the answer should’ve been obvious.

“You *are* very easy to read, milady,” the maid affirmed. “Especially when you’re feeling down. You get so quiet—it’s very noticeable.”

“N-No way...!” Jeanette exclaimed. *I can’t believe my emotions are so obvious!* This was the first she’d heard of this. Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

Claus threw her a lifeline. “This only applies to those of us who know you well. Everyone else always struggles to understand what you’re thinking, so don’t worry.”

“Exactly,” Sara agreed. “For example, others wouldn’t realize that the reason your eyes twinkle when you look at a jewel is because you’re trying to ascertain

its worth.”

Then I guess it's fine... Jeanette thought hesitantly, still blushing.

“Anyway,” Claus said, getting the topic back on track. “A letter from Ariel arrived this morning, right? You seemed very happy about it.”

“Yes... In the letter, Ariel mentioned that the senile, lecherous Marquis Balladur had passed away and that his son has succeeded him. But the new marquis is prejudiced against her, so they had no wedding and no rings. They're really only married in name. And apparently the staff are following the marquis's example and treating Ariel badly,” Jeanette explained, frowning dejectedly.

It was just as Claus had said before. The new Marquis Balladur had only been willing to marry Ariel because she was a wicked woman. However...

“I thought it'd be fine since the lustful marquis is no more, so I didn't object to sending her off, but I wonder if that was the right choice. Ariel mentioned she was relieved she doesn't need to pay attention to him, but I'm still worried.”

I should've paid off that debt, even if I had to force Ariel to accept it. If I'd done that, she could've married someone more suitable. Jeanette couldn't stop herself from having such thoughts.

While she racked her brain, Claus smiled softly. He wrapped his arm around her and embraced her tightly, his chin brushing against the top of her head.

“L-Lord Claus?!”

“You're so kind, Jeanette. It's very charming, but I'm jealous of Ariel, you know?”

“Of Ariel?!” Jeanette echoed. Ariel was a girl, and her stepsister to boot. *What's he jealous of, exactly?!*

“Your father is finally back, and I thought that meant we could proceed with our wedding. But all you've been thinking about is Ariel,” Claus explained, inhaling deeply.

Jeanette let out a shriek when she realized he was sniffing her hair. “Ahhh! Lord Claus! I still haven't had a bath today!”

“So? You always smell lovely, like sunshine.”

“Still!” Even Jeanette felt some shame as a woman. She protested frantically, until Claus finally gave up and released her. But his hand remained wrapped around her waist.

“Anyway, Jeanette... Setting aside the fact Leila sold Ariel off, her ending up in a bad marriage is her getting her just deserts, in a way.”

Jeanette moaned in resignation. Indeed, Ariel had garnered a reputation as a wicked woman because she used to genuinely slander Jeanette. It was simply the result of everyone finding out the truth.

“I know this may sound cold, but there’s nothing you can do for her, nor should you. I think Ariel has to overcome this trial on her own,” Claus opined.

“I...suppose...” Jeanette murmured with a dispirited countenance.

Claus laughed. “It’s like you went past being her sister and are acting like her mother now.”

“Ugh... Logically I know you’re right, but I was so happy when Ariel actually smiled at me back then...!” Jeanette confessed, fumbling with her fingers.

She had believed that Ariel would hate her forever. But at the time of their parting, Ariel had shown her a genuine smile. Ever since then, that smile had been glimmering within Jeanette’s memories.

“Well, that’s why I’m jealous of her. I wish *I* was the one on your mind all the time...” Claus said with an exasperated sigh. “But she’ll be fine, Jeanette. When Leila abducted you, you saw for yourself how Ariel defied her. I’m sure she’ll be able to carve out her own path in her new home.”

“You’re...right. She’s not a child anymore...” Jeanette couldn’t help but want to do something for her stepsister, but Ariel hadn’t requested her help. *So for now, I have no choice but to grit my teeth and watch from afar.* Jeanette tightened her fists, bracing herself.

“If you just can’t let it go, how about sending a gift?” Claus suggested.

“A gift? Like...an offering of money as a way of asking Marquis Balladur to stop bullying Ariel?!”

Claus burst into laughter. “No, not quite. Your idea is rational and realistic, which is very you. But it could have a number of both positive and negative effects, so let’s set it aside for now. I was talking about something more sentimental, though. For example, when sailors set out on a long journey on the sea, their family members give them protective charms as a way of praying for their safety, right?”

“Oh, I get it now!” Jeanette replied, reddening again. *He’s got great ideas, as always! I shouldn’t be trying to solve everything with money!*

“How about something that will make it clear that you’re on Ariel’s side? I think that should be enough for now.”

“Yes! I should definitely do that!”

I wonder what I should send her? Usually, I’d subconsciously choose something with practical daily use, but I should go for something more significant here...! Jeanette began umming and ahing. *Ariel likes gemstones, so maybe a piece of jewelry... But Gilbert mentioned that she really cared for her tulips too. Maybe I should send her a tulip as a way for her to remember me? Ahh, but she’s getting bullied by the servants. If they destroy the tulip bulb, that would just cause Ariel even more sorrow! How about something that’s difficult to break...? I hope nobody’s stealing her things...*

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door. Jeanette hurriedly looked up to see a servant peering in.

“Excuse me, Count Guivarch. Baron Roussel is here. Would you like to see him?”

“Father?” Jeanette exclaimed, exchanging a surprised glance with Claus. It was already quite late, and early risers would’ve likely gone to bed already.

“I wonder what prompted this late visit?” Claus mused before addressing the servant. “Let the baron in.”

“Right away!”

When they came face-to-face with the baron, they realized he must’ve been drinking somewhere, as he seemed somewhat tipsy. With his cheeks slightly flushed, the man plopped himself onto the sofa.

“Father, what made you come here at this hour? Did you forget the way home because you were drinking?” Jeanette fretted, then asked the staff for a glass of water.

The baron laughed. “What a harsh welcome! I’m not actually *that* drunk, so don’t worry.”

“That’s what every drunk person says. Should I send mother a message?”

Her father shook his head at her concern. “It’s fine,” he said. “There’s no need. I mean, you couldn’t even if you wanted to. After all, Leila left the house today.”

“What?!” Jeanette clapped her hand over her mouth in shock. “Did mother finally dump you?!”

“No! It’s the very opposite, I tell you! *I’m* the one who asked for a divorce!” he clarified, roaring into laughter. Claus, who was sitting next to him, also began laughing joyously.

“Really?! I was sure it’d be the other way around...” Indeed, Jeanette’s thoughts weren’t all that far-fetched. Leila had always complained about Clement’s drinking habits. Jeanette was convinced that seeing the baron get himself drunk first thing after finally coming home had been the woman’s last straw. “But why?! You two would’ve been able to live as a happy couple on your own now!”

“The fact we were alone is exactly why, Jeanette,” the baron proclaimed earnestly. “You see... I knew from the start that Leila didn’t like me in the slightest.” This was the first time he’d ever admitted such a thing. “But I didn’t mind. I believed she was so calculating and ill-tempered for the sake of her daughter, which charmed me...” He paused, shaking his head in disappointment. “But since she sacrificed her daughter, it’s all over now.”

His words were incredibly heavy. All this time, he hadn’t cared that Leila didn’t love him, yet now she had crossed a line he just couldn’t forgive. Jeanette hung her head.

“I couldn’t believe it when Claus first told me about it,” her father continued. “Or maybe I just didn’t *want* to believe it. When I heard that she abducted you

and tried to send you off, it made my blood boil. And when I realized she used Ariel as collateral for her debt instead, I didn't have the strength to be angry anymore. I only felt disappointed."

"Father..."

When people truly give up on each other, maybe it's not from anger, but disappointment... Jeanette thought, squeezing her father's hand.

His face was still flushed with alcohol, and he spoke with a note of loneliness. "You went through a lot of hardship too, Jeanette. I see both you and Ariel as my precious daughters. I didn't want to take Ariel's mother away from her and put you through years of difficulties as a result..."

"I'm okay, father. I don't have even a single memory of hardship from my life at home!" Jeanette asserted resolutely.

One of the nobles had once asked her, *"It must've been so difficult for you when Ariel slandered you, right?"* But Jeanette didn't think she went through years of hardship because of Leila and Ariel.

"If anything, I'm really glad I got to have so many rewards! It was lots of fun, and I grew a lot because of that!" she said, as though nothing bad had happened at home.

The baron laughed loudly. "I see. Indeed, that's the kind of girl you are."

"If I had to pick, I'd say I hate those nobles who made fun of Lord Claus and said he was selling himself! Ugh, just remembering about it makes me mad! I should have followed Lord Claus's example and overcharged those people during the tulip boom...!"

Claus smoothly joined the conversation at that point. "It's okay, Jeanette. They *were* overcharged from the very beginning."

"Really?!" Jeanette exclaimed. *Lord Claus truly doesn't miss anything!*

While she was both surprised and impressed, her father once more roared with laughter, slapping his thigh in a drunken manner. "I missed this! I really feel like I'm home. And Claus, is it just me, or have you become more upfront these days? I've been thinking this for a while, but I didn't want to say

anything.”

“I decided to stop hiding things, or else Jeanette would’ve never noticed my feelings,” Claus responded with a smile.

“Ahh.” The baron seemed to have surmised something from those words. “Jeanette’s thickheaded, just like me. Then again, I did manage to figure out Leila’s true feelings toward me, so...?”

“I... I’ve become much more aware of his feelings recently! I think...?” Jeanette said, still sounding uncertain toward the end.

“If you *haven’t* become aware of them after everything I’ve done, I think I’d burst into tears.”

“Ohh! Just that exchange alone shows me how hard you’ve been trying, Claus!” the baron commented with a shudder.

“Now that you’re back, I was hoping Jeanette and I could get married, but she’s over here thinking herself into a stupor because of Ariel... I want her to only think about me,” Claus complained, sounding disappointed as he cast her a sidelong glance.

Jeanette looked away. “I... I will take the appropriate measures!” she promised.

Having remembered something, the baron suddenly looked up. “Oh! This reminds me, I have a gift for you both.”

“A gift?”

The man began searching inside his breast pocket. After a moment, he pulled out a thoroughly crumpled piece of paper. Jeanette’s eyes glinted at the sight. *It’s all crumpled up because of father, but it looks like high-quality paper...*

“There it is! Here you go,” her father said, handing it to them.

Opening it up revealed a letter written in the Voltaire Empire’s official language, Norvian. Jeanette and Claus both looked at it together. “Um... ‘The following information is described below...’?” Jeanette murmured in confusion.

“There are a lot of words here I don’t recognize...” Claus added, squinting at the paper.

Nonchalantly, the baron announced, “It’s a title deed to a diamond mine. It’s yours now.”

“*What?!*” Jeanette and Claus cried out in unison.

“Ah, Basko—that is, Voltaire’s emperor—gave it to me. But gemstones are more your thing, aren’t they, Jeanette? It’s a perfect fit, so I’d be glad if you accepted it.”

“You’d be glad? Father, this is a *diamond mine*!!! Its value is unparalleled!”

“Besides, this is something the emperor bestowed upon you! Surely you cannot just hand it over to us! And...what is the emperor even thinking, handing over a diamond mine to a foreign merchant?!”

While Jeanette and Claus were in a frenzy, the baron looked unconcerned. “Eh, it’s fine. This may be the title deed, but the mine is within the Voltaire Empire’s territory. If the current emperor passes away, his successor would definitely reclaim it. Think of this as a limited-time offer.”

“Really...?”

“Taking such realistic consideration of the future is very much like you, Sir Roussel...” Claus remarked. Like Jeanette, he must’ve glimpsed the kind of life the baron had led in the empire through his calm demeanor.

“Anyway, since this is a special chance, do what you can to make as much money as possible from the mine,” the man told them.

“Right. We should aim to exhaust the veins, since we don’t know when the empire will repossess the mine,” Claus said. “It’s an unstable situation.”

“So our next line of products should be diamonds?” Jeanette mused.

“Between the two of us, Lord Claus, I feel like diamond products would fit Matheson Trading best!” With that, she quickly began putting a plan together in her mind. “This gemstone has a loyal following, so I don’t think selling it would be hard, but...”

