

Author: *Mori*

Illustrator: *Huyuko Aoi*

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Duchess
in the **ATTIC**

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Dutchess
in the **ATTIC**



Dutchess *in the* ATTIC

Presented by: *Mori*
Illustrations by: *Huyuko Aoi*



Get out!
I'll divorce you!

Your Grace, **you** will be the one
who shall leave. Yesterday afternoon,
you signed the papers agreeing
to hand all your assets—
your land and manors—over to me.

Characters



Opal

A lady who was forced into a political marriage and became a duchess. Inspired by her father, a competent lord, she is also interested in managing land. She hates to lose.



Hubert

A man who lost his parents when he was young and was forced to succeed the title as a child. He married Opal to pay off his debts.



Claude

The third son of a baron and Opal's childhood friend. He's a reliable, older brother-like individual to her.



Stella

A frail, young girl residing in the duke's house. Hubert seems to treasure her, but...?

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0. The Duchess in the Attic

A servant's morning starts early. As the servants of the manor walked to and fro on creaking floorboards, within a sparse room, sunlight shot through a thin curtain.

Opal tossed and turned in her uncomfortable bed, pulling her thin covers over her head. But unfortunately, she wasn't able to go back to sleep. The maids tried their best to sneak past her room, careful not to make much noise, but the thin walls couldn't possibly block out the hustle and bustle of their routine. With nothing else to do, Opal reluctantly sat up on her bed—one that was much too firm for her body—and stretched out her sore limbs.

"Here's to another day," she mumbled, all to herself in her lonely room.

From under her lavish nightgown, she uncurled her legs and slipped her feet into a pair of slippers. Slowly rising from her knees, she stood up, rotating her weary arms while heading for the window to draw the thin curtain back. She was lucky that her simple room even had a curtain, but alas, her tiny window was filthy and clouded. Opal could only catch a fuzzy glimpse of what was outside.

Still, she noted with a wry smile, it was yet another bright and beautiful day out. But it mattered not how sunny the day was; she was never allowed to step outside the manor. For now, anyway.

Opal changed into a dress, brushing her hair into a neat bundle and finally switching her slippers into a different pair of shoes. Footsteps creaked from outside her room, and she opened the door out onto the corridor. A maid who had just happened to pass by froze in place, staring at Opal as if she were a ghost.

"Could you tell Beth to bring me some hot water?" Opal requested.

"C-Certainly," the young maid replied with a tremble. She immediately fled the scene like a scared rabbit.

Upon closing the door, Opal noticed her room had become a touch brighter and headed for the simple desk by the window. She knew it'd take a while for her attendant, Beth, to prepare the hot water. And it wasn't because Opal's room was in the attic, the highest room within the manor and located above the maids' rooms—oh no, this was Beth harassing her. Opal, however, found it foolish to wait idly in irritation and decided to spend her time reading the books that she had borrowed from the manor's library.

"Good morning, madam," Beth said reluctantly, arriving after a long while. She poured the hot water into Opal's washbasin.

"Good morning, Beth," Opal replied. "Could you kindly bring me breakfast after you're done with that?"

"Certainly."

Despite Beth's reluctance to serve Opal, Opal was the mistress of the manor, and a duchess. As long as Beth was Opal's attendant, she had to obey Opal's orders. Beth left, the floorboards creaking with every step she took, while Opal dipped her hands in the hot water. She frowned. It was tepid at best and hardly warm.

"Good grief, so stubborn..." the noble lady muttered. The words were directed more at herself than at her attendant.

It'd been ten days since Opal had married into House McLeod. Her husband, Duke Hubert McLeod, despised her, causing the other servants in his manor to give her the cold shoulder.

Opal was as annoyed with the situations as the servants were. "How foolish."

She laughed through her nose, feeling like a protagonist from some sort of fairy tale. Her close friends described her as stubborn, a lady who refused to lose—and they weren't wrong. Opal wasn't about to whine about her situation. She certainly wouldn't go down without a fight, and indeed, she had no plans to throw in the towel.



She had a ploy to overcome her current situation, and so, she spent yet another day in her dingy room in the attic.

“I’m *not* going to lose!” she declared firmly to her lonely room.

The sun had already risen, and as Opal gazed out the cloudy, tiny window at its fuzzy shape, she reminisced upon her past.

1. The Beginning

It all started one night at a normal dinner party hosted by Earl Holloway. His daughter, Lady Opal, had just become a debutante, but she had grown a little tired of all the crowds and stepped out into the garden, a space familiar to her. She'd visited the earl's manor at the royal capital numerous times since she was young, and this garden had been the perfect playground for an energetic little girl like Opal. Even in dim lighting she knew her way and could navigate the garden quite well. However, the garden during this particular party was completely different from a usual afternoon stroll.

Someone suddenly hugged Opal from behind. Before she knew it, she was pushed down onto the grass, and a kiss was forced upon her. Something slimy touched her lips, and she scratched the face of her assailant, completely disgusted by the sensation. The man flinched and groaned in pain, giving Opal time to scream for help. She knew that guards were on standby within the garden.

