

A vibrant anime-style illustration of a wedding scene. A bride with long red hair, wearing a white wedding dress and a floral headpiece, is being held by a groom with short silver hair in a dark suit. The groom is holding a large bouquet of white flowers. They are surrounded by falling pink and yellow petals, white doves, and a rainbow. In the background, a church steeple is visible under a blue sky with clouds. The overall mood is joyful and celebratory.

Author: Miyako Miyano

Illustrator: Hayase Jyun

3

Jeanette the Genius

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

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"Wh-Wh-Wha-!!!"

"Mmm...?!"

Claus swiftly pressed his lips against hers. Right in front of Meltia, her maids, and Sara, who'd sneaked in together with Jeanette.

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Chapter 1: Approaching Marriage

Jeanette and Claus were having breakfast in the Guivarch residence. Claus, who was sitting next to Jeanette, smiled at her.

“By the way, Jeanette. What kind of wedding ceremony do you think we should have?”

Right as he’d asked this, Jeanette had taken a huge bite of bread.

“Wuhding cewemonuh?” she mumbled, attempting to echo his words.

Claus’s smile grew wider.

“Yes. Now that Sir Roussel’s safe and sound, there’s nothing stopping us from getting married.”

That’s true, Jeanette thought while swallowing the food.

Looking back, quite a lot had happened leading up to this moment. Her father had gone missing while Claus was studying abroad, causing her ex-stepmother Leila to take over House Roussel. Everything had begun when Leila had kicked Jeanette out of the house.

Claus had soon returned from his studies and reunited with Jeanette. Afterward, she had noticed that Duke Pablo had been swindled into buying a fake Bairapa tourmaline. The duke had granted her his patronage as a result of her help, leading to the success of her Orlonde silk business among the aristocracy.

Out of desperation, Leila had tried to sell the title deed to Roussel Corporation, but Claus’s friend Kyuriakris collaborated with Jeanette, bought the deed, and safely returned it to her.

Then Kyuriakris had introduced her to tulips, which led to the creation of the tulip bubble. Leila had fallen into debt because of it and had Jeanette kidnapped. But during that time, her stepsister Ariel had stood up for Jeanette.

Now that I think about it, Ariel’s already married too, Jeanette realized. She

grinned at the recollection. Leila had sold Ariel off as collateral for her debt, and Jeanette had initially been rather worried for her stepsister. However, it seemed Ariel was doing quite well. *In her latest letter, she mentioned that she was grossed out because the marquis keeps wanting to spend too much time with her. But then she went into minute detail and spelled out everything they did together, so I think they're actually getting along.*

Jeanette remembered the various letters her stepsister had sent her. One of them read: "For some reason, the marquis took me to a tulip garden that's been popular with the nobles lately, but the tulips I got from you were prettier. When I told him that, he became depressed and I had to scramble to console him. It was so annoying."

Another letter read: "I got him to let me grow tulips in the estate's garden, but then he blurted out that he wanted to care for them too! Even though he's a marquis, he's getting his hands muddy and playing with dirt. What a weirdo! Still, he has pretty nails."

Ariel wouldn't know the marquis has nice nails unless she looked closely, right? She probably stared at his hands without even realizing it! Despite her crabby attitude, Ariel was nevertheless gazing fixedly at her husband's hands. The mental image caused Jeanette to giggle. I'm so glad she's enjoying herself.

If Jeanette said as much to Ariel, the other girl would probably say, "How exactly am I enjoying myself here?! That's such a gross way to look at it, sister!"

But Jeanette wouldn't have minded. *I'd love to see them both someday. I did meet the marquis when he bought those rings from me, but I want to see Ariel together with him!* Just the thought made Jeanette feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"You seem to be having fun, Jeanette." Claus spoke up suddenly. "Are you thinking about our wedding?"

Jeanette hurriedly apologized. Her thoughts tended to stray all over the place—it was her bad habit.

"Sorry! I was actually thinking about Ariel!"

"Miss Ariel? I knew you were thinking about something other than the

wedding, but I didn't expect it to be her."

So he figured out that I wasn't thinking about it! Jeanette's heart pounded.

Claus laughed, as if seeing through her.

"Naturally, I could tell. How many years has it been now since I've had eyes only for you?" Those amethyst irises gazed at her, glimmering in the morning sunlight. He hadn't put on a tie yet and his shirt was loosened around the neck, causing his angular Adam's apple to be visible. This masculine, unrefined appearance seemed almost unsuited for the usually graceful Claus, but that was exactly why Jeanette's heart throbbed at the sight.

I let down my guard, but Lord Claus is so beautiful even in the morning!

"Um, what were we talking about?!" Jeanette squeaked, trying to calm her racing heart.

Claus smiled patiently.

"Our wedding, Jeanette."

"Right! That! You said there's no need to wait any longer, right?!" she asked, her cheeks flushing. *I knew that we'd get married someday, but it's so embarrassing to think of it actually happening!*

"Since the bride's the star of the wedding, let's do everything your way," Claus said, enjoying himself. "I'm fine with you inviting a large crowd and having a grand celebration. And if you don't want it to be too flashy, I don't mind only inviting our relatives either." Then he suddenly leaned close to Jeanette. "Or, if you prefer, we can have a ceremony with just you and me, where we quietly swear our love for each other."

Jeanette shrieked when she felt his breath in her ear.

"Eeek!!! L-Lord Claus! It's only morning, and you're already dripping with sex appeal!!!"

If this continues all day, my heart won't be able to take it! she thought while blushing.

Claus grinned at her, pleased.

“I’m glad you’re getting flustered. In the past, no matter what I did, you never noticed anything.”

“Th-That’s not true...!” she protested, pressing her hands to her reddened cheeks. *I just never thought his actions were directed at me, so it didn’t feel real...!*

However, now she was well aware that Claus was truly looking only at her as he whispered these words of love. *W-Waaahhh!!!* The thought made her inwardly scream again, and her blush deepened even more.



While Claus watched her and chuckled, Jeanette forced some words out.

“U-Um, uh, err... Right, the ceremony! Let’s discuss that!” she pleaded, doing her utmost to get the topic back on track. “I’ve been giving it a lot of thought, and I can’t decide how I’d like to go about it...”

“Really? Then how about you discuss it with me? We can decide together,” Claus suggested.

“O-Okay!” Jeanette calmed her breathing and began listing her ideas. “Um... To be honest, I did think about having a quiet ceremony with just the two of us, since getting married is a little embarrassing. But at the same time, I’d like to invite everyone who’s helped us...”

Claus nodded.

“Right. There’s Duke Pablo and Lady Christine. And I don’t know if he’d come, but I want to invite Kyuriakris so I can show off—ahem, I mean, receive his blessing.”

“If possible, I’d also like everyone from Roussel Corporation and Matheson Trading to attend...”

“With all these guests, it won’t be a small ceremony anymore. With just the groups you’ve mentioned, there’d be over a hundred people, and that’s a conservative estimate.”

“Right. And if our employees are to be there, I thought it might be good for us to incorporate the latest wedding ceremony trends and make it educational for them.”

“Oh? Such as?” Claus inquired.

Jeanette’s eyes lit up.

“The other day, on a certain island, a queen attended her wedding dressed in a pure-white gown! Her pure and sweet appearance struck a chord with everyone! I predict that we’re about to have a white wedding dress boom!”

“Huh. Usually, people wear dark-colored dresses for their weddings, like green or black. But a white one... Yes, I think it’d definitely suit you, Jeanette. You should wear one for our ceremony,” Claus said with a pleased smile.

Perhaps he was picturing her wearing such a dress.

“The fabric needed for white dresses is expensive, so this might only be a trend among the nobility for some time,” Jeanette added. “But if we find a way to mass-produce white dresses, I think they might take root in our culture!”

“Mass production, hmm? The craftsmen’s handiwork is great, but there *is* a lot more we could do if we could produce the dresses en masse.”

“Anything that becomes fashionable with the nobles can quickly become a trend throughout the whole capital! If we ride that wave, we can rake in even higher earnings!”

“Indeed, there’s always more money to be made,” Claus agreed with a smile. This had become their motto of sorts. “But we’re getting further and further off track here, Jeanette.”

“Oh!” Jeanette exclaimed. *My bad habit strikes again!* she thought with a groan.

Claus chuckled at her.

“Still, just talking with you about the wedding is fun. I honestly don’t mind whether we go with a quiet ceremony or an extravagant one. At the end of the day, what matters is that I’m marrying *you*,” he told her, gently pressing his forehead against hers. “You’ll make the most beautiful bride in the world. I still can’t believe I’ll get to hold your hand and swear my love to you.”

Claus looked happy from the bottom of his heart as he spoke, and Jeanette’s heart throbbed at the sight.

“Lord Claus... I feel the same way,” she confessed with blushing cheeks. “To think I’ll become your bride... It still feels like a dream.”

“Does it?” Claus giggled.

Jeanette grinned along with him.

“Yes! Um... I know you’re my fiancé, but you always felt like an unattainable man, someone I could only yearn for from afar...!”

“Unattainable? You’re exaggerating. I’m here now, and I’ll always be by your side.”

“R-Right!”

“I’m sure we’ll be happy together, Jeanette.” Claus’s hand clasped hers tightly.

“Yes...!” Jeanette felt lightheaded from all the sweetness, as if she were having a lovely dream.

Yet right at that moment, House Guivarch’s steward showed up, holding a tray with an envelope on it.

“My apologies for the interruption, Lord Claus. You have a letter from His Majesty.”

“His Majesty?” Claus echoed, exchanging a look with Jeanette.

The king? What could it be about? she wondered.

Claus took the envelope and opened it. As he read the contents of the letter, his brows creased.

“What does it say, Lord Claus?” Jeanette asked.

“His Majesty has asked me to arrange a performance of *The Princess’s Matrimony* in the royal palace.”

“In the palace?” Jeanette blinked. *The Princess’s Matrimony* was the title of the play about Duke and Duchess Pablo. Jeanette and her companions had used the play as a pretext to advertise their diamond rings on a large scale. Sales were still going strong. The rings had become their own brand and were the main source of income for the company.

“I suppose the play’s garnered a high reputation,” Claus remarked.

Jeanette nodded.

“We did perform it for free in lots of places, since it’s a form of advertisement,” she observed.

They had created simple stages across the royal capital and staged the play many times over. There had been no admission limit, so everyone regardless of status could watch the drama.

“But it’s amazing that we can perform it in the palace now!” Jeanette went

on. "I'm sure all the actors will be so happy to hear that they can meet His Majesty!"

"Yeah..." Claus murmured. He seemed to be lost in thought.

"Lord Claus?" Jeanette asked in confusion.

"Actually, His Majesty won't be the one watching," he clarified.

"No...?"

*We'll be performing in the palace, but His Majesty won't be the audience?
What's going on?*

While Jeanette pondered, Claus spoke up again. "The one who wishes to see it is...Princess Meltia."

"Princess Meltia?" Jeanette blinked once more.

Meltia was the first princess of the country. Her parents were the present king and queen, and she had turned sixteen this year. She was the youngest of three, with two older brothers. Meltia was famed for her beauty and apparently looked as adorable as a fairy. People often referred to her as the "Fairy Princess."

"The invitation may have come from the king, but it's the princess who will be meeting with us," Claus clarified.

"Isn't it incredibly rare for her to grant an audience like this?!" Jeanette exclaimed excitedly. "I feel like I haven't even heard about her for a very long time!"

"Me neither," Claus replied with a puzzled look. "Apparently, she's very frail, so she doesn't make public appearances."

Jeanette and Claus were both shocked. After all, though the princess was famous for her beauty, her weak constitution was just as well-known. She seemed to have some kind of incurable illness, so she never attended things like tea parties, plays, or ceremonies. Glimpsing her for even a moment was considered a turn of incredible good fortune.

"What a valuable opportunity!" Jeanette said. "I can't believe Princess Meltia will watch our play!"

“According to the letter, she requested that she be the only spectator. And since I’m the organizer, she wants to have a chat with me afterward.”

“Really?! So you’ll not only get to see her, but you’ll also get to *talk* to her?! I wonder what she’ll say...?! Please tell me all about it, Lord Claus!” Jeanette begged enthusiastically.

Claus seemed to deliberate something.

“In that case... How about you come with me, Jeanette?” he proposed.

“Huh?” Jeanette’s eyes grew wide. “I’m not sure if I should. Only you and the theater troupe have been invited.”

“The play is sponsored by Matheson Trading, which means you’re one of the involved parties. Besides, nowhere does the invitation mention that I’m *not* allowed to bring my fiancée,” Claus pointed out with a confident smile.

That’s pretty far-fetched reasoning...! Yet in spite of her thoughts, Jeanette nodded in agreement. Even as a member of high society, she could count on one hand the number of times she’d seen Princess Meltia, and those had just been glimpses from far away.

Claus could easily read how she felt, and he smiled at her.

“You want to see the Fairy Princess up close, don’t you?”

“Well... Yes! I’d love to meet her!” Jeanette admitted despite her complicated feelings on the matter.

Holding the letter in his hand, Claus grinned.

“Then it’s decided.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve been to the palace! The hall is so spacious!” Jeanette exclaimed with great emotion. She was observing as the troupe set up the stage inside of the palace’s large dance hall.

Today was the day they’d be performing for the princess. Set designers, lighting crew, costume supervisors, and lead actors had all gathered in the hall first thing in the morning in order to begin preparations. Jeanette and Claus

were watching over them together.

“You haven’t been here since your high society debut, right?” Claus asked her.

“That’s right!” Jeanette nodded.

In this country, a person was permitted to participate in high society once they turned fourteen. The custom was that once the young ladies and gentlemen turned the appropriate age, they visited the royal palace and greeted the queen. Jeanette recalled coming to the palace to do so together with her stepmother Leila, who had looked extremely reluctant.

“I remember that Her Majesty looked at me with great surprise!”

“Your stepmother used to decide your makeup at the time, didn’t she...?” Claus asked, smiling dryly.

At this, Jeanette gasped.

“Wait! If I’ll be meeting the princess, should I have done that kind of makeup?! It might be rude of me to meet her with this little makeu—”

“No. You’re fine like this,” Claus interrupted firmly. “I’ve already told you many times, Jeanette. I like the light makeup you wear these days. Your clear eyes glitter like the morning dew, and your cherry-red lips look vibrant and delicious. Your cheeks are plump and lovely too, just like a fairy.”

Jeanette blushed upon receiving Claus’s rapid-fire compliments.

“Th-Thank you...”

Am I imagining it, or has Lord Claus become even more of a poet than before?!

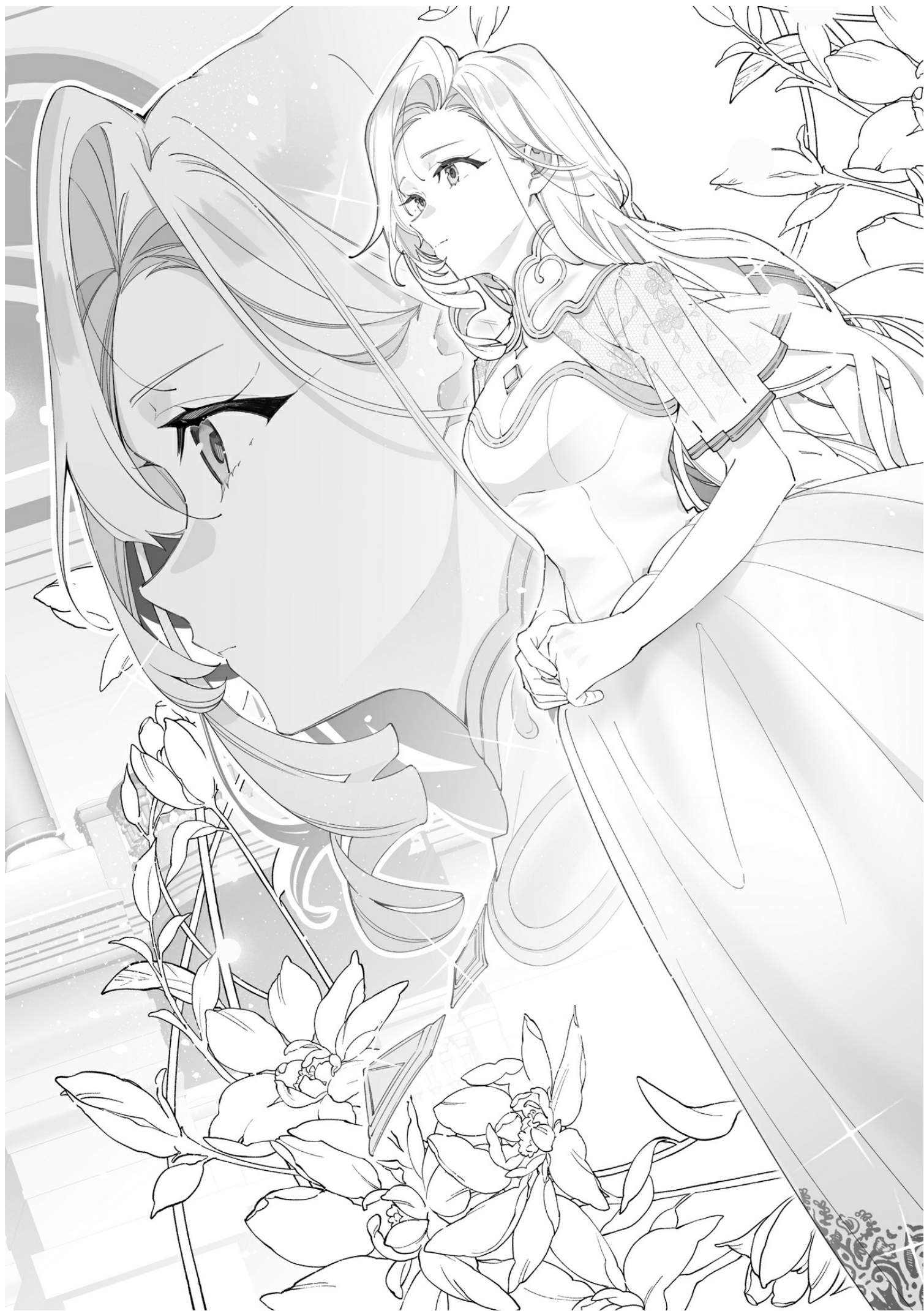
While she was busy being bashful, the time came for the play to begin. A male servant stepped forth.

“Her Highness Princess Meltia!” he announced in a clear voice. Then, the dance hall’s doors slowly opened.

“Wow...!” Jeanette cried at the sight of the girl who had stepped inside.

Princess Meltia was the most beautiful girl Jeanette had ever seen. Her pale, billowing hair was almost white in color, flowing in gentle waves all the way to the floor. Her eyelashes were the same shade, framing her eyes like wisps, and

her crystal clear aquamarine irises seemed to see through everything. Her skin was so pale and translucent that it almost looked pure white, and she had a well-shaped, round forehead. She had a small, oval face, and her slender hands peeked out from the sleeves of her white dress. Her beauty was almost otherworldly, befitting her nickname as the Fairy Princess.



Oh my goodness! I thought I was used to beauty from being around Lord Claus, but she is terrifyingly gorgeous!!!

Jeanette had heard that Princess Meltia's parents—the king and queen—doted on her endlessly. Seeing the girl for herself, Jeanette could understand why. Just one glance at the beautiful princess shot right through Jeanette's heart. Even though Meltia had a blank look on her face, as though everything was the same as usual for her, she still looked pretty. Gracefully, she sat upon the chair that had been prepared for her. Even that gesture made her seem like some kind of precious being.

While Jeanette trembled from emotion, Claus smiled his usual gentlemanly smile. Then, he elegantly lowered his head. However, before he could say anything, an older woman who appeared to be Meltia's main lady attendant spoke up.

"The princess hates being made to wait! Please begin the play at once!"

Meltia herself didn't move a muscle. She simply stared at Claus in silence.

"Very well," he replied.

Claus gave a signal, and the play began. Jeanette stood to the side, keeping a careful eye on the princess. Even during the performance, Princess Meltia's eyes often strayed to Claus. One moment she'd be expressionlessly gazing at the actors, and the next she'd turn to look at Claus instead. A funny scene that usually resulted in a burst of laughter and applause played out, yet Meltia didn't so much as smile. She only kept glancing between the actors and Claus. During the final reunion scene, the very same thing kept happening.

She seems more interested in Lord Claus than in the play, Jeanette thought. However, because of Meltia's blank face, it was impossible to tell what she was really thinking.

Once the play ended, Jeanette sent the actors a vigorous round of applause. The princess's face still didn't so much as twitch, as unexpressive as if she were a doll. *Did she not enjoy it?*

As Jeanette grew anxious, Claus smiled and approached Meltia.

“Was the play not to your liking?” he inquired.

The princess’s large eyes slowly settled on Claus. She then gently shook her head in denial. The head maid stepped forward.

“Her Highness says that the play was interesting.”

“Then could you please applaud the actors?” Claus requested. “I believe that your commendation would mean the world to them, Your Highness.”

Meltia pondered for a while. Finally, she very slowly clapped her hands. The maids accompanying her all followed suit, albeit more energetically. Jeanette and the actors breathed a sigh of relief.

The head maid once more spoke up solemnly.

“The princess would like to have a meeting with you, Count Guivarch. Would you please follow me?”

“Very well.” Claus nodded, and the maid turned around and began walking away. Jeanette wasn’t sure what to do, but Claus grabbed her hand. “Come on. Let’s go together,” he whispered.

Jeanette replied in a low voice as well.

“Um, but...didn’t she only request *you*, Lord Claus?” Even she could sense that the princess wanted to speak to him alone.

But Claus winked mischievously.

“It’s fine. They’re not looking this way right now, so they won’t notice.”

“That’s so childish...”

“And if you can’t go with me, I’m going home.”

“Are you even allowed to do that?!”

“It’s fine. Besides, this isn’t a gentlemen’s club. Wouldn’t it be strange for anyone to forbid me from bringing my fiancée along?” Claus pointed out. “I’ll be meeting with a princess. I’m sure she’ll feel more at ease with another woman present rather than being alone with me.”

“I suppose...” Despite her doubts, Jeanette ended up following Claus as he pulled her by the hand.

Once they made it to the designated room, the maid turned back around. "This is the princess's tea room— Oh?" She finally noticed Jeanette.

Jeanette shrank back like a child caught doing something naughty. Claus, however, didn't hesitate in the slightest. He looked at the maid with a confident smile on his face.

"Well... So be it. Please go inside," the maid instructed.

Sh-She let it go! Jeanette thought with relief as she and Claus stepped into the room. *Wow! It's so bright in here!*

As soon as they entered, the first thing she noticed was that the room was full of sunlight. Most of the walls had been made from glass. The sunbeams pooled inside, and since most of the furniture was white, the room was almost as well lit as any greenhouse.

The princess was already inside. She was reclining on a white sofa, with a fluffy white cat next to her. The attire she wore seemed to be made from soft, flowing fabric. The pale arms that peeked out from underneath looked so thin it was as if they could snap at any moment.

"The princess felt dizzy during the play, so she will speak to you from this position," the head lady attendant explained.

Jeanette turned to look at Meltia. *I was distracted by her beauty earlier, but...now that I look again, she does seem a little pallid.*

The pale, fairylike princess slowly nodded at her maid's words. Her light blue eyes gazed at Claus before stealing a glance at Jeanette.

Claus stepped forward to greet the princess.

"I'd like to thank you once again for inviting me here. I am Count Claus Guivarch of House Guivarch. This is my fiancée, Jeanette Roussel."

"I-It's an honor to meet you!" Jeanette hurriedly curtsied.

Meltia narrowed her eyes, and her shapely lips slowly opened.

"Why did you bring *that* girl with you? She'll get in the way." In a voice as soft

as a bell, the fairylike princess spoke in a sharp, haughty way that didn't fit her appearance.

Huh?! For a second, Jeanette almost thought somebody else had spoken. She quickly turned to look at the head maid. Yet the woman's lips were tightly shut, so it couldn't have been her. Was that actually Princess Meltia...?!

Claus's smile stiffened too.

Meltia's next words only added salt to the wound.

"I wanted to speak to *Lord Claus*. What kind of impudent woman would ignore that and shamelessly follow you all the way here?"

There was no mistaking it. No matter how hard Jeanette looked, these hateful words were coming right from the adorable princess's mouth. She felt disoriented but quickly tried to apologize.

"I'm so sor—"

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness," Claus interrupted. "I made her come with me. If you're going to punish anyone, it should be me." He covered Jeanette with his arm, as if to shield her.

Meltia watched this display apathetically. After a moment of silence, she finally responded.

"Oh, whatever." She looked beautiful even as she was reclining, and a pleasant scent drifted from her all the way to her guests. Yet simultaneously, she was acting incredibly pompous. "You're definitely Claus Guivarch, right?"

"Yes," Claus affirmed, smiling. He didn't seem confused at all—he was being just as refined as usual.

I'm sure that on the inside, he's shocked about this as well! But he's showing no hint of it. Classic Lord Claus! Jeanette thought, impressed. She then hardened her expression. *I have to do the same!*

Meltia visually inspected Claus from head to toe, and smiled in satisfaction.

"You're as perfect as they say."

"As they say"? So she's heard about him.

“You’re a nobleman from House Guivarch and a person of excellent character, from what I’ve been told.”

“It’s an honor to receive your praise,” he responded, unperturbed.

Meltia’s smile widened.

“In that case, Lord Claus,” she said in a sweet, coaxing voice, “marry me.”

There was a long pause.

“Excuse me?” Claus asked. Even his smile faltered at this point.

Jeanette almost made a sound, but managed to suppress it by quickly clapping her hands over her mouth. *Marry?! The princess wants to...marry Lord Claus?! she screamed inwardly.*

Meltia reiterated her request, firmly pronouncing each syllable.

“Marry. Yes, *mar-ry*. I want you as my husband,” she said, her cheeks flushing. She was the picture of a young maiden, and her adorableness startled Jeanette all over again. The maids inside the room all let out sighs of admiration. However, there was one person unmoved by the princess’s cuteness: Claus.

“I must refuse,” he immediately responded with a forced smile.

Meltia was taken aback.

“Huh?!” Her eyes grew wide, and her mouth hung open. She probably hadn’t even considered the possibility of Claus rejecting her. Her previous composure flew out of the window and she hurriedly leaned forward. “Wh-Why?! *I’m* the one asking you! *Me!*” she said, beating her own chest.