Among jewels, the diamond reigned as king. In Ancient Kyrian, it was dubbed “*adamas*,” meaning “unbreakable.” Its absolute hardness and beauty had made royals and nobility adore it since ancient times.

“But there’s one thing you’re forgetting, Jeanette,” Claus said.

Jeanette tilted her head. “I am?”

“Because of what happened with the tulips, the luxury goods market is a mess right now, right?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “That’s true... In that case, trying to sell diamonds now wouldn’t go well. Everyone might be too scared of the same thing happening with a new fad. Also, those who suffered financially might be tightening their purse strings...”

Of course, there were some people who had avoided hardship, but many of the aristocrats had suffered losses. *Right now, it might be best to sell goods aimed at the general public, which was least affected by the tulip mania, rather than the upper classes... But diamonds have always been popular among royalty and aristocracy, and because of their high price, the general public isn’t really familiar with them...*

Jeanette deliberated, and Claus was doing the same next to her. After a while, he spoke up. “I might have an idea, Jeanette. Will you hear me out?”

“What is it?!” she asked with a glimmer in her eyes. Most of the time, Claus just watched her get on with things, so it’d been a while since he shared his own idea with her.

“Lend me your ear,” Claus said, leaning in to whisper something to her.

Soon enough, Jeanette was nodding along vigorously. Her face lit up, and she exclaimed, “That’s a great idea, Lord Claus! Let’s go for it!”

Once Claus finished explaining his idea to Jeanette, she immediately set about making preparations. Her task was to arrange for a diamond-based product that would be easily obtainable even for the middle class. Luckily, plenty of diamonds could be procured from the mine she’d received from her father, so all that was left was finding craftsmen who could work with them.

Other than their price, the reason diamonds hadn’t appeared on the regular market so far also had to do with the difficulty of processing them. But...

Thank goodness! I can definitely do this!

Whatever the circumstances, finding people was Jeanette's specialty. She had plenty of connections: her fellow merchant acquaintances Edmond and Gautier; the jeweler Guajardo, who she'd made contact with during the Bairapa tourmaline incident with Duke Pablo; and of course, her father. She made full use of her contacts.

Jeanette had also warned a lot of people against buying tulips during the height of the mania, helping them avoid massive losses. She'd made numerous allies as a result, so if she told them she wanted to stir the market anew, they'd be happy to cooperate.

The diamond processing proceeded at a rapid pace. Meanwhile Claus had, as expected, begun making large-scale preparations too. The Guivarch estate saw plenty of visitors every single day, including artisans and traders who'd come to see Jeanette, as well as various other people Claus had summoned. There was constant noise inside the mansion. At one time, Jeanette thought she heard someone singing, and at another she saw a group of dour-looking men whispering among each other.

Other than having meetings with the craftsmen on the estate, Jeanette also went out to visit their workshops. There were a *lot* of diamonds that needed to be processed, and she made periodic visits to ensure that everything was going well.

One afternoon, she was on her way to a craftsman's place, when something caught her attention. "Oh? Is that...?"

The plaza, which was the busiest place in the area, was filled with the loud sounds of the carpenters swinging their hammers. Drawn in by the noise, Jeanette stepped closer to take a look and realized they were assembling a wooden stage. Not far off, Claus was speaking with the site foreman. Jeanette remained in the thin shadow cast by the streetlamp and gazed at Claus fixedly.

His silver hair glimmered in the sunlight, and his flawless face retained both sweetness and gallantry. He was tall and slender, and the air around him made him stand out among everyone else. The proof of that lay in the fact that the women in the area had forgotten all about their work and just stared at him

longingly.

Lord Claus looks amazing even from a distance. I'm not surprised...! Jeanette thought, unintentionally joining the group of women enchanted by Claus as she exhaled dreamily. She had gotten used to seeing his bright smile, but looking at him now made her realize all over again how conspicuously beautiful he was. *Of course, he's very good-looking, but it's like...all of his movements are full of such elegance and dignity! He really draws the eye...* Jeanette let out a sigh of admiration.

Right then, a low, familiar voice addressed her. "What are you doing, Jeanette?"

She whipped around to find Kyuriakris giving her a puzzled look. "Lord Kyuriakris! What a coincidence to run into you here!"

Like her, Kyuriakris had been going around visiting craftsmen. Usually, he took a different route from hers, but on occasion they ran into each other.

Noticing what she'd been looking at earlier, the prince murmured, "Ah, Claus, huh? He really does stand out. But don't you think that's true of me too?" he asked with a bold smirk.

Jeanette's eyes widened. Kyuriakris was right—he did stand out just as much as Claus. He was taller, with a broad build and large, dark, ferocious eyes. All of that combined with his dark complexion made him exude an exotic air. The women who passed by must've thought so too, as they blushed and cast him glances. Unlike the other nobles, Kyuriakris had a wild sex appeal about him. If Claus was a holy angel, then Kyuriakris was like a demon straight from the underworld.

"Yes, you're very beautiful, Lord Kyuriakris! As expected of someone with royal lineage!" Jeanette said with an impressed nod.

Kyuriakris's shoulders sank, as if he'd lost all strength. "I wanted to make your heart throb here, but...I see. This must be the thickheadedness that Claus mentioned..." he grumbled, face-palming.

Suddenly, someone pulled Jeanette from behind. "Ah!" she shrieked in surprise, hurriedly glancing over her shoulder only to see a pleasantly smiling

Claus. He must've shown up at some point, and now he remained behind Jeanette, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer.

Despite his smile, a vein was bulging on his temple. "I can never relax with you around, can I, Kyuriakris?"

"That's right. Who do you think I am? You can't take your eyes off me."

Another vein appeared on Claus's temple in response to these nonchalant words. However, they were in the middle of the street right now. Seeing two beautiful men had caused the girls in the area to gather and shout, "Look over there!" in shrill voices.

Jeanette was also garnering attention, as some wondered out loud, "Who's that girl?"

Those two really attract attention when they're together! I feel like the air around us is enormously sparkly! Jeanette thought. Perhaps because the sun was shining brightly today, the two men she was caught between looked downright dazzling. Everyone in the area, regardless of gender, came to a halt just to look at them. *They're so gorgeous that it's sinful! Even the carpenters are petrified! The economy will stagnate because of their beauty!*

Jeanette pulled on Claus's hand in a panic. "Let's go home, Lord Claus! At this rate, the labor force will be completely decimated!" she cried.

"What are you talking about, Jeanette? Regardless, I'm just glad I get to hold your hand," Claus responded with a smile, following after her.

"All right, our preparations are in their final phase now. We'll be able to announce the new product shortly," Claus said with satisfaction while looking at the stage which had been constructed in the plaza. He must've been thinking about the unveiling of the diamond goods aimed at the general populace.

"The stage is large and impressive. But will it really be enough to convince everyone to buy diamonds?" Kyuriakris questioned.

Indeed, he had a point. Making a grand announcement upon a gaudy stage was sure to attract attention. But whether that would lead to actual sales was a separate matter entirely.

“Obviously, we have a strategy in mind. Right, Jeanette?” Claus asked, smiling at Jeanette cheerfully.

“Yes!” she replied, nodding vigorously.

The strategy was something Jeanette and Claus had decided upon after discussing it together for many days. They’d gone through everything in meticulous detail and privately asked various people for their cooperation.

“What, you guys are keeping me out of it?” Kyuriakris inquired sulkily, scrunching up his face.

Claus smirked, as if in revenge for what had happened earlier. “That’s right. Surprises have to be kept secret, no? Look forward to the day of the announcement.”

In response, the prince let out an exasperated sigh.

The day of the announcement had finally arrived. The stage, large enough to support more than ten people, was decorated beautifully, and rows of chairs were lined up before it. Thankfully, they’d been blessed with good weather, and gentle rays of sunlight beamed down upon the scene.

“Weather’s the one thing we can’t control, so I was a little worried. Luckily, it’s clear and sunny out,” Claus commented.

“Yes! Luck is an important factor too. I think it’s a good omen!” Jeanette said happily, and spotted her father in the distance. She had invited him to attend the announcement. “Father!”

Noticing her, the baron walked over. He seemed to be in good humor.

“We’re going to unveil something truly wonderful!” she told him. “I hope you’re looking forward to it!”

“Oh? Indeed, I look forward to seeing what form the imperial mine’s diamonds will take,” he replied.

“Right!” Jeanette said, then glanced to his side. During past events, he had always attended together with Leila. But of course, now that they had divorced, the woman wasn’t present.

Her father must've realized what she was thinking, as he smiled forlornly. "Are you thinking about Leila?"

"Oh, no! I just thought about how you two really did separate... Sorry, I didn't mean to remind you about it!"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," the baron reassured her. When he spoke next, there was a slightly distant look in his eyes. "She left the house, just as I told her to. I asked Gilbert to investigate where she went, and it looks like she joined a monastery far from here."

Jeanette listened to this with surprise. From what she knew, Leila had received a large settlement from the baron after their divorce. And since this was Leila, Jeanette had been convinced the woman would insist on living in the capital no matter what.

"I've heard monastery life is very tough, since they have to be self-sufficient," she said. "Will she really be all right...?"

"Who can say? I don't know. But...perhaps she had some things to think over." He was referring to the way Leila had sold off her biological daughter as collateral for her own debt. "Maybe she finally realized the depth of her sin. Or maybe she was stricken with guilt... Whatever the case, our paths won't cross again. Still, we were once husband and wife. I think I'm allowed to hope for her to find a new path for herself in the monastery."

"Right." Jeanette nodded earnestly. "I do want Ms. Leila to atone for how she treated Ariel. But one day, I'd like her to forget all of her pain and resentment, and live out her days with peace of mind. Life is long, after all!"

Leila had given Jeanette all kinds of "rewards," and even when the woman had tried selling her off, Jeanette had never harbored hatred toward her. This might've been because she didn't think Leila had ever given her any painful memories.

After a while of chatting, the baron left for his assigned seat. When Jeanette next looked around, she spotted more attendees arriving. "Lady Christine! Your Excellency! I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed, rushing over to the Pablo couple.

Christine was in high spirits, and she gave Jeanette a warm hug. “Jeanette, this is incredible! I’ve never seen a stage like this before!”

“Me neither,” piped up the duke. “To think I’d see a stage like this not in a theater, but out here in the middle of the city... You two have come up with yet another novel idea.”

While they were impressed, the embarrassed Jeanette began explaining. “These days, plays are something you’d only see in the theater. But in the past, there were a lot of traveling theater troupes who’d perform in places like this.”

“Goodness, is that so? You even have such detailed knowledge of history!” Christine remarked, happily complimenting Jeanette.

The bashful Jeanette then led the couple to front row seats. Indeed, today’s surprise they’d been secretly planning was a play that would be performed as part of launching the new product.

“A play? And just what do you plan on performing here?” asked the discontented Kyuriakris. Today, he’d come as a member of the audience, rather than as a Roussel Corporation employee. He still seemed to be sulking over the fact that Jeanette and Claus were hiding something from him.

“You’ll see once it begins,” Claus said. He looked to be in the best mood ever as he led Kyuriakris to his seat.

“The seats are packed, milady! There’s even people standing to watch!” Sara called out as she surveyed the area.

They’d arranged rows of chairs, all of which were now tightly filled with people. The front row was reserved for the nobles Jeanette had invited directly, while the others were a varied mix. There were well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, as well as store workers who had come from the nearby shops, still clad in their aprons. There was a man with a whip attached to his belt, who must’ve been a coachman. A shoe-shining boy was present too, and a woman from some restaurant had brought a few of her children along.

Everyone had been lured in by the idea of being able to see a play for free. Some had even closed their shops for the day just to attend.

Once the right moment arrived, Claus signaled the facilitator. Then, he and

Jeanette sat in the front row to watch the course of events.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone!” the facilitator began. “The play being performed today is called *The Princess’s Marriage*.”

The audience members whispered among each other. “Is that a famous play?”

“I’m not sure. It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, as long as it’s interesting, that’s enough for me!”