She screamed without a second thought; the fatal implications of an unmarried woman dragged into such a fuss had never crossed her mind. As the guards drew near, the man hastily made his escape. Only Opal was left behind, her hair and dress a complete mess. As she sat there in a daze, both the guards and the party guests gathered around her. The guests' eyes were filled not with pity but with curiosity.

Her memory was fuzzy after that. Opal remembered her attendant rushing to her side, carrying her back to her room, and putting her in a bath. Once cleaned, she had been put in bed and had promptly fallen asleep without being able to fully process the situation. The poor lady hadn't a chance to predict what was to come.

Every year, the season of socializing was from spring to summer. High-ranking nobles gathered at the royal capital as every night, various parties and balls took place. These served as the perfect occasions to discuss politics and

economics or to simply chatter away and exchange information.

Naturally, this was a critical time for unmarried men and women—and their parents. On the daily, nobles enacted secret plots against each other, dragging down others in order to secure the best partner they possibly could.

The next morning, Opal woke up and received a message from her father, a summons to his study. She quickly got herself ready and even skipped breakfast as she headed straight for his room and knocked on the door. Upon receiving a word of consent, she immediately entered and saw her father, Earl Holloway, seated at his desk with a look of chagrin.

“Good morning, father,” Opal said. “I heard that you called for me.”

“Why do you sound so carefree?” the earl demanded. “Do you understand what you did last night?”

“Indeed, I apologize for causing a commotion during the party last night. But I was able to make it out safe and sound—”

“That’s *not* the issue. The issue was your wretched appearance in front of such a huge crowd.”

The anger in his voice caused Opal to jolt in fear. Not once had she been asked if she was all right. In fact, her father wasn’t even interested in what had actually occurred last night. She knew her father quite well, but his blatant callousness lit a fire in her rebellious spirit.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” Opal insisted. “That man should be to blame!”

“And do you know who this man is?” Earl Holloway asked.

“I do not. He fled when I shrieked and made a fuss.” Opal was proud of herself, lauding her own strength and courage to react in such a frightful situation, but her father only let out a deep sigh.

“And that’s the problem. Had you not made such a fuss, we could’ve kept this a secret from the rest of society.”

“But if I hadn’t, I would’ve been in so much more danger!”

“If we were able to protect your reputation, we would’ve been able to find a good husband for you, despite you losing your virginity. But now, rumors of you

being a harlot have spread like wildfire. Only a few men will take you in now. But of course, the brat who visited us this morning is completely out of the question.”

“Pardon?”

Opal was tempted to point out that she was still a virgin, but she was unable to hide her shock at just how little her father cared for her well-being and couldn’t offer a word of rebuttal. She could only eke out another question.

“A brat came forward, claiming to be the one who met you last night,” the earl said. “He said he wants to take responsibility and marry you.”

“He stepped forward?” Opal asked. “After fleeing last night? He *attacked* me, and yet he has the gall to claim that it was a *meeting*?”

“You wandering out by yourself in the garden must have been a perfect opportunity for him. He’s the second son of a poor viscount’s house, after all. He claimed to have fled when you caused a fuss. Good grief,” Earl Holloway groaned. “I made a huge mistake inviting that cheeky kid to my manor.”

“A poor viscount’s house...”

Opal was dazed as she recalled a young man who’d been chasing after her recently. She came from a wealthy family and had quite a bit of dowry to offer, and those who heard this often targeted her for marriage. Opal, however, was always on guard. She’d lost her mother when she was young, and her father, who was obsessed with making money, paid no attention to her. Her brother, two years older than her, had entered a boarding school, and her family had been hardly present within the earldom. She had been raised all alone.

The servants within the manor were kind to her, of course. Still, Opal envied close-knit families and had dreamed that one day, when the time came, she’d create the warm household and loving family she had never had. And so, she yearned to marry a man she loved. She didn’t want to marry into a house for money and took it upon herself to find a partner that would see her true self.

While she did have a childhood friend she was close with, he was unfortunately the third son of a baron—her father wouldn’t permit her to marry a man like him. Opal had realized that early on and had quietly

suppressed the burgeoning love she felt for him. With her heart full of hope, she'd made her way to the royal capital to meet the man of her dreams. But no one had attracted her.

No, there was one... Opal thought. She remembered the man that she had danced with just once. He was a young duke who had just graduated from university and rarely attended these dinner parties. Due to his high rank, the women at the party were embroiled in a vicious battle to claim him for their own, and it had been difficult to even get close to him.

However, when Earl Holloway had introduced his daughter to the duke, the young man had invited Opal to dance as an act of exchanging pleasantries. He was a man of few words, but the hands that touched hers had been very gentle, and the rare smile he had given still revealed his boyish innocence. Opal thought that her life would be filled with joy if she spent her days with him.

"Listen well," Opal's father said. "Truth be told, you can no longer hope for a good relationship. But there will certainly be someone who requires your money. I'll inspect each man carefully and decide your marriage partner for you. Until then, you'd best not create another commotion. Is that clear?"

"Yes, father..." Opal replied. Her tone was meek, but she was so lost in her thoughts that she barely heard his words.