Claus remained calm.

“As I’ve already told you, I am engaged. Unfortunately, I cannot marry you, Your Highness.”

But the princess didn’t back down.

“You’re engaged? So what?! You can just call it off—”

“I won’t,” Claus interjected, his voice loud and clear. “I will *not* cancel my engagement. I’m going to marry Jeanette.”

L-L-Lord Claus! Should you really be saying that to her?! Jeanette panicked.

Usually, interrupting a member of the royal family was seen as the height of disrespect. Yet Claus didn't look even slightly intimidated. He simply stood there smiling, while a powerful pressure silently emanated from him, seemingly saying, "I ab-so-lu-te-ly re-fuse." His well-defined features dramatically heightened the effect when he chose to look serious.

The princess shrank back, unable to find her words.

"Wh-Why...!" she mumbled, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish's.

The head maid stepped forward and threw the princess a lifeline.

"Do you even realize who you're talking to?!" she called out loudly. "This is the first princess of our country! How dare you refuse her request?!"

"I still refuse," Claus answered dismissively, his voice painfully nonchalant.

It was the maid's turn to shudder and gasp.

"But why? What about me do you find dissatisfying?" While Claus and the maid spoke, Meltia had regained some composure. Her clear blue eyes glared at Claus harshly. "By marrying me, you'd be bringing your family great prestige! You'd get the royal family's patronage and a dowry large enough to last a lifetime! Not to mention, I'm beautiful!"

"Princess Meltia," Claus said slowly. His voice was low yet resonant. Though he'd only said her name, his voice sounded strangely pleasant. It shocked Jeanette a little. The same seemed true for Meltia, as her glimmering eyes looked at Claus with a note of passion. "I'm not marrying Jeanette because I want prestige, fortune, or anything else. I'm marrying her because I love her."

"Wah!" Jeanette squeaked when Claus reached out for her. His long arm wrapped around her, and he placed a kiss on the top of her head. *H-He's doing this in front of the princess...!*

Meltia's cheeks turned red at the sight. She looked both angry and embarrassed.

"I-I can't believe you're flirting with another woman in front of me!!!"

"She *is* my fiancée, after all." Claus chuckled, as if asking, "Is there a

problem?” Even in this kind of situation, his unruffled demeanor and elegant smile were as beautiful as if he were a painting.

The blushing Meltia was at a loss for words. But soon enough, she clenched her fists and trembled in fury.

“What’s wrong with you?! I’m a princess! Not once has a wish of mine ever gone unfulfilled!”

“Well, that’s...” Claus began, then trailed off. Jeanette could almost hear him finishing that sentence with “because you were spoiled all your life.” She glanced at him.

“Gracious! Not only do you refuse me, but you’re even flirting with someone in front of me! I’m so annoyed! I hope you realize I’m going to tell papa about this!”

“Go right ahead,” Claus replied with a smile, enraging the princess further.

“You’re awful! I don’t even want to look at your face anymore! Get out of here!”

“I shall take you up on that.” As if he’d been waiting for this, Claus bowed once, then turned on his heel and walked away with Jeanette.

They could hear the maids pacifying the princess behind them as they exited the room.

“Your Highness, you might feel dizzy again if you get too agitated! Please calm down...!”

Jeanette quickly walked down the hallway with Claus.

“Um, are you sure it’s fine if we just leave?” she asked, worried.

“Yes. In fact, we’d best leave as soon as possible. Overstaying our welcome would be problematic right now.” Claus was smiling bitterly as he replied.

“I-Is that so...?” Jeanette wasn’t sure what he meant, but if he said it, then she believed him. After all, people had tried to woo him more times than she could count. *He might’ve gone through something similar in the past...*

This was the first time someone had tried to steal Claus right in front of

Jeanette, but she had heard that women always swarmed him whenever she wasn't around. However, he always swiftly rejected them.

"Oh..." Jeanette muttered, realizing something. "Do you think she only asked for the play as a pretext to speak with you?"

"If that's the case, then I suppose I wasn't imagining it when I thought she kept looking at me during the performance."

So Claus had noticed it too. The princess really must've used the play as an excuse to see him.

Claus sighed.

"I hope she'll give up..."

"Hmm? You clearly told her no, right? Would someone keep trying even after that?" Jeanette inquired. If she had confessed to someone and they responded to her the way Claus just had, she would've certainly called it quits. Then again, if the person she would've been interested in already had a fiancée, she would've never dreamed of confessing to them in the first place.

Claus groaned at her question.

"Who knows... She was bold enough to ask me to marry her right in front of you, my fiancée."

"Tr-True..." That brazen act alone showed just how far beyond Jeanette's common sense the princess was.

"I hope no trouble comes from this..." Claus muttered. Unbeknownst to him, his worries would soon turn to reality.

Chapter 2: Meltia's Marriage Proposal

"Another letter from the king," Claus muttered with annoyance, looking at the envelope in his hand. He and Jeanette were currently having breakfast.

After their visit to the palace, they had returned safely to House Guivarch. However, from the following day onward, Claus had begun receiving numerous letters from the royals. And each message summoned him to the palace.

Jeanette gulped.

"Looks like Princess Meltia won't give up on you after all..."

"Yeah." Claus sighed.

Half a month had passed since they'd met the princess. Since not even Claus could refuse a summons from the king, he had no choice but to travel to the palace day after day. Yet whenever he made it there, the person waiting for him wasn't the king, but Meltia herself. Claus refused her advances even more firmly than before, but the girl behaved as if that weren't the case. He was at a complete loss as to what to do.

I caught the eye of a troublesome woman... he thought, rubbing his temple.

He wasn't one to boast, but countless women had tried to court him over the years. Some had gone after him with pure, genuine feelings, whereas others threw money at him upon finding out about his family's debt. Yet others tried to use their seductive wiles to get their way. Indeed, he had interacted with many types of women. That said, all of them had been fellow nobles, so it had never escalated into a serious matter. Even when some of the higher-ranked aristocrats had tried to threaten him, their tactics had had no effect because House Guivarch had long since fallen into bankruptcy.

But Princess Meltia was a whole other matter. She was royalty.

For now, I'm just dealing with her. But if His Majesty himself actually steps onto the scene, things could get bad...

For nobles, royal orders were absolute. If a king were to say that white is black, a noble would have to agree. There were even examples in history of women being forced to divorce their husbands and become the king's lovers. Claus himself would be in no position to refuse if the king ordered him to marry the princess. One word from His Majesty, and Claus's engagement to Jeanette could be destroyed.

With such loathsome thoughts swirling in his mind, Claus opened the newest letter. As he read the contents, his brows furrowed.

"Oh no..."

"What's wrong?" Jeanette asked, sounding concerned. She leaned in closer to take a look.

Claus couldn't even find it in himself to smile at her.

"It's a royal order. From now on, I must serve as Princess Meltia's economics tutor."

"Huh?"

The letter did indeed state that Claus was to teach the princess economics for the sake of deepening her education. Obviously, however, that wasn't the true goal. It was just a pretext to get Claus into the palace.

"Good grief... Both the king and the princess are being difficult. I mean, I have my own job to do as a feudal lord," Claus said. In fact, because they kept summoning him, his productivity had slowed down recently. Thankfully, he had excellent vassals, so they were managing things for now. But if this continued, the common folk would be the ones suffering.

"As her tutor, will you have to visit the palace several times a week?" Jeanette inquired.

"The letter doesn't say. It's just demanding that I go to the palace."

"I see..." Jeanette's shoulders drooped. Claus's lips quirked up. He brought her closer and kissed her round, smooth forehead. "Eek?!"

Her little shrieks are adorable, he thought. No matter how many times he hugged or kissed her, Jeanette couldn't seem to get used to it. She brushed

through her messy bangs to hide her embarrassment.

“This isn’t over yet,” Claus said. “His Majesty must be aware that I have work to do. I’ll use that as an excuse to negotiate with him and reduce the number of times I have to visit the palace as much as possible.”

“But Lord Claus...” Jeanette’s shoulders sank again. “If you keep refusing, it could harm your reputation, and that of House Guivarch... I’m worried you might be treated coldly by everyone as a result,” she said dejectedly.

Claus chuckled at her. *Come to think of it, Jeanette was worried for me back then too.*

When Jeanette’s father had gone missing, Jeanette had been cast out of House Roussel by her stepmother Leila. Claus had been in a frenzy trying to find Jeanette, until she appeared at his residence out of the blue and said, *“Please cancel our engagement!”*

Those words had nearly killed Claus then and there. Thankfully, once he heard her reasons, he realized that she didn’t hate him, nor had she fallen in love with someone else. Rather, she had been worried about him. He had been so relieved to hear that. The memory made him smile.

“Are you saying that if my family falls again, you wouldn’t want to marry me?”

“Of course not! That’s not it at all! Whatever happens, I’ll stick with you, Lord Claus!” Jeanette insisted, wide-eyed.

“I was just teasing you. I knew you’d say that,” he told her, kissing her on the lips this time.

Jeanette immediately stiffened up, her cheeks flushing. Even after they parted, she remained as stiff as a board, and her face looked close to boiling.

“Besides, Jeanette. Did you forget?” Claus asked her.

“F-Forget...? Forget what?”

“What I said before. That I’m not marrying you for the sake of my family, and if it meant I could be with you, I’d throw my rank away.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. She’d clearly just remembered.

“So if the price of marrying you is simply being treated coldly by others, I see it as a blessing,” he said sincerely.

“Lord Claus...!” Jeannette called out, her eyes glistening.

Claus gently stroked her cheek.

“It’ll be fine, Jeanette. There are plenty of paths we could take. For now, I’ll visit the palace and figure out what they’re thinking.”

Jeanette clenched her fists.

“All right. Please take care and have a safe trip!”

“Thanks. I’m off.”

And with that, Claus left the Guivarch residence.

“So you’re Count Guivarch? I’ve heard about you. Despite your youth, they say you’re a capable man,” remarked King Eric II, the current monarch of the country.

Much to Claus’s surprise, it was the king himself who had come to see him this time instead of the princess. Up until now, Meltia had always been the one waiting for him, so at this unexpected development, Claus’s expression stiffened.

“Sorry to keep summoning you here,” Eric went on. “I’m sure you must’ve noticed, but my daughter Meltia has become very fond of you.”

“I’m honored to hear that,” Claus responded. For now, he decided to remain calm and polite, and carefully observed the king’s next words.

“I know you already have a fiancée. But this is the first time Meltia’s taken such an interest in anyone—especially a man. As her father, I want to make all of her wishes come true.”

Claus listened in silence. He’d done a bit of research and had found out that Meltia was a late and long-awaited daughter for the king and queen. On top of that, because of the princess’s poor health, she had mostly been confined to her room from a young age. That was why her parents pampered her so much.

This didn't change even once she'd become a teenager.

"If possible, I'd prefer not to force you to break up with your fiancée...but the thought of seeing my daughter cry over a broken heart pains me. That's why I want you to stay at the palace as her tutor and get to know her better. She's a beautiful, lovely girl. Perhaps you'll come to see her merits too."

It seemed that the king wasn't planning to take extreme measures, but he did want to pair Claus up with Meltia. *What an arrogant way of thinking. Just like a certain someone I know... I wonder if all royals are like this?* Claus thought, recalling a certain dark-skinned friend of his. His lips hardened into a line. *Even if I did see the princess's "merits," there's no way that'd make me break up with Jeanette.* But of course, he didn't say that out loud. *Outright rejecting a royal order wouldn't be prudent. I have to find common ground.*

If Claus rejected both the king's order and the princess's proposal, he risked not only losing his peerage, but having Matheson Trading and Roussel Corporation seized. If push came to shove, he and Jeanette had the knowledge and tenacity to make a living anywhere, but he didn't want to force Jeanette to leave her homeland because of him.

"Very well. I shall undertake the task of being Her Highness's tutor."

"Oh! Excellent!"

"However, I also have my own job as a feudal lord," Claus went on, tentatively pushing back against the royal demands. "If I have to come here frequently, it might hamper my work."

"Ah, don't worry about that!" Eric replied dismissively. "Two days a week will do it."

Two days? That should be manageable, Claus thought. But the true bad news came with the king's next words.

"In return, I want you to live in the palace for the time being."

Claus paused.

"Excuse me...?" he asked, wondering if he'd misheard. *He wants me to live here?*

The cheerful Eric prattled on.

“You needn’t worry. I’ve already arranged to have all the tools and people you’ll need to be moved into the palace!”

At this, even Claus couldn’t retain his composure.

“*What?! Your Majesty, I’m not—*”

But right then, someone else interjected.

“Lord Claus! I’m so happy you agreed!”

Princess Meltia entered the room, her voice as light as a bell.

“Living under the same roof as you is like a dream come true! I look forward to your tutoring!” she said, entwining her pale, slender arm around Claus’s. Her sheer beauty paired with those rosy cheeks would’ve made anyone but Claus let out an involuntary sigh.

Instead, Claus’s expression soured as if he’d just bitten into a nasty bug.

“Huh?! Lord Claus can’t return to the mansion?!” Jeanette screamed. It had been a few days since Claus had gone to the castle, and this morning a letter had arrived from him, which she had just read.

“Milady, what’s going on?” Sara asked, peeking into the room. She had just been dealing with a visitor when she heard Jeanette’s screech.

“Well...” Jeanette sounded clearly troubled. “Lord Claus says that he’s trapped in the royal palace...”

“Trapped?! What do you mean?!” Sara exclaimed, just as startled.

Jeanette folded the letter back up, then went to sit on the living room sofa to calm herself down.

“I was worried when he didn’t return for a while, but I never would’ve thought it was because of something like this...!”

Three days had already passed since Claus left to visit the castle. On the first day, Jeanette had still felt calm. But then came the second day, and then another, and Claus still wasn’t back. Finding this suspicious, Jeanette had

decided to visit the palace herself. Right as she was making her preparations, Claus's letter had arrived.

"Milady, please tell me what's happening!" Sara requested, approaching Jeanette.

In spite of her bewilderment, Jeanette began explaining the letter's contents.

"Lord Claus has been ordered to live in the palace for a while. He must act as the princess's tutor and do his work as a lord from the palace itself."

"Is that why those strange servants have been moving Lord Claus's things?!" Sara asked, observing said servants. They wore the royal crest and had arrived in droves early this morning. After they entered the House Guivarch residence, they began going through and packing Claus's belongings.

"I guess so..." Jeanette muttered, watching them out of the corner of her eye.

Not content with his possessions, the servants were also taking Claus's personnel away. It almost looked as if everything that belonged to Claus had now fallen into the king's hands.

Sara was dumbfounded and hesitated before speaking.

"Um, milady... Just for how long will Lord Claus have to live in the castle?"

"I... I don't know," Jeanette confessed. Claus had mentioned in the letter that he had no idea when he'd be allowed to return.

"I-Is this even allowed...?!"

Sara's confusion was understandable. Jeanette was just as perplexed—in fact, even more so.

"What's going to happen now, milady?"

"For now, let's wait it out. It's only been three days," Jeanette replied. "His work as a tutor has only just started. Maybe once everything settles, they'll let him leave," she added, clenching her fists.

Sara started to say something, but swallowed her words.

"So, it's been a month, and our *princess* is still under house arrest?" Kyuriakris

asked teasingly. He'd come to visit the Guivarch residence and was currently seated on the sofa.

Jeanette was sitting next to him mumbling and groaning; she couldn't find the words for a proper reply.

"Ugh..."

Indeed, a month had passed since Claus had gone to the royal palace. He sent Jeanette a letter once every three days, but he still had no prospect of returning home. He'd tried pleading with the king and princess, to no effect.

"Good grief! It's usually the hero's job to go save the kidnapped damsel, but to think it's *Claus* who got himself kidnapped... What a damned princess!" Kyuriakris chortled.

"Ughhh..." Jeanette's shoulders drooped dispiritedly. "It's absurd to try and win someone's heart by keeping them trapped against their will. I've been waiting for Her Highness and His Majesty to realize as much, but..."

Kyuriakris scoffed.

"You're being too soft. Don't you know the saying, 'All is fair in love and war'?"

"Ngh..."

"They took his belongings and even his servants. It's plain as day. I'm the same: I take what I want by force. That goes for the throne and for women. Royalty especially have a tendency to be like that, you know?"

Kyuriakris's blunt words pierced right through Jeanette's heart.

"Nnngh..."

H-He's right. I misjudged the situation...! This is royalty we're dealing with!

"I had a feeling this is how things would go ever since I first heard of Claus's detention," the prince went on. "Still, it's been a month now, huh? Before you know it, a whole year could pass like this." He smirked at her.

That statement was a direct hit.

"Waaah!" she moaned.

Kyuriakris stood up, only to sit right next to her and bring his face closer to hers.

“Anyway, Jeanette. You should give up on someone pathetic enough to let himself get kidnapped like this. Join me instead. If you don’t want to be confined to a harem, I’ll allow you and you alone to travel freely through the palace.”

“Huh?” Jeanette’s eyes widened at this sudden change of topic. *Why is he bringing this up now?!*

“Say yes, Jeanette. I don’t want to force you into anything if I can help it. But as I said earlier, being royalty means taking things for yourself. That’s especially true for the imperial family in Pakira. If you don’t agree, I’ll just have to drag you home with me.”

“Whaaat?!”

Is it my turn to be stolen?! Jeanette wondered, hurriedly leaning away from Kyuriakris. Before long, she found herself squeezing into the corner of the sofa.

“Ummm! I’d prefer to talk about this some other time!”

“No.” Kyuriakris’s black eyes glinted, like a carnivore who had spotted his prey. His sharp, beautiful features drew nearer to Jeanette, who stiffened.

Oh no, this is bad! All I’ve been able to think about is Lord Claus, so I didn’t notice, but aren’t I completely alone with Lord Kyuriakris right now?!

Yet right as a droplet of sweat appeared on Jeanette’s temple...

“MILADYYYY!!!”

Bang!

...the door flew open and Sara burst into the room. She was wielding a broom in her hands, holding it like a sword.

“Lord Kyuriakris! I won’t allow you to lay a hand on her!” the maid proclaimed, glaring harshly at the prince.

He smiled in amusement.

“Ah. You got here quicker than I expected. I even ordered my servants to hold

you back and all...”

“Huh?!” Jeanette squeaked in shock. *I thought it was strange that I hadn’t seen Sara for a while! Was that because of him?!*

“Hah!” Sara shouted triumphantly. “I beat all those frail men with my trusty broom!”

What?! Sara, you’re so strong! Jeanette thought with amazement.

The maid kept going.

“I actually received a warning about this from Lord Claus! He said he was sure that Lord Kyuriakris would take advantage of this opportunity to try and abduct milady, and that he wants me to protect her! And that’s exactly what I’m going to do!”

“Oh?” Kyuriakris lifted an eyebrow. “Damn you, Claus. You’re thorough as always... However.” He smiled impishly. Slowly, he rested his chin in his hand in a most high-handed and dignified manner. “You seem to have forgotten that I am the Pakiran Empire’s first prince. Do you think that you, a mere maid, can speak to me like that?” he asked, emanating the overwhelming aura of a ruler.

Both women shuddered at the change in the air, which had suddenly grown cold and intense.

Eek!!! So Lord Kyuriakris can be this scary?! Jeanette had almost forgotten, but when the prince wanted to, he could be extremely intimidating. His sharp eyes bored into them, refusing to be denied. Sara grew pale like a cornered mouse.

Yet even so, she didn’t give in.

“L-Lord Claus told me about this too! He said, ‘Kyuri will probably try to frighten you into backing down by using his status. But don’t be intimidated. For the most part, he’s a good guy, so despite the things he says, he won’t actually do anything violent. That much I can guarantee!’” Sara’s grip tightened around the broom as she continued to scowl at the prince.

Kyuriakris looked down at her for a moment...only to burst into loud laughter.

“Pfft... Ha ha ha! Damn it, Claus! You told her *that* much?” he exclaimed,

pressing his hand to his forehead. “And he even said I’m a ‘good guy,’ huh? That means I can’t tease you anymore, or I’d lose my honor... Maid—your name was Sara, wasn’t it? I concede this victory to you and Claus. I’ll reflect on my actions and rein it in from now on.”

Jeanette let out a relieved breath. *I’m saved!* If Sara hadn’t come, Jeanette might’ve actually been devoured by Kyuriakris.

“Thank you, Sara!”

The maid pounded her chest.

“Leave it to me, milady! In Lord Claus’s absence, I shall protect you!”

“So reliable! That’s my Sara!” Jeanette said, rushing over to embrace the other woman.

“Of course. You’re my treasure too, milady,” the maid replied, hugging Jeanette back tightly.

Kyuriakris hummed as he observed them.

“Seeing two women so intimate with each other isn’t half bad. Sara, how about you come too and become a maid at the harem?”

Sara’s eyes glinted once more.

“‘Too’? Milady isn’t going anywhere!”

In face of her menacing look, Kyuriakris cackled again.

“All right, let’s leave that aside. But what are you going to do about Claus?” he asked Jeanette, crossing his arms. “At this rate, it sounds like he won’t be allowed to leave until he accepts Princess Meltia’s marriage proposal. Meaning he’d have to break up with you.”

She nodded.

“I suppose both Her Highness and His Majesty are truly after him...”

“That’s right. They wouldn’t keep him for this long otherwise.”

Jeanette bit her lip. Ever since she’d found out about Meltia wanting to marry Claus, Jeanette had simply watched on from afar, feeling lost. But with the way things were, she couldn’t take it easy anymore.

“So? Do you plan to just hand him over?” Kyuriakris questioned teasingly.

“Of course not,” Jeanette said, looking up. “A person’s heart belongs only to themselves. I won’t allow anyone to force Lord Claus into anything—not even royalty!” she announced vigorously.

Kyuriakris’s eyes grew wide in wonder.

“Oh? Are you going to pick a fight with the royals?”

She hesitated for a moment, but quickly straightened up.

“I don’t like putting it that way...but basically, yes!” A flame lit up in her eyes as she spoke. “Someone’s trying to steal Lord Claus. This must be a reward—I mean, a trial from God himself!”

“Wh— Ha ha ha!” The prince burst into laughter. “I heard about this from Claus, but are you seriously going to turn this into a reward?!”

“N-No, it’s j-just a figure of speech...!”

It’d be rude to Lord Claus to treat this as a reward! That was a slip of the tongue!

While Jeanette frantically tried to explain herself, Sara’s expression grew exasperated.

“It’s too late, milady. You let your true feelings slip out.”

“Ugh...” Jeanette hung her head, having no escape.

Kyuriakris chuckled.

“I think it’s a good thing. Rather than weeping over the situation like some tragic heroine, tackling it head-on is a lot more your style. I like strong-willed women like you.”

Unexpectedly, Sara nodded along to his words.

“I feel the same way. Of course, you’re adorable when you’re all dejected, milady, but I like you best when you’re your cheerful self.”

“Oh? So our feelings align. How rare,” the prince remarked.

“On that alone, we are kindred spirits,” the maid replied, and they both

smirked at each other. “Anyway, milady! What kind of strategy do you have in mind?”

Jeanette nodded.

“Let’s start with the basics: information gathering.”

“‘If you know the enemy and know yourself, you needn’t fear the result of a hundred battles,’ huh?” Kyuriakris asked.

“Yes!” She nodded again.

When Sara tilted her head in confusion, the prince began explaining.

“It’s from a book on the art of war from the Far East. It means that as long as you have a good grasp of your enemy’s capabilities and present situation, and understand your own position as well, you can keep winning no matter how many battles you fight.”

“I see!” Sara replied.

Jeanette continued laying out her plan.

“To be honest, I have no clue how to get Lord Claus back from the royals. But that doesn’t mean I’ll give up! I’ll start looking, and I might find an opening in something seemingly trivial.”

Sara nodded energetically.

“To begin with, we’re going to review all business records we can get our hands on and scour the capital’s newspaper!” Jeanette decided.

“Business records and newspapers?” Sara echoed. “What use is that going to be?”

“It’ll get us information about Her Highness Princess Meltia!” Jeanette replied, and then began explaining.

The first step was to thoroughly get to know the key figure: Meltia. They would look at lists of businesses’ clients, hoping to find Meltia’s name or those of other people with close ties to the royals. They’d also closely examine the capital’s newspaper for any clues about the family.

“Sara, could you please check the archives and bring me all the newspapers

from the past sixteen years, since the princess's birth?"

"Of course!" With renewed vigor, Sara left to go to the archives.

"Princess Meltia, huh...? I'll question my retainers and see if I can get any information on her as well," Kyuriakris said as he got to his feet. "After all, Claus is more or less my friend."

"Thank you so much!" Jeanette said.

But moments before he vacated the room, the prince suddenly stopped and turned to face her.

"By the way, let's continue our previous conversation once Claus is back."

"S-So you're still interested in that..." Jeanette murmured, scrunching up her face.

Kyuriakris laughed loudly and then departed the Guivarch estate.

Jeanette was looking through client registries and making notes on any person who caught her interest. She wasn't just looking for information on the princess, but also the king, queen, and the two princes. Sara was next to her, doing the same.

"Milady! There really isn't much information about the princess!" Sara complained when Jeanette finished looking through the registries and they both began reading the newspapers.

"True..." Jeanette responded, nodding.

Indeed, every issue of the newspaper only mentioned the king, queen, and their sons. Sporadically, a line or two did mention the princess. But it was only comments about her from the royal family, such as her parents stating, "Meltia enjoyed that," or her brothers saying, "We'll bring her a souvenir."

"That's just proof of the fact she's never stepped onto center stage," Jeanette went on. "The newspaper romanticizes her as a sickly and fragile princess, but there's nothing in their coverage about her actual personality."

Jeanette herself had never dreamed of being able to meet Meltia face-to-

face. And she never would've imagined that such a pretty, fairylike girl could've spewed such bitter, violent words.

Surely it couldn't be that she's purposely hiding her true character...right?

For most people—with the exception of a small group who specifically *wanted* to be verbally abused by a beautiful woman—a princess having a sharp tongue wouldn't be seen as a positive. If anything, finding out the truth would be like having their fantasies of a poor sickly maiden smashed with a hammer.

Jeanette shook her head. *No, I must be overthinking it. Anyway...* With a groan, she picked up one of the newspapers again.

"I was at least hoping they'd mention her hobbies or likes and dislikes, but there really isn't much about her."