In the midst of all that, a trumpet sounded to announce the start of the play. Someone suddenly shouted offstage. “Christine, that’s enough! Do you even understand the fact that you’re a princess?!”

The curtains drew back, revealing a young woman straddling a fence. Her straight hair was platinum blonde, and the sight of her made Duke Pablo exclaim in realization, before he clamped his hand over his mouth.

Next to him, Christine was pressing both her hands to her lips to stop herself from making any sounds and watching the stage while stifling a giggle.

“Ugh, why did the noisiest one of them all have to find me today?” the actress lamented.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” demanded the male actor as he stepped onto the stage. He was a brunet whose bulky build resembled a bear’s.

Indeed, this play was about the beginning of Duke and Duchess Pablo’s romance. Originally, Jeanette had considered making their story into a novel. But Claus’s idea went with the story perfectly, so Jeanette had collaborated with Christine and adapted it into a play instead.

When Claus explained as much, Kyuriakris finally grasped what was happening. “I see,” he said with a nod. “But why a play? And why a love story?”

“It’s related to the product, of course. Just keep watching.”

Jeanette and Claus smiled as they watched the play proceed smoothly. Eventually, the scene in which Princess Christine was about to be married off to the Pakiran Empire arrived. The actress playing her walked onto the stage in a wedding dress, casting her eyes down sorrowfully.

“Hee hee! How nostalgic. At the time, I thought I’d never see you again,” Christine whispered into her husband’s ear.

“R-Right,” he replied awkwardly.

Everyone watched as the actor playing Layton burst into the scene, looking strong and robust. “Your Majesty, please don’t forget our promise!” he screamed, drawing the eyes of the audience.

In the next moment, all the other actors exited the stage. Those playing the southern tribesmen of the Pakiran Empire appeared in their place. Layton’s actor gripped a huge hammer in his arms, and began cutting them all down one after another. His smooth movements showed great martial prowess. The crowd cried out in response, sounding impressed.

“That’s the muscle daruma from hell!” the Pakiran emperor’s actor exclaimed, and this time the audience roared with laughter.

Jeanette glanced over and saw that Christine was laughing happily, while Duke Pablo was awkwardly scratching his reddened cheeks.

At last, the final confession scene arrived. Now, only the actors playing Christine and Layton were left on the stage.

“Princess Christine, despite who I am...won’t you please marry me?!”

“Layton...” The actress gazed at the other with teary eyes, before leaping into his arms.

The two exchanged a passionate kiss, and as if on cue, the audience erupted with cheers. “Bravo!”

“That was amazing!”

“Layton really gave it his all!”

The sounds of applause were mixed with the music which signaled the end of the play. People were up on their feet, and the plaza was bursting with fervor. Only Duke Pablo seemed embarrassed, but even so, he was smiling and clapping like the others. Christine was leaning against his shoulder, ecstatic.

Listening to the story was really fun, but actually seeing it played out by the actors is so moving! It really is the love story of the century! Jeanette thought as

she applauded enthusiastically. They did have to change some things to fit the stage adaptation, but for the most part, everything was based on Christine's real-life experiences. *It's almost like Lady Christine is the heroine of a fable!*

As the applause began dying down, Claus stood up.

Oh no! I can't be distracted now! Jeanette scolded herself inwardly. *I have to root for Lord Claus!* With that, she fixed her expression. It was time for Matheson Trading—or rather, Claus's performance.

The two lead actors were bowing deeply on the stage. Claus joined them and called out just as clearly and grandly as they had delivered their lines. "The story has reached a happy ending, everyone. But there's still a little bit left to go." His voice tickled everyone's ears pleasantly, like a cool breeze in the middle of a heat wave. His calm, beautiful, well-projected voice caused the audience to turn to him with intrigue.

"Afterward, Layton gave Christine a ring. He ran from place to place, until he found a single shining diamond which he had affixed to the ring." Claus gestured toward the actors.

In response, Layton's actor rummaged in his pocket before pulling something out. It was a ring with a large diamond on it. That said, even though it was sizable, to the audience, it seemed like little more than a speck. But when he moved it, the diamond caught the sunlight and glittered in seven colors. Its glimmer was just like that of the morning star appearing in the daylight. The women sitting in the back rows let out passionate sighs.

"Did you know that the diamond is called by many names?" Claus continued. "A tear of the gods, a fragment of a shooting star, and an everlasting symbol." Although he was speaking loudly so that the audience could hear him, his voice wasn't grating on the ears. Instead, it had a softness to it that seemed to permeate everyone.

"Mother Earth has fostered diamonds for thousands of years. Even if our bodies perish, diamonds will persist unto future generations. Our ancestors placed their wishes into these diamonds, and have traditionally chosen them for their wedding rings."

The belief was that couples with diamond wedding rings had a bond that

would last for eternity.

“‘For you, an everlasting light...’ May the diamond watch over Christine and Layton’s path. And if any of you have a beloved, consider granting them an everlasting light too.” To cap off his speech, Claus offered the lead actors a deep bow.

Despite the fact he was standing next to a beautiful couple, his own beauty hadn’t faded at all in comparison. Rather, he might’ve been the most conspicuous one onstage. His good looks were heightened by his elegant conduct and etiquette, which had been drilled into him as a member of the nobility. He had an overpowering aura which put even the popular actors to shame. Everyone gazed at him as if they were under a magic spell while sighing dreamily.

Jeanette was no exception. *L-Lord Claus is just too beautiful...!*

“Hey, who’s that beautiful man? Is he an actor?”

“I don’t know. But he’s gorgeous...”

“Should we go up to him and ask for his name later?”

Behind her, Jeanette heard such murmurs. She was about to turn around and agree with them wholeheartedly, before informing them of Claus’s name. As *expected, Lord Claus’s acting skills are brilliant too! He really could become an actor! He’s good-looking and smart. To think he has both business acumen and the ability to act... He’s incredible!* she thought with a shiver.

Right then, Claus raised his voice again. “Now, I would like to borrow this stage and grant my own beloved this ring as well.” His violet eyes were fixed on Jeanette, and he called out her name.

“Huh?!” Jeanette froze at this sudden announcement. Everyone’s gazes strayed toward her. *Why did he just say my name...?!*

She wasn’t alone. Christine, who’d helped them arrange the play, was also staring at her in bewilderment. After all, Claus had only explained to her how the diamonds were tied to the play, and hadn’t ever mentioned Jeanette coming onto the stage.

“Jeanette, could you come up here?” he prompted again.

Flustered, Jeanette glanced around her surroundings. All those gathered in the area were staring at her. This made her feel even more shaken up, when someone suddenly stood by her side.

“Come now, milady!” Sara urged quietly, pushing Jeanette, with a big grin on her face.

“H-Huh?” The confused Jeanette stumbled onto the stage and gingerly approached Claus. “Um, L-Lord Claus, what is happening...?!” she whispered.

In response, Claus took her hand. He went down on one knee, just like a knight about to swear his loyalty to a queen. From his breast pocket, he pulled out a small, rectangular velvet box.

Is that...? Jeanette stared at it with wide eyes while Claus’s lovely, elegant fingers opened it up.



Inside the box was a glittering diamond ring.

“My beloved,” Claus said, looking up.

Jeanette felt like she was on the verge of fainting. Those amethyst-like eyes, full of sweetness and emotion, were gazing right at her.

“Jeanette, I love you. I want to be by your side, make a family with you, and be the one to protect you until the very end. So please allow me to give you this everlasting light. Won’t you marry me?”

It was a second proposal. Jeanette’s face flushed in an instant. The audience was abuzz with whispers.

“Huh? Is this also staged?”

“But doesn’t that girl look too pure?”

“Look, she’s so red in the face. I don’t think they’re acting!”

You’re right, this isn’t acting! Jeanette couldn’t say that out loud, of course, instead covering her face with her hands.

“What do you say, Jeanette?” Claus asked quietly. Though he knew the answer, there was a note of trepidation in his gaze all the same.

“Ummm...! O-Of course, yes, I accept...!”

“Thank you,” Claus said, immediately pulling her into a hug.

The audience once more erupted into cheers, and some people whistled through their fingers.

“Good for you, buddy!”

“Congratulations!”

“I hope you’ll both be happy!”

People shouted encouragement, while Jeanette’s eyes darted around helplessly. In contrast, Claus smiled leisurely, waved, and called out, “Thank you!” After a moment, he added, “Be sure to get your diamonds from Matheson! We have a wide selection that is sure to appeal to all customers!” Of course, he hadn’t forgotten about advertising. His bright smile caused a few

more shrieks to resound from the crowd.

Jeanette and Claus left the stage while everyone cheered. Matheson Trading's associates were handing out leaflets advertising the diamond rings. Naturally, the leaflets depicted engagement and wedding ring sets that Matheson was selling.

"You really did it, Claus..." Kyuriakris stomped over toward them, crossing his arms with a stern look on his face. "I can't believe you tried to discourage me by doing a public proposal!" he grumbled, a vein bulging on his temple.

Behind him, Jeanette's father was smiling and clapping. "Good grief, Claus! What a brave show!"

Claus smiled at the baron, before laughing at Kyuriakris's words. "Discourage you? No, you're wrong. I wanted to discourage *everyone* present and tell them that Jeanette is *my* fiancée."

"Huh?! What's with that calm smile of yours?! It's seriously grating on my nerves!" Kyuriakris snapped.

Meanwhile, a blushing Christine rushed over to Jeanette. "What just happened, Jeanette?! I had no idea something this wonderful was coming!"

"Um, actually, I didn't either..."

"I thought so! You were bright red!" The woman giggled, poking Jeanette's cheeks. "He's such a schemer! I can't believe he hid it from us. But it made for a great sight!"

"I-I-I'm so sorry! You and the duke were supposed to be the stars of the show, but in the end, Claus and I stole the attention..." Jeanette said, feeling remorseful.

Christine's eyes widened with shock. "My, what are you talking about? You two were always the stars of the show. Right, dear?"

"Right," Duke Pablo agreed. "This is your business, so you're the stars. But we had plenty of fun watching something that stirred such nostalgia."

"Lady Christine... Your Excellency..." Jeanette felt the corners of her eyes burn in response to their kind gazes.

“Besides, the play will still be performed a few more times, no?” Christine added assertively.

The duke’s eyes grew wide. “What? Is that true?!” he asked. He must’ve been convinced that it would only be put on once.

Unfortunately for him, Christine had already granted her permission, and multiple performances were scheduled. Of course, the couple would get royalties from it.

“Yes!” Jeanette answered. “We’ll put it on over and over, until the phrase ‘everlasting light for two’ takes root!”

“Ughhh... My reckless rampaging will spread all over the capital...!”

“What are you saying? The play shows off your gallantry. It makes me proud,” Christine said, planting a kiss on the duke’s cheek. His face instantly relaxed.

Their harmonious relationship was thriving as always. Jeanette watched them with a smile, until a panicked Sara dashed over to her.

“Milady, I have bad news! We have more customers than we expected at the kiosk we set up! If things continue this way, there’ll be chaos in the plaza!”

“What?! Excuse me, but I must leave now!” Jeanette said, bidding the duke and duchess farewell before following Sara to the kiosk.

Her and Claus’s strategy had begun with the realization that if they simply brought out diamond rings, the classes unfamiliar with them surely wouldn’t have been interested. Claus had then come up with the idea of putting on a play featuring a diamond wedding ring. Getting people emotionally involved in the Pablo couple’s story created a great starting point. Informing them about the diamond’s meaning and long tradition inspired attachment and longing.

The result was a great success.

They had set up a display area in the plaza to allow everyone to see the diamonds for themselves. But there was more interest than they ever anticipated, so now Jeanette, Claus, and even Kyuriakris and Sara ran over to deal with the situation. They hurriedly guided those who were genuinely interested in purchasing the products to the Matheson store.

Jeanette looked over the ridiculous number of contracts they'd knocked out today, before casting her gaze to the night sky. *Everything went well! I hope diamonds will keep growing in popularity! And I hope they reach her one day too...*

She wondered what would make a good gift for that girl. Imagining a diamond ring twinkling on the girl's slender finger, Jeanette gazed at the sky and prayed.