Despite the huge volume of newspapers, they hardly mentioned the princess. Jeanette felt like she was searching for a speck of gold dust in the sand.

"Milady, you can leave this to us!" Sara said, pounding on her chest. "We can deal with the newspapers by throwing a bunch of people at them until someone finds something! You should focus on what only *you* can do."

"Well... All right! Thank you, Sara!" Jeanette replied with a nod. "In that case, I'll write a letter to Lady Christine!"

Among Jeanette's personal connections, Duchess Christine Pablo was certainly the one closest to the royal family. The woman herself was a former princess and the sister of the current king. In other words, she was Meltia's aunt.

Lady Christine has never mentioned Her Highness...but even so, they are related by blood. She might know something.

Jeanette began writing the letter, expectations swelling inside her chest.

Claus was in the room he'd been allocated within the palace. While he was busy filling out paperwork, Princess Meltia clung to his back.

"Secluding yourself in your room to work again, Lord Claus?" she asked him.

Claus forced himself to smile when he felt something soft rub against his back.

“If you’re aware that I’m working, Your Highness, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t interrupt me.”

“But I finished my homework and I’m bored now!”

“You’re done already?” Claus inquired, frowning. “Then can you explain in your own words what the word ‘mercantilism’ means?”

“Easily!” Meltia claimed with a confident laugh. She moved away from Claus and began her explanation. “In short, it means acquiring foreign currency via exports and putting a high tax on imported goods to create a favorable balance of trade, right?”

“And the point of that is?”

“Well, you need money to maintain a country!”

“In that case, what are the recent criticisms of mercantilism?”

At that, Meltia finally began to lose her air of certainty.

“Well...”

“If you don’t know, then that’s your new homework,” Claus told her. “That said, you’re studying more diligently than I expected,” he added, sounding mildly impressed.

Honestly, I thought me being her tutor was just an excuse to get me to stay here...

Yet in contrast to his initial assumptions, Meltia was actually earnest about her studies.

Realizing that he’d praised her, the princess giggled proudly.

“Right? I’ve always loved reading books.”

“That’s good. Books are full of your predecessors’ wisdom and hopes. I believe that the more you read, the wiser you will become.”

“Hee hee!” Meltia grinned, pleased by his words. “Do you see me in a new light now, Lord Claus? I don’t mind you falling for me.”

“I do see you in a better light, but I won’t come to love you. I have Jeanette,” he replied with a smile, causing the princess’s face to stiffen.

“Humph! I just don’t get you. How can you say another woman’s name in front of a peerless beauty like myself? It’s so insensitive!”

“I’m doing it intentionally,” Claus said nonchalantly. “You seem to constantly forget I have a beloved, Your Highness, so I’m reminding you.”

“You’re awful!” Meltia cried, waving her hands in the air. “Just so you know, I’m serious about you! I’m only this desperate because I’m truly in love with you!”

“And that’s why I must respond seriously as well, since I already love someone else.”

“That’s not what I mean!” Meltia snapped, angered by his relentless deflections. “Can’t you just be a little nicer to me? This is my first time being in love, you know?”

If I do that, you’ll misunderstand my actions, Claus thought. He wasn’t going to say this out loud, but he’d seen plenty of women just like the princess. Pushing her away from the start was something he did both to protect himself and to be kind to her. *The higher someone builds up their expectations, the more it’ll hurt when things fall apart.*

As he thought that, tears began suddenly overflowing from Meltia’s big eyes. Claus was startled. *A woman’s tears are dangerous... Even though I haven’t done anything wrong, I still feel guilty.*

While he deliberated on what to do, the princess spoke up.

“At least stop referring to me so formally. Instead of ‘Your Highness,’ just call me Tia. Surely you can do that much?” she implored tearfully.

Even someone like Claus couldn’t refuse her like this. He sighed, nodding reluctantly.

“Very well, Lady Tia.”

“Tee hee! I’m so glad, Lord Claus!” Meltia said with a large grin. It was as if she hadn’t just been crying mere seconds ago. No, in fact, those must’ve been

crocodile tears.

Once Claus realized that, he face-palmed. *She got me...*

“See you later, Lord Claus!”

In contrast to the groaning Claus, Meltia left the room with a skip in her step.

Alone at last, Claus exhaled deeply. *It’s already been a month since I’ve moved here... But in this room, I get no privacy.*

The spacious room had been arranged exclusively for his use, and it was decorated extravagantly. All the tools, documents, and even people he’d need to do his job were brought into the palace. At a glance, nobody would’ve thought he was uncomfortable here. But Meltia entered the room whenever she felt like it, so Claus couldn’t truly relax. The room did have a lock, but the princess carried a spare key, so there was no point.

I’m so tired...

Claus listlessly rested his elbows on the desk and opened the only drawer which was locked with a key. This was where he kept Jeanette’s letters. He didn’t want Meltia seeing them, so he kept the drawer key in his chest pocket.

He picked up the newest envelope and opened the seal. Jeanette’s lively handwriting greeted him. Her script reflected her personality: vigorous, yet somewhat round and adorable. Claus fondly brushed the letters with his fingers.

Ahh... I want to see her again so badly. It’s already been a month. I feel like I’m going crazy.

It felt like it had been a very long time since he’d last been in the Guivarch residence. He recalled how Jeanette would sit down to eat breakfast in the mornings with wild bed head, which Sara would furiously comb through while the girl ate. And once it was time for work, Jeanette would cheerfully leap outside...

Claus chuckled at the memories. She was unlike any other noblewoman, but that was all part of her unique radiance.

If I had known this would happen, I would’ve dragged her to my room when

she was defenselessly walking around in just her nightgown...

Just how many times did Claus have to reason with himself and suppress his urges? And he only managed it because he told himself that once they found Baron Roussel, Claus and Jeanette would marry right after.

I want to see her, to touch her. I want to run my fingers through her glossy hair, poke her chubby cheeks, and hold her tiny body tightly in my arms...

Reflexively, Claus let out a long sigh. It had been a long time since he'd had to wait this long to see Jeanette.

Up until this mess, she'd been with me almost all the time, so I almost forgot that it's so unfulfilling to be apart from her.

His hunger for her was growing day by day.

The king and princess seem to think they can change my mind by keeping me away from Jeanette, but it's the opposite. The more I stay away from her, the more I yearn for her.

Smiling to himself, Claus put the letter back into the locked drawer.

A few days had passed since Jeanette had decided to recapture Claus. She was presently visiting Christine at Duke Pablo's townhouse. The duchess was clad in a comfortable dress, sitting on a sofa with a cup of tea in hand. A sweet, pleasant aroma wafted from it.

"Welcome, Jeanette. You said you have an urgent matter to discuss—what's going on?"

Jeanette furrowed her brows, gazing at Christine with a serious expression.

"It's a bit of a long story, but... First, have you been in contact with your niece, Princess Meltia, lately?"

"Meltia?" Christine echoed with surprise. As she searched her memories, her eyes drifted toward the ceiling. "Hmm. When did I last see her? She doesn't usually attend family gatherings. I did invite her to visit me here, but she refused." Christine cast Jeanette an intrigued look. "Why are you asking about Tia?"

“Well, it turns out that Her Highness has fallen for Lord Claus and wants to marry him,” Jeanette explained.

“What?!” Christine raised her voice uncharacteristically. In her shock, she nearly spilled her tea, so she quickly set the cup down on its saucer.

“Lord Claus refused her, but even His Majesty seems on board with the idea...” Jeanette continued. “The other day, Lord Claus was summoned to the palace on royal orders, and hasn’t been allowed to come home.”

“*Whaaat?!* ” The duchess covered her mouth with her hands. “H-Hold on a minute. This is all too much to keep up with. How does Tia even know about Lord Claus? That girl barely even leaves her bedroom, to say nothing of attending high society events.”

“I think she learned about him thanks to the play we did around town to promote the diamond rings.”

Christine nodded in understanding.

“Ah, I see... In that case, Meltia must’ve found out about his reputation from her maids,” she reasoned, frowning. “Still, the audacity of that girl, to propose to a man who’s already engaged... She has been selfish ever since she was a little girl. I see she hasn’t matured at all.”

Those words meant that Christine must’ve known Meltia as a child. Jeanette leaned forward.

“Lady Christine, please tell me about Her Highness. I can’t find any information on what kind of person she is. I need to know more about her in order to take back Lord Claus!”

Christine looked a bit startled.

“I don’t mind, but... I’m surprised to see you getting this desperate over him.”

“Huh?” Jeanette’s eyes widened.

The duchess giggled.

“I knew you were passionate about business, but you always seemed a bit distant and frivolous when it came to matters of love.”

“F-Frivolous?” Jeanette repeated, her shoulders sinking.

Yet Christine’s words struck a chord with her. She still had no idea how to respond to romantic advances, and it had taken her years to notice Claus’s affection for her. The duchess’s assertion was correct.

The woman smiled as she regarded Jeanette.

“Hee hee! It’s been fun to watch Lord Claus chase after you one-sidedly, but this is quite a lovely development too. It’s making me remember my own youth. It was so bittersweet yet pleasurable...”

“Pl-Pleasurable?” Jeanette asked, sweating buckets.

“Oops, I’d better stop,” Christine said, pressing her hand to her mouth. “Still, even though I love my husband very much, we’ve been together for so long that there’s no longer that innocent naivety between us, I suppose. One inevitably grows beyond these things, but that’s why it’s so much fun hearing about the young love of others! Tee hee!”

“W-Well, as long as you’re enjoying yourself...”

“Ah, sorry. I got off topic. So, what do you want to know about Tia?”

“Everything!” Jeanette responded without missing a beat. “I’d like to know about her upbringing, her personality, and her preferences. Every little detail counts! It might help me to find a way to rescue Lord Claus!”

“My, my! It’s like Lord Claus is a captive princess. But even if you don’t do anything, isn’t it possible that he’d find a way to free himself?”

Jeanette frowned.

“It *is* possible, and I’m sure he’s doing what he can to change Her Highness’s mind. However...”

“Yes?”

“I can’t just sit around and wait!” Jeanette replied vigorously, clenching her fists.

Christine giggled again, as if she’d expected that response.

“Indeed. That’s the Jeanette I know. You’re the kind of girl who takes her

chances. That's why I like you so much."

"Th-Thank you!" Jeanette spluttered, embarrassed by the sudden praise.

Christine once more picked up her teacup.

"That said, I don't really know what Tia's like anymore. She's always had a weak constitution and was prone to getting fevers. I recall her parents and brothers fretting about her."

"They say she's still sickly. Does she have a specific illness?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure... I've never heard any details about her diagnosis," Christine said.

"I see..." Jeanette wrote down the information in the notebook she'd brought with her.

"When she was little, they even said they weren't sure how long she'd live. My brother and sister-in-law were so disheartened by that. After all, this was their long-awaited daughter."

They weren't sure how long she'd live? It must be a serious disease! Jeanette thought. She didn't seem that unwell when I met her...but illnesses aren't always visible.

Meltia had looked frightfully delicate and a little pallid, but her voice had been full of vitality and vigor, and she'd spoken very clearly. If someone were to just hear her speak, they would never have guessed that she was dangerously ill.

"So her condition is still affecting her to this day, right?" Jeanette prompted.

"Hmm..." Christine paused thoughtfully. "Eric once mentioned that she's a bit better nowadays. They don't need to worry about her passing away anymore. Now that I think about it, that happened right around the time the court physician had been replaced."

The physician changed? Does that mean Her Highness's diagnosis could've changed too? This is fascinating!

Jeanette leaned in.

“What’s the name of that physician? Where can I find him?”

“I’m not sure. This happened a while after I married and moved out of the palace, so I don’t know the details,” Christine replied. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more use to you.”

“Not at all! This has been a huge help!” Jeanette reassured the woman, scribbling in her notebook.

This was my blind spot! I never bothered to learn who the court physician was, but he’s definitely someone who’d meet Her Highness often! How can I get closer to him?

While Jeanette was brainstorming, Christine spoke up again.

“But Jeanette, even if you learn more about Tia, what exactly are you planning on doing? She’s the princess, and the king and queen love her dearly. If you make an enemy of Tia, you’ll have to face them too. This is different from a normal love rival.”

“I’m aware that normal methods won’t work. After all, I’m up against royalty,” Jeanette replied. On top of that, Meltia was the kind of person to keep Claus under house arrest despite his numerous refusals to be with her.

“Your opponents are the most powerful people in the country, so resorting to violence is ill-advised... But what about financial prowess?” Christine suggested.

To put it more bluntly, she was referring to bribery. Jeanette’s father, Baron Roussel, had engaged in this kind of dealmaking in order to get Claus to become her fiancé. In exchange for the baron shouldering House Guivarch’s debt, their son got engaged to his daughter. This was nothing unusual in noble circles. Some people married for the sake of acquiring a dowry, and huge sums of money could also be used to annul engagements or marriages.

After a moment of pondering, Christine remembered something.

“You own a diamond mine, don’t you? Could you present it to the king, perchance? Even my brother wouldn’t neglect such an opportunity.”

“I did consider that, but it’d be quite difficult...”

“Why’s that?”

“The emperor of Voltaire granted that mine to my father as a sign of his friendship,” Jeanette explained. “Even if father was allowed to give the mine to me—and that’s still unclear—if I then transferred it to the king, that might fracture the relationship between my father and the emperor.”

In fact, Baron Roussel was currently in the middle of visiting Voltaire. Or rather, he’d been forcefully summoned there because the emperor had taken a liking to him.

“I see...” Christine groaned. “Indeed, passing on something you received from a person as a show of goodwill can be quite problematic.”

Jeanette nodded.

“I also already asked His Majesty if he’d be interested in obtaining the rights to the most popular products sold by Matheson Trading and Roussel Corporation, but he refused.”

“Really?”

“He wrote back saying that if the princess discovered he gave up on Lord Claus because of money, she’d lose trust in him.”

“Did he, now? Gracious, that brother of mine! He really spoils Tia...” Christine placed her hand on her chin and pondered for a while. “What if you get through to him by performing some meritorious service? Just like my husband once won my hand in marriage, you could ask for Lord Claus to be your prize.”

In the past, Duke Pablo had gone to the Pakiran Empire himself to speak to their emperor, who was engaged to Christine (she was a princess at the time). A southern tribe had been troubling the emperor for many years, so the duke suppressed them. His reward was the right to marry Christine.

“A meritorious service... You mean something to resolve the king and queen’s—or the princess’s—troubles?” Jeanette inquired.

“Basically, yes.”

The two women racked their brains. Five minutes passed, and then ten, and still no good ideas dawned on them. Christine let out a deep sigh, as though she’d used up all her strength.

“It’s no use. I know I suggested it, but I can’t think of anything. I have no idea what kind of things are troubling Eric or Tia.”

“Our country is very peaceful, isn’t it? If I had to say, I suppose Her Highness’s matrimony is in itself a problem.”

“Then we’re back where we started!” Christine groaned with frustration. “Maybe there’s no other option than trying to change Tia’s mind? What if you present her with an even more wonderful man than Lord Claus and see if she has a change of heart?”

Jeanette bit her lip.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know any man more wonderful than Lord Claus!”

“Well... I’m sure if he heard that, he’d be over the moon,” the duchess remarked with a chuckle.

“Really?” Jeanette asked with surprise.

“It’s too bad he’s not here,” Christine said, adding that she’d be sure to inform him about this once he was free. “Then what about that friend of Lord Claus’s? The one from Pakira.”

“You mean Lord Kyuriakris?”

Jeanette had actually revealed his true identity to the duke and duchess, since she was close with them. They were shocked at first, but welcomed him warmly nonetheless.

“Indeed. His looks and upbringing are perfect, no? After all, he’s Pakira’s first prince. He and Tia are almost equals in terms of status.”

“You have a point, but...” Jeanette trailed off.

“You’re not too keen on it?” Christine inquired, gazing at her.

“Well... No,” Jeanette admitted hesitantly. “I wouldn’t mind introducing them to each other under normal circumstances, but doing it in order to get Lord Claus back... It’s almost like Her Highness is being offered a replacement. I feel like it’s rude to them both—” she cut herself off once she realized what she’d said. “Ah, I’m so sorry! You had a great idea, Lady Christine, and here I am nitpicking!”

“It’s fine, Jeanette,” Christine said with a kind smile. “If anything, I apologize for saying something so insensitive. You’re right—people’s hearts aren’t chess pieces for us to play with. I’ll reflect on my words. I almost made the same mistake as my brother just now.” After a pause, the duchess continued. “And I just realized that Lord Kyuriakris isn’t a good option anyway.”

“He’s not?”

“No. After all, he’s a prince of Pakira. That means that even if Tia fell for him and decided to marry him, she’d have to become a part of his harem. Her parents would never permit that. They’ll want to keep her close by.”

“From that perspective, Lord Claus is a very convenient choice for them,” Jeanette noted. Claus was a noble from this country, so if Meltia married him, she’d get to stay here.

“Which means that they want *you* to change your mind about Lord Claus just as much,” Christine pointed out.

“Nnngh...” No matter how much Jeanette deliberated, she couldn’t think of any viable solutions. After much agonizing, she finally spoke up. “If I can’t offer her a *person*, how about an *object*?”

“An object?”

“Yes. If I give Her Highness an object even more enrapturing than romance, perhaps she’ll forget all about Lord Claus?”

“That’d be very difficult, I’m afraid,” the duchess said plainly, her brows furrowed. “She’s a spoiled princess. If there’s something she wants to eat, they’ll arrange it for her regardless of price. If there’s something she wants to own, they’ll go and get it for her even if they have to cross the ocean. Poets, dancers, performers—all of them could be summoned to the palace at the drop of a hat if she said the word.”

“True...”

After all, Jeanette and the theater troupe had visited the palace a while ago for that very reason.

“In that case, what if I proposed something that Her Highness *cannot* do?”

“Something Tia cannot do?”

“Yes! For example...”

When Christine heard Jeanette’s proposal, she fell into deep thought.

“Ew! I told you I hate that medicine! It tastes horrible!” the princess’s angry shout resounded.

Claus had just arrived on the scene, wide-eyed. A man in his fifties was standing in front of Meltia with a troubled look on his face. Meanwhile, the girl was pointedly looking the other way.

“Your Highness, this isn’t medicine. It’s a nourishment tonic...”

“Whatever! It’s all the same to me! I won’t drink anything nasty! Now go away!” Meltia demanded, making a shooing gesture at the man. That was when she noticed Claus. Her face brightened instantly. “Lord Claus!” Then she once again grimaced and glared at the older man. “See?! It’s time for my studies now, so get out of here! Goodbye!”

“B-But...!” The man tried to insist, but the maids chased him off. The women were clearly Meltia’s allies. “Your Highneess!!!” the man cried weakly as the maids dragged him off.

“Who was that, Lady Tia?” asked Claus.

“Oh, that was the court physician, Dr. Jaquilla. He’s always nagging me and giving me this awful-tasting medicine.”

Court physician, huh?

Dr. Jaquilla had silver-gray hair and a thick beard. He wore a black vest and glasses, so he certainly looked the part of a doctor.

“But how can you get better if you don’t take your medicine?” Claus asked Meltia.

“I’ll be fine. Even if I don’t take it, I don’t get fevers anymore. Anyway, will you tell me more about yourself today, Lord Claus?” the girl asked, entwining her arm around his.

“No,” Claus said nonchalantly. “I’m here to tutor you.”

“You’re no fun,” she complained. “Then how about this? If I answer all your questions correctly, you’ll answer one of my questions. If you don’t accept these terms, then I won’t study. And I might feel dizzy!”

Claus turned his face away from her with an exasperated sigh.

“Fine. Let’s go with that. But only if you get *everything* correct.”

“Yay! I’ll do my best!”

Once Claus was done tutoring Meltia, he walked around the palace in search of a certain person. Eventually, he found said person seated in a gazebo in the palace garden. Claus put on a smile and approached.

“Greetings,” he said, startling the man. “I’m sorry you had such a difficult time earlier. And I apologize for the late introduction, but my name’s Claus Guivarch. I am Her Highness Princess Meltia’s tutor.”

“O-Oh, right. You’re the rumored Count Guivarch, then? I’m the court physician, Auguste Jaquilla.”

Indeed, the person Claus had been looking for was Dr. Jaquilla, who had been so viciously rejected by the princess earlier that day.

This man should know about Princess Meltia’s illness in detail.

Although Claus wasn’t able to meet with Jeanette, they still exchanged letters regularly. In one of them, Jeanette had mentioned that she wanted to find out more about what Meltia was suffering from.

“May I join you?” Claus inquired with a pleasant smile.

Jaquilla nodded gladly.

“Of course. But what could you possibly want from a senile old fool like me?”

“I felt a sense of kinship with you after witnessing that earlier scene,” Claus explained. “I don’t usually say this out loud, but the truth is, I’m also at the mercy of Her Highness’s selfishness every single day.” This was an undeniable fact.

“Oh...” Jaquilla nodded, surmising something from Claus’s words. “You must be having a hard time too. Even I have heard of it. They say that although you’re already engaged, you’re being kept at the palace against your will?”

“Yes, that’s true.” Claus smiled uncomfortably. He knew that this expression, filled with such sorrow and anguish, would stir the sympathy of any person, regardless of age or gender.

“Good grief... Her Highness is a troublesome person.”

“But what about you, Dr. Jaquilla? Have you informed Their Majesties that the princess won’t take her medicine?”

“Well, they both have a soft spot for Her Highness, so— Oh! Please don’t tell anyone I said that.” The doctor glanced around nervously to make sure nobody else had heard him. “If His Majesty hears me speaking like that, he’s bound to get angry with me.”

Claus pounced at the opportunity.

“Then how about we speak in my room?”

“In your room?” Jaquilla parroted dubiously.

I thought he might react like that.

Claus once more put on his troubled smile.

“My apologies for such a brazen request. It’s just that it’s already been over a month since I’ve been detained here. I haven’t been able to see my friends or my fiancée, and everyone around me is utterly loyal to Her Highness. Just now, I felt that I could finally have a genuine conversation with someone, and I spoke thoughtlessly.”

“No, no. There’s no need to apologize.” As Claus had expected, Jaquilla quickly reassured him. He seemed to be a man of good, honest character. “I can’t blame you for feeling that way... Honestly, if I had to deal with Her Highness every day without being able to go home, I think I’d want to drop everything and run for it.”

“You too, Dr. Jaquilla? I feel the exact same way,” Claus replied with a laugh. He meant what he said.

The physician chuckled as well.

“Well, I suppose we can chat for a bit. I’m already done with most of my work for the day.”

“I do have some wine that my fiancée sent me. Would you be interested in having a drink with me?” Claus proposed. “It’s Château d’Orgaux, aged fifteen years.”

“Ohhh, that sounds great! D’Orgaux is the queen of red wine, after all!” Jaquilla exclaimed, smiling broadly.

Most of the people in this country were fond of wine, so Jeanette had sent the bottle to Claus for emergencies. The mention of it had an instant effect on the doctor, who looked visibly more relaxed.

“Then let’s go before Her Highness detains us,” Claus said with a grin, and then led Dr. Jaquilla to his room.

A few days had passed.

“Sara, it’s *finally* time,” Jeanette said earnestly while reading Claus’s letter.

“It is?” Sara asked.

“Yes. Lord Claus has managed to question the princess’s doctor!”

“Then let’s begin the preparations at once!”

“Indeed. Go ahead!” Jeanette requested.

With that, Sara promptly left the room.

In these past few days, Jeanette, Sara, and Kyuriakris had been working on a plan to rescue Claus. They’d gathered intelligence, kept up correspondence with Claus, and made preparations. Now, Claus had finally managed to get some information out of the court physician. Most of it had been in line with Jeanette’s expectations.

In that case, what I arranged should prove useful... she thought while gazing at the large pile of items nearby. *I’d better inform Lord Kyuriakris too! Now’s the*

time for step one of the rescue mission!

Jeanette nodded to herself and began penning a letter to the prince.

Chapter 3: The Mission to Rescue the “Princess”

“Lady Tia, are you sure you won’t be attending the welcoming party?” Claus inquired. He was seated upon the sofa in the spacious tea room. As usual, Princess Meltia, clad in a white sheer silk dress, was leaning closely against him. “I saw a group of people enter the venue not too long ago. I believe it’s starting soon.”

“I’m not going,” Meltia replied dismissively. “I’m tired. And I thought you already knew that I don’t attend such festivities.”

“I was just checking with you,” Claus assured her. “But I heard Their Majesties will be meeting a Pakiran prince today. They say he’s a very good-looking man who’s popular with the ladies. And apparently the green traditional outfit he’s wearing is quite the sight.”

Meltia laughed mockingly.

“I can see right through your tricks, Lord Claus. You’re hoping that I’ll change my mind after meeting this prince, right? Unfortunately, I’m a very devoted woman. I don’t care how handsome he is. I’m not interested.”

Claus tilted his head.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, but why have you become so fond of me? I can’t imagine what could make you feel that way.”

“What are you talking about?!” the princess asked in vexation, her body tensing. “You have silver hair and mysterious violet eyes! Whenever you’re troubled, you look like an archangel straight out of a painting! That alone is enough to make me fall for you!”

Claus put on a small, troubled smile.

“But it’s not just about your looks,” Meltia went on. “You radiate elegance and you’re faithful to your fiancée. The more I learn about you, the more I like you. And I think it’s wonderful that you don’t look upon me lustfully. And the way you sometimes say such bitter words is such a contrast to your

gentlemanly reputation that I can't help but love it!"

"I see..."

Claus smiled wryly. It seemed that his firm rejection had the opposite effect on Meltia. *Well, I also get fed up with people only caring about my looks, so I get what she means. And I completely understand that she enjoys not being given preferential treatment.* His thoughts drifted to his fiancée. *Jeanette's the same. Of course, she does compliment me, but unlike others, she doesn't do it with ulterior motives. She has no ill intentions whatsoever, which is refreshing.*

He had always been surrounded by people who shot him lecherous looks. Those who didn't eventually revealed they had some other kind of ulterior motive. Even married people often sent him meaningful winks. Among them, Jeanette was the only one who admired him with the innocence of a child.

In a way, Princess Meltia and I find joy from the same sources... Although to me, this coincidence is just an inconvenience.

"Back on topic, I still think it's a shame you won't attend the party," Claus spoke up. "As your tutor, I believe it would be a great source of learning for you. Will you not go even if I ask you to?"

Meltia hesitated as she looked at his smile. But just like when she had refused to drink Dr. Jaquilla's nourishment tonic, she turned away with a huff.

"I hate those kinds of things and that's that! I won't go even at your request. I'm sure my papa wouldn't allow it anyway. It'd be awful if I collapsed during a party."

"I see... Well, I must admit that when I heard about the party, it made me crave some recreation myself. Do you mind if I play the piano later on?"

"The piano?" Meltia asked, surprised. "You can play?"

"Indeed."

"Very well! I permit it! But not later—I want you to play now! I want to listen, so play in this room!"

"All right."

"Someone bring the piano here at once!" the princess ordered, and the maids

rushed out.

Instead of us going to the room with the piano, she's having it brought here... Classic Princess Meltia. This is exactly as I expected, Claus thought.

A while later, the maids and a few other servants carried the piano into the tea room. The grand piano was extremely heavy, so the maids must've asked for extra help. Claus smiled to himself when he spotted a flash of red hair among them.

"There it is!" Meltia exclaimed. "Now, go ahead and play, Lord Claus! What will it be? I can't wait!"

Claus slowly approached the instrument. While the rest of the maids retreated, one of them stayed in place, her head bowed.

"Huh? You're in the way. Step back!" the princess demanded.

However, the maid didn't budge.

"Hey! Didn't you hear me?"

Right as the princess grew angry, Claus swiftly approached the maid with a grin on his face.

"Ahh, I really missed you, Jeanette!"

"What? Jeanette?" Meltia asked, knitting her brows.

Jeanette quickly looked up at the sound of Claus's voice.

The Pakiran prince who had visited the palace today was, of course, Kyuriakris. Jeanette managed to sneak into the palace as his companion, and while he distracted everyone else, she hurriedly put on a maid outfit. Then, just as planned, she waited by the grand piano and joined the maids when they asked for extra help with carrying it.

"I missed you too, Lord Claus!" Jeanette said, gazing at the man for the first time in a month and a half.

Claus's narrow eyes sparkled, and the red tint in his cheeks emphasized his sex appeal more than ever. He was smiling sweetly at her, and Jeanette felt her

head spin from being directly exposed to his beauty and allure.

Wow! Lord Claus's sexiness has an even greater impact after not seeing him for so long!!! Jeanette tried to steady herself, feeling like she might faint.

That was when Meltia finally realized who Jeanette was. Her large eyes were open so wide that they almost looked like perfect circles, and her mouth was agape.

"Wha...?! Y-You! You're Lord Claus's fiancée!"

"Yes! I'm Jeanette Roussel!"

Jeanette's cheerful response caused Meltia to start shaking all over.

"How did you get into the palace?! Someone, seize this woman!"

"Well, you see—" Jeanette began, about to nonchalantly explain how she'd infiltrated the palace. However, Claus chose that moment to step right up to her and sweep her into his arms. "L-Lord Claus?! Mmph!"

As if that weren't enough, Claus swiftly pressed his lips against hers. Right in front of Meltia, her maids, and Sara, who'd sneaked in together with Jeanette.

"Mmm?!"

Moreover, Jeanette felt Claus's hot tongue slip into her mouth. *L-L-Lord Claus?! People are watching!* Yet she couldn't protest. Claus was holding her tightly, preventing her escape. Right here, in front of everyone, he passionately and unabashedly violated her mouth!

Jeanette glanced to the side and saw that the princess was frozen, her mouth hanging open. It was to be expected. All the maids were at a loss for words as well. Only Sara, covering her face with her hands and peeking through her fingers, was watching the couple with a radiant grin.

"Nnn... Mmf..."

Jeanette's head was getting fuzzy from the vigorous kiss. When she began gasping for air, the princess finally snapped to her senses. With a furious blush, she screamed.

"E-Enough! How dare you make such a shameless display right in front of

me?!”

As the girl’s voice echoed inside the room, Claus finally withdrew. But he didn’t step away from Jeanette, instead keeping his face close to hers as his eyes shifted to Meltia. Jeanette, who was already on the verge of collapse, didn’t notice how erotic his gaze looked, but the maids who had been watching all gulped at the sight.

“I was showing off,” Claus announced. “Did it have an effect on you?”

“Wh-Wh-Wha—!!!” the princess stammered.

“Besides, this is my first tryst with Jeanette in so long. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t interrupt, Lady Tia.” With that, he began to bring his face closer to Jeanette’s again.

“Hold it!” Meltia yelled, her face still bright red.

However, it wasn’t her shout that stopped him. Jeanette’s knees had finally buckled. That kiss had had quite the effect on *her*.

“Got you,” Claus said, catching her right before she fell to the floor. “Sorry. I was so happy to see you again that I couldn’t hold back.”

“N-No, I, um, err... It’s aww wight...” Jeanette mumbled, unable to articulate properly. Claus gazed at her lovingly.

“*Seriously*, what is *wrong* with you two?!” Meltia screeched in a rage. “I was so shocked when this woman sneaked into the room, only for you to k-k-kiss her! And so shamelessly too! What were you even thinking?!”

“My apologies, Lady Tia. I wasn’t thinking about anything other than Jeanette,” Claus replied with a smile and not an ounce of regret.

“That’s not what I meant!!!”

“Are you okay, Jeanette? I overdid it, huh? Do you want to sit and rest for a bit? Or do you need to loosen your collar?” Claus asked diligently, ignoring the angrily shaking princess. He moved Jeanette’s bangs aside and placed his hand on her round forehead.

“I-I’m okay. I’ve calmed down a bit...” she replied stiffly, managing to stand by herself despite how lightheaded she felt. “Please forgive me for appearing in

front of you like this, Your Highness.”

“*Forgive* you? Just how audacious can you get?!” Meltia shrieked with a scowl.

“Exactly!” shouted the maids who surrounded the princess, glaring at Jeanette reproachfully.

Jeanette wasn’t intimidated by this and stared right back at Meltia.

“I’ve tried asking for an audience with you numerous times, but you never agreed. It pained me to have to do it this way, but you left me with no other choice.”

It was the truth. Jeanette had sent countless letters to the princess, but they had all been ignored. The maids must’ve realized as much, for they all looked away, perhaps out of guilt. Only Meltia, who moved to lie down on the sofa, continued glaring at Jeanette. Fiery and haughty words came spewing from the beautiful, fairylike girl’s mouth.

“So what? Did you come here to complain because I won’t let Lord Claus leave?” she demanded, clearly not feeling sorry in the slightest.

Jeanette smiled.

“No. I’m here as a merchant. I want to make a proposition!”

“Proposition?” Meltia repeated quizzically. Not in her wildest dreams had she expected Jeanette to say something like that. “What are you talking about? And what’s this about being a merchant?”

The princess was obviously confused. Sensing that, Jeanette grinned.

“Before that, there’s one thing I’d like to confirm with you, Your Highness.”

“What?”

“It’s widely rumored that you are in poor health. Am I correct in saying that you suffer from anemia?”

Meltia’s eyes widened.

“Huh? Why do you know about that?!”

That was the information which Claus had managed to extract from the

drunken Dr. Jaquilla.

Apparently, the court physician had screamed the following: “It’s true that Her Highness is somewhat frail, but that was mostly the fault of the corrupt quack who preceded me! He was a scoundrel who deceived Their Majesties by telling them that the princess might not live for long unless she drank his medicine! Her current poor health isn’t because she has some incurable illness. It’s just the anemia caused by her unhealthy lifestyle! I’ve said that so many times! But Their Majesties keep spoiling her, so her condition will only get worse! I’ve been her physician for many years now, and I know she’s not actually sick!!!”

Jeanette wasn’t surprised when she first heard what the doctor had said. She’d already had some doubts regarding the princess’s weak constitution because of her lively, vigorous voice. Yes, Meltia did often get lightheaded, but her voice and her sparkling eyes were full of life. Claus’s letters had mentioned that the princess was overflowing with vitality too. In light of all that, Jeanette had become suspicious. Just what sort of illness did Meltia really have?

There are many illnesses which cannot be seen just from the person’s appearance, so I didn’t want to assume anything based on that. But when Dr. Jaquilla said it was just anemia, I was convinced.

As a side note, Dr. Jaquilla had made a nourishment tonic in order to improve Meltia’s symptoms. The ingredients were pig liver and ground spinach, which made it taste spectacularly awful. Although it was effective, it wasn’t exactly drinkable.

“That’s why I brought with me Matheson’s newest product: one bottle a day keeps the anemia at bay!” Jeanette announced, pulling out a bottle from the multipurpose apron she wore under the maid outfit.

“Wh-What? ‘Keeps the anemia at bay’? What is it?” Meltia asked, confused.

Jeanette grandiosely held up the bottle and began explaining.

“Yes! This here is called Anemia-Be-Gone! It’s a tasty tonic designed to improve symptoms of anemia! And it doesn’t taste like pig liver. It’s made of lovely, sweet-tasting prunes!”

“Prunes...?”

“Ah, I’d better explain that part too!” Jeanette searched through her apron and pulled out a round, purple fruit which resembled a large raisin. “This is a plum. Once you dehydrate it, it becomes a prune, like the ones in this vial!” She raised said vial above her head as though it were a precious gem. “Plums are a bit odd. For some reason, when you dehydrate them, their nutrients get concentrated. You can then gather a large amount of them, grind them, and turn them into syrup! And that’s what Anemia-Be-Gone is! If you take it once a day, you can become anemia-free!”

“Waaah! How wonderful! It’s perfect for women!” cried Sara, purposely offering a follow-up to Jeanette’s spiel. When Meltia glared at her, the maid cleared her throat.

“By the way, although this tonic isn’t commonly used in our country, it’s been safely employed as a supplement against anemia in other nations, so you don’t have to worry!” Jeanette continued. “Your Highness, if you’d like to test whether this is a trick, please just try it yourself!”

Jeanette tried to approach Meltia, but the head maid butted in with a furious shout.

“Her Highness isn’t going to ingest that questionable tonic!”

That’s a fair point!

No member of the royalty would accept such a dubious proposition. While Jeanette deliberated on how to handle this, Claus stepped forth.

“If Her Highness is to drink this, I’d like to personally feed her.”

“I’ll drink it.”

“Your Highness?!” the head maid screeched when Meltia swiftly agreed. “What are you saying?! You mustn’t drink that suspicious substance!”

“Oh? If you’re so concerned, then you can be my tester,” Meltia responded. “I want Lord Claus to feed it to me. Besides, it’ll be a plus if this actually manages to make me feel better. I’m sure my parents will be pleased too.”

“Ugh...” The maid looked troubled.

“Please?” the princess asked in an exceptionally saccharine tone of voice.

That finally made the woman cave.

“Very well...” she replied reluctantly. “In that case, I’ll taste it first! Some poisons have delayed effects, so we’ll wait for at least three hours until—”

“It’ll be fine, ma’am.” The court physician, Jaquilla, suddenly interjected. He must’ve entered the chamber at some point. “I can guarantee this syrup’s safety. It’s nothing more than a nourishment tonic.”

“I thought this might happen, so I called for Dr. Jaquilla,” Claus whispered to Jeanette. “He was very interested when I told him about Anemia-Be-Gone.”

“I see! You’re as thorough with the behind-the-scenes maneuvering as always, Lord Claus!” she replied admiringly.

Meanwhile, the head maid spilled a little bit of the tonic onto her hand and licked it. She took a sip and rolled it around in her mouth, then waited for ten minutes.

“Well... It seems fine,” she said at last with a sour look on her face.

“Come, Lord Claus! Quickly! Feed it to me!” Meltia demanded.

“Very well.”

Claus retrieved the bottle from the head maid and approached the princess. He stopped in front of her and grasped her chin.

“Ngh...”

The adorable, fairylike Meltia’s cheeks quickly flushed red. The two of them looked like a prince and princess from a fable, causing all the nearby maids to sigh dreamily. Yet for some reason, Jeanette felt a painful pang in her chest. She pursed her lips at this odd sensation.

What is this pain...? Maybe I tied that a little too tight?

“Lord Claus, it smells sweet...” Meltia said.

“That is what prunes smell like. Now, go ahead and drink.” Claus placed the opening of the bottle against the princess’s mouth and gently tipped it up.

“Nice and slow...”

Meltia's pale, dainty throat slowly moved as the man spoke. At first, she was frowning cautiously, but the more she drank, the more her expression relaxed. Before long, with Claus's guidance, she finished the whole bottle.

"It tastes better than I expected," the princess admitted.

Jeanette lifted her head at that.

"Doesn't it?! And this tonic isn't just good for anemia. It's also a great source of nourishment for a weakened constitution!"

"Humph... I couldn't drink Dr. Jaquilla's tonic, but this one isn't so bad. So are you saying that if I keep drinking this, I'll get cured?" Meltia inquired.

Jeanette shook her head.

"The tonic itself is effective...but that alone won't be enough."

"What? Then it's useless."

"It isn't!" Clenching her fists, Jeanette stepped forward. "Your Highness, before we get into whether you're actually sick or not, there's no denying you suffer from an utter lack of physical exercise!"

The princess's countenance stiffened.

"Excuse me?"

But Jeanette wasn't about to give in.

"I know it's true! Your Highness, you don't do any, and I mean *aaany* physical exercise in your day-to-day life! Right?"

According to Claus, this was Meltia's daily routine: In the morning, after breakfast, the princess would play with her beloved cat, Blanche. Once she'd had enough of that, she did some embroidery, sang a few songs, and then went to bother Claus. In the afternoon, she'd take her lunch and then have a nap. Once she woke up, she once more played with her cat. On her study days, she'd study, and when the time was right, she'd have her afternoon tea. Afterward, she'd find Claus again. When she got tired of that, she went back to her room to read. In the evening after dinner, she'd take her time bathing and grooming herself. Then, she retired for the night.

Meltia had the lifestyle of a true sheltered princess.

“I heard that you don’t even walk around the garden! Is that true?!” Jeanette questioned.

Meltia pouted.

“It’s not my fault! I might collapse if I’m outside for too long.”

“That’s not true, Your Highness,” said Jaquilla, approaching the princess with a serious expression. “I’ve already told you many, many, *many* times in the past that your fatigue and dizzy spells are caused by anemia. This is primarily due to your overwhelming lack of physical exercise! Even healthy people would become sickly if they confined themselves inside all the time like you!”

“You’re so annoying, Jaquilla!” Meltia objected, making a shooing gesture as if she were trying to get rid of a bug. “I don’t mind not having any stamina! If I get tired, all I need to do is rest. It doesn’t bother me, so I don’t need to exercise!”

As the princess glanced aside with a huff, Jeanette spoke up again.

“But you’d be able to do so much if you had a little more stamina. The palace gardens are so very beautiful. If you could walk through them, you’d be able to admire the different seasonal flowers, have picnics, and feel the breeze. It’d be a wonderful experience. Basking in the sun feels amazing too!”

“No thanks. My maids pick the flowers for me every day, and if I want to feel the breeze, I can just open the window. And you saw how sunny this room is, right? So I don’t need to go outside to bask in the sunlight.” Meltia spoke dismissively while brushing through her pale hair. “If there’s something I want, my parents or brothers get it for me, whether that’s objects or people. You even performed at the palace before because I wanted you to. If I wish to see performers, dancers, or the circus, anything can be brought to the palace for me. I have no need to improve my stamina.”

“Is that *really* true?” Jeanette asked, her voice full of implicit meaning.

Meltia glared at her.

“What? If you’re going to bother me so much about it, then can you show me something I *can’t* get?”

Jeanette grinned as though she'd been waiting for those words.

"Of course I can! Sara!"

At her cue, Sara nodded vigorously. Then she sat at the grand piano which they'd brought into the room earlier.

"I'm ready, milady!"

This time, it was Jeanette who nodded in acknowledgment. She nimbly unfastened the cord tied around her waist and spun around. As she did so, the cloth which had looked like an apron until now turned inside out and spread all around her. Just like that, she was suddenly clad in a beautiful dress that resembled a summer night's sky.

"Huh?!" Meltia's eyes widened. "Wh-What? How did that happen?!"

"You see, I combined a dress with this maid's uniform! The material is Orlonde silk, a bestseller from Matheson Trading!" Jeanette explained, twirling around once again. The silk reflected the sunlight, shimmering beautifully.

Meltia seemed undaunted.

"Sure, it's pretty, but did you really think you could win with just that? If I asked my father, he'd definitely get this kind of fabric for me!"

"Oh, no. This is just the beginning," Jeanette said with a smile.

Claus approached her at that moment.

"May I have your hand, Jeanette?"

"Of course!"

Claus took Jeanette's hand, and they moved to the center of the spacious room, eyes fixed on each other.

"Wh-What on...?!"

Sara began playing a light yet elegant waltz, and Jeanette and Claus began moving in time with the music. Jeanette had done her research and knew the wide tearoom had minimal furniture, so it made for a perfect impromptu dance hall.

Meltia and her maids were dumbstruck as they watched the couple suddenly

begin dancing.

“What are you—?” the princess spluttered.

Jeanette and Claus moved in perfect harmony, their steps fluid and smooth. They both looked like they were having the time of their lives, which naturally fascinated their audience.

“I feel like it’s been so long since I’ve gotten to do this with you,” Claus whispered into Jeanette’s ear, his hand around her waist.

“I feel the same way. In fact, we’ve been so busy with work that we haven’t attended any balls,” Jeanette replied, spinning around with Claus’s guidance.

Their arms were entwined, their gazes locked, and occasionally their faces drew so close together that it was as if they were sharing the same breath. Each time it happened, they both giggled and continued dancing smoothly. The flowing Orlonde silk reflected the sunlight, rooting everyone else to the spot.

“You always look beautiful beneath the light of a chandelier, but seeing you dance in the sunlight is something else entirely. I wish I could forget about everything else and dance with you like this forever,” Claus murmured against Jeanette’s ear. The ticklish sensation made her jolt lightly.

“Lord Claus, they might hear you...!” Jeanette pleaded. However, after a moment of thought, she quietly added, “But I think I feel the same way...” Then she chuckled, staring into Claus’s eyes all the while.

This dance was intended as a demonstration for Princess Meltia. Yet even so, Jeanette’s heart throbbed as Claus led her and treated her with his usual tenderness. Once the dance finally drew to an end, the couple turned toward their audience and bowed.

“What did you think of that, Lady Tia?” Claus inquired while smiling.

Meltia, who’d been enraptured by the dance, quickly snapped back to her senses.

“I-It was very good...” she answered with uncharacteristic honesty. Claus’s beauty must’ve dispelled her malice.

“Thank you for your kind words,” he replied.

At this point, Jeanette stepped forward.

“Your Highness! Lord Claus dances wonderfully, doesn’t he? Wouldn’t you like to try dancing with him too?”

“Me...?” The princess frowned, hesitating.

Claus held his hand out to her. For just a second, her eyes flickered with something. Perhaps she was recalling how graceful Claus had looked during the performance. Maybe she was picturing herself dancing with him too. However, instead of taking his hand, the girl took a step back.

“I... I can’t,” she said. “I don’t know the steps. And the song was so long—I don’t think I could dance until the end...”

Jeanette wasn’t surprised by that response. *Even though dancing looks easy, it actually takes a lot of stamina. Knowing how to dance is considered an aspect of etiquette among the aristocracy, but Princess Meltia gets dizzy just from walking around. Dancing would be very difficult for her.*

“Then we found it, didn’t we?” Jeanette prompted, gazing fixedly at the girl. “*This* is something that you cannot get, Your Highness.”

“Wha—?!”

Earlier, the princess had boasted that she could get anything she wanted. And yet...

“Even if you wanted to, you can’t dance with Lord Claus because you have no stamina. Doesn’t that mean this is something you cannot obtain?” Jeanette pointed out.

“That’s just sophistry!” Meltia replied angrily. “Honestly, I don’t really care that I can’t dance!” she insisted with a huff, refusing to admit defeat.

Jeanette offered an uncharacteristically mischievous smile.

“I see... So you don’t mind not knowing how warm Lord Claus’s embrace is?” With that, she swiftly entwined her arm around Claus’s. “Or the sweet scent of violets that surrounds him?” She drew her face closer to his.

For his part, Claus watched her with a broad grin.

“And you don’t mind not knowing the happiness of having Lord Claus look right into your eyes during a dance?” Jeanette leaned her face so close to Claus’s that they were almost kissing, then cast a side glance at the princess.

“Nnngh...!!!”

Just as Jeanette had expected, Meltia’s face was flushed with fury. *O-Okay! We’re almost there! Just a little bit more... Come on, Jeanette! Play the part of a sexy girl to frustrate Her Highness...!*

Although on the inside she was drowning in sweat, Jeanette did her best to continue the performance.

“What a shame! Being led by Lord Claus feels so dreamy and wonderful, but you’ll never know what that’s like, Your Highness... Truly, what a shame.”

“Can you not say the same thing twice?!” the princess roared, huffing through her nose. “Anyway, I can totally do it! Even if I can’t finish the dance, if I can just do it for a little bit, I’ll still experience all of what you said!”

“You mustn’t, Your Highness! What if you push yourself too far and collapse?!” the head maid interjected, hurriedly trying to stop the girl.

The other maids joined in too, grasping Meltia by the arms.

“Exactly! Don’t do it, Your Highness!”

“Y-You’re all exaggerating! Surely I can dance for a *little* bit!”

“No, we aren’t!” the head maid insisted. “Dancing is a lot harder than it looks! You’ll get dizzy the moment you try!”

The maids all continued yammering, causing the princess to let out a groan.

Claus smiled regretfully.

“Unfortunately, it looks like it’s impossible for you.”

“No it’s not!” Meltia protested.

But the maids weren’t giving an inch.

“Don’t do it, Your Highness!”

“Stop it! Get out of my way!”

“Lady Tia,” Claus spoke up again gently in order to pacify her. “Your maids are just worried about you. And frankly, so am I. If we’re to dance together, I’d feel safer if you had enough stamina *not* to collapse, at the very least.”

Meltia pursed her lips in frustration. Of course, Claus was subtly telling her that she needed to build up her stamina if she wanted to dance with him.

“Ugh...”

“How tragic. Dancing with someone you like is so much fun...” Claus said. “Anyway, Jeanette. Since we’re here, how about one more dance?”

“That sounds great! Let’s do it!”

The couple joined hands. Just as they were about to start dancing again...

“*Fine!* I get it already!!!”

...the princess screamed with a massive scowl, her whole body shaking.

“If you want me to exercise so badly, then I will!”

We did it!!! Overjoyed to finally hear those words, Jeanette raised her arms in celebration.

Dr. Jaquilla grinned broadly as well.

“Ohhh! A wonderful decision, Your Highness!”

“I’m so glad, Your Highness! Let’s do our best together!” Jeanette exclaimed, grasping the princess’s hands.

Meltia gave her a dubious look.

“‘Together’? Are you actually saying you’re going to do this *with* me?”

“Yes! It’ll be much easier if you have some company!”

“In other words, she’ll be your motivator,” Jaquilla added.

Meltia looked displeased, but at last she reluctantly nodded.

“Humph... Fine, whatever. It’ll be more efficient with you around.”

Oh...? The princess must be quite clever, to realize that right away! Jeanette thought. Then again, Claus did mention in his letters that Meltia was unexpectedly zealous about her studies and quick on the uptake. *We might see*

some good results even faster than I imagined! Although it'd be impossible to know until the time came, a good outcome for Princess Meltia would hopefully also mean a good outcome for Jeanette.

"But if you offend me, I'll kick you out without mercy!" Meltia declared.

"Okay! I'll do my best not to!" Jeanette replied, clenching her fists determinedly, fired up about what was to come.

A few days later, Jeanette once again arrived at the royal palace. Of course, this time she had no need to sneak in. Instead, she was granted official permission to visit as Dr. Jaquilla's assistant. Jaquilla, who was nominally her instructor, stayed by her side so as not to raise any doubts.

"I still can't believe it!" he said with a grin on his face. "Do you really plan to start today?"

"Yes! Sorry to trouble you, but if you think it goes too far at any point, please step in!" Jeanette requested, vigorously thumping her chest. Then, in a quieter voice, she added, "And, um... Please keep Their Majesties at bay if you can..."

If Their Majesties were to find out that Jeanette was ordering their daughter around, they might faint from shock (especially in the case of the queen). But Jeanette couldn't let them stop her at this stage.

"Mm-hmm, leave it to me. And as a doctor, I'm also very curious to see the results of your plan, Miss Jeanette," Jaquilla whispered back.

The two were collaborating for their own reasons: Jeanette in order to get Claus back, and Jaquilla to satisfy his curiosity as a doctor. As a side note, Matheson Trading had also begun selling Anemia-Be-Gone, and a share of the proceeds went to Jaquilla as the physician in charge of supervising the tonic. Ever since they'd made this deal, Jaquilla had become extremely cooperative.

"Thank you, Dr. Jaquilla. I'm sure we'll be able to improve Lady Tia's constitution," said the grinning Claus. It wasn't time for him to tutor Meltia, yet he'd shown up anyway and sneakily took his place by Jeanette's side.

Meltia glared at them.

“So what am I supposed to do?” she grumbled.

“First things first, please change into this!” Jeanette said cheerfully, holding a set of clothes out to the princess. “Your dress is gorgeous, but exercising in it would be difficult. That’s why I prepared this for your use exclusively!”

“Humph, fin— Wait, what’s with this outfit?!” Meltia asked as she looked it over.

Jeanette had arranged for an all-white set of clothes which exuded a distinctly oriental aura. Instead of a shirt, the top resembled a bathrobe. There was also a large belt called an obi used to secure the clothes in place.

“Are these *pants*?! You seriously expect me to put this on?!” Meltia spluttered.

“Yes! Pants are perfect for exercising. They’re easy to move around in, and there’s no risk of stepping on the hem and tripping like with a dress,” Jeanette explained.

“No! I refuse! These clothes are weird!”

“Huh? Really?” Jeanette asked while unceremoniously slipping off her own dress.

“What are you—?! Oh, you’re wearing them too...”

Beneath her dress, Jeanette was wearing the exact same outfit she’d handed to Meltia. Claus smiled at the sight.

“Everything you wear suits you, Jeanette. This is such a fresh look too—you look adorable,” he said.

For some reason, this caused Meltia to jolt.

“Humph, I’ll put this on then... I need to change, so you need to leave the room. But if you want to look, you can stay, Lord Claus,” she said, casting him a flirtatious glance.