Later that evening, Jeanette, having finished wrapping up many matters, was reclining on the sofa. Claus, who'd gotten home later, entered the room. While loosening the tie around his neck, he sat down next to her. "Good work today, Jeanette."

"Lord Claus!" Jeanette hastily straightened up.

Claus smiled at her. "It's fine, you can relax. You had a busy day."

"B-But you came back even later than I did!" Jeanette responded, flushing and glancing away. In reality, she'd been flabbergasted by that public proposal, and this was the first time she was properly speaking to Claus since it had happened. And even though it was the second proposal, for some reason her face felt hot.

Claus noticed, and clasped her hand. "Sorry I kept that secret from you. I wanted to say it to you in front of everyone, but did you dislike it?" he inquired with a slightly dispirited countenance.

Jeanette quickly shook her head. "No, it's nothing like that...!" Her face reddened again as she spoke.

Claus had first proposed to her when she had visited the Guivarch estate in order to break off their engagement. At that time, Jeanette hadn't even dreamed that Claus liked her, so rather than happy, she'd only felt startled. However, ever since then, Claus had shown her how he felt about her over and over (though his methods were slightly pushy).

And now, she finally understood: Claus truly meant it when he said he loved her.

So I have to respond in kind too...! Jeanette thought, even though the idea of saying such things out loud embarrassed her.

She clenched her fists to motivate herself, and stammered. “Um, this is a bit embarrassing, but... I was really happy when you proposed to me, because I also... I also love you, Lord Claus!”

I said it! Jeanette felt relieved that she’d been able to get the words out. Then, a shadow fell over her. She looked up in confusion, only to see Claus’s face right in front of hers. He seemed to be at his wit’s end, desperately resisting something, which made him look terribly sexy.

Waaah! He’s so close! Your face is dangerous, Lord Claus!!!

Claus’s long fingers caught the bewildered Jeanette’s chin. “Jeanette...” he said, his violet eyes drawing closer.

Even Jeanette knew what he was about to do. He’d already done it once in the past, after all. She readied herself, tightly closing her eyes. His lips pressed against hers, passionate and intense. He kissed her hungrily, and when he finally pulled away, Jeanette was gasping for air.

Th-That was...kind of amazing...?! Jeanette thought, feeling dizzy.

Uncharacteristically, Claus was blushing as well. “Sorry. I was so happy I couldn’t help myself. Though...I was still holding back.”

“Y-You were?! ” she squeaked. *Then what’s going to happen to me when he really goes for it?! Jeanette was too afraid to ask, and only gulped.*

Whether he knew her feelings or not, Claus was still flushed as he spoke. “Heh... I’ve been holding back this whole time, but it might be impossible now that I’ve gotten a taste of it once. I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself every day... All right, let’s get married as soon as possible. I’m sure if we give them enough money, the wedding venue will be able to move the date up...!”

Lord Claus, is it just me or are you saying some disturbing things right now?! Jeanette watched worriedly as he mumbled under his breath like he was possessed. But then she suddenly remembered something. “Oh, right!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands.

Claus looked at her curiously. “Hmm? What is it? Are you ready to have the ceremony now?”

“Why would you think that?! Um, no. I wanted to ask if you’d be opposed to me selling the diamond mine to a certain family?”

“A certain family? Which one?”

“Well...”

Jeanette whispered the answer into Claus’s ear.

Last Chapter: A Present from Her

In front of Ariel was a quiet manor located a short distance from the capital. The sunlight poured down upon it, and from a distance, a displeased voice called out to her. “Hey!”

But Ariel only briefly glanced in that direction, before going back to watering the plants while pretending she couldn’t hear the caller. The water splashed down from the can and soaked into the diligently fertilized flower bed, turning the soil a dark brown.

“Hey, *you*! Answer me!” the icily beautiful Bernard—also known as Marquis Ballardur and Ariel’s husband—demanded angrily, clearly annoyed that she was ignoring him.

The man stood right behind her, and Ariel let out a sigh as she finally turned around to face him. “Unfortunately, my name isn’t ‘you,’ so I won’t respond to it. If you need something from me, call me ‘Ariel,’” she huffed curtly, raising her chin.

Bernard looked grumpy, but nonetheless properly responded with “Ariel.”

“Yes? What do you need from me, my dear husband?” Her voice was cold and disinterested, and not at all like that of a dutiful wife addressing her husband. But that was obvious: she’d been sold off into this house as collateral for a debt and endured harsh treatment from everyone. Not to mention, Bernard was the one who started ignoring her first.

In response, Ariel decided to defiantly live as she pleased. However, lately her husband had begun acting strange. For some reason, he had started wanting her to join him for dinner, tried starting conversations with her despite the blank looks she gave him, and generally acted in enigmatic ways.

I don’t know if he’s had some sort of change of heart, but it creeps me out. Just what is he after?

While Ariel was on her guard, Bernard spoke up irritably. “Have this,” he said,

and held out a small velvet box.

“Hmm? What is that?”

“Just open it,” he insisted, stubbornly holding it out to her.

Without much of a choice, Ariel took the box and opened it to see...

“A ring?”

Indeed, inside of the box was a silver ring. A round, glittering gemstone—a diamond—was embedded in the center.

“We never had wedding rings, right? So I got this,” Bernard declared, crossing his arms. On his left hand, he wore a similar ring.

“Why thank you,” Ariel replied. *What is he trying to do, giving this to me now? We didn’t even have a wedding ceremony or consummation, but he’s suddenly trying to be all proper about the marriage?*

“Go on, put it on.” Barely a second after he said that, Bernard snatched the box back from her. Then, somewhat clumsily, he took out the ring, grabbed Ariel’s left hand, and placed it on her finger. “See? It’s a perfect fit,” he concluded, looking satisfied.

“Riiight... Thank you,” Ariel said out of necessity as her eyebrows creased at her husband’s incomprehensible behavior. “But why are you giving me this ring so suddenly? You yourself said that you wouldn’t buy me any luxury goods.”

When Ariel had met Bernard, the first thing he’d said to her was “*I have no extra money to spend on you.*”

So why? Ariel wondered, staring at him with suspicion.

Bernard’s cheeks flushed and he cleared his throat. “W-Well... I ran into a merchant who offered to sell me the rings at an unmatched price, so I thought I might as well. And I’ve noticed that without a ring, it’s harder to avoid women.”

“Hmm...”

“What’s with that face you’re making? You don’t believe me? Or maybe you think I gave you a fake?” he asked as Ariel gazed at him coolly. “You needn’t worry. This merchant’s famous within the capital, and I’m sure it was really her

because her distinctive feature is her red hair.”

Ariel jolted at that description. “A female merchant with red hair...?”

“Right. She’s selling diamond goods right now, and she said she wants to build a friendship with House Balladur, so she sold me the rings at a special price.”

No way! Ariel cried inwardly. “What was her name?!” she asked, leaning forward with anticipation.

This time, Bernard was the one frowning at her. “What on earth? You’re reacting completely differently from before...”

“Just tell me the name! Please!” she pressed, drawing closer to Bernard than ever before.

Bernard was overawed, and his eyes wandered in every direction as he answered. “What was it again...? Now that I think about it, she might’ve had the same surname as you. As for her first name, I think it was—”

“Jeanette?!” Ariel exclaimed.

Her husband looked startled at the interruption. “Huh, so you know her?”

It really was her! Ariel giggled at having her guess confirmed. Bernard began explaining something about the diamond, but she wasn’t listening and only continued to laugh. *Lord Bernard has so little interest in me, I’m sure he didn’t even notice that the merchant was my sister.*

But that was fine with her. If Jeanette hadn’t mentioned that she was Ariel’s sister and had just presented herself as a merchant, she must’ve had her own reasons. *Right, sister?* Ariel thought, holding up her hand to gaze at the ring.

The diamond glittered in the sunlight in seven different colors, as if blessing Ariel’s future. This was Jeanette’s roundabout gift to her. As for the writing engraved on the ring, which read, “An everlasting light for you,” it’d still be a little while until Ariel understood its meaning.

Extra Chapter: Ariel's Marriage

Not a single person at the Balladur manor had welcomed Ariel. That was her impression when she first arrived, ready to face death.

She entered the large foyer, stepping onto the polished marble floor. High-class furniture was tastefully arranged in the room. But in contrast to the manor's opulence, all of the servants lined up before her had icy expressions. The dark-haired man who finally stepped up to greet her was glaring at her as if he were looking at something filthy.

Ariel's face stiffened. *This man... Is he Marquis Balladur's son? Well, his stepmother's even younger than him, so it's no wonder he's unhappy.* Based on his looks, the man seemed to be around twenty-four or twenty-five years old.

Ariel gently lifted the hem of her skirt and curtsied in a ladylike manner. "I'm Ariel. I hope we get along."

However, the young man only continued glaring at her without a word.

Feeling awkward, Ariel glanced at him for another moment before asking, "Um, where is Marquis Balladur?" She didn't want to meet the lecherous marquis, but it wasn't as if she could avoid doing so. As such, she wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible and face the old man who was to become her husband.

With obvious reluctance, the man she took to be the marquis's son answered her. *"I'm the marquis."*

"What?!" Ariel exclaimed before she could stop herself, then clamped her hand over her mouth. *He's the marquis?! But he was supposed to be over sixty years old!*

Perhaps conjecturing what she was thinking, the young man explained. "My name's Bernard Balladur. My father, the previous marquis, passed away recently. So you're going to become *my* wife." Neither his tone of voice nor his countenance suggested that he was joking.

Ariel just blinked at him. *No way... Is this true? So I'm not going to be the bride of that lustful old man?! Is such a stroke of luck even possible?!* Ariel could scarcely believe it, and she carefully observed the man in front of her.

Bernard was slightly shorter than Claus. There was no excessive fat on his body, and he was both graceful and toned. His lustrous black hair was tied back in a ponytail, and his sharp eyes were an icy blue. He didn't have Claus's sweetness or glamor, but each part of him was neatly arranged. It wouldn't be a far cry to call him a beautiful man.

This man is going to be my husband? Ariel continued blinking in disbelief. *I'd given up on having a happy marriage, but with this, maybe it'll be possible after all...*

But right as she thought that, Bernard spoke up again, glaring at her with vitriol. "Don't get the wrong idea. I have to take you as my wife out of necessity, but I have *no* intention of loving you!" His wrathful voice echoed loudly in the entryway. "And I heard all those stories about you. You tried to ruin your sister's reputation among high society, and you even stole from her!"

The light disappeared from Ariel's eyes at those words. *Right, of course he knows about that. Well, I suppose I'm getting my just deserts...*

With a severe expression, her soon-to-be husband went on. "It infuriates me to think a woman like you is going to become Marchioness Balladur, but since it's in name alone, I'm willing to tolerate it. Just don't forget: you were sold to me as collateral, and therefore you are my possession. I will provide for your basic necessities, but I have no extra money to spend on you. Don't you dare think I will buy you any luxuries!"

It seemed as though Bernard hated her even before they'd gotten married. *If he despises me this much, he shouldn't marry me at all... If he thinks he can treat me any way he likes as if I'm his possession, then in a way, he's just like his father.* Ariel's fists gripped her skirt tightly. Her chest was full of bitterness. But...

At a time like this, I'm sure sister would...

Ariel recalled the face of her older stepsister Jeanette when she'd seen Ariel off. She pictured the other girl's vivid red hair and her greenish-gray eyes.

Jeanette was never discouraged, and her smile was always bright.

Ariel had started to lower her head, but now she lifted it again. Her eyes were calm once more. *I'm sure Jeanette would say something like "How nice to have a husband in the same age range as me!"*

The new marquis was tyrannical and prejudiced against Ariel. But at the very least, he wouldn't do as he pleased with her body. If anything, his expression implied he didn't want to so much as touch her with one finger.

So it's not as bad as it could be, Ariel thought, bowing once again. "Yes, Your Lordship."

"You're forbidden from speaking to me. If you need something, call for the butler."

"Very well."