Claus thoroughly ignored her.

“Come on,” he said while putting his hand on Jeanette’s arm. “Let’s give her some space.”

“Okay!”

“Ugh!”

With the princess’s groan echoing behind them, the couple stepped out of the room along with Dr. Jaquilla.

“This is so convenient!” Jeanette whispered to Claus while they waited. “The princess is willing to do anything for you. Dr. Jaquilla is pleased too.” But then Jeanette gasped. “I’m so sorry! I feel like I’m just taking advantage of you...”

“I don’t mind. Besides, if it can get me free, I’ll go along with anything,” Claus responded. “In fact, you had to get involved because I’m so spineless... I’m sorry, Jeanette.”

“No need to apologize, Lord Claus! None of this is your fault! And I’ll do anything to get you back home safe and sound!” she responded emphatically, causing Claus to smile.

“Thank you. You’re right—the most important thing is for us to go back to our home as soon as possible. By the way, are you okay, Jeanette?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

Claus looked at her as if trying to sound her out.

“I know we agreed to it in advance, but I fed the tonic to the princess by hand, and I’m supposed to dance with her... Doesn’t any of that annoy you?”

“Nope! It’s part of our strategy, after all!” Jeanette proclaimed spiritedly.

“I see...” For a moment, Claus was lost in thought. Not long after, he suddenly pulled Jeanette closer and kissed her forehead.

“Wah?!”

“It’s been so long since we got to talk like this, just the two of us...”

“R-Right... I missed you a lot during this past month and a half, Lord Claus,” Jeanette admitted, her cheeks flushed.

Claus hugged her even more tightly.

“I missed you too. I felt like I was going crazy. That’s why when we finally met, I couldn’t stop myself.”

Jeanette blushed even more at the memory of the passionate kiss they'd shared in front of everyone a few days ago.

"S-So that's why...! I was convinced it was a part of your strategy to shake up the princess."

"No, I'm afraid not. I just did that because I wanted to."

"Because you wanted to...?" Jeanette echoed bashfully. But right then...

Clang!

...the door flew open and the head maid peeked out from the other side to glare at the couple.

"The princess has finished changing."

"R-Right!" Jeanette said, following the maid into the chamber.

In spite of her obvious dislike, Meltia had properly put on the outfit. The somewhat angular, squarish sleeves of the robe weren't particularly glamorous. If anything, the clothes looked almost masculine and powerful. Yet the princess, with her pale skin and slender frame, looked borderline divine in them.

"You look good in anything, Your Highness!" Jeanette exclaimed.

"Wearing pants feels so weird. I can't get used to the feel of them around my legs," Meltia complained, glaring at the offending material. "Anyway, now what?"

"Now it's time for the warm-up!" Jeanette decided.

"Warm-up?"

"Yes! Whether exercising or going for a walk, the first step is to relax your muscles! They say that if you skip the warm-up, you're more likely to get injured!" Jeanette said, then raised both of her arms in the air. "Let's start with the arms! Clasp your hands together, and stretch them aaall the way up like this! No need to rush—please go slowly and follow my example!"

"Hmm...?" Meltia watched Jeanette suspiciously, but tried imitating her.

After lifting their arms, they tilted their bodies to the left and right. Once that was done, they put their hands on their hips and leaned forward, then back. It

wasn't long before the princess was out of breath, panting as she cast Jeanette a look.

"H-Hey... Is this really...a warm-up?"

Jeanette giggled.

"Yes, it is. Does your body feel hot already?"

"Y-Yes... I feel a bit hot..."

"Excuse me! Are you sure you're all right, Your Highness?! I won't allow you to push her too far!" the head maid shouted, having grown worried for Meltia. She glared at Jeanette accusingly, but the latter just smiled.

"She's okay. I won't go too far. Now, Your Highness—the warm-up is done, so let's move on to the real deal. But you must promise me one thing."

"Huh?"

"What I'm about to teach you is a secret technique which mustn't be disclosed to the public. I'd like you to keep it a secret from Their Majesties too."

"What?! You're trying to hide this from Their Majesties?! I knew it! It's something dangerous after all!" the head maid screeched.

"Very well," Meltia replied.

"What?! Your Highness?!" The woman whipped around at the sound of the princess's quick approval.

"Well, a secret technique's a secret technique. Besides, mama and papa are going to make a fuss and try to stop me if I tell them about it. So keep it a secret from them, okay?" Meltia asked the maids.

"I... F-Fine, if that's your desire...!" the head maid relented, unable to oppose the princess.

"Now, hurry up and teach me." Meltia turned to look at Jeanette. Surprisingly, she'd embraced the idea rather quickly.

"All right! First, tighten your fists like this!" As she spoke, Jeanette stood with her knees apart and held out both of her tightened fists. Meltia did the same. "And then..." Jeanette inhaled deeply, and then the look in her eyes sharpened.

“Stance!!!” she yelled so loudly that Meltia and the maids flinched.

But Jeanette paid them no heed. With a grand movement, she widened her stance and bent her knees so that she was half crouching. At the same time, she kept her left hand close to her body while pushing her right arm forward.

“G-Goodness!” shouted the head maid. “Your legs are spread apart—how disgraceful! I can’t allow the princess to do such a thing!”

Indeed, Jeanette’s legs were spread apart in this pose. However, she wasn’t about to give up.

“What are you talking about? This is a splendid form called the Straddle Stance! It’s the key to strengthening your legs!”

“St-Straddle...?”

“This is what we got these clothes for! And the pants! And this room! Now, Your Highness, go ahead! You want to dance with Lord Claus, right?!” Jeanette exclaimed, her eyes glinting with fiery passion, as though she’d been possessed by something. “Keep your legs open to twice the width of your shoulders! Bend your knees and move your hips down!”

“H-Huuuh...?” Even though Meltia felt overwhelmed, she tried to mimic the pose.

Jeanette smiled.

“Very good! Now, stay in this position! Time for the thrusting technique! Sei!”

With her legs apart, this time Jeanette thrust out her left arm, while pressing her right arm close to her body.

“Now do as I do! Sei! Sei! Sei! Sei!”

Each time she cried out, she thrust out one arm and withdrew the other.

Meltia watched her with her mouth hanging open.

“But...what even is this?!”

“It’s karate!” Jeanette replied, still doing the exercises as she grinned broadly.

“K-Karate?”

“Yes! It’s a type of martial art from the Far Eastern islands, characterized by its striking techniques! It’s a great form of self-defense which uses your whole body and is perfect for building up your strength!”



Jeanette had learned karate long before her engagement to Claus. One of her father's merchant friends who had stayed with them for a while had taught it to her. According to the merchant, the people from the Far Eastern country studied karate from a master starting when they were children. After hearing about it, Jeanette was fascinated and immediately wanted to try it too. Since she was a girl, she didn't actually spar with anyone, but she learned how to do the "kata," or "stances," which she could practice by herself. The combat-like movements were exhilarating in a way that was different from dancing, and Jeanette had become obsessed with them.

How nostalgic! Whenever I did karate, Ariel always glared at me like I was some kind of monster! I've been so busy lately that I haven't been doing it at all... But I love karate because it makes me feel stronger!

Perhaps the reason Jeanette was always running around on an inexhaustible supply of energy was because she had learned karate as a child and still practiced it on her own from time to time. That was why karate had been the first thing that had come to mind when she'd started brainstorming a way to build up Meltia's stamina.

"Karate has many different stances," she continued. "And each stance uses different muscles. It can be practiced at a suitable pace by people of all ages, from children to the elderly, so it's perfect for you, Your Highness!" As she spoke, Jeanette's fists never stopped, cutting repeatedly through the air. "Come on! Join me!"

The princess began uncertainly imitating Jeanette.

"L-Like this...?"

"Yes! That's great! And with each strike, shout out from deep within your belly! Like this! Sei! Sei!"

"S... Sei! Sei!" Meltia thrust out her fists unsteadily.

Jeanette watched with satisfaction, and once again raised her voice spiritedly.

"Next is the Upper Level Punch! Aim upward! Sei! Sei!"

"S-Sei! Sei!"

The princess frantically tried to keep up with the exercise. The maids all exchanged a glance at the strange shouts resounding inside the room. But once they realized that Jeanette wasn't going to stop anytime soon, they gave up and shook their heads.

From then on, Jeanette and Meltia continued practicing karate every day together. The more days passed, the more strikes they did, and once Meltia got used to that, they moved onto practicing the stances.

"Your Highness, please be aware of your center of gravity when you spin! That way, you'll be able to do it smoothly!" Jeanette roared, thrusting her fist out after spinning. "By the way, this move is very effective in freeing yourself from a ruffian's hold and breaking his clavicle!"

"That sounds a bit dangerous, doesn't it?!"

"Well, it *is* a form of self-defense! But don't you think it'll be useful to you?!"

After all, Meltia was a princess. It was unlikely that anything would happen to her considering how peaceful their country was, but in the worst-case scenario, if someone did try going after her, her knowledge of self-defense arts could be very beneficial.

"That might be true..." murmured the head maid, who was watching them from the side. "Her Highness's unparalleled beauty could attract some lawless miscreants, in which case this could be useful for her..."

"Right?!" Jeanette exclaimed, once more turning around and slamming her bare foot down onto the floor.

Another maid started muttering.

"And it feels like we're watching some kind of oriental dance. It's...kind of fun!"

"Right?!" Jeanette repeated, stomping on the floor again. "Not only is karate ideal for self-defense, it's also beautiful as a performance! In other words, it's the perfect type of solitary martial art!"

"I get it already, so can you go over this move again? I can't remember it,"

Meltia interrupted.

Jeanette hurriedly fixed her posture.

“Oh! Sorry, I got too excited and started rambling...! Anyway, I’m going to do it one more time, nice and slow!”

This continued every day, until bit by bit, the princess’s complexion started improving. Her aquamarine eyes gained even more of a sparkle than before.

Her eyes are like diamonds, but even brighter! Jeanette thought while observing Meltia.

“Your Highness, I feel like your punches are a lot sharper lately!”

“Really? To be honest, I agree,” Meltia admitted with delight, wiping the back of her neck with the towel Jeanette had handed to her. “And even though I’m moving about so much, I don’t feel dizzy. If anything, my body has become lighter. How strange... Before, even standing up was difficult for me. But now, I feel like I can keep going and going.”

“That’s proof of you building your stamina!” Jeanette replied with a laugh. “Isn’t it so much fun to be able to move your body around freely? And honestly, punching feels so refreshing!”

“Yes, it does. That’s a benefit you won’t find in dance,” Meltia pointed out with a smirk.

Jeanette laughed again.

“Your Highness, how about we take a walk outside for a change?” Jeanette asked cheerfully. It was another day, and for once she was wearing a dress as opposed to the karate outfit.

But in contrast to Jeanette’s grin, Meltia grimaced in dismay.

“I hate being outside. The sunlight might burn my skin!”

“It won’t if you use a sun parasol! If you’re worried, you can use my ultra-protective blackout parasol!” Jeanette said, swiftly presenting the princess with said item.

Meltia's expression only soured further.

"But what if my feet hurt? I'm not used to being outside for long."

"You don't need to worry about that either, Your Highness! You've built up your stamina by now, and if you're still unsure, you can use these deluxe boots from Matheson!" With another quick movement, Jeanette produced a pair of long boots to show the other girl.

The princess frowned so deeply that her eyes were almost shut.

"I see you're well prepared."

"Thank you! I've actually been beavering away to develop these new products just in anticipation of today!" Jeanette explained, her cheeks flushing a little. "If you don't want to carry a parasol, I can offer you a hat with a sunblock function built in! I also have knee supporters, and if you're concerned about bugs in the garden, I have an insect repellent, though it does have a bit of a noticeable scent! And taking your physical condition into account, I've prepared honey lemon drops! You can pop one in your mouth while you walk and—"

"Oh, all right, already!" Meltia interrupted, finally admitting defeat. "You're persistent and well prepared to a fault! But fine—I can take a walk. It's no big deal!"

Yay! My enthusiasm got through to her! Jeanette thought with a happy grin, not at all put off by Meltia's dudgeon.

"Anyway, should I wear these?" Meltia asked while pointing to the long boots.

"Yes! These are Matheson Trading's newest product. They're marketed as riding boots, but in reality, they're much more than that. Please try them on!"

At Jeanette's urging, Meltia reluctantly put the boots on. She then took a step, and her shapely eyebrows furrowed.

"What on earth? They're so easy to walk in!" she exclaimed, gazing at her own legs in confusion. "You said they're riding boots, but they're not heavy at all. I tried wearing riding boots once in the past, and I remember being annoyed about how tiresome they were to walk in."

"That's because the leather of these boots has been altered to make it as light

as possible!”

“And I feel like there’s something soft under my feet, which also helps with walking. Almost like...like...”

“Like you’re walking on clouds?” Jeanette supplemented.

“Yes! That’s the perfect way to describe it. How is that possible?” the princess asked, genuinely astonished.

Jeanette smiled as she began explaining.

“They’re actually made with special soles designed for shock absorption. The material is a secret, but you can feel the difference when you walk in them for yourself!”

“I do feel like I could walk anywhere in these boots...”

“That’s great! I was going to propose walking from one end of the palace to the other today, you see!”

Meltia looked startled.

“H-Hold on! How am I supposed to go that far on my first walk?! Do you even know how large the palace is?!”

“It’s...” Jeanette murmured. *How much of a distance is there from one end of the palace to the other, again?*

While Jeanette did her utmost to recall the information, Meltia glared at her with discontent.

“Either way, I refuse! I don’t care how good these boots are, I don’t want to walk that much! The thought alone is terrifying!”

“But...!” Jeanette remonstrated.

Right then, someone chuckled nearby. Jeanette turned around and her face brightened.

“Oh, Lord Clau—”

Yet before she could finish, Meltia cried out even more loudly.

“Lord Claus!” The princess practically leaped in his direction. She was on the

verge of hugging Claus, who stopped her by placing his hands on her shoulders.

“I see you’re doing well, Lady Tia.” Claus spoke with a smile, but didn’t relax his grip on her.

Meltia struggled for a brief moment, still attempting to embrace him, but finally gave up.

“You’re so stingy, Lord Claus! Can’t I give you a little hug? Just as a greeting!”

The man simply continued to smile while remaining silent. His eyes weren’t smiling at all, however. Numerous women must’ve said the same thing to him in the past. Jeanette shuddered to think how those events could’ve played out.

“Anyway,” Claus said, changing the topic, “Jeanette, it looks like Lady Tia doesn’t want to walk with you. So how about we take a walk instead, just you and me?” he asked with a grin, presenting his arm to Jeanette.

“Just you and me?” Jeanette echoed.

“I’ll go!” Meltia interjected, nimbly wrapping her arms around Claus’s like a snake.

Claus’s expression hardened.

“Lady Tia, I was offering my arm to *Jeanette*, not *you*.”

“Humph! What does it matter? First come, first served!”

“Lady Tia...” Claus’s eyes narrowed sharply. Seeing this, Jeanette hurriedly spoke up.

“H-How about we all walk together?!” she suggested.

Usually, Claus was a gentleman, but on occasion he could be unforgiving. Jeanette recalled how ruthlessly he’d confronted her ex-stepmother and Ariel. The memory made her heart pound. *Then again, Her Highness might not mind him acting like that. Still...* Jeanette stole a glance at Meltia, who rejected her proposal without a care in the world.

“I want to take a walk with Lord Claus and nobody else!”

“I’m not going anywhere without Jeanette,” Claus replied firmly.

“Oh, *fine*... Let’s all go together then.”

I knew it... I feel like Her Highness is used to Lord Claus treating her coldly!

After all, Meltia was keeping Claus under house arrest in the palace against his will. He might treat her a bit coolly here and there, but she didn't mind at all.

Regardless, the bizarre trio of Jeanette, Claus, and Meltia all departed on a walk together.

"Lady Meltia... I'm having a hard time walking and we're drawing attention, so would you please let go of my arm? I'm sure it must be hard for you to keep up with my pace too," Claus said.

They weren't walking at the usual, elegant pace of nobles. This was supposed to be reinforcement training for Meltia's stamina, so they were practically jogging. Even so, Meltia clung frantically to Claus's arm, making for quite a strange sight and catching the eye of everyone they passed by.

Yet in spite of his words, she refused to let up.

"No!" she insisted irritably.

Claus sighed.

"Sorry, Jeanette," he said. "I wanted to help, but instead I made a spectacle of myself. You shouldn't be seeing me like this..."

"It's okay, Lord Claus!" Jeanette assured him. "If anything, your presence has motivated Her Highness, so I'm grateful!"

If Claus hadn't shown up, Meltia would probably still be throwing a tantrum about the walk. The fact that she had her arms entangled with Claus's was no big deal. Or at least...it *shouldn't* have been. But the sight of the princess clinging so closely to Claus that her chest pressed against him caused Jeanette to feel a stab of pain. She tilted her head in wonderment.

Huh? Maybe I'm in poorer shape than I thought. Are my muscles aching?

"But...don't you think...that I got a bit better...thanks to all the...exercise?!" Meltia asked in between desperate gasps for air. Claus cast her a pitying look.

"Don't push yourself too much, Lady Tia. It'd be troublesome if you collapsed here."

“What?! Troublesome?! I’m doing my best here just for you!” Meltia shrieked.

“I don’t remember asking you to do that.”

“Y-You’re so mean!” the princess screeched.

Claus looked at her with exasperation, yet Jeanette noticed something else. *Lord Claus says harsh things to Her Highness, but I think he’s actually enjoying himself a bit...* Despite his exasperation, he wasn’t looking at Meltia with the same genuine disdain he’d held toward Leila and Ariel. *He often praises Her Highness in his letters, and he even calls her ‘Lady Tia’...* Jeanette had heard him use that affectionate nickname ever since the piano incident, and he seemed completely used to saying it.

As Jeanette pondered, Claus suddenly looked her way.

“Are you all right, Jeanette? You’ve been quiet for a while. Did you get tired?” he asked, using his free arm to hug Jeanette tightly.

“N-No!”

“Hey! Stop showing off when I’m right here!” Meltia demanded.

Claus laughed.

“I’m only getting started, you know?” he responded, placing a quick kiss on Jeanette’s forehead.

Naturally, this infuriated the princess. Her reaction amused Claus, who laughed once more. Jeanette blushed and shyly pressed her hand to where Claus had kissed her.

What am I even worrying about? Lord Claus is prioritizing me just as he always has! But even so, she couldn’t forget how happy Claus had looked while gazing at Meltia moments ago. That image stayed lodged in Jeanette’s mind for a long time, like a fish bone stuck in the back of one’s throat.

“So, is it time for the finishing touches?” inquired Christine, sipping on her tea. Jeanette was visiting the woman in Duke Pablo’s townhouse.

“Yes,” she replied firmly. “Her Highness is used to doing the karate stances,

and she can finish the walks without any problems! Her bouts of anemia have decreased drastically, and I think her complexion has improved a lot too!”

For the past month, Meltia had exercised every single day with Jeanette. They progressively intensified the training, and the princess’s stamina had noticeably improved. Her voice was even more vigorous than before, and her cheeks, which had once been pale and unhealthy, had regained a rosy gleam. Meltia had once been a sickly, frail beauty, but now she had developed a vibrant, lively spirit, which made her look all the more at the peak of her beauty.

“In that case, she shouldn’t have any issues attending a ball, right?” Christine prompted. Jeanette nodded energetically. The duchess almost returned the gesture, but then... “Pfft! Tee hee!” She started laughing and covered her mouth with her hand.

“What’s so funny, my beautiful wife?” asked Duke Pablo as he entered the room.

Christine laughed even harder, turning her gaze to her husband.

“Hee hee! Listen, Layton. Jeanette and I were just talking about Tia.”

“Ah, right, the princess ordeal. So has Claus managed to return home safely yet?”

“Not yet. We’re in the middle of coming up with a strategy for that,” Christine clarified. “But gosh, Jeanette is so funny. She actually managed to get that selfish child to practice karate!”

“Ka-ra-te?” the duke repeated in confusion.

Jeanette’s eyes lit up.

“Yes! It’s a martial art from the Far Cast, and the perfect method of strengthening your stamina!” she explained, tightening her fists and thrusting them out. “Sei! Sei!”

Duke Pablo watched her with wide eyes.

“You got Her Highness to do *that*?”

“I told you! Isn’t it hilarious? Tee hee!” Christine giggled. “This is a feat only Jeanette could’ve accomplished. No other lady would’ve been able to make Tia

practice karate—the thought wouldn't even cross their minds! Just how are you able to do such things?" The duchess continued laughing. The incident must've tickled her funny bone.

"It's not such a big deal," Jeanette replied bashfully. "I got her to do it by using the prospect of her dancing with Lord Claus as bait."

"It's even funnier that that worked!"

"But how is Her Highness practicing karate related to Claus's rescue?" the duke questioned in puzzlement.

At that, Jeanette and Christine exchanged a look with each other and smirked.

"It's been a while, Your Majesties," Christine said, offering the king and queen a majestic curtsy.

Jeanette observed from the side. They were in one of the chambers within the palace, and Dr. Jaquilla was next to her. Following the duchess, the two of them also lowered their heads before the royal couple.

The king, sitting upon a chair, happily addressed his sister.

"It's been a while, Christine! Are you doing well?"

"Are your husband and sons healthy?" asked the queen with a smile.

"We're all perfectly well, thank you," Christine answered.

"Very good. And who's that behind you?" the king questioned.

Jeanette stepped forward.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesties. I am Jeanette Roussel."

"Jeanette Roussel?" Eric echoed. Thanks to Dr. Jaquilla's impregnable defense, Meltia's parents still hadn't discovered that Jeanette was visiting the palace every day to teach their daughter karate. As the king tried to recall who Jeanette was, Christine supplied an explanation.

"She's my friend, as well as Lord Claus's fiancée."

The king and queen stiffened as they realized Jeanette's identity.

“O-Oh, right... So you’re his...” the king trailed off quietly. He must’ve felt guilty. “Ahem. I do feel sorry for what I did. I’ll pay you back with a gift the next time you visit...”

“Brother,” Christine interrupted flatly. “Do you *really* think you can resolve things that way?”

“Uh...”

As the king sank into silence, the queen spoke up to pacify the situation.

“Christine. We’re a family, so let me tell you this much: We were aware of the fact that Claus already had a fiancée. But...we just wanted our darling daughter’s dream to come true, even if only for a moment.”

“Exactly!” Eric added. “Tia’s always been weak, and when she was a child, we had no idea how long she had left to live...even though it was a load of hogwash. But now, she’s sixteen. Sixteen, you know? Sixteen! That’s old enough for her to marry. And as her father, I want her dreams to come true...” he emphasized, while the queen teared up at his words.

Christine listened to them with a polite smile, but behind her, Jeanette watched them fixedly. A vein of anger bulged on her temple.

“Well, I understand how you feel,” the duchess said at last after a heavy pause. “Tia is your long-awaited daughter, after all. If I managed to have a daughter now, I’m sure I’d fawn over her as well.”

The king nodded vigorously.

“Therefore,” Christine continued, “we don’t blame the two of you. Isn’t that right, Lady Jeanette?”

Jeanette took a step forward.

“Yes! I don’t blame either of you at all! If anything, I’m thankful to have had the honor of becoming Her Highness’s acquaintance! And thanks to her, I was able to develop lots of new products!”

She was telling the truth. Leaving aside the matter of Claus, becoming acquainted with Meltia had been a blessing for Jeanette. They were able to market Anemia-Be-Gone as the perfect drink for women, beloved even by

Princess Meltia herself. *Thanks to that, the sales are through the roof!* Jeanette couldn't help grinning at the recollection of just how much money the company had made recently.

"Really? Then I'm glad," the king said with obvious relief.

"I also met with Tia recently, and I noticed she's looking a lot livelier than usual," Christine added.

"Ah, that's true! It's all thanks to Dr. Jaquilla's treatment."

Dr. Jaquilla bowed at the king's praise. Meltia's improvement was actually because of Jeanette, but the royal couple wasn't aware of that. Jeanette also feigned ignorance.

"That's great. In that case..." Christine's eyes glinted. This was the critical phase of the plan. "Isn't it time for Tia to return to high society?" she proposed with a smile.

The king's face soured.

"High society..." he murmured, unenthused.

"Indeed. You just said yourself that she's of marriageable age, didn't you? If you're able to think about such things, then isn't it her royal duty to participate in high society?" Christine pressed. "Besides, Tia actually told me that she wants to attend a ball. I wouldn't mind hosting one, if it came down to it."

In reality, Meltia hadn't said that she wanted to attend a ball, but rather that she wanted to dance with Claus. However, Christine chose a broad interpretation of the princess's words that suited her own convenience. *Technically*, what she'd said wasn't a lie.

Even so, the king didn't look convinced.

"A ball? Hmm... I wonder..."

"What are you fretting about? It's a part of a noble's duties to attend a couple of balls here and there. That's all the more true for a princess."

"That may be so," the queen said in support of her husband. "But Tia fainted during her debut. She was so depressed afterward! I'm worried that if she pushes herself too far, the same thing will happen again."

“Your Majesty...”

“Hmm...” Eric muttered. “I’m worried as well. In the worst-case scenario, she may not be able to recover.”

“Not you too, brother!” Christine sighed.

The couple’s overprotective attitude was just as strong as the duchess had predicted. *To them, Her Highness might still be a little girl*, Jeanette thought. At least, that was how the situation appeared to her.

Christine was getting fed up, and her expression grew more severe.

“As Tia’s aunt, I believe you’re both being overprotective of her. Didn’t you just admit that Dr. Jaquilla’s treatment is effective?”

“I did, but that doesn’t mean my daughter’s ready to attend a ball,” Eric snapped.

Jeanette once more stepped forth with a smile on her face.

“Pardon my insolence, but may I say a word?”

“What is it?” the king asked, turning to Jeanette with apparent suspicion.

Most noblewomen would’ve been frightened to have the nation’s most powerful man look at them in this way. However, Jeanette felt perfectly fine. After all, she had faced Leila and Ariel in the past, as well as merchants and black marketeers who’d looked even more intimidating. The king might’ve been the most powerful man in the country, but it wasn’t as if a single misstep would cost Jeanette her life. At worst, she might lose her peerage or assets. As such, she continued smiling without a hint of fear as she spoke.

“Even if Her Highness attends a ball, she doesn’t have to stay from the beginning until the end. She could dance once or twice so as not to exhaust herself and then leave. That way, she’d still be able to say that she attended.”

“Right! That’s a great idea!” Christine joined in, quickly backing Jeanette up. “It may be asking too much for Tia to do everything perfectly the first time. But like Jeanette said, even just one dance would be enough. It would still become proof of Tia’s return to high society, and I’m sure it’d boost her own confidence. Don’t you agree, Dr. Jaquilla?”

“Yes, indeed. This idea has my seal of approval. I’m certain that Her Highness will be able to do one dance in her current condition,” Jaquilla insisted, pressing his hand to his chest earnestly.

The king and queen exchanged a look. They looked on the verge of arguing back, so Jeanette went on.

“And...I would like you both, as Her Highness’s parents, to have a little more trust in her.”

A flash of emotion swirled through their eyes at those words.

“Her Highness Princess Meltia is no longer a little girl,” Jeanette said. “She has her own will, and she’s a wonderful young lady who has worked hard to improve herself.”

Meltia was sixteen—she was on the boundary of child and adult. From her parents’ perspective, she was still a child they couldn’t help but worry about. But Jeanette was from the same generation as Meltia, and in her eyes, the princess had already begun ascending the stairway to adulthood.

All that’s left now is for her parents to trust her and let go of her hand.

Jeanette’s father had done the same for her. When the time was right, he had let go of her and watched over her while allowing her to do as she pleased. That was what it meant to trust one’s child.

And I think that’s how children become adults.

Jeanette’s glittering green eyes bored into the king. In the end, he pressed his hand to his forehead as he succumbed.

“So this is what it means to let the bird leave the nest, huh...? So be it. I’ll allow Tia to attend a ball.”

“But darling...!” the queen exclaimed.

However, Eric shook his head.

“My sister and that young lady are right. Becoming old enough to marry also means that you’re old enough to take responsibility. If we don’t trust that Tia’s ready to dance once or twice, then who will?”

The queen was at a loss for words. She turned her gaze to Dr. Jaquilla, silently imploring for his help.

“I’m ninety-five percent sure it’ll be fine,” he said.

“See? Even Dr. Jaquilla agrees. You’re the only one left,” the king urged.

At last, the queen steeled her resolve as well.

“Very well. But I want you to be around Tia in case the worst happens, Dr. Jaquilla.”

Christine’s eyes gleamed. She quickly looked at the physician.

“Do you agree, Dr. Jaquilla?”

“Of course.”

“In that case...” Christine smiled her most beautiful smile of the day yet. “It’s decided.”

“Listen! I was allowed to attend a ball!” Meltia exclaimed pompously when Jeanette arrived for the practice session.

“Congratulations! I’m sure all the nobles will be overjoyed to hear that!” Jeanette said. She had been the one who’d put in so much effort to make this happen, but she gave no indication of it as she grinned. There was something bigger on her mind. “Your Highness, might I ask you for a favor...?”

“Wh-What? You have a funny look in your eyes!” Meltia said, wary of the way Jeanette was acting even more animated than usual.

“Will you permit Matheson Trading to give you a gown to wear for the ball?!” Jeanette asked with great enthusiasm.

“Matheson Trading?”

“Yes!”

I want Her Highness to wear our newest creation! Jeanette thought. Of course, this was part of her scheme as a businesswoman. In the past, she had given Christine a dress made with Orlande silk to wear, and it became a hot topic within high society. If somebody like Meltia—whose every little

appearance at an event caused a storm—were to wear a Matheson dress, it was sure to become an instant hit.

But on top of that, Jeanette also had her own personal expectations. *I mean, the princess looks beautiful no matter what she wears! I definitely want to see her in one of our gowns!!!*

If Meltia found this out, she was sure to become angry and yell something like “I’m not your personal dress-up doll!”

Still, Jeanette couldn’t help herself from continuing.

“Of course, I’m going to arrange for a top-class, state-of-the-art dress for you, Your Highness! The tailoring will be done by my most trusted artisa—”

“I refuse,” Meltia interrupted, shooting Jeanette’s idea down in one fell swoop.

Jeanette’s shoulders drooped dejectedly.

“Oh... Really...? Would you mind telling me why?” she asked. She was willing to turn anything into an advantage, and by asking she’d at least get some information.

The princess laughed through her nose.

“My reason is obvious—I already have a dress!”

“Really?! Do you mind if I take a look?!” Jeanette asked, enthralled.

Meltia winced.

“No way. That’s part of the fun—waiting until the actual day.”

“I beg of you! I’m sure your dress must be of the highest quality! I’m just dying to know how gorgeous it truly is! I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep at night! I’m restless at the sheer thought of you in such a beautiful dress! Won’t you please let me take a look?! I wouldn’t even mind if you put it on! In fact, I’d love that very much!”

“What on earth? You’re being kind of gross,” Meltia huffed, though she didn’t look entirely displeased. “Are you really *that* desperate to see it?”

“Yes!”

“Then can you promise that you won’t copy it? Not the cut nor the color.”

“Of course! I’d never do something so presumptuous!”

“Humph... Fine, I’ll let you take a peek.”

“Hooray! Thank you so much!!!”

I wonder what kind of beautiful garment I’m about to see. I can’t wait!

Jeanette hopped up and down, having completely forgotten about karate.

“Bring my dress at once!” the princess ordered, and her maids quickly ran off to do her bidding. While they waited, she continued haughtily. “Hee hee! I’m sure you’ll be shocked when you see it. It’s so beautiful and vibrant!”

“Indeed! I’m very excited! I wonder what color it’ll be.”

“You remember how there was a Pakiran prince who visited a while ago? Lord Claus said that the green outfit he was wearing was wonderful, so I’m also going to wear a green dress!”

“Oh yes, Lord Kyuriakris did wear something like that!” Jeanette responded. She had infiltrated the palace on that day by pretending to be his companion. *If I recall correctly, he wore a traditional Pakiran outfit. Its green shade was lovely! Though rather than vibrant, it was a more muted tone. Huh...? Wait, when it comes to vibrant green dye, isn’t that...?*

At that moment, the maids returned with the dress.

“Look! This is what I’m going to wear for the ball!” Meltia shouted, pointing proudly at the gown. It was a brilliant green.

“Wow! What a gorgeous, bright shade of green it is...!”

The garment was lavishly decorated with lace, and it was dyed with a lively color resembling fresh grass. It was sure to be set off beautifully by Meltia’s pale skin. However...

“This is...” Jeanette had initially looked enraptured, yet the color suddenly drained from her face.

The princess took no notice of that, reaching for the dress.

“Well? Isn’t it lovely? I had it ordered just for me. The lace is first-class too—”

“Don’t touch that!!!” Jeanette screamed.



Shocked, Meltia flinched and then froze in place. Jeanette raced over to the princess and grabbed her slender wrist to pull her away from the dress.

“What are you doing?!” demanded the infuriated head maid. “First you dare speak to Her Highness in that tone, and now this?!”

“Please, everyone needs to get away from that dress right now!” Jeanette insisted.

“Wh-What?! Why?!”

“Quickly!!!”

At Jeanette’s desperate cries, the maids stepped away from the gown despite their confusion.

“Someone please summon Dr. Jaquilla at once! And make sure to take measures to protect yourself from poisonous fumes!”

“Poison?” Meltia tilted her head quizzically. “Are you trying to say my dress is poisoned, Jeanette?”

“Yes—and it’s deadly!” Jeanette replied, throwing the gown a stern look. It was the brightest green...just like the shade of green which was rumored to have once killed an emperor.

“What do you mean? It’s just a normal dress!”

As the princess protested, Jeanette continued glaring at the garment.

“I once read a published report from a scholar in Thoren. It mentioned that Scheele’s green contains a high level of arsenic.”

“Arsenic...?”

“It’s a deadly poison. In other words, this is a dress of death which would kill you just from putting it on.”

The maids all let out a shriek at the mention of death.

“What?!” the head maid screamed. “Do you mean to say that the tailor who sold us this dress was trying to kill Lady Tia?!”

“I can’t say that with certainty, because it’s still not widely known in our

country that the dye for this shade of green is poisonous. I have no idea if the tailor in question was aware of it either.”

Scheele’s green had originally blown up in popularity not far from this nation, in the Kingdom of Dillo. When Jeanette’s father had heard of it, he’d tried getting a hold of it for Roussel Corporation, yet for some reason a lot of the merchants involved with it had grown sick. Headaches, fevers, and other seemingly trivial symptoms had ailed them, but the young Jeanette hadn’t overlooked that. When she voiced her concerns to her father, he had instantly canceled the deal.

Father had joint ownership over Scheele’s green with the other merchants, but they trusted him and followed him in divesting themselves of it, so it never became popular in our country. But that’s also why the fear of the dye of death hasn’t reached us either!

Perhaps a tailor unaware of the deadliness of the green pigment had unknowingly delivered it to the princess.

The head maid was in a frenzy.

“How outrageous! Whether they knew of it or not, selling a poisoned dress to the princess is a serious crime! We must inform Their Majesties at once!”

The woman began stomping away, but Jeanette quickly caught her arm.

“Please let them know that this shade of green is poisonous! It may cause harm if left unchecked. Their Majesties ought to release a public warning... No, in fact, an outright ban on selling this pigment—Scheele’s green!”

“All right. I’ll let them know,” the maid agreed before walking away.

Jeanette breathed a sigh of relief. *With that, we should be able to avoid any further harm!* She then turned to look at the princess, who was standing there in a daze.

“It just looks like a dress... Is it really poisonous?” she murmured.

Jeanette nodded sorrowfully.

“I have no means to prove it here and now, but there are many substances that look beautiful but are actually harmful to our bodies. Cobalt violet is an

infamously toxic pigment, for example. I've also heard of a powder used in the Far East as makeup—but its high white lead content caused many deaths. And Scheele's green led to many people in Dillo becoming sick."

"So if I had put on that dress...?"

"It would've affected not only you, but most likely anyone else who touched it or stayed near you."

Meltia staggered on her feet and sank down to the floor.

"I may not have known about it...but I very nearly put people's lives in danger..." she said, shaking all over.

Jeanette crouched down next to the princess.

"Thank you for showing me that dress, Your Highness. Because of that, we prevented anything bad from happening."

Meltia was silent. Her trembling, pale blue eyes gazed up at Jeanette as if begging for help. Jeanette smiled gently.

"It's okay. I'll always be here to assist you whenever you want me to."

"Really? You'll help me? But I..." Although Meltia didn't finish her sentence, Jeanette had a good idea of what the princess had wanted to say: "But I've been trying to steal your fiancé."

Jeanette smiled again.

"These are entirely separate matters. You're my friend, Your Highness."

Meltia's eyes widened.

"Friend...?"

"Oops! That slipped out on the spur of the moment—how impudent of me! My apologies! A-Anyway..." Jeanette stammered, trying to conceal her slipup. "Am I right to assume you have no other dress to wear for the ball?! So how about it?! I know you may be reluctant, but why not give Matheson's dress a try?! It won't be green, but I'm confident I'll be able to provide you with a dress to match your beauty, Your Highness!"

"Fine..." Meltia said, cutting off Jeanette's frantic words. "I'll wear Matheso

—*your* dress.”

“Thank you!!!” Jeanette sprang up, overjoyed.

“Well, I have no other choice. Since I owe you for spotting the poison, I ought to listen to one of your requests.”

“Oh! In that case, please let Lord Claus return home!”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’ll listen to *one* request. My debt to you will end once I wear your dress. And I forbid you from withdrawing that offer!”

“Ugh...”

As Jeanette groaned, Meltia giggled in response.

Chapter 4: The Fairy Princess Meltia

For the first time in a long while, the royal family was hosting a ball. The attendees were abuzz with the discussion of the Fairy Princess.

“Is it really true that Her Highness Princess Meltia will make an appearance today?”

“I think so. That’s what her aunt, Duchess Pablo, said. Look, there she is talking to Their Majesties! There must be some credibility to the rumor.” The young noblewoman pointed to where Christine was conversing with the king and queen. The young noblewoman also kept glancing around every few seconds, as though she were waiting for someone.

“I wonder what brought this on right at this time,” the other young lady mused. “I heard Her Highness is very feeble because she suffers from an incurable illness. Do you suppose she got cured?”

“Maybe she’s trying to find a partner? She’s sixteen, so she’s quite eligible for marriage!”

While the women squealed among themselves, the gentlemen were also glancing around wildly with bloodshot eyes.

“I can’t wait to see her beauty in person! She’s not married or engaged yet, is she? Maybe I have a chance.”

“Don’t even bother. Everyone says she’s the apple of Their Majesties’ eyes. Can you imagine what would happen if you were to hurt her? Losing your rank would be the least of your worries. They might throw you and your entire family into prison.”

“Besides, Her Highness would never take *you* on as her partner. Just look in the mirror.”

“What?! How dare you?! And that’s rich coming from *you*!”

“Excuse me?!”

These kinds of conversations blended with the sound of laughter. The nobles were in high spirits indeed, and Jeanette watched them together with Kyuriakris.

“Good grief. Look at them, making merry,” Kyuriakris remarked snidely. “Are they really *that* excited about this princess?”

“I think some people are so excited because *you’re* here too, Lord Kyuriakris!” Jeanette asserted.

The prince’s hair was brushed back and held in immaculate shape with a styling product, and he was wearing the formal outfit of Pakiran royalty. The purple robe, decorated with finely detailed patterns, was fitted perfectly to the shape of his body. In some places the material was loose, and in others tied tightly, enhancing his exotic beauty and allure. The nearby noblewomen were all fanning their flushed faces with folding fans while sending him furtive looks.

“Humph! I shouldn’t have revealed my identity. It irritates me how they’re falling all over themselves now,” he huffed. Indeed, the reason he was the target of all these passionate glances was because he’d finally come clean about being the first prince of Pakira back when he’d helped Jeanette infiltrate the palace. Now, he was no longer able to get away with pretending to be a waiter and had to behave like a dignified royal.

“Really?” Jeanette asked with a grin. “Well, I’m glad to be able to see you in your formal clothes! I already knew what sort of outfits Pakiran royalty wear, but actually seeing one in person is totally different! This lovely purple robe only shines so brilliantly because you’re the one wearing it, Lord Kyuriakris. By the way, how is this pigment even achieved? Oh, the green outfit you wore that other time was also made with a method I’ve never seen before!”

Jeanette’s praise and questions were pure and genuine. Pleased by this, Kyuriakris laughed smugly through his nose.

“Oh? So you’ve finally noticed my charm. And you of course noticed the uniqueness of my robe. Would you like to learn my country’s secret manufacturing method? Then let’s forget this whole ball and go to my place instead—”

“Lord Kyuriakris, they’re here!!! It’s Her Highness and Lord Claus!!!” Jeanette

said excitedly, having spotted the pair.

Kyuriakris seemed dissatisfied at having been cut off and didn't reply.

All the guests noticed the appearance of Meltia and Claus, quickly turning to look their way. The dance hall grew silent. Their Majesties watched their daughter, their gazes swimming with anxiety and anticipation. Only Christine and Jeanette observed the pair with sparkling eyes.

"Woow... She was already beautiful, but today she's truly radiant!" Jeanette whispered.

Meltia's hair was done up and decorated with pearls. She had also donned a pearl necklace, and she looked as though she were emanating a white light from within. Perhaps it was because on top of her naturally graceful appearance, her dress, though white, shone wondrously in all the colors of the rainbow. At first glance, it looked to be made of white silk, but each time the material shifted, it emitted a curious, rippling light, like an aurora.

"That fabric is similar to Orlonde silk," Kyuriakris noted.

"You have a sharp eye! I wouldn't expect any less from you, Lord Kyuriakris!" Jeanette replied brightly. "You see, while Orlonde silk comes in many colors, surprisingly, white wasn't one of them. It's very difficult to retain the basic white color and have it change shade only when it moves. But we finally managed to solve that problem, so Matheson Trading arranged for Her Highness to wea—"

"Huh. I heard that Claus would be escorting her, but he's even matched accessories with her?" Kyuriakris asked, ruthlessly interrupting Jeanette's rambling. He was referring to the pearl pinned to Claus's tie.

"Ah, yes! Her Highness said she wanted to match with him!"

"I see. I wonder if she threw a tantrum about it..." he muttered with a distant gaze, as though having figured out something. "But are you okay with this, Jeanette? Matching outfits is proof of a close relationship, don't you think?"

Claus had once mentioned that he'd always made sure his and Jeanette's outfits matched in order to show everyone that they were engaged. It was almost like a way of marking someone as yours. However, Jeanette's eyes

widened at the question.

“Huh? Is there a problem with that?”

“I guess not... I thought *that* feeling would sprout for you sometime soon, but it seems like I was wrong.”

That feeling? I wonder what he means? Jeanette pondered the matter, but it wasn't long before her gaze was once again stolen by Meltia and Claus.

“Just look at them! They really look like a painting...” someone said while sighing wistfully. Jeanette agreed from the bottom of her heart.

I totally get it! They're the most beautiful people I've ever seen!!!

When Meltia opened her mouth, it was a different matter, but as long as she was silent, her beauty was flawless. Thick eyelashes fringed her downcast eyes. Her perfectly pointed nose was so slim that it almost looked artificial. It was a miracle in itself that such a gorgeous human being could even exist.

The same went for Claus. His silver hair, which was slightly more rigid than the princess's, fluttered divinely. As he smiled, his violet eyes were filled with both sweetness and seductiveness.

Everything about the pair from head to toe was in perfect harmony. The onlookers felt as though they were staring at a historical masterpiece.

At last, music began gently flowing through the venue. Meltia and Claus started to dance together, their majestic movements causing everyone else's breaths to hitch.

“They look so good together... Look, the men who had their eye on the princess are stunned by all this beauty!” a noblewoman commented quietly.

“Oh, you're right. They finally remembered their place,” another replied, and the two of them giggled. “But yes, Her Highness and Lord Claus look perfect together. Just watching them fills me with joy.”

“I know! I hope they get married.”

“That'd be so wonderful! They'd make a stunning, flawless couple!”

“Their presence alone would fill high society with brilliance! And if Her

Highness became a countess, wouldn't we also have a chance at befriending her?"

As the ladies chattered elatedly, one of them suddenly murmured something.

"But...didn't Lord Claus already have a fiancée?"

"Oh!" all the women exclaimed in unison. Jeanette felt their gazes home in on her.

They're looking at me...!

She did her best to keep her expression neutral and pretend she didn't notice. Relieved that she apparently didn't hear them, the noblewomen shuffled closer and began talking as quietly as mice.

"There she is..."

"Right, Jeanette Roussel..."

Judging by the fact that the women didn't proceed to slander her, Jeanette must've finally earned her place in high society. (After all, every single person who'd ever spoken ill of her lost the opportunity to buy trendy new items, and so people had learned their lesson.)

"Well, all I'm saying is that Her Highness and Lord Claus suit each other. That's fine, right?"

"Right, just saying that is not a bad thing."

"Exactly. This doesn't count as slander...does it?"

It was a subtle way of expressing their feelings. They kept their language vague because they were wary of Jeanette's presence.

Still, I understand where they're coming from... she thought, turning her gaze back to the dancing pair. *Her Highness can actually stand next to Lord Claus without looking out of place, unlike me. They really do look like they're right out of a painting. Her Highness is a princess at the end of the day...*

Not to mention, if Claus married the princess, then just like Duke Pablo, he'd obtain a powerful weapon in the form of the royal family's backing. Royal lineage wasn't something Jeanette could give Claus, no matter how hard she

tried.

And while Lord Claus is a gentleman and always treats women kindly, I feel like he's especially let his guard down around Her Highness.

Meltia's karate training had paid off, as she was enjoying the dance without gasping for air. Claus seemed peaceful as well, with no trace of animosity or exasperation. He looked very much at ease.

They've been living in the palace together for two months now, haven't they...?

Jeanette had noticed it ever since she began acting as Dr. Jaquilla's assistant, but Meltia often went to Claus's room even outside of her study times, and they spent a surprisingly long time together. Meltia was also a quick learner and excellent student. Jeanette herself had noticed as much when instructing the princess in something she disliked—fitness. Claus, who taught Meltia on subjects that were her forte, must've found her an even better pupil. It would've been strange if those two hadn't grown closer in their time together, just as the king and queen had planned.

"They really do...suit each other..." Jeanette muttered before she could stop herself.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Kyuriakris asked.

Jeanette quickly shook her head.

"No, it's nothing!"

I wonder why I blurted that out just now?

She found it strange, but nevertheless she went back to watching Claus. He and Meltia were holding hands, their bodies pressed close, and they smiled while whispering to each other.

This was not an unusual sight. Nobles of the opposite sex were permitted physical contact in public exclusively during balls. Whether someone had a partner or not, it was normal for people to touch each other during a dance. It was what everyone did. But even though Jeanette acknowledged that inwardly, her brows furrowed ever so slightly.

Huh? What's going on...?

For some reason, her chest felt tight. Her heart was pounding as quick as an alarm bell, and her stomach coiled in on itself as though someone was squeezing it.

Oh no! Did I eat something bad?!

Jeanette's body and stomach were both strong, to put it mildly. She rarely suffered from food poisoning, but it wasn't an impossibility. She turned to the side and began to draw in long breaths in an attempt to calm herself down.

Kyuriakris noticed what she was doing, and frowned.

"What's wrong, Jeanette? Do you feel unwell?"

"No!" she denied hurriedly. "I'm perfectly fine, just like always!"

Kyuriakris chuckled.

"I see. That's good. In that case...since we have the chance, will you dance with me?"

"Gladly!"

Jeanette and Kyuriakris walked out onto the dance floor together. As they danced, Kyuriakris's lead was more masculine than Claus's, and he spun Jeanette around in a more vigorous fashion. He was grinning in satisfaction.

"I thought revealing my true identity only came with downsides, but now I see there are advantages as well."

"Advantages?" she repeated.

"Yes. I can dance with you, Jeanette," Kyuriakris said, and slipped in a kiss to the back of her hand.

"Wah!"

That he was able to sneak a kiss like that during a dance...such a swift and refined movement! Jeanette thought, impressed by a rather enigmatic aspect of the situation.

"Oh? Claus is still dancing. That princess is really doing her best," Kyuriakris pointed out.

She followed his line of sight and saw that the pair was indeed still going. Their expressions were even more relaxed than before. There was a sense of intimacy around them, so much so that a stranger might think they were lovers.

Jeanette fell silent. That sight filled her with an indescribable feeling.

“Ow!” Kyuriakris exclaimed, and only upon hearing his groan did Jeanette realize that she had stepped on his foot.

“I’m so sorry! You should check for an injury!”

“No, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it, it happens.”

“But if you’re actually hurt...!” Jeanette insisted, dragging the reluctant prince away from the dance floor.

“What? It wasn’t that serious. I’m perfectly fine.”

“If you’re sure...” she said in a fluster.

“Anyway, did you notice something?” Kyuriakris asked in a knowing tone. “I feel like for a while now, you haven’t been able to focus.”

“No, not really...! If I had to say, I might be a bit concerned that Her Highness will collapse—”

“You’re lying,” he said firmly. “You should know best of all that the princess has the endurance to dance until the end.”

“Well...”

Indeed, Jeanette thought so too. Meltia’s daily karate training hadn’t just been for show. She had built up her stamina remarkably fast and improved her skills so much that even Jeanette was surprised at how clean her techniques had become. Dancing should’ve been a breeze for the princess now.

Then why am I...?

As Jeanette wondered, Kyuriakris gave her a hard stare.

“Jeanette, take a good long look at those two.”

“Huh...?”

At his urging, she once again turned her gaze toward the pair. Meltia was

bursting with vitality even now, dancing animatedly. Claus watched her zealous movements with a tenderness in his eyes that he hadn't shown to anyone but Jeanette in the past.

A stab of pain went through her heart.

"Ngh..."

Without thinking, she pressed her hand to her chest. *I might actually be unwell...!* Worse yet, she was struggling to breathe properly.

"I-I'm sorry, Lord Kyuriakris. I think I might be in poor shape today after all. I'm going to take a breather on that terrace over there!"

Jeanette sped off without even waiting for his reply. It was uncouth for a lady to run in public, but she didn't care about that right now. *My health and life come first!* Clutching her chest and gasping for air, she ran.

By the time she reached the balcony, she was breathing heavily. But just as she thought she was alone, she heard a voice behind her.

"Phew! You're faster than I thought, Jeanette."

"Lord Kyuriakris?!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry, I didn't even notice you were following me...!"

"No, it's fine. I got to see you run at full speed, so I'm glad."

Is... Is that a compliment? Jeanette's cheeks flushed with shame.

"But you can't be feeling *that* unwell, if you're able to run so fast," the prince said.

"I'm not so sure about that..."

Her chest was still aching, and it felt tight and uncomfortable. On top of that, she felt like crying, and she had no idea why. She quickly closed her eyes.

"Ah! What kind of illness is this?! My constitution is extraordinarily strong, but I'm in so much pain for some reason... This might be bad!"

"I don't think it's an *illness*."

"Huh?" She opened her eyes, and realized that Kyuriakris was gazing at her gently.

“Well, I guess some people *would* call it an illness... But either way, I know what emotion you’re feeling.”

“Emotion? So it’s not a sickness?”

“No.” Kyuriakris turned to look toward the dance hall. “Jeanette, the pain you’re feeling right now is a result of jealousy.”

Jeanette’s eyes widened at that word.

“Jeal...ousy...?”

“Yes, jealousy.”

She blinked a few times. Of course, she knew what that word meant. However, she’d never have guessed that was what she was feeling. Kyuriakris must’ve read that in her expression.

“Your chest started to hurt because you looked at Claus dancing with Princess Meltia, right?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you think when you saw them?”

“Um... I thought they looked very good together.”

“I see. But what about that moment when your heart ached?”

“Hmm... I thought that Lord Claus was looking at Her Highness very tenderly...” Jeanette admitted, and felt another stab in her chest.

“There it is, Jeanette. Claus looked at another woman with tenderness. That alone caused you so much pain. That’s what jealousy feels like.”

“It is...?” she asked with disbelief.

“The same goes for when you thought they looked good together,” the prince continued. “You wondered whether the princess was a better fit for him than you. That made your chest seize up, didn’t it?”

“That’s true, but...I feel like that’s just the obvious, objective truth...”