"You're not allowed to go into our territories either. It'd be troublesome for me if some random man impregnated you."

"Very well."

Seeing the way Ariel obediently nodded, Bernard seemed satisfied at last. He turned around, and walked off somewhere by himself. The servants followed suit, scattering in various directions as though Ariel didn't exist.

"Your Ladyship." A single lady's maid addressed Ariel, her expression stiff. "I'll take you to your room."

"Thank you," Ariel replied, but the attendant didn't smile in response. She swiftly picked up Ariel's luggage and began walking away. Ariel hurried after her.

"Um... *This* is my room?"

The maid had taken Ariel to a large and spacious...*attic*. Something scurried by her feet, and she let out a shriek; it was a mouse. Ariel surveyed the room and spotted a few spiders nesting in the corners. The floor was covered with dust, and even the single bed looked dusty. Ariel touched the wooden desk to check, and a layer of dust clung to her finger when she drew it away.

“Ugh...!” She scrunched up her face.

“Yes, this is your room. Now, excuse me.” The attendant placed Ariel’s luggage down with a loud thunk. Without another word, she whipped around and walked out of the room.

“Ahh... I see.” The maid’s attitude told Ariel everything. *They’re harassing me, huh? How spiteful...* she thought with a sigh, but then her thoughts came to a halt. She recalled how much more malicious she and her mother had been when they’d bullied Jeanette for so many years. Ariel had even ruined the other girl’s reputation.

I guess it’s no wonder that they hate me. I’m only suffering the consequences of my actions. Ariel sighed, drawing her luggage closer as she began noisily rummaging through it.

“I think it should be around here... Ah, there it is!” she called out, merrily pulling out the extendable feather duster Jeanette had invented.

In fact, back when Ariel was departing for the Balladur manor, the tearful Jeanette had pushed several items into her hands while insisting, *“Please take these with you! They’re all really useful!”*

“When she gave these to me, I thought they’d just take up space in my luggage for no reason, but... I think I can use them here.” As she spoke to herself, Ariel tied her hair back. She then took out the next item she’d gotten from Jeanette, which was the multipurpose apron with countless pockets. Ariel put it on, then looked around the attic.

“There we go!” In the corner of the room were a number of cleaning tools, such as a broom, a dust cloth, and a wooden bucket. “This is an attic, so I thought these might be here.”

Ariel opened the window and without hesitation reached for the broom. *I should start with the highest places in the room...but this place is too dirty, so I have to start with the floor.*

In reality, ever since Jeanette had left and the servants ran away, Ariel had been in charge of cleaning the Roussel estate. Or, to be more accurate, since there was nobody else around to do it and Leila couldn’t stand the house being

dirty, she had ordered Ariel to clean it.

At first, Ariel used to complain and say things like “*Why do I have to do this?!*” But with time, she found herself surprisingly absorbed in the task. She had discovered that turning dirty things clean was strangely satisfying. Before she’d even realized it, she had come to enjoy cleaning.

This room being so dirty just makes the cleaning that much more worth it!

Using the tip of the broom, Ariel scattered the baby spiders, and started vigorously sweeping the attic. As the bristles scraped against the floor, huge clouds of dust soared into the air, but she didn’t mind. If anything, it was fun to see the dense piles of dust blown away. Once she’d swept the room through once, she reached for the feather duster and started cleaning the window and its frame.

Wow, this is incredible! The extendable feather duster Jeanette gave me lets me reach high places without using a chair! Ariel thought excitedly as she dusted the top of the window frame.

And this apron’s really useful too with all its pockets. When she was done with the dusting, she put the feather duster away into a long pocket, and from a different one she took out the dust cloth, with which she began cleaning the window. *Jeanette mentioned the apron’s washable too. It was made with the expectation that it’d get dirty, so the material can withstand being washed over and over.* Nice work... Ariel thought, impressed.

She had never noticed it back when she lived the life of a typical noblewoman, but Jeanette’s products were extremely convenient. Many of them were immensely effective, especially when it came to cleaning.

I wonder if it’s because mother and I always forced Jeanette to do the cleaning... Ariel felt uneasy again, having realized an uncomfortable truth. But she quickly did away with those thoughts and focused on cleaning.

By the time it had gotten dark outside, the attic wasn’t exactly sparkling clean, but it *did* look considerably refreshed. “Phew! For now, I guess this will do,” Ariel said, dusting her hands off while surveying the room. She’d throw out the dust gathered in the corner later, but for now the attic looked a lot cleaner after being swept.

“He may be rotten, but he really *is* a marquis! Even though this is an attic, the furniture here is surprisingly elegant! The bed is of good quality too.” Ariel patted the bed. Atop the wooden planks was indeed a mattress made of wool, not something cheap like straw. The marquis had forced Ariel to live in the dirty attic on purpose, so there was no way he’d taken care to arrange a good mattress for her. Apparently woolen mattresses were just the norm in this manor.

A marquis really is rich... Ariel thought, still patting the bed. At that moment, she heard the sound of someone climbing up the stairs.

“I’ve brought your meal.” The young lady’s maid who’d first brought Ariel to the room had appeared, holding a tray with a severe look on her face. When she noticed the attic was clean, she jolted and her eyebrows twitched, but she said nothing as she placed the tray on the desk. Before long, she was gone again. Apparently, she didn’t care to get a response from Ariel.

Ariel’s eyes widened as she looked at the tray. Arranged atop it were a steaming soup, a salad, and soft-looking bread. Though the meal seemed plain for a marchioness, the onion-colored soup had a pleasant aroma, and the vegetables looked fresh.

“I was sure they’d give me something rotten or that I’d get no dinner at all,” Ariel murmured. Both of those were ways she and Leila had harassed Jeanette in the past. The memory caused Ariel to groan again. *Ugh! Jeanette doesn’t blame me at all, and yet I feel so terrible. Is this what you call a ‘dark past?’ I feel like a certain noblewoman said that at some point!*

Cringing with shame, Ariel took a seat. She took a sip of the clear soup, and it tasted just as good as it looked. The sweetness of the vegetables spread in her mouth. “Mmm... It’s delicious...!”

Although everyone at the manor was harassing her, they still gave her a good meal. “They might actually be good people... I mean, even though I’m such a wicked woman, they still gave me a woolen mattress and a tasty meal! Isn’t this great?”

As her stomach filled, Ariel felt herself becoming more optimistic. “The marquis told me not to expect any luxury. But on the flip side, doesn’t that

mean I can do whatever I want, so long as it's not extravagant?" With that realization, Ariel's eyes shimmered. "In other words, I'm free!"

The next day, an angry-sounding voice suddenly woke Ariel up. "It's time for breakfast."

She sat up in a daze and saw that the maid from yesterday had brought Ariel's meal with a sour look on her face. Once again, she didn't wait for a reply from Ariel, irritably placing the tray on the desk with a clatter and turning on her heel to leave.

"Wait!" Ariel cried out hurriedly.

The attendant kept walking away as if she hadn't heard anything.

Ariel tried again. "I want some water to wash my face! And my body's all sticky too, so I want a bath!"

The maid clicked her tongue. "If you want water, get it yourself!" she said with annoyance, and left.

However, Ariel didn't lose heart. "Well, then I guess I will," she decided and carefully made her way down the attic stairs.

It should be around here... Ariel thought as she approached a building a short distance from House Balladur's main residence, where the staff workrooms were located. The servants all cast her puzzled looks as she walked inside the building. The facilities included a storeroom, a general-purpose kitchen, another kitchen dedicated to baking, and finally the laundry room. Inside, the staff were busily washing clothes.

Ariel took a deep breath, and addressed a middle-aged woman. "Hello. Er, I'd like to wash my body. Could I take some water?" she asked. *I wonder if this manner of speech is fine...*

Up until now, Ariel had only ever given her servants orders. She'd say things like "Come on! Hurry up and bring the water!" or "You should've brought it without being told!" But she was sure that if she tried doing that here, nobody

would respond to her. That was why she was trying to mimic her stepsister Jeanette's attitude. She spoke kindly, without losing her temper, and with a friendly smile on her face.

I bet Jeanette would've been even more energetic, but surely I don't have to imitate that too...?!

The woman Ariel had spoken to muttered, "What's that?" and looked up with a flash of annoyance. But when she spotted Ariel, she looked startled. "Y-Your Ladyship?!" she exclaimed. She hadn't been expecting Ariel to show up here. Her face went through a number of expressions in a very short amount of time. Hatred based on the rumors she heard about Ariel being a wicked woman, confusion as to why Ariel was here, and conflict over whether she should heed Ariel's request.

After a long moment of silence, she said, "The water's over there, so feel free to take some!" Just like the maid from before, this woman concluded that she'd treat Ariel in an unsociable and brusque manner.

"Then I will. Thank you." Ariel smiled, and picked up a nearby bucket. She filled it with water, and added some hot water from a pot that happened to be boiling. "Oh, I'll borrow this towel too," she said as she took one of the folded towels that was waiting to be brought into the manor.

The flabbergasted woman watched her, but Ariel didn't care. *The marquis said that he'll provide my basic necessities. The staff told me to take it, so this doesn't count as stealing, right?* Though her heart was beating a little fast out of nerves, Ariel managed to bring the bucket back to the attic.

The water-filled bucket had been heavy, but Ariel felt relieved to be able to cleanse her body. As she changed into the clothes she'd brought with her from the Roussel state, she thought, *I live in an attic and bathing is a little inconvenient, but this might actually be fairly comfortable. At least I don't have to put up with mother taking her anger out on me.*

Ariel thought about Leila, who'd always been raging over Jeanette. As she recalled the way her mother had sold her off, a stab of pain went through her heart, but she quickly shook her head. There was no point thinking about that now. Instead, she grabbed the feather duster that Jeanette had given her.

“All right! Time to clean whatever I didn’t get to yesterday! Once I’m done, maybe I’ll take a walk? Surely they won’t be mad at me just for walking around?”

And with that, Ariel’s modest new life had begun.

“Good work, Tabitha. I’ll be taking some hot water today as well,” Ariel said, picking up her bucket as swiftly as she had for the past couple of days.

Tabitha was the middle-aged woman Ariel had spoken to during her first visit to the servants’ building, and she seemed to be in charge of running the laundry room. She and the other staff were stealing glances at Ariel, but the girl didn’t mind.

Right as Ariel was about to reach for a towel, she remembered something. “Ah, I’ve been meaning to give this to you. I got it from my sister. Feel free to use it.”

“Wh-What is this...?” Tabitha inquired, looking even more perplexed than before as she gazed at the object Ariel was holding. It was a strange wooden frame with a large number of clothespins. The rectangular frame had a hook affixed to it, and the clothespins were spaced apart along its length at equal intervals.

“My sister calls this the clothespin hanger,” Ariel explained.

“Clothespin hanger...?” Tabitha repeated, squinting at the unfamiliar item.

Ariel put the bucket down and approached a nearby clothesline. “First, you hang this on the clothesline.” She did so, then picked up a pair of wet socks. “And then you use the clothespins to hang the small pieces of laundry. Like this...”

Snap. Snap. Snap.

“Oh...?!” Tabitha’s eyes widened in surprise as she watched Ariel hang up the laundry.

“See? With this tool, you can dry all the socks!” Ariel said proudly. In front of her, the socks were all neatly hung up in a row while occupying a minimal

amount of space.

“Incredible! There’s so many socks, but they all fit on here!”

“And given the frame’s size... We could use it inside on rainy days, right?!”

“Oh, could I hang my own clothes in the empty space? I got mud on them yesterday, and I was just thinking of giving them a wash!”

The female staff swarmed the clothespin hanger, talking excitedly among each other. Ariel watched them proudly from the side, her arms crossed. *Hee hee! It’s very useful, isn’t it? Sister sent it to me after I told her in a letter that I do my own laundry.* Based on the women’s reactions, it seemed they liked it too. In that case, giving it to them had been the right choice. Concluding as much in her mind, Ariel turned away to get her towel.

“Your Ladyship!”