“Don’t twist the story, Jeanette. Besides, there’s an easy way to tell if you’re feeling jealous. Do you want to watch those two dancing so closely again...or

not?”

Jeanette pursed her lips tightly. His words made her realize that she didn't want to see Lord Claus dancing with Meltia again.

“I-I...!” she stammered, unable to find the words. She herself had arranged for the princess to dance with Claus. How ridiculous of her to loathe the sight of it! “Ngh...”

The pathetic feeling of jealousy turned her mind into a mess. She wanted to say something, but nothing came out, and she just kept opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish.

Kyuriakris placed his large hand on top of her head.

“Don't worry,” he told her. “No matter how good they look together, or how much fun they seem to be having, Claus has you. He doesn't want anyone else. I bet he's secretly thinking that you're more beautiful than she is. You're *not* inferior to that princess, so have some confidence in yourself.”

“Lord Kyuriakris...” Jeanette looked up at him. He gazed back at her softly. His comforting words slowly filled her chest with warmth.

“Still, I've been waiting for that feeling to finally sprout within you.”

“Sprout...?”

“Yes. I mean, you didn't feel even an inkling of jealousy before the dance, right?”

“Oh...”

Jeanette recalled Kyuriakris asking her if she was okay with seeing Claus and Meltia dance together. *At that moment, I would've never thought my chest would hurt just from seeing it...* And yet here she was, feeling exactly that.

Kyuriakris patted her head to soothe her.

“Hey, it's normal to feel jealous. In fact, it's natural.”

“Natural...? Then do you also get jealous, Lord Kyuriakris?” she inquired, staring at him fixedly.

He had always said he wanted Jeanette as his wife. But while he often got

irritated by Claus and Jeanette being romantic together, it always seemed somewhat jokey. While Jeanette felt the pain of jealousy, Kyuriakris had never expressed a similar sentiment.

Yet as soon as Jeanette asked that, the prince's aura changed.

"Oh?" he hummed, his relaxed expression shifting into his usual predatory smile. "Could it be that you never picked up on my feelings? Did you think I proposed to you just for show, like some character in a novel?" He looked at her with eyes as sharp as a carnivore's.

Jeanette had intended her question to come across as casual, but she realized she was playing with fire.

"No!" she negated quickly. "I didn't think that at all!"

With a sense of urgency, Kyuriakris took a step closer to her.

"I felt jealous more times than I can count."

Cornered by the balcony's railing, Jeanette broke into a cold sweat as she gazed at the approaching prince.

"When you and he danced intimately together. When you shared the same carriage and returned to your joint home. When you kissed in front of everyone to celebrate your engagement. You think I didn't feel jealous during all those times?"

"I... I'm..."

"Listen, Jeanette."

Jeanette raised her hand to stop him from getting closer, but he just grabbed it.

"All those times made me seethe with jealousy. I suppressed my raging heart, stifled my wild breathing, and gritted my teeth so I could put up a cool, indifferent facade." Kyuriakris drew so close to her that she could practically feel his breath on her skin, and she gulped. "Why do you think I went through all that effort to conceal my feelings?"

"B-Because you're Lord Claus's friend...?"

“No.”

“Then, um... Because you can’t openly show your feelings as a royal?”

“Wrong again.”

“Then why...?!” Jeanette asked, troubled.

For some reason, Kyuriakris laughed. His eyes turned kind again, as though he were soothing a child.

“Because if I let you see the extent of my jealousy, I’m sure you would’ve been troubled, just like you are now.”

“You’re...probably right...”

Whenever Kyuriakris got close to Jeanette, although he was pushy, it always felt as though he was joking around. He’d propose marriage to her, and then let her run away. This chain of events almost seemed like a prearranged joke. Even if it embarrassed Jeanette, she had a friendly relationship with him. However, if a prince like him were to seriously hit her with the full force of his jealousy...

I doubt we’d be able to maintain a friendship like we do now.

“I’m a royal. I take whatever I want. I was like that in my homeland, and in the beginning, I planned to take you for myself as well. But...” Kyuriakris paused for a moment. “After spending time with you, I realized that you only smiled your most radiant smile when you were with Claus.”

Jeanette blinked at these unexpected words.

“It’s not just that you enjoy your time with him,” he went on. “There’s that hint of shyness when you smile at him too. But you never look at *me* like that. If I truly stole you from him, I’m sure that smile would be lost too... And that thought made me realize that I don’t want to rob the woman I love of her smile.”

Kyuriakris’s long fingers scooped up Jeanette’s hair.

“Lord...Kyuriakris...” she murmured.

The prince lifted a lock of her hair to his lips and kissed it. She had no idea how to respond to his shocking confession. He’d “proposed” to her many times

before now, but this was the first time she saw him so earnest and impassioned.



“Ah, you’re troubled after all, aren’t you? Damn. I didn’t mean to say this much.” Kyuriakris scratched the back of his head.

“I...”

“Don’t,” he interrupted. “I’ve known your answer for a long time now, so don’t hit me with the coup de grâce. Have some mercy.” He paused to glance over his shoulder. “In the meantime, it looks like the ‘princess’ has arrived,” he added, stepping away from Jeanette.

The princess?

“Jeanette!!!” Before Jeanette could ask what Kyuriakris meant, Claus’s shout rang out, answering her unspoken question.

“Lord Claus.”

Claus ran out onto the balcony, breathless. Kyuriakris laughed.

“You’re late, Claus. I was *this* close to sweeping Jeanette away to Pakira with me, you know?”

Yet Claus cast the other man a serious look.

“Under usual circumstances, maybe so... But today, you protected her, didn’t you?”

Kyuriakris’s smile stiffened.

“What are you talking about? I was trying my hardest to seduce her.”

“Oh really?” Claus smoothed down his hair, which had grown disheveled during his run. “Kyuri, I’m sure you know that Jeanette isn’t concerned with herself, but she cares about my reputation greatly. That’s why she once asked me to break up with her.”

He was referring to the time when, shortly after her father had gone missing, Jeanette had asked Claus to end his engagement to her because she was worried about what people thought of him.

“I’m sure some of the party guests claimed that the princess and I look good together. In fact, I heard a few of them myself. Jeanette was closer to them, so she must’ve heard even more than I did. In which case, it would’ve made her

wonder whether she should step aside.”

Jeanette’s eyes widened, because although she hadn’t said it out loud, this was indeed something that had gone through the back of her mind.

“Kyuri, there’s no way you could’ve left her alone in those circumstances.”

“Because it was my chance to snatch her away?” Kyuriakris asked, still being self-deprecating.

Claus shook his head.

“No. You wouldn’t do that in her moment of weakness. You wish for her happiness too, one way or another.”

Kyuriakris said nothing. Claus must’ve hit the mark.

“How long have we known each other?” Claus asked while laughing. “I know you well, Kyuri. Anyway, if you actually wanted to take Jeanette for yourself, you could just use your princely authority to do it.”

“The only reason I haven’t is because it’s no fun to do it by force...”

“You didn’t do it because you don’t want to rob her of her smile. Right?”

Those were the exact words Kyuriakris had told Jeanette earlier. The prince gasped and cast Claus a startled look.

“Did you hear what I said earlier...?”

“Hmm? What do you mean? I’m just telling it like I see it. And I knew that you’d be the one to cheer Jeanette up if she felt upset, Kyuri.”

Once more, Kyuriakris said nothing. He only chuckled, as though he’d finally given up.

“There you go again, Claus... Why do you have to see through everything? Did you develop mind reading abilities?”

“Why? That’s easy.” Claus smiled. “Because I love you both. One of you is the woman I love, and the other is a friend I love. Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s honestly scary if that’s all it takes for you to figure things out so accurately. It’s a true horror!” Kyuriakris said with a grin.

“Call it what you will.”

“Aww, man! I can’t believe you’re actually trying to bring me, your love rival, over to your side. I can’t go around flirting with Jeanette anymore now that you’ve said all that.”

“A great figure once said, ‘Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?’” Claus replied with a smirk.

“You’re a schemer—how terrifying,” Kyuriakris responded with a chuckle. “Well, as your beloved friend, I believe it’s my time to make a gracious retreat.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

With another huff of laughter, the prince turned away. He didn’t say another word, merely waving his hand as he departed.

“Now then.” Claus turned back to Jeanette with an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry I took so long, Jeanette. I was going to find you right away, but I got caught up longer than expected.”

“I-It’s fine,” she replied. Her heart pounded as she gazed into his violet eyes.

Why can’t I calm down...?

“I made you see something painful, didn’t I?” Claus grasped her hand tightly and kissed it. “But no matter what anyone says, you’re the only one for me. I don’t want anyone else. So please don’t mind what the others are saying, okay?”

“O-Okay.”

“I do think Lady Tia is beautiful, but that’s not all that counts. I can’t say this where Their Majesties might overhear me, but...” Claus drew his face closer to hers and lowered his voice. “I think you’re much more beautiful than she is. And I’m sure Kyuriakris agrees.”

Jeanette looked surprised. *He said the same thing as Lord Kyuriakris...* When she realized that, she giggled.

“Right. Thank you, Lord Claus.”

“So don’t worry about anythi— Jeanette, what’s wrong?!”

“Huh?” Jeanette was shocked when Claus raised his voice. At the same time, she felt tears slide down her own cheeks, and her eyes widened. “Wha...?”

“Jeanette...” While she hurriedly wiped her face, Claus hugged her tightly. “I’m sorry. I really did hurt your feelings. And even before that, I’ve just been stuck in the palace...!”

“No, Lord Claus,” Jeanette said, still in his embrace. “It’s just... I suddenly felt so happy and relieved... Earlier, for just a brief moment, I thought that you really had fallen for Her Highness...”

“What? Why did you think that?”

Jeanette fidgeted in his arms.

“Well... Um... Because you were looking at her so tenderly...” As she spoke, her face gradually became redder and redder.

Oh no, I think I just messed up! I sounded so childish!

“Sorry, never mind, just forget what I—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Claus hugged her even tighter.

“Oh God, is this a dream? It’s not, is it? To think that *Jeanette* is feeling jealous...”

Ahhh! Lord Claus seems happy, but I’m so embarrassed by how pathetic I am!

Jeanette felt overwhelmed by this strange new feeling she’d never before experienced, but Claus laughed joyously.

“Sorry, Jeanette. I know you’re in pain...but I can’t help feeling happy about it. Your tears make me so glad...”

“My tears?!” she echoed.

Has Lord Claus gone crazy?!

“Not like that. What I mean is that the fact you’re crying because of how you feel about me makes me happy. There’s a big difference. But...before I explain further, can I say just one thing?”

“What is it?”

“I want to kiss you.”

Jeanette’s eyes widened.

“W-We’re at the palace! Someone could come out here at any time!”

“I know. But I still want to do it. Will you let me?” Claus whispered into her ear.

Jeanette blushed again. *Someone could genuinely turn up at any moment! We may be engaged, but for us to kiss in such a public place...!* Despite her thoughts, however, she found herself nodding.

Claus slowly pressed his lips against hers, and the kiss tasted sweeter than any of the confections she’d had today.

Chapter 5: Forevermore

“Ahh! Yesterday was so much fun!” Meltia said with a sunny look on her face. It was the day after the ball, and Jeanette had just arrived at the palace. “So? Will you agree that dancing at a ball is something I have obtained the ability to do now?” the princess added with a smug giggle. The memory of Jeanette pointing out what Meltia couldn’t do must’ve stayed in her mind this whole time.

Jeanette grinned.

“Yes! You were spectacular last night, Your Highness. You carried yourself with such poise, and you were both adorable and elegant! When I saw you, I thought that you looked like the pride of our nation that everyone would love to show off! And our Matheson dress suited you so well too... In fact, even though it’s only been a day, we’ve already received a heap of client inquiries about it! That’s how striking of an impression you made! It’s no wonder. You look gorgeous in anything as it is, and last night you were truly shining... Ah, just look at this! The royal newspaper wrote a huge headline about you!”

Following her rambling, Jeanette approached Meltia to show her the article. The princess seemed a bit put off as she replied.

“I get it, you’re excited. You ramble so fast sometimes... It’s kind of scary.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to get my feelings across to you...” Jeanette explained dispiritedly.

“Oh, it’s fine. In any case, I had a great time last night. If that’s what it’s like, I think I’d like to attend all kinds of balls from now on.”

“That’s wonderful!” Jeanette said, her expression brightening again.

If Meltia attended more parties, it meant Jeanette would be able to see her in even more gorgeous gowns. While Jeanette couldn’t dance together with Meltia on account of them both being women, she could at least feast her eyes on the princess’s beauty from afar.

“I can’t wait to see what kind of dresses you’ll wear in the future, Your Highness! I’ll have to make sure I don’t miss any parties that you’ll be attending... Oh! Also, I’ve been meaning to ask: In addition to such events, would you like to try going outside a bit more?”

“Outside?”

“Yes. There’s so many things to do out there! You can have picnics, ride horses, or go sightseeing. Lady Christine told me that when she was younger, she and Duke Pablo tried milking cows and tending fields!”

“Milking cows? Tending fields? What are you talking about?” Meltia asked, taking a keen interest in Jeanette’s words. Once Jeanette explained, the other girl looked impressed. “Wow... Is that what happens out in the town? I’d like to see this creature you call a ‘cow’ for myself. And the fields too.”

“I’m sure you’d enjoy it! Lady Christine told me those were unforgettable memories for her.”

“Humph... I can’t believe my aunt did all that. It’s a bit shocking.”

“That’s because she’s a very cheerful, lighthearted person! But she’s also just and kind. She’s a wonderful woman. Maybe we could invite her and take a trip to a farm together?”

“All right,” Meltia agreed. “As usual, I’ll leave everything to you.”

“Okay!” Jeanette nodded eagerly. *Going to a farm with those two will be so much fun!*

Most noblewomen would’ve hated the idea. The fact that Meltia was gladly going along with it showed that she truly was from the same family as Christine.

“When it happens, I’ll invite you not as Dr. Jaquilla’s assistant, but just as myself—as Jeanette Roussel.”

“Yes... Invite me as yourself,” Meltia said, then paused to gaze fixedly at Jeanette. Jeanette had a feeling that recently, the princess had looked at her in this way more and more often—at the *person* that she was. “Hey, Jeanette...”

“What is it?”

“I want to go to many other places too. I want to see all those things you talk

about being in the town. I want to go to cafés, eat those cakes you mentioned are popular lately, and...see the company that you work at.”

Jeanette’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. *Her Highness has become interested in the outside world!* Rather than summoning things to the palace, the princess wanted to go out and see them for herself. Without a doubt, this was a sign of her growth.

“Okay! Let’s visit all kinds of places! And I’d love for you to visit Matheson Trading! I’m sure all the employees would greet you warmly too. But...I can’t believe you’re actually curious about the outside world now, Your Highness. I’m glad I told you about so many things while we practiced karate.”

“Well, you just seemed so happy when you talked about all of it. Obviously I want to experience such things myself. Plus...you have very good taste.”

“Oh...?! Are you complimenting me?! Thank you so much!” Jeanette exclaimed with a broad grin.

The princess looked away with a huff. Her cheeks were a little flushed.

“So I expect you to help me with picking out my party dresses from here on out! I, uh... I’m not well-versed in what’s trendy, so it’d be embarrassing if I picked something outdated!”

“Of course I’ll help! In that case, next time I’ll bring a tailor with me. You’ll be able to tell them what kind of dress you’d like, and the tailor will have even more motivation to make the perfect outfit for you!”

That put Meltia in good humor.

“Very well. Also, there’s the matter of Lord Claus. Whenever I attend a party, I want him to escort me.”

“I’m afraid that won’t happen,” Jeanette replied, firmly rejecting the idea.

“Why?!” Meltia spluttered. She hadn’t expected to be denied, and she instantly became displeased.

“You see... I realized something during the ball last night.”

“Wh-What?”

“I sent him off to escort you for the evening without giving it a second thought, but when I actually saw you two together...I got extremely jealous!”

Meltia paused.

“*Huuuh...?*” she uttered at last, loud and confused.

“You’re both so beautiful, and when I saw you standing next to each other, it was as if I were looking at a prince and princess from a fairytale!”

“Th-Thanks...?”

“But that beauty is a sin in itself! You looked *too* good together, and that made my chest ache...! I know it’s impudent of me to compare myself to you, but despite how I look, *I’m* Lord Claus’s fiancée!”

“I know.”

“You’re beautiful, intelligent, and you’re our nation’s princess. And then there’s me—just a stumpy, insignificant baroness. It’s obvious you’re more suited to being Lord Claus’s partner than I...” the disheartened Jeanette lamented, her shoulders drooping. Her voice had grown so quiet that it panicked Meltia a little.

“W-Well... I wanted to say something like ‘See? Now do you understand how amazing I am?’ But I’d feel bad if you’re going to be *this* upset about it... Cheer up already,” she said, trying to make Jeanette feel better.

“That’s why, Your Highness, I’m begging you...” Jeanette said, looking into the princess’s eyes with sincerity. The girl must’ve known what was coming, for her shoulders stiffened. “Please return Lord Claus to me!”

“No!” Meltia yelled, looking aside.

“Your Highness!”

“I said no! I love him!”

“So do I. I... I’m in love with Lord Claus.” Jeanette tightly clasped Meltia’s hand. “I know you like him very much. But when it comes to him...I won’t hand him over to anyone, not even you.”

Meltia gasped, but said nothing. Then, she shook Jeanette off and started

walking away without even looking at her.

“I’m so annoyed! Just go home for today!”

“Your Highness...”

Just like that, the princess stomped out of the room.

She’s angry with me... Jeanette thought in a fluster. I didn’t come here intending to say all that...

In reality, she had just wanted to use her merchant’s wiles to coax the princess to become more interested in the outside world. This had been her objective when she’d arrived at the palace today. She wanted Meltia to realize that there were other fun things in this world beyond Claus. Jeanette wasn’t sure if that’d make Meltia forget about Claus entirely, but going outside more would certainly broaden the princess’s horizons. Perhaps something would eventually change Meltia’s mind in the process, and she’d be willing to hear Jeanette and Claus out.

This had been the last resort Jeanette had come up with.

But people’s hearts are complicated... It was arrogant of me to think I could change Her Highness’s mind. After all, I can’t even rein in my own feelings properly...

Yet those words had spilled out of her mouth when Meltia mentioned she wanted Claus to escort her from now on. If only Jeanette had chosen her words more carefully and rejected the idea more gently...

The crestfallen Jeanette’s shoulders sank dejectedly.

Later that evening, Claus lay in bed in his room in the palace. The room was dark, and he was on the verge of falling asleep. But suddenly he heard the click of the door being unlocked. He opened his eyes.

Is it Lady Tia...? She was the only other person who had the key to his room besides himself. *I thought she might do this at some point...*

Claus had heard from the servants that Meltia and Jeanette had fought earlier today. That was very unusual for Jeanette, who was usually gentle with

everyone. But that fight must've been the reason Meltia had come here now.

He slowly sat up and peered through the darkness at the person who was standing by the door.

"What is a lady doing here so late at night?" he asked.

"I'm sure you can figure it out."

Claus opened the window curtains. It was a full moon tonight. The room was bathed in moonlight, which revealed the form of Meltia clad in a dressing gown.

"I love you, Lord Claus," she proclaimed.

"I know."

"Is that all? Don't you see me as a woman, even a bit? Can't I convince you to like me a little?" she asked as though she was at her wit's end.

Claus narrowed his eyes.

"You are very charming. As Jeanette always says, you are a beautiful, intelligent, attractive young lady."

"In that case—!"

"However, I cannot grow to love you as a woman," Claus interrupted softly. There was no need to be harsh with her, because no matter how much she insisted, his feelings wouldn't change.

"Ngh...!" Meltia bit her lip. Yet a moment later, her expression changed. "Even with *this* in front of you?"

The princess gripped the belt of her dressing gown. Her delicate fingers slowly untied it, and the gown slipped off her frame, revealing an expanse of pale skin beneath. She was completely naked. Her soft body gleamed in the moonlight, and in spite of her slight frame, she had a large, ample chest. Her waist was so slender that it almost looked breakable, yet her hips and bottom were round and feminine. Although her body had traces of childishness to it, it also had the sex appeal of an adult woman.

Claus's eyes widened in shock.

"As you can see, I have confidence in my body. And...I'll let you do anything

you want with me, Lord Claus,” Meltia said, her aquamarine eyes staring at Claus with longing.

As if lured by her words, Claus staggered over to her. His long fingers reached out, drawing closer to her. Meltia shivered and closed her eyes. And then...

“It’s cold. If you don’t wear this properly, you might get sick.”

Claus had picked the gown up off the floor and draped it around her shoulders. Following his dismissive remark, he turned around and went back to bed as though nothing had happened.

“I need to get up early tomorrow. You’d best get some sleep too, Lady Tia, or you’ll feel tired. It’s no good for a young woman to miss so much sleep. Now, can you please go back to your room?”

Claus had rejected her. As soon as Meltia realized this, her face went completely red.

“D-Don’t you want my body?! Just take a look! My chest is really big and soft! Jeanette has nothing on me in this department!!!”

“*Stop it,*” Claus snapped. The princess shuddered at his harsh tone. “You don’t know her. And don’t bring her up right now! I’ve been doing my utmost to resist the urge, but when you say things like that, I can’t help picturing it! If I do something rash when I see her tomorrow, are you going to take responsibility for it, Lady Tia?!” he grumbled, waving his hand in front of him to chase off his wicked thoughts.

Meltia’s mouth flew open at that.

“Wh-What?! Are you saying that even though I’m right in front of you, you’re imagining *her*?!”

“I can’t help it. I’m a man, after all.”

“That’s not what I mean!!! I’m asking why you have no reaction to a naked girl approaching you!”

“Oh,” Claus muttered. It finally dawned on him what Meltia had meant. “My apologies. It’s just that I’m used to it, so...”

“‘Used to it’?! What on earth?!” she demanded.

Claus smiled vaguely. The princess had no idea this wasn't the first time he had been approached by a naked woman. If anything, it was an obnoxiously frequent occurrence for him.

Drunk women are especially dangerous...

Indeed, during balls, women used to drag him off into the darkness all the time. Other times, they'd bump into him and "accidentally" spill their wine on him as an excuse to take him into a different room. These incidents decreased once Jeanette had moved in with him. But on a few occasions, women had suddenly shown up on his doorstep as guests and started stripping once he let them into the estate.

And while I attended boarding school, men approached me as well...

Claus smiled dryly at the recollections.

"I'm used to seeing naked men and women. So seeing your naked body makes no difference to me, Lady Tia."

"D-Do you mean to imply you live a sordid lifestyle...?!" Meltia asked, misunderstanding his words.

Claus paused, and then decided to roll with it.

"Yes, you could say that."

Now if only she could run off in disgust, that'd save me so much hassle...

But after a moment of deliberation...

"I like that side of you too!"

...Meltia was undaunted.

Still no good, huh? Claus chuckled inwardly.

"So please, Lord Claus! Stay by my side from now on!" the girl implored, trying to convey her genuine feelings to him. She was pleading with him more earnestly than ever before.

That was why Claus had to answer in kind.

"Lady Tia," he said. He would have to be clear so as not to get her hopes up. His violet eyes met Meltia's pale-blue ones. "As I told you before, no matter

how charming of a woman you are, it won't make a difference to me. Even if the world's most beautiful siren were to approach me, I wouldn't change my mind. My heart belongs only to Jeanette, and I am devoted to her."

Afterward, Claus smiled gently, his eyes shining with unshakable conviction.

"Ughhh...!" Meltia's eyes welled up with tears. "Fine. I've known from the beginning anyway," she said, large tear droplets spilling over her cheeks. "But I still wanted you! I fell in love with you at first sight. You were my first love...!"

The princess burst into tears, covering her face. Claus reached his hand out to her...but then withdrew it again.

"Your Highness Princess Meltia. It's been my honor to have been your first love."

That was all that he could say to her.

"Your Majesties. What's going on?" Christine inquired curiously. She was standing next to Jeanette inside the audience chamber.

That morning, Jeanette had received a sudden summons to the castle. When she arrived, she found Christine and Dr. Jaquilla were present too. While the three of them exchanged confused glances with each other, the king and queen smiled.

"Sorry to call you over so suddenly," Eric said. "Actually, we'd like to discuss the ball from the other day. You all saw for yourselves, didn't you? Tia danced during it."

Realizing his intention, Christine nodded and spoke up supportively.

"Yes—she was so lovely! Her dance was perfect. I was worried that when she opened her mouth, she might utter something selfi—ahem, I mean, *tomboyish*, but her words were perfectly refined and ladylike! I was so relieved."

The king nodded happily.

"We never thought we'd see the day when Tia danced like that either. I thought she looked like a national treasure that I'd love to show off everywhere."

“I can’t believe my little girl has already grown into such a fine young lady...” the queen added, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“It’s all thanks to your treatment, Dr. Jaquilla,” Eric pointed out.

“No, no. It was thanks to Her Highness’s own efforts,” the physician replied humbly.

Jeanette smiled as she listened to the conversation. Their Majesties still had no idea that she had taught their daughter karate. Both Meltia and Jaquilla had hidden it well. Of course, all the credit would be given solely to the doctor, but Jeanette didn’t mind. All she wanted was to have Claus back.

“She really enjoyed herself, and said she’d like to attend more balls,” Eric went on.

“That’s great to hear. We need to show her more of the outside world,” Christine responded.

“True... It’s what she wants as well, so I’d like to give her more chances to go to parties. Don’t you agree?” the king asked, addressing his wife.

Still misty-eyed, she nodded.

“Yes. It’s time to let her move on from being my adorable little Tia... It’s my duty as her mother.”

It looked like the ball had changed not just Meltia’s mind, but the queen’s too. She was no longer worried sick about her daughter—she had started to trust in her.

Her Majesty looks so happy. I’m glad! Jeanette thought.

That was when Christine decided to take the opportunity to ask something.

“There’s one other thing... Isn’t it time to let Count Guivarch return home at last?”

Their Majesties’ breaths hitched at that. They looked at each other and then nodded.

“I also wanted to address this matter,” Eric admitted. “We’ve detained him here long enough; I think it’s time to let him go.”

Jeanette gasped when she heard the words she'd been waiting for. Christine's face lit up too. She grinned at Jeanette.

"Isn't that great?!"

"Yes! But...why so suddenly?" Jeanette asked the king. He smiled, though it looked a little pained.