“Wah!” Ariel shrieked when someone suddenly called out to her. She turned around, only to find Tabitha with her hands on her hips, glaring at her. The woman had always treated Ariel curtly, but this was the first time she had glowered at her like that. *Oh no... Did I do something wrong? Maybe I hurt her pride?* Intimidated, Ariel felt a cold sweat grip her.

Tabitha held out her hand, as if demanding Ariel to hand something over. “Humph!”

“Huh...? D-Do you want another hanger? I’m sorry, I only had one.”

“That’s not it!” the woman responded vexedly, stomping over to Ariel.

“Ah!” Ariel exclaimed as Tabitha snatched the bucket from her hands. “H-Huh...?”

While Ariel stood there blankly, Tabitha skillfully filled the bucket with just the right amounts of cold and hot water to create the perfect temperature. Then, she once again threatened Ariel. “Don’t just stand there! If you don’t hurry back to your room, the water will go cold. Or are you telling me you *don’t* want a hot bath?!”

“N-No, I do!”

“Then follow me!” Tabitha instructed, and began walking away gruffly.

Ariel had no clue what was going on, but she chased after the woman.

The other staff giggled as they watched them, and one of the younger girls whispered to Ariel, “Ms. Tabitha is saying that she’ll prepare hot baths for you from now on, Your Ladyship.”

“R-Really...?”

“And you over there!” Tabitha exclaimed, whipping around and pointing toward the servant who’d mentioned she wanted to dry her own clothes earlier. “You can use the free space to dry your things, but only for today. From tomorrow onward, that spot’s reserved for Her Ladyship’s clothes!”

“And that’s her saying we’re going to do your laundry starting tomorrow,” the young girl once again explained to Ariel.

“Really...?” Ariel could only blink at this sudden development. “But is it really fine for her to treat me so nicely just because I gave her a new tool...?”

The girl giggled. “What are you saying? You’re the lady of the house. Well...to be honest, we heard that some terribly wicked woman was coming, and that the maids in the main residence hated her, so we kept our distance from you...”

It shouldn’t have been surprising at this stage, but it turned out that the staff really did hate Ariel.

“But the staff at House Balladur aren’t so ungrateful as to treat a kind person coldly,” the girl finished with a friendly smile.

It was the first time anyone had smiled at Ariel since she’d arrived at the Balladur manor.

A few days later...

“Your Ladyship, *what* are you doing?” demanded the unfriendly lady’s maid with a shocked look on her face. Ariel had asked around, and apparently her name was Beth.

“Huh? Are you talking to me?” Ariel inquired, surveying the room with wide eyes.

“Do you see anyone else around here?” Beth snapped, sounding fed up.

“Right, sorry. It’s just that this is the first time you’ve started a conversation with me.”

Half a month had passed since Ariel had first arrived at the mansion. Today, she had been cutting up one of the dresses she’d brought with a pair of scissors when the shocked Beth had addressed her.

“Indeed, I am. Why are you cutting up your dress? Have you lost your mind? Or maybe you’re pretending to have gone crazy to disgrace House Balladur’s name?” Beth taunted.

Ariel shrugged. “No. I brought this dress with me to wear at parties, but I won’t be attending any, will I? So I decided to repurpose the material into clothes for everyday use. Tabitha taught me how to.”

“Tabitha?” Beth echoed with a frown.

Ever since Ariel had given Tabitha the clothespin hanger, the woman, for all her huffing and puffing, had treated her kindly. She was a caring person at her core, and on top of doing Ariel’s laundry and preparing her baths, she also taught her various things about life at the manor.

Beth continued to stand there with an intense look on her face. “I don’t know what ideas you put in the laundry girls’ heads, but *we* know that you’re a wicked woman. Trying to butter us up won’t work.”

“Yes, yes. I know. Now do you mind if I continue?” Ariel replied. By now, she had gotten completely used to the maids’ contempt.

Tabitha taught me about this too. According to the woman, all the maids at the main residence loved the new marquis dearly, and to them, his word was law. As such, since the marquis despised Ariel, the maids were hostile toward her too. *Well, not that I care.*

Her husband was as cold to her as ever. Or rather, he acted as if she didn’t exist. Ariel had caught sight of him a few times in the mansion, but they hadn’t spoken a single time since her arrival. *But thanks to that, I can take it easy, so I don’t mind.*

Once Ariel was done fixing her clothes, she was going to take a walk in House Balladur's rose garden, which Tabitha and the laundry girls had told her about. It was famous even among other nobles, so Ariel was looking forward to seeing it. *I wonder if I'll be able to take a rose back with me so I could give it to the others as a gift? Then again, I bet Tabitha would rather I give her soap made by Jeanette!*

While thinking such things, Ariel finished her work and headed to the rose garden near the manor.

As soon as she stepped toward the entrance, the soft fragrance of roses enveloped her. "Wow... What a lovely scent!" The garden was built like a maze, and it seemed to be waiting for her to enter. Ariel inhaled the scent of the roses, feeling a lump in her throat. She'd brought a small basket with her, and she exultantly stepped into the garden with it in hand.

The garden was filled with colorful roses and pleasant aromas. White, pink, yellow, red—each area had blooming roses of a different color and type. Ariel felt as if she'd stepped into the world of a fairytale. "How wonderful! It might've been worth marrying into this family just to be able to come here every day!" she exclaimed cheerfully, overcome with adoration for the flowers.

Right as she turned to walk to the next section, she heard a sound. "Gyaaah!" And just like that, a small boy suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Huh...?" Ariel froze in place, staring ahead with disbelief. "Is... Is that a *child*?!"

The boy, whose height only reached to Ariel's waist, wandered around the rose garden on unsteady feet. Based on his babyish features, he must've been about two or three years old. His outfit wasn't extravagant or flattering either—if anything, it looked peasantly.

"There's no way this is the marquis's son, right? Did this boy wander in here from somewhere and get lost?" Ariel mused out loud to herself, watching with wide eyes as the toddler waddled over toward a rose bush.

"Flower! Flower!" he exclaimed.

"Ah, wait! That's dangerous!" Ariel shouted. After all, roses had thorns. The

little boy flinched in surprise at her voice, and then—

“WAAAH!!!”

—loudly burst into tears.

“What?! Was that enough to make you cry?!” the flustered Ariel mumbled as she approached him. But she had no idea what to do next, and only stood there helplessly. *Oh no! I’ve never interacted with a child before! What am I supposed to do?!*

“WAHHH!!!”

“Um, I... I’m sorry, okay?” Ariel said nervously. *If I scared him, then apologizing should help, right?*

But the boy’s crying didn’t stop. “AHHH!!!”

Oh come on! What now?! Wait, I know! Ariel hurriedly held out her basket. It was filled with a bunch of colorful rose petals she’d picked up during her walk through the garden. She’d supposed that nobody would scold her for taking petals which had fallen on the ground. “Here, look! Aren’t they pretty? If you take them in your hands, like this...” As she spoke, Ariel picked up a handful of the petals and tossed them into the air. A flurry of colors whirled around them.

“W-Wow...” The boy’s cheeks were damp with tears and his nose was running, but he gazed at the petals in fascination with his mouth hanging open. It seemed Ariel’s actions were effective.

A-All right! He stopped crying! I’ll do it one more time, Ariel thought, gathering the remaining petals from the basket and throwing them toward the sky.

“Flower! Flower!” The toddler called out and chased after the fallen petals with a shine in his eyes. His plump cheeks wobbled with each step, and his small lips were pursed in concentration as he tried his hardest to collect all the petals one by one.

Ariel watched him, awash with relief. *Phew! He seems to be feeling better now.*

She thought she could relax for a while, but the petal throwing game seemed to have enraptured the boy. “More! More!” he begged, and made Ariel toss the

petals into the air over and over. Each time she did, he screamed in joy. His face lit up with a pure and innocent smile that showed he was enjoying this little game from the bottom of his heart.

Watching him caused Ariel's feelings to soften. "Hee hee... Children can be quite cute, can't they?" Scattering the petals into the air, Ariel couldn't help but smile as well. "Hey, what's your name? Well...maybe you can't say it yet. Do you know where your mama and papa are?"

"Mama! Papa!" the boy parroted her, staring at Ariel with a grin. He wasn't old enough to have a conversation yet.

"What now...?" Ariel murmured, feeling at a loss as she continued playing with the boy.

Suddenly, in the distance, a masculine voice called out: "Jack! Jaaack!"

Ariel jolted. It must've been someone searching for the boy. "Come! We might've found your papa," she said. Surmising that carrying the boy would be quicker given his age, Ariel held out her arms, and he allowed her to pick him up without complaint. "Oof! You're small, but you're surprisingly heavy...!" she remarked, before heading toward the voice.

Following the sound of the voice, Ariel came face-to-face with a male servant in his thirties. Based on his outfit and the shears attached to his waist, he must've been the gardener. "Is this your child?" she asked him.

The man's face lit up when he saw the boy. "Jack! Yeah, that's my son. I got a little too absorbed in my work, and before I knew it, he'd disappeared... What a relief! Thank you!"

"He was in the rose garden and almost touched some thorns. It was a close call," Ariel admonished.

The gardener slumped, hanging his head. "I'm sorry... I do my best to keep an eye on him, but I can't watch him all the time or I won't be able to do my work."

"What about his mother?"

"Well..."

The man explained that his wife had collapsed because of an illness. It took a while before anyone found her, and now she had to be on complete bed rest. It was also possible that she was infectious, so Jack couldn't stay with her.

"Luckily, my neighbor agreed to nurse my wife, but I have no one to look after Jack... I had no choice but to ask the marquis for permission to bring him here with me."

"He authorized it? Then he could at least have one of the maids help you out," Ariel said with a pout. Even she knew that having to look after a child this young while working was ridiculous. Not to mention that as the gardener, the man had shears and other sharp objects around him, so it wasn't safe.

The man laughed awkwardly. "No, I couldn't demand such a thing. His Lordship was the one to summon a doctor for my wife. I already owe him a debt I cannot repay."

"Humph! Even if that's the case, do you really think you can look after this child right now?" Ariel asked. She might have brought Jack back to his father, but there was still a risk that the boy would wander off again.

The gardener frowned. "Well..." He glanced down at his son, who seemed to have completely forgiven the earlier incident thanks to the petal tossing game and was gazing back at his father with a happy grin.

Seeing that innocent smile, Ariel let out a sigh. "It looks like there's no other way. I have plenty of free time anyway, so how about I look after Jack while you're working?"

"What?! I couldn't ask that of you, Your Ladyship...!"

"So you'd rather risk him getting lost or hurt?"

The gardener groaned.

"Then it's decided," Ariel said with a laugh. "Come on, Jack. We'll play together until your papa's finished working."

"Okay!"

Jack jumped into Ariel's arms without any hesitation. He had no sense of wariness toward others. *He's so trusting, I'm worried that someone might*

kidnap him! I'll have to keep a careful eye on him.

It wasn't as if Ariel wanted to do a kind deed, but she did have lots of time to spare. It was fun seeing the flowers by herself, but seeing them with a small child might not be so bad either. That was what she thought.

However...

"I was being naive...!" Ariel cried out listlessly.

Jack was next to her, sobbing loudly. "GYAAAH!!!" The reason behind all these tears? A butterfly he'd tried touching had flown away.

"You're only two years old. There's no way you'd catch a butterfly..."

"GYAAAH!!!"

"You're not listening at all..."

Jack had sprawled himself on the ground, where he continued wailing. Moreover...

"Ugh... BLEH!!!" He'd cried so much that he threw up.

"Ahhh?!" Ariel rushed over to turn him onto his stomach so he wouldn't choke, and then picked him up. Vomit smeared over her clothes, but she didn't have the time to care about such things. She rushed over to the laundry room and ran into a shocked Tabitha.

"Your Ladyship? Who is this child?!"

"Please help me! What are you supposed to do when a child throws up?!"

Thankfully, Tabitha had experience with child rearing, so she taught Ariel everything step-by-step: what to do if a child throws up, how to feed him, how to put him down for a nap, and even how to change his diaper.

"Perhaps you should return that boy to the gardener, Your Ladyship?" Tabitha suggested. "Or we could look after him in your stead. You are the marchioness, after all! You shouldn't have to do such things..."

"It's fine," Ariel replied. "I don't want to disrupt your work, and I have the time to spare. I'll just think of it as a game, and then it's quite literally child's play! Come on, Jack."

And so, while the shocked servants looked on, the nervous Ariel nevertheless continued looking after the boy. When he was hungry, she went with him to the kitchen to pick something up for him, and when he was sleepy, she brought him to her attic room and let him nap there. They'd play together all day, and in the evening, she returned him to his father.

In less than a week, Jack had become totally attached to Ariel. Ariel, too, took the boy along with her almost everywhere she went.

One day, the two of them were basking in the sunlight in House Balladur's gardens, when Ariel noticed someone was stomping over toward them. He had a slender yet toned build, lustrous black hair, and eyes as cool as ice. Indeed, it was her husband, Marquis Balladur.

Those blue eyes of his were blazing with fury right now. He stopped right in front of Ariel to block her path, and glared down at her coldly. "You've really gone and done the unthinkable, haven't you?"

"Wh-What?!" Ariel squeaked fearfully, holding Jack in her arms. Sensing the threatening atmosphere, the boy clung to her tightly.

"I told you not to get impregnated by some man, but never did I think you already had a secret child! Just how shameless of a woman are you?!"

"*Excuse me?*" Ariel replied in a deadpan before she could stop herself. *A secret child? Is he talking about Jack?* Her jaw almost fell off at this absurd accusation.

Yet Marquis Balladur paid no heed to her shocked expression and continued. "And you're taking advantage of the fact I've given you freedom by taking this child around everywhere as if you own the place! If you think I'm willing to overlook such a breach of order, then you've made a huge mistake, you wicked woman!"

Crack.

Something snapped inside of Ariel at that moment.

"Well, aren't you a complete and utter *idiot!*"

The marquis froze at the dreadfully menacing look Ariel shot his way.

“What?”

Ariel held Jack close to her to shield him, then went on calmly. “Allow me to inform you that this isn’t *my* child. He’s the gardener’s son. Did you hear that? The gar-de-ner! Obviously, I’m not the mother. You should know that, since *you’re* the one who granted this boy permission to be here!”

“Huh...? The gardener...?” That word struck a chord with the marquis, and he seemed to be trying very hard to recall something.

But Ariel gave him no leeway. “You can’t even remember the gardener you allowed to bring his son here, and you accused me of having an illegitimate child out of nowhere. Just how much of a dimwit are you?!”

“*Dimwit?!?*”

“And I’ll take this opportunity to add that just allowing the boy to stay here wasn’t enough at all! Children get hungry, cry, and poop!”

“P-P—?!?” The man’s eyes widened in disbelief upon hearing Ariel utter such a word.

“Obviously the gardener can’t do his work while looking after such a small child! You could’ve at least assigned a maid to care for the boy! Or was such a simple idea beyond you?”

The marquis couldn’t respond to Ariel’s bitter words.

“And this whole ‘wicked woman’ business... Yes, I did do bad things in the past. But whether it was as collateral for a debt or not, I’m still your wife. Yet you’ve forced me to live in the attic and have everyone treat me coldly. How are *you* any different from this supposed ‘wicked woman’ that I am?”

“Attic...? Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Then it’s the fault of your own mismanagement,” Ariel declared, before letting out a short breath. Then, she realized Jack was staring at her, and she gasped. “That must’ve been scary for you. I’m sorry you had to see that, Jack. Come on, let’s go. We don’t have the time to spare on this dimwitted marquis.” Holding Jack in her arms, Ariel turned to walk away.

“Wait,” the marquis called out, holding one hand to his forehead.

“Do you need something else?” Ariel asked, throwing him a glare.

He groaned. “What you just said... Was it all true? That this boy is the gardener’s son...and that you live in the attic?”

“Yes, it is. If you don’t believe me, summon the servants and ask them yourself.”

“Fine.” The marquis nodded, and turned to a nearby servant. “Gather everyone!” he ordered loudly.

All the servants of the Balladur manor were gathered in one place. Among them were Tabitha, Beth, and a few other maids who were supposed to be Ariel’s ladies-in-waiting. Some of them she’d never seen before.

“Those should be all the attendants assigned to you,” the marquis said.

Ariel scrutinized the women’s faces (all of whom were looking away awkwardly). Based on the atmosphere between them, they must’ve forced all the work related to Ariel on to Beth.

“Gardener, is it true that this is your son?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right. Her Ladyship looks after him for me... I owe her a great debt, and she’s not to blame for anything!” the gardener assured him, standing up for Ariel.

The marquis frowned, then turned to the maids. “You, who were assigned to be her attendants. Is it true that you conspired together to force the marchioness to live in the attic? I don’t recall asking you to do that.”

“W-We...”

“It was Beth’s doing! We would’ve never done such a cruel thing ourselves.”

“What?!” Beth exclaimed, in disbelief that the others were forcing all the blame onto her.

They’re awful. Not only did they force Beth to care for me alone, but now they’re trying to blame her for everything, Ariel thought.

“Is that right, Beth?” the marquis demanded. “Did you make that decision

yourself?”

“I...” Beth grew pale. Then, she bit her lip and hung her head, seemingly giving up. “I did—”

“Life in the attic is very comfortable!” Ariel cut in, stepping forward before the maid could finish.

Her husband cast her a glare. “What are you talking about?”

“I meant what I said: that it’s comfortable. Besides, all these women that you’ve introduced as my ladies-in-waiting... I don’t remember a single one of them caring for me other than Beth. This is the first time I’ve ever seen them.”

A buzz went through the gathered servants. The marquis was no exception. “Is that true?”

“It is. Isn’t that right, Beth? You’ve cared for me all by yourself, no?” Ariel prompted. The confused maid hesitantly nodded.

Marquis Balladur pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed deeply. “I see, so that’s what’s been going on. It seems that you were right to say that the fault lies in my management.”

“There’s one more thing, Your Lordship,” Ariel added.

“What is it?” he asked, looking exasperated.

“It’s true that the lady’s attendants were treating me coldly, but please don’t punish them. After all, everything that happened is *your* fault.”

The marquis looked blatantly offended at her provocative words. “*My* fault? Why?”

“You’re the one who declared me a wicked woman. When I first arrived, you verbally abused me in front of everyone, openly showed your hatred of me, and called me your possession. Isn’t it obvious that after witnessing such things, the servants would mimic their master’s behavior?” Ariel said, delivering a logical conclusion.

“Ugh...!” The marquis was at a loss for words.

“That’s why you shouldn’t punish them. You made the biggest mistake

yourself,” she told him. *It’s not like I’m interested in revenge either.* “If you understand, then let’s end this discussion here. Everyone’s got their work to do, after all!” she said, turning away with a huff.

“R-Right...” Marquis Ballardur seemed flustered after that sequence of events.

I was pretty harsh with him. I wonder if everyone will harass me more as a result? Well, I don’t care. If they do, I’ll just get angry again! Ariel decided. Ever since the incidents with Jeanette, Ariel had been reflecting on her own actions and had become more modest as a result. However, originally she was a feisty girl who once happily bullied her stepsister. Ironically enough, it was the marquis himself who had shaken that part of her out of its slumber.

Ever since that day, in contrast to Ariel’s worries, as opposed to harassing her more, everyone gradually began treating her better. To start, she was moved out of the attic and into the marchioness’s room, and perhaps by way of apology, she received several new dresses. Her meals became more extravagant, and she was allowed to wash in bathtubs filled with hot water.

“Your Ladyship, how about I give you a massage during your bath?” suggested Beth, who’d once been so unfriendly. It was almost as if she were a different person, which confused Ariel.

“Th-Thank you...”

The maid must’ve come to like Ariel ever since she stood up for her. *I don’t really get it, but... I suppose it’s fine, isn’t it?* As Beth gave her a careful massage, Ariel let out a blissful sigh.

What is with that woman?! Bernard thought as he stalked toward his room. All he could think about lately was his new wife. *I heard that both she and her mother were wicked women, so I was convinced it wouldn’t cause me pain to take her on as my wife in name only. Never did I imagine she’d point out my flaws to me like this!*

Bernard had treated Ariel strictly in order to ensure she wouldn’t disgrace House Ballardur. But she hadn’t responded to that in any way, and according to

her lady attendants, she was living leisurely without a care in the world. Bernard had agonized over whether she was hiding something behind her newfound freedom, when one of the maids had tipped him off that Ariel had a secret child.

He'd swallowed the story and intended to reproach Ariel...only to receive an unbelievable retaliation from her.

"Damn it. I was a fool for blindly believing the maids," Bernard murmured to himself. "Wait... Was it wrong of me to have instilled in the servants' minds from the start that Ariel was a wicked woman? I suppose it made everyone prejudiced against her... But I was sure she *was* a wicked woman!" In a fit of anger, he slammed his fist into his desk.

When he realized what he'd done, he let out a sigh. At the same time, the words of a certain someone rang in his mind. *"But take heed, Marquis Balladur. Just because she's a wicked woman doesn't mean you can treat her however you want."*

Bernard ran his fingers through his bangs. *Count Guivarch was the one who said that to me*, he thought, and recalled the event...

After Bernard had first agreed to take Ariel as his wife, Count Claus Guivarch visited his manor. Due to high society's small social circles, the two had already been acquainted, though they weren't particularly close.

When Claus first arrived, he smiled so beautifully that even men would find themselves gasping, and asserted curtly, "The lady of House Roussel, Leila, borrowed money from your father, didn't she? If she tries to offer you a red-haired girl as collateral, do not accept no matter what. She's my fiancée."

Staring at Claus's lovely smile, Bernard frowned. "And here I thought something major had come up, since you showed up out of nowhere. I don't think you have a reason to interfere in this matter. Or do you want to shoulder the debt yourself?"

"That'd be no problem for me, but my mother-in-law incurred that debt. My angel—in other words, my fiancée—has nothing to do with it, so I don't want her getting wrapped up in it. Not to mention, I despise my mother-in-law, so I

have no desire to repay her debt.”

Upon hearing that, Bernard grasped the situation. “I see... I suppose there’s a troublesome parent in every house.” He himself had gone through a lot because of his father, who had been dubbed “the lecherous marquis.” As someone who had to bear responsibility in his father’s stead, he could sympathize with Claus. However, he was curious about one thing. “But you only mentioned the red-haired girl. If House Roussel offers me a different girl, will that be a problem for you?”

“Not at all. I won’t mind, since it won’t be my fiancée,” Claus replied without any hesitation and smiled. He sounded so nonchalant that it was as if they weren’t discussing an actual person’s life.

Bernard’s eyes widened. “That’s a surprise. You’re known as a bit of a philanthropist, and they say you’re kind to everyone. Yet right now, you’re being shockingly heartless.”

Claus laughed, his eyes shining with an icy glint. “A lot of people have the wrong idea about me. I’m not a philanthropist by any means. If anything, I might be the very opposite.”

“So you’re able to act kindly to everyone because you have no interest in them, huh?” Bernard said.

Claus only smiled in response.

Bernard took that reaction as an affirmation. *I see. I thought he was a goody-goody and a model student type, but in reality he’s a blackhearted man who only wears the mask of a gentleman.* However, Bernard smirked at the thought. He didn’t find Claus detestable for that. *It’s a lot more interesting this way.*

“All right,” he told Claus. “If they try to offer me your fiancée, I’ll refuse. I’m bad at remembering women’s faces or names, but you mentioned she has red hair?”

“Yeah, thanks. I appreciate it. By the way, based on the things you said, are you thinking of taking a wife instead of a repayment of the debt? It’s unexpected, since you’re known to be a misogynist.”

Bernard nodded. “It was originally my father’s idea, but I found it surprisingly

useful. It's not a huge amount of money for us. And as you know, I'm a marquis."

"Of course I do. Everyone knows you're a misogynist, and yet you still get countless women trying to seduce you. Ah... I see now. You're looking for a woman repellent, aren't you?"