"It was Tia's decision. She told me yesterday to let Count Guivarch go home already."

"Tia said that?" Christine asked with disbelief. "What in the world changed her mind?"

"We don't really know... But she did proudly declare that a proper young lady shouldn't forcibly detain the man she loves."

"Oh my," the duchess murmured, her mouth hanging open.

"You must be thinking she has no right to say that, hmm?" the queen asked Jeanette with an elegant laugh.

"Not at all!" Jeanette protested.

The queen gazed at her and continued speaking in a kind tone of voice.

"It's all right. We really did cause you two so much trouble... This was the first time Tia expressed interest in a man—no, in another *person*. That's why we were so elated. Baroness Roussel, I'm sorry that you got wrapped up in our selfishness. I apologize from the bottom of my heart."

The woman lowered her head. Panicked, Jeanette quickly waved her hands.

"Please, there's no need! This was a very valuable experience for me!"

It was true. She had started visiting the palace because Claus had been under house arrest, but it all turned into an amazing learning experience for her. She looked at Their Majesties with a large, cheerful grin, and that seemed to reassure them.

"Then let's return him right away," the king decided. "Someone bring the count here!"

Some servants scurried out of the chamber at his order. A short while later,

they returned with a breathless Claus in tow.

“Lord Claus!” Jeanette exclaimed. *The day is finally here!*

She had been waiting all this time for the day when she could hug him once more without anyone getting in the way. The day when Claus would finally return to her side.

“Jeanette!”

Like magnets, the two of them rushed at each other and embraced. Claus held Jeanette tightly, and she could feel his hot breath in her ear as he whispered.

“Let’s get married as soon as we’re back.”

She could feel the resonance of his voice and his warmth.

“We’ll become a married couple, and nobody will be able to tear us apart again. Let’s have a quiet ceremony with just our family. Once that’s settled, we can have a bigger celebration.”

“Right! I was thinking the same thing!” Jeanette responded, holding her arms around Claus just as tightly.

In reality, she knew that no matter what kind of legal agreements they made, the powers that be could easily separate them if they really wanted to. History was full of cases where married couples had been forced apart. However...

It doesn’t matter what happens next—I’m going to become Countess Guivarch. And whatever hardships strike us, I’m going to counterattack! After all, those are going to be rewards too!

Jeanette lifted her head and looked into Claus’s eyes. His violet irises stared back at her wistfully.

“Lord Claus, I want to marry you. From now on, I want to live as your wife!” she said, revealing her true desire.

Claus smiled at her.

“Yes. We’re going to be married.”

Epilogue: Countess Guivarch

Inside the small church, the attendees—each harboring their own thoughts and feelings—gazed at Jeanette and Claus, who stood in front of the altar. Jeanette wore a snow-white dress that exuded class. Her face was covered with a veil, and the wedding band was already shimmering around her ring finger.

Claus was dressed in a black tuxedo, which gave his figure a snappy look. He also wore a ring, which gleamed just the same as Jeanette's.



Jeanette's father, Baron Clement Roussel, sitting in the front row, was already bawling his eyes out. Once he'd heard that his daughter was getting married, he'd made a mad dash back home from the Voltaire Empire. Sara was next to him, crying just as loudly. Her face was smeared with tears and snot.

Staring at Sara with utter disgust was Jeanette's stepsister, Ariel. The girl had put on a little more muscle since Jeanette had last seen her, and the diamond ring upon her finger shone brightly.

On the other side of the church, where Claus's relatives were, Kyuriakris was sitting quietly. He was smiling, though his expression had a note of defeat in it.

A little further back, Duke and Duchess Pablo were watching the ceremony with their hands clasped together. They looked at Jeanette and Claus with such kindness and warmth it was as though they were looking at their own children.

The priest's low, resonant voice reverberated throughout the church.

"Claus Guivarch. Do you take Jeanette Roussel to be your wife? Do you vow to love her, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"I do," Claus said, smiling softly at Jeanette. She stared back at him fervently.

"Jeanette Roussel. Do you take Claus Guivarch to be your husband? Do you vow to love him, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"I do," Jeanette said, her vivid green eyes sparkling.

"Then I now pronounce you husband and wife."

The two of them smiled at each other, then exchanged a gentle kiss under the warm, watchful eyes of the guests.

"So you and Jeanette got married a mere *two days* after you left the palace?" Meltia asked sulkily. She was sitting in the parlor of the Guivarch estate. Rather than wearing a negligee like she did at home, today she was wearing a typical everyday dress worn by noblewomen. It was a delicate gown in the shade of lavender, and it was obvious at a glance that it was of high quality. Of course,

the item had been arranged for the princess by Jeanette.

“Yes. After all, one of us could be kidnapped again at any moment. If anything, I think we put it off for much too long. You must strike while the iron is hot,” Claus replied with a smile, entirely undisturbed by Meltia’s sullen attitude.

Meanwhile, Jeanette’s entire focus was on Meltia’s dress.

“Ahhh!!! It’s just as beautiful as I imagined it! I knew going with the Tatotah weave was the right call! You look both elegant and adorable! What a win!”

Meltia’s frown deepened.

“Gosh! Why are you two always like this?! I can’t believe I actually bothered to come here in person only to find out you’re already married! How pointless!”

“Oh, it’s not pointless at all. I mean, aren’t you here to see Matheson Trading’s latest work, Your Highness?” Claus pointed out briskly, at which the princess fell silent.

Indeed, that had been the excuse she’d made in order to visit House Guivarch. Usually, she would’ve demanded that Claus and Jeanette visit her at the palace, but this time she’d insisted that she’d go to them instead. The king had been baffled but allowed her to leave despite his trepidation.

“It’s all right!” Jeanette reassured Meltia spiritedly. “I’ve prepared some items I believe will suit your tastes! I have high confidence in them!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” the princess huffed. “Do you *really* think I’m just here to see your goods?!”

“Um... Are you not...?” Jeanette, who’d just been about to fill the room up with exquisite items, asked with a heartbroken expression.

“The answer should be obvious! Why are you so obtuse only about *these* kinds of matters?! Are you just acting stupid on purpose?!”

“N-No!” Jeanette responded, shocked by the accusation.

Oh no! I thought I finally learned to read the room, but I guess not?! And apparently Her Highness isn’t here to see Matheson’s goods...

Her shoulders drooped in disappointment. Claus drew her in gently.

“I love this side of you too, Jeanette,” he told her.

“Could you stop flirting right in front of me?!” Meltia grumbled while glaring at them sharply. “If you think I’ve given up just because you’re married now, then I have some news for you!”

Claus cast the princess a dubious look.

“What are you scheming *this* time?”

“I’m not scheming anything! But the love between you two can’t last forever! There’s still a chance you could have a fight and divorce!”

Claus sighed deeply.

“You’re something else... Are you really bringing up divorce on the third day of a newlywed couple’s marriage? You’re certainly bold.”

“Of course I’m bold! I’m a princess!”

“That wasn’t a compliment—it was *sarcasm*,” Claus clarified scathingly.

Jeanette giggled while watching this exchange. Sara, who was next to her, whispered into her ear.

“Are you okay with Her Highness saying something like that, milady? In fact, don’t you hate that she came here in the first place?”

“Not at all. Besides...” Jeanette paused. “These days, whenever I look at Her Highness, I’m reminded of Ariel.”

Meltia and Ariel were very similar in the way they both used abusive language and acted arrogantly without any regard for others. Perhaps that was why instead of hating Meltia for being her love rival and trying to steal Claus, Jeanette felt a sense of fondness for her.

And I bet no other noblewoman would agree to practice karate with me other than Her Highness!

“Oh... Yes, I can see her resemblance to Lady Ariel...” Sara nodded in agreement. “But I think it’s incredible for you to forgive your love rival who kidnapped your fiancé over something like that...”

“Is it?” Jeanette asked with a chuckle. She turned back to the other two. Claus was still giving Meltia a suspicious look.

“First of all, Jeanette and I won’t divorce in this life or the next. We won’t be apart even if we’re reborn into another life, so please give up.”

However, Meltia held her ground.

“But there’s still a chance that *Jeanette* might come to hate *you*, Lord Claus.”

“Ugh!”

This time it was Claus’s turn to take a mortal blow. He pressed his hand to his chest and replied with pain in his voice.

“SSurely not... Or at least that’s what I’d like to think. But on the off chance it does happen, I still have no intention of giving up on her. I will chase her to the ends of the earth and recapture her.”

That’s a bit scary, Lord Claus... Jeanette thought while gulping.

“Goodness, Lord Claus... You’re shockingly tenacious,” the exasperated princess murmured under her breath.

“Right back at you.”

Jeanette laughed again.

“You two are like very close siblings,” she opined.

“What?!” Meltia spluttered. “Are you saying you don’t think of me as an enemy because he doesn’t even see me as a woman?!”

“Huh?” Jeanette flinched with surprise. “That’s not what I meant!”

“That was a great provocation, I’ll give you that! However...” Meltia pointed her index finger at Jeanette. “The church might have acknowledged you, and so have my mama and papa, but / definitely won’t! So don’t you forget it!”

“How absurd...” muttered Claus.

“She might be even more ridiculous than Lady Ariel...” Sara added quietly. Both she and Claus looked fed up.

On the other hand, Jeanette answered innocently.

“Okay! But if you won’t give up, then what do you intend to do from now on, Your Highness?”

Meltia shrunk back at that question. She hadn’t expected such a rejoinder.

“Um... Uh... Right, what indeed...?” For a while, she deliberated silently, until finally her face lit up with an idea. “I’m going to come here every single day!”

Jeanette frowned slightly.

“That might be a bit of a nuisance, so please don’t...”

“Wha—?! N-Nuisance?! Are you implying that having *me*, the *princess*, visit you will be a *nuisance*?!”

“Yes. If you come every day, I won’t have time to do my job...”

Meltia groaned in frustration.

“Th-Then I can just join you! I want to know what kinds of things ordinary people do too!”

“Wow! That’s a wonderful idea!” Jeanette rejoiced. “Yes, by all means, please come with me! Doing business is so much fun! I’m sure it’ll become helpful knowledge for you. Oh, I know! Let’s practice karate together during breaks!”

“Excuse me? I still have to practice karate?!?”

“Yes! Persistence is a powerful tool! And I really enjoy our practice sessions, Your Highness!” Jeanette explained with a sweet grin.

For some reason, that caused Meltia to fall silent. Her long hair was done up in a ponytail today, and she fiddled with it while glancing at Jeanette.

“H-Humph... Fine then. I’ll play along,” she said at last. “And stop being so formal with me. Instead of ‘Your Highness,’ you can call me Tia too, you know?”

“Oh!!! Thank you so much!!! Then from now on, I’ll call you Lady Tia!” Jeanette replied elatedly.

Meltia looked somewhat satisfied at that. Sara observed her and Jeanette, and then whispered to Claus.

“Um, Lord Claus... Could it be that Her Highness said that she’s here to see you as an excuse, while actually wanting to visit *milady*...?”

“Yeah. To be honest, I had a feeling that was the case. She’s not exactly an upfront person.” He chuckled. “But this is still troubling. I have plenty of methods for dealing with Lady Tia’s affection for me, but her becoming my rival is another matter. As a man, I’m not sure how to deal with a female rival for my wife’s affection.”

Sara laughed at his earnest grumbling. Jeanette and Meltia continued making plans and having fun all the while.

Extra Chapter: Sara's Sun

"CONGRATULATIONS, MILADY!!!"

The sky was a lovely clear blue, perfectly signifying a new beginning. Sara was bawling her eyes out at the freshly married Jeanette, who stood in front of her with a bright smile.

"Thank you, Sara! But wow, that's so many tears! Here, have my handkerchief!" she offered, and then wiped Sara's cheeks gently.

"THANK YOUUU!!!" Sara choked out. With tears and snot dripping from her face, her puffy eyes once again zeroed in on the other girl.

Yes, her beloved mistress, Jeanette. Ever since Jeanette had saved her from that hellish orphanage, Sara's whole world had revolved around her. This sun, who had continued to shine brilliantly no matter how much her stepmother had tormented her, had finally become Claus's sun today. In Sara's eyes, the new couple standing together was like seeing two creator deities side by side. She couldn't look at them without crying.

"Waaah... I-I've been waiting for this day for so long! I have no regrets left! I'd be happy to pass on to the next world at any moment now!"

"Y-You cannot!" Jeanette protested quickly. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Sara! Don't go anywhere!"

"Milady...!" Sara cried. *She looks so cute when she's panicking!*

Sara couldn't hold back a giggle. Claus, who stood next to Jeanette, chuckled as well while gazing fondly at his new wife. Sara must've been making the same expression he was.

"Also..." Jeanette went on, a little bashfully. "Since we moved into House Guivarch, I'd almost forgotten just how much we used to hang out. But while Lord Claus was living in the palace, you and I spent a lot of time together, just the two of us, and it reminded me of the good old days!"

“That’s true.”

Before Jeanette left House Roussel, she and Sara were always together. Sara stayed with Jeanette around the house and accompanied her outside too. Sometimes she acted as Jeanette’s assistant, while other times they went shopping together in the town. But since they moved into the Guivarch estate, the girls’ time together had decreased dramatically. Naturally, that was because Claus was there.

I do feel a bit lonely...but that doesn’t mean I should get in the way of milady and Lord Claus!

Jeanette’s happiness was Sara’s happiness. Not to mention, she genuinely enjoyed seeing the two of them being an adorable couple together.

“And...I had so much fun spending time with you again, Sara,” Jeanette admitted shyly. How radiant was her smile!

“Oof!!!” Sara and Claus groaned in unison.

Sara pressed her hand to her chest as though something had shot through her heart. Her expression was crumpled in anguish. Claus was doing the same.

“So cute...” he murmured.

“Are you okay, Sara?! Are you in pain?!” Jeanette asked.

“N-No, no! It’s just that you’re too dazzling, milady... The street slang for this is ‘finding something precious’... In other words, I’m totally fine and healthy. If anything, I feel like my lifespan was just extended, so please don’t worry.”

“Oh, really? Well, I’m glad you’re okay!”

“Sorry to interrupt, but Duke and Duchess Pablo are heading this way,” Claus pointed out.

Jeanette quickly turned to look.

“Ah, sorry, Sara! We’d better go and say hello to them!”

“Not a problem! Please do.”

Sara was a mere servant, so for her to have been invited to the wedding in the first place was a source of infinite joy. And to think that Jeanette had even

spoken to her on this day!

Ahh, my mistress is truly a wonderful person...!

Jeanette was kind, adorable, spirited, cheerful, smart, generous, open-minded, loving, funny, and charming. It was impossible to take one's eyes off her, and everyone adored her. Indeed, she was a mistress Sara could be proud of.

I will follow you for the rest of my life, milady!

Spurred on by her feelings, Sara pressed her hands together as though in prayer. Suddenly, she heard someone's laughter nearby.

"I see you're passionate as ever, Jeanette's maid."

At the sound of that deep voice, Sara's eyes flashed.

"And what's so wrong with that?! I won't take any criticism over it, not even from you, Lord Kyuriakris!"

"I'm not criticizing you. I just thought you looked like you were having fun, as always."

"Hmm..." Sara narrowed her eyes, gazing at Kyuriakris warily.

Ever since the day she had beaten his servants with her broom, he seemed to have memorized her name. And whenever she pretended to turn into a wall so that she could watch Jeanette and Claus being lovey-dovey together, Kyuriakris had started talking to her more and more often. She would rather he not interrupt her observations, but she couldn't exactly say that to the first prince of Pakira.

"I must say, you've been surprisingly docile this whole time, Lord Kyuriakris. I was sure you'd show up to the ceremony only to disrupt it."

"I suppose..." he said calmly. *Too* calmly, in fact. He lacked his usual vigor.

Sara tilted her head. She wanted to test out a hypothesis, so she decided to purposely provoke him.

"Did you finally realize how wonderful milady and Lord Claus are together?"

"Yep." Instead of getting riled up, the prince just flatly acknowledged her

words.

Does... Does he have a fever? Sara wondered. She couldn't help it—Kyuriakris was completely different from his usual self. It was as if he had finally let go of all of his negative emotions. *Or maybe he's just so depressed that he doesn't even have the energy to compete anymore?* After all, Jeanette and Claus had finally gotten married. It was a beautiful grand finale straight from a fairy tale, so the possibility of Kyuriakris feeling depressed was quite high. *If that's true, it might've been cruel of me to try and provoke him...*

"Um..." Sara began reluctantly, feeling awkward. "Don't be so upset, okay? Those two... No matter who shows up, no matter how powerful or beautiful they may be, milady and Lord Claus won't be torn apart. They're a special couple. It might hurt your feelings, but unfortunately there's nothing you can do about it, Lord Kyuriakris. You have to be pragmatic..."

Huh? Am I even consoling him properly? I feel like I'm just adding salt to the wound!

Sara quickly tried to supplement her words.

"It may not be my place to say this, but you're a powerful man and very handsome too, so I'm sure you'll still have plenty of lovely women to choose from. So please cheer up...!"

Feeling she was finally able to get her sentiment across, Sara let out a sigh. *That should do the job!* she thought, looking at the prince expectantly. But he was staring at her with eyes as wide as saucers.

"To think *you're* consoling me, of all people..." he muttered.

"Huh? Did I say something weird?!"

Kyuriakris chuckled at her panic.

"No. I'm just a bit surprised, is all," he clarified, smiling.

"I see..."

He must've sensed in her tone of voice that she was unconvinced. He went on.

"Since you tried to comfort me, I'd like to inform you: I'm not depressed

because of Jeanette. I've known since I met her that she belonged to Claus."

"Then why did you go after her so stubbornly?" Sara glared at him.

Kyuriakris laughed again.

"Because I loved her."

Loved. He had said it in the past tense. Sara gave him another wary look.

"In the beginning, I genuinely wanted her," Kyuriakris confessed. "I knew she was my friend's beloved, but I couldn't give up without even trying. But in the end, it was just the pointless struggle of a man who had fallen in love for the first time."

"Milady is a rare and wonderful woman, it's true. I can understand why you fell for her." Sara nodded vigorously. "But if you were able to see that, I guarantee that it means you have a discerning eye! I'm sure that whoever you fall in love with next will be an incredible person as well!"

The prince chuckled at her encouragement.

"Right. If you guarantee it, then I'm sure it'll come true," he replied, his dark, narrowed eyes gazing at her softly.

For just a moment, those eyes made Sara's heart skip a beat, so she quickly cleared her throat.

I completely forgot because I was so busy protecting milady, but this man has spectacularly good looks! That was dangerous!

Sara shook off her wicked thoughts, and then smiled.

"Yes! So please move on! And please don't even think of going after milady for a second time!"

"I won't go after her. I don't want you chasing me around with a broom." Kyuriakris smirked.

"I-It's not like I'm *always* like that!" Sara protested, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Oh yeah?"

"But if anyone goes after milady, I'll show no mercy."

“See? You *are*!”

They both laughed. Then, they quietly watched together as a white cloud drifted across the blue sky.

Extra Chapter 2: The Guivarch Couple's First Night

"Are you ready, milady?! It's finally time! If you're able to overcome tonight, then you and Lord Claus will be a couple in both name and reality!"

It was the evening of Jeanette and Claus's wedding day. Jeanette was sitting on her bed with a frightfully determined Sara in front of her. Jeanette was wearing a simple white negligee.

"I know! But Sara... We already are a couple, aren't we? I mean, we had a ceremony at the church, and we signed the documents."

"No! Well, you *do* have a point, but strictly speaking you're also still wrong!"

"Am I...?"

Jeanette wasn't sure what Sara was talking about. There were practically question marks floating above her head. Sara cleared her throat.

"Look, milady. A wedding ceremony isn't enough to make a couple a true couple. You'll become a couple once you share a bed! Otherwise, you'll have a mariage blanc, which is considered an incomplete marriage! Everyone will point and laugh at you!"

"Mariage blanc... I didn't know there were different kinds of marriages." Jeanette gulped.

"There are! That's why tonight is *very* important!!!" Sara emphasized dramatically.

Jeanette nodded earnestly.

"Okay! So what should I do? Tell me, Sara!"

Jeanette had never thought much about these things because she never had a woman around to teach her about them. But now that she was married, she could stay ignorant no longer.

I've got to learn properly about this!

Yet for some reason, Sara was utterly silent.

“Sara?” Jeanette asked, confused.

The maid stared at Jeanette fixedly.

“Well... I do know about it on a superficial level just from hearing things, but... Should I really be telling you about it? I’ve never done it myself... But I guess you need to know in order to prepare yourself mentally, huh...? But then again, knowing Lord Claus, I bet he’d say something like ‘I’ll enjoy teaching the oblivious Jeanette myself’... Yes, I’m sure of it...” Sara muttered under her breath.

“Um... Teaching me about what?”

At Jeanette’s question, Sara quickly snapped back to her senses.

“Nothing! It’s nothing at all, so please rest assured! You can just stay innocent!”

“But you said that tonight is important. If that’s true, then I’d better learn about it properly.”

“No no nonononono! It’s *totally* fine!” Sara waved her hands with great exaggeration. Her eyes were looking everywhere except at Jeanette.

How suspicious...

Jeanette pouted.

“You’re hiding something from me, Sara.”

“No I’m not!!!”

“You’re lying. I know because your hands are clenching your skirt. It’s your tell.”

Sara scrambled to come up with a response.

“S-So you can see through *that*, can you?!”

“Come on, Sara. Tell me. Tonight is important, so I don’t want to mess up.”

The maid let out a troubled shriek.

“Yes, but... If I tell you, he might be angry with meee...!”

“Then I’ll tell Lord Claus not to be upset with you. Okay?”

“Even so, I don’t think I should tell you this...!”

“Tell me *what?*” Jeanette prompted, totally at a loss.

Sara was covered in a waterfall of sweat. Her fervor from before had all but disappeared.

“Come on, Sara...” Jeanette pleaded, reaching out her hand to grab the other girl.

“Jeanette, you shouldn’t trouble poor Sara any longer.” Claus’s voice echoed nearby all of the sudden.

“Lord Claus!” Jeanette exclaimed. *When did he get here?*

“Eek!!! Lord Claus!!!” Sara sprang into the air. “I’m so sorry!!! I was going to leave sooner, but I overstayed my welcome!!! I’m leaving immediately!!!” The maid raced out of the room at light speed.

“Wait, Sara,” Claus spoke up, stopping her in her tracks. “Thank you for your consideration. Your assessment was correct,” he told her with a mischievous smirk.

Sara’s eyes widened.

“Oh, I knew it...! All right! Milady, break a leg!” Sara gave Jeanette a thumbs-up before dashing out of the room.

“Sara! Ah, she’s gone...” Jeanette murmured.

Break a leg? Are we going to be fighting? she pondered. There were still question marks filling up her mind.

“Um, Lord Claus,” she said, looking at him with sincerity. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t get Sara to explain anything to me. So could you do it instead? As your wife, I don’t want to do anything shameful!”

“Heh... This just proves that you really don’t know anything, hm?” Claus asked, pressing his hand to his mouth to hide his laughter.

“I-I’m aware of my own ignorance! But I’m a quick learner, so I’ll give it my all and do my best not to get in your way!”

“Pfft... Ha ha!”

The more Jeanette insisted, the funnier Claus found this situation.

“Goodness...” he said, wiping a tear of laughter from his eye. “While I was under house arrest at the palace, I thought I should’ve just dragged you over to my bedroom when I had the chance. But I retract that sentiment. Now that I got to see you like this, and knowing how I’ll get to see you soon, I’m really glad I held back.”

Claus was smiling at her. Even so, there was a certain glint in his eyes. It made Jeanette shiver.

Huh? What is this? Somehow, I feel like a mouse about to be eaten up by a cat...

“Jeanette.” Claus approached her and placed one of his knees on the bed. The mattress creaked under his weight, and Jeanette reflexively backed up.

“Y-Yes? What is it?”

“Do you truly want to know?” he asked, his violet eyes boring into her.

Jeanette’s own reflection gazed back at her in those eyes, and she realized she looked a little frightened. *No! I can’t be so timid!* After inwardly cheering herself on, she nodded cheerfully.

“Yes! Of course I do!”

“I see.” Claus smiled happily. “Then I’ll teach you *all* about it. Don’t worry, we have plenty of time...” he said, and then gently touched her.

Most likely, only Jeanette herself still had no idea what kind of fate awaited her from there.

Afterword

Hello, this is Miyako Miyano. Thank you for purchasing the third volume of *Jeanette the Genius*!

Our genius girl has finally gotten married. But as promised (?), it was not a straightforward affair.

Beware of spoilers if you still haven't read the story itself, but a large part of my idea for this volume was to write about Claus being seduced by the most beautiful girl in the world when she's totally naked. I wondered how he'd react to something like that, and that's how I got started. What did you think of his response when that scene finally came up? I'd love it if you shared your thoughts and impressions with me!

And the new character, Meltia, is similar to Jeanette's stepsister Ariel, so I had a lot of fun writing her. Ariel was worried, but for the sake of the story's development I left her out of this volume. That said, I would love to see her and Meltia interacting one day! (I bet those two would get in a fight about Jeanette...)

Also, shortly before the release of the third volume, *Jeanette the Genius* received a manga adaptation! The artist, Nanari, draws Jeanette and Claus SO beautifully! The scenes look even more adorable and full of doting love than the original story. *serious face* I'd be really happy if you buy the manga too! To those of you who already bought it, I'm shaking your hand! *smiles*

The production of this volume was quite difficult, especially for my manager, who had to rush around a lot mainly because I had a few health issues crop up. But I'm so relieved that we managed to safely get this volume out so that you all could read it.

Originally, Meltia's name was actually Malizia. But then my manager said, "That means 'malice' in Italian, is that okay?!" Thank goodness this was pointed out to me! It's not okay at all! What a close call!

Jyun Hayase's consistent and beautiful artwork has been a sight for sore eyes...! I haven't been able to stop looking at each of the illustrations with a big grin on my face. They bring me so much joy, and I look forward to seeing them in the print sample!

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to my proofreader, designer, the sales people, and everyone involved with this book!

Above all, I hope that everyone who purchases this volume enjoys it to the fullest!

Miyako Miyano









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Jeanette the Genius: Defying My Evil Stepmother by Starting a Business with My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! Volume 3

by Miyako Miyano

Translated by Ray Krycki Edited by Jonathan Engel

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