"I'm glad you understand." Indeed, Bernard was relieved that Claus was clever enough to pick up on what he was trying to say. "I want a wife who can act as a woman repellent for me. But if I marry a normal noblewoman, she'll start asking me to love her or have children with her, and all that couple-y nonsense. But a wife I get as collateral for debt wouldn't make such demands of me, would she?"

"You have a point."

"Also...have you heard the rumors going around recently?"

Claus jolted at Bernard's question. "Rumors...? To be honest, I've been so busy with work recently that I haven't been paying much attention."

"They say that House Roussel's Ariel stole all of her stepsister's belongings, tried to steal her fiancé, and spread all kinds of lies about her to ruin her reputation. You must be the fiancé in question, Claus. Isn't that right?"

"My, so they dug up that much..." Claus murmured, looking startled.

"What are you talking about?" Bernard asked with a laugh. "Aren't *you* the one who spread those rumors?"

"Sadly, I'm innocent. Rather than spread rumors in social circles I have no control over, I prefer to tattle to the person who can actually do some damage," Claus explained with a composed smile.

"I feel like that's an even nastier way of doing things..." Bernard muttered, shuddering. "Anyway, I don't think my heart would hurt if I were to have a marriage blanc with that wicked woman."

"Sounds like you *do* have a conscience, though."

"Yes, I wouldn't want to put an innocent woman through that."

"Well, if that's what you want to do, I won't oppose it. I have no reason to

protect Miss Ariel either. But take heed, Marquis Ballardur. Just because she's a wicked woman doesn't mean you can treat her however you want. Remember that."

"Of course," Bernard responded. "I have no intention of treating her in an inhumane way. I simply need a wife in name only."

Claus contemplated for a short while, then murmured under his breath. "Hmm... In a way, that might open up a new path for her... Very well. I won't interfere with this matter any further."

The two men exchanged a handshake, and their conversation drew to a close...

Bernard frowned upon recalling that meeting. *It's not like I acted in the way he implied...but still, maybe I pushed things too far?* Ariel might have been his wife in name only, but he hadn't even known where she lived, and he'd reprimanded her based on a lie he'd believed without question. He closed his eyes tightly as he remembered what had happened. *I think I should apologize to her.*

Bernard had gone looking for Ariel, and found her for some reason doing the laundry together with the servants. "What on earth are you doing?" he asked her.

When the servants noticed their master had arrived, they hurriedly lowered their heads. Ariel finally noticed him when he addressed her, too, and glanced at him with obvious dislike. "Do you need something?"

Bernard recoiled at her harsh glare. He'd intended to apologize diligently, like a proper head of the house, but when he saw the obvious disgust Ariel looked at him with, all the words he'd prepared died in his throat. She must've come to hate him more than he'd expected after what had happened.

"N-Not really... But what are you doing?" he inquired again.

"I'm washing diapers. Jack is only two years old, so he needs a lot of them."

"D-Diapers?! You should leave that to the servants! Why are *you* doing it?"

Bernard demanded. It was unthinkable for a marchioness to wash the diapers of her servant's child.

The displeased Ariel shook her head. "Because I'm the one with the most free time. But why do you care all of the sudden? Aren't you the one who refused to treat me like an actual marchioness, Your Lordship?"

"W-Well..." Bernard cleared his throat awkwardly. "I was unfair toward you. I didn't check where you were living, and I accused you of having a secret child..."

"I don't really care," Ariel replied brusquely. "I'm just a bride who was sold off as collateral for a debt, and I did all the bad things you heard about from high society, so I'm prepared for you to treat me however you see fit. Anyway, is that all you wanted to say? I need to hang these diapers up to dry now, so do you mind?"

"R-Right..." Bernard mumbled, bewildered at the girl's blatant dislike of him. *She did admit to her own wrongdoings, but is this really the same Ariel Roussel I've been hearing about?! She's completely different from what I expected!*

Bernard's hatred of women had begun when he was a child. Whenever his father's lovers or young brides sneaked into his bedroom to try and connect with the next head of the house, he'd be forced to flee their evil clutches. And whenever he stepped outside, noblewomen who wished to become the next marchioness would swarm him and bat their eyelashes at him. They'd look at him with flirtatious expressions, exuding a strong scent of perfume. In sweet voices, they'd slander other women in order to kick them down. Bernard hated all of it.

Strange... From what I've heard, Ariel Roussel was like the culmination of all these wicked women. But in contrast to that, she leisurely glared at him, spoke to him harshly, and vigorously washed the diapers of a servant's child.

"You... Who are you? Are you really Ariel Roussel?" he asked before he could stop himself.

Ariel's scowl deepened. "Why yes, I'm Ariel, your wife in name only."

"Then why did you tolerate that kind of treatment? Collateral or not, it's strange that you're so understanding. You're supposed to be a wicked woman,

so shouldn't you be more violent?"

"Even a wicked woman is a human being, which means she can change."

"Then what caused you to change so much?"

Ariel looked thoughtful for a while. "I suppose...that would be my sister," she said eventually.

"Your sister? The one you slandered?"

For some reason, Ariel smiled at that question. It was the first time Bernard had seen her smile since she'd arrived. As she was doing laundry, her golden hair was up in a tight bun, and she had no makeup on. But her blue eyes were strangely clear, radiating a tranquil beauty. Bernard panicked for a moment when he realized what he'd just thought and shut his mouth tightly.

"I'm sure you're aware, but I used to bully my sister constantly," Ariel began. "But she was always so kind to me... So kind that I wondered if there was something wrong with her. Later, high society found out about my bad deeds, and on top of that, my mother sold me off. Yet even then, the only person who still treated me with kindness was my sister."

Ariel paused and turned to look Bernard in the eye. "That was when I realized: my sister is an incredibly strong person. And it was she, of all people, who was shining down on us as brightly as the sun. Once I realized that, I felt ashamed of my own actions." The girl smiled in embarrassment. "It might be too late, but at least from now on, I want to live in a way that wouldn't bring shame to my sister. That's all. That's also why I want to avoid causing you any problems too, Your Lordship." After saying that, Ariel walked away to dry the diapers.

Bernard stood still, staring at her retreating figure.

"How strange..." Bernard murmured, looking out of the window of his office. Ariel was walking through the garden by herself. Observing her, he kept muttering. "Yes, it's definitely strange. Why can't I look away from her?"

Ariel had changed ever since that incident. She'd begun glaring at him with obvious loathing and smiling at the servants instead. And the lady's attendants

who'd treated her coldly before now wished for her to be their mistress again.

Bernard himself had changed too. Lately, his eyes were always searching for Ariel. When he was in the manor, he wondered when he'd bump into her, and when he was working in his office, he looked through the window to check if she was walking outside. And each time he found her, he found himself carefully watching whatever she was doing.

After a while, the butler cleared his throat. "Your Lordship, if you're that curious about her, why don't you talk to her?"

"Th-That would impede my work!"

"I think that's already happening..."

Bernard pretended not to hear that, scratching his head frantically. "Ah, damn it! What is wrong with me?!" Then, he turned to the butler. "You said I should talk to her, huh? Do you think my emotions would calm down if I did that?!"

"Perhaps they would, or perhaps they'd get roused even more... Well, in any case, you should start by trying to talk to her. How about a simple conversation? You two *are* married, after all."

Bernard's shoulders twitched upon hearing those words. "Married, huh? I suppose we are, at least on paper." Having made up his mind, the marquis stood up and stomped out of the room.

"Hey, you!" Bernard called out, heading toward Ariel, who was walking around the large, painstakingly crafted garden.

The girl glanced his way briefly, then turned away again with a huff.

"You! Answer me!"

"Unfortunately, my name isn't 'you,'" she said. In other words, she was demanding that he call her by her name.

Bernard let out a quiet groan, and then muttered, "Hey, Ariel."

"Yes? What is it, Your Lordship?" Ariel sounded exasperated, but nonetheless gave him a diligent reply.

The marquis frowned. *No, this isn't right.* He hadn't come here just to see her for no reason. *Yes, what I want is...*

"Ariel, is there something you want?"

"Huh?" Ariel's eyes widened. "Why are you asking me that out of nowhere? Are you trying to apologize for what happened? I've already had enough of that."

"No..."

I thought that if I gave her something she wanted, she'd smile at me. That was the new budding feeling within Bernard. He wanted to see Ariel smile again. Yet he wasn't brave enough to say that out loud, and he didn't even understand why he had such a thought. He only mumbled incoherently for a while.

"A-Anything is fine! I, Marquis Ballardur, am asking you if there's something you want!"

"Why are you aggressively peddling your generosity?"

"W-We're married, aren't we? I reflected on everything, and decided that I want us to act more like a real married couple."

Ariel sighed at Bernard's faltering reply. "Well, if that's what you want, Your Lordship, then I'll go along with it..."

"And stop calling me that. We're married, so refer to me in a way that reflects that."

"How bothersome... Then how about this? My dear husband."

The moment she said that, Bernard turned away from her. "Humph!"

"What's wrong now? I won't say it again if you hate it so much," Ariel said, discontent. She hadn't noticed how red Bernard's face had gotten.

"I don't hate it, so always refer to me in that way!" he replied hurriedly.

"Yes, yes, fine. Is that all you wanted?"

"Wait! You haven't told me what you wanted yet!"

"Oh, you're so tenacious... But I suppose there is *one* thing."

Bernard quickly turned back around to face Ariel. "What is it?"

"A tulip," she said, her eyes lighting up with a twinkle. Bernard's heart lurched again at the sight. "If you want to make my wish come true, then I wish for a tulip. I searched, but there aren't any in this garden... They're the one flower I have a special fondness for."

Ariel's smile when she said those words was like a flower bed in full bloom. A bright, shining, beautiful flower bed that belonged only to Bernard. He hadn't realized how captivated he was and just kept staring at his wife's face.

As a side note, at that time, Bernard still hadn't noticed the fact that he'd fallen in love with a woman who was supposed to be his wife in name only. As for all his feelings and efforts, it'd be quite a while before they were rewarded.

Afterword

Hello, this is Miyako Miyano.

Thank you for buying the second volume of *Jeanette the Genius*.

I'm sure many of you have realized by now, but I wrote this story based on the historical tulip mania (it's written on the obi as well!). Originally, I considered using the tulip mania as a base and changing the flower. But tulip bulbs have such special characteristics, and the flowers have a beauty which captivated the people of the past. They were even deified. There aren't many flowers about which you can say the same thing! I decided it was best to keep them as is, rather than awkwardly trying to insert another flower in their place.

Although the story turned out quite different from the real events, there are various theories speculating about whether the tulip mania even really happened, so I thought it'd be fun to enjoy it through a fictional lens!

By the way, in reality, it seemed that nobody took the sales approach that Jeanette did. Instead, the business transactions were usually done in taverns and bars (according to the books I used as reference). It might be fun to compare that part to real life events too.

As for the unrelenting Leila, I had her play the role of a noblewoman who doesn't really understand business. I'd already decided her final fate in the original script of the story. As for Ariel, I considered having her follow her mother to the monastery or having her work as a maid in a noble house. Who would've thought I'd end up writing that short story about her!

I didn't expect for Claus to go off the rails like that on page 78! It wasn't a part of my original script, and as I was writing it, all I could hear in my head was "And iii-eee-iii!" (I wonder if teens will get this reference?)

The reason I was able to finish this volume safely is all thanks to my manager. I'm so sorry I kept giving you false promises over and over about when I'd finally

send the extra chapter OTL. Thank you so much for everything.

Once again, Hayase Jyun has drawn this volume's faaaaaaaaan—(inhale)—tastic artwork! Thank you so much! I'm incredibly fortunate! (blushes)

To my proofreader, who so smoothly corrected my enigmatic Japanese; the designer, who once more produced a wonderful cover; all the salespeople; and everyone connected to the book in any way: thank you so much from the bottom of my heart!

And more than anything, I hope those who picked up this volume had a lot of fun reading it!

Miyako Miyano









Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Jeanette the Genius: Defying My Evil Stepmother by Starting a Business with My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! Volume 2

by Miyako Miyano

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Jonathan Engel

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Miyako Miyano, Hayase Jyun 2023

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Drecom Co., Ltd.

This English edition is published in arrangement with Drecom Co., Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: April 2024