The earl, satisfied with her reply, gave a wave of his hand to send her back. The famished Opal obediently stepped out and headed to have some breakfast.

That night, Opal attended a dinner party hosted by a certain marquis. Only then did she truly understand what her father had said. The noblewomen who had been so friendly with her just the night before ignored her completely. The young men who had gathered around her the moment she'd made her appearance were nowhere to be seen. A few men still approached her, but a single glance at their attire made it clear that they weren't wearing the latest fashion.

The ladies glared at her with contempt while whispering nasty rumors. Any normal noble lady would've been unable to tolerate this humiliation and would've fled from the scene, but Opal was stronghearted and stubborn. She stayed. *She* hadn't done anything wrong; the blame should've gone to the man

who'd tried to assault a frail lady like her. The viscount's second son, who had confessed to the crime, wasn't present.

He likely couldn't appear in front of others for a while—Opal's sharp nails had scratched his face. During the carriage ride home, her attendant grumbled about just how humiliated she'd been, but Opal ignored it all. *If you don't want to serve me, just quit.*

She no longer had her mother, and there was no other woman of age within her family that could look after her. The attendant had simply been hired, and she was free to quit at any time. Ultimately, it seemed she couldn't resist the fat paycheck and continued to tag along with Opal to societal occasions.

Opal remained proud and confident despite the rumors that swirled around her. However, she found it difficult to handle the men who were after her money or looking to indulge themselves in a night of debaucherous pleasure. Every time she managed to successfully rebuff their advances, they would claim she was "used to handling men," only making the rumors worse.

In the blink of an eye, Opal's circle of friends disappeared, and she received fewer and fewer invitations to societal occasions. But still, appearances needed to be maintained, and as the daughter of a wealthy countess, she was made to participate only when strictly necessary.

As the season drew to a close, Opal breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, she could return to her favorite manor, her favorite land. *I'll be forgotten about by next season, I'm sure of it. There's always another scandal.*

As her body rocked with the movements of the carriage, Opal spent the time eagerly awaiting being home with optimistic dreams about her ideal marriage.

2. Her Childhood Friend

Opal returned to her favorite manor, and the days passed as they usually had before she'd made her society debut. As usual, her father was obsessed with growing the family wealth. Ever since that fateful incident, he'd become completely disinterested in Opal. Her older brother was preparing to enter university, and he'd spend his lengthy vacation at his friend's house, with no plans to return home. Opal had practically become something of a stepmother, and spent her days managing the manor, but she also enjoyed being active, like going horseback riding or climbing trees.

Surely, the residents of her earldom had heard rumors about her scandal, but they didn't treat Opal any differently. Whenever she went to visit them, they paid their utmost respects and came to her for advice. Trying to spend every day to the fullest, Opal dedicated each afternoon to reading outside.

The sunlight was a touch strong these days, but with the end of summer around the corner, there was still relief to be found in the shade. Opal placed some baked snacks and fruits into a basket, grabbed a book on agriculture (her recent favorite read), and stepped out of the manor. Just a brief walk led her to the massive trunk of her favorite tree.

She'd scaled this tree numerous times as a child, and she was now able to easily climb up even with a basket on her arm. She tucked her basket between the trunk and a straight branch as she stretched her legs onto the familiar reading perch, leaning back against the trunk. She became so engrossed in her book that she failed to notice the footsteps of someone approaching.

"I don't think a lady would ever climb a tree," a voice suddenly called to her, making her jump with fright.



“Oh dear, Claude,” Opal said. “What *have* you been learning at your university? I’m sure there’s at least one lady out in the world climbing trees and helping with the field work.”

She tried her best to mask her initial surprise with her cheeky words, while Claude, her childhood friend, let out a deep chuckle in response, the soothing sound already calming her startled mind.

“I’m sure I only know of one such lady—she happens to originate from this earldom, in fact—but I’m still learning,” he said. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“That seems for the best,” Opal replied.

Claude had just referred to Opal, who had just become a debutante, as a lady. He hadn’t changed one bit; perhaps he was ignorant of the rumors that swirled around her. Since he was off at university, there was a good chance that he was in the dark about the recent gossip. Opal vehemently wished Claude would never hear the salacious rumors about her. Though she had never been able to muster the courage to tell Claude how she felt, she still wanted to remain the usual, tomboyish, cheeky Opal Holloway in front of him.

She loudly shut her book, as though closing a door on her glum thoughts, and placed the book inside of her basket.

“Claude, will you be a dear and catch my basket?” she called down to him.

“All right.”

The moment he replied, she threw her basket down and expertly descended the tree. She didn’t need to check if Claude had caught her belongings—they’d done this numerous times before, and not once had he failed to catch them. When Opal made one final jump and landed on the ground, he gave a mischievous grin.

“I thought you were already done with climbing trees, Opal,” he said.

“By the time you graduate and become a splendid gentleman, I’ll surely be a perfectly respectable lady,” Opal retorted.

Claude was a year older than her older brother; he wouldn’t graduate for another three years. Perhaps she’d be married off by then and would be forced

to part ways with her favorite tree. Needless to say, her future husband would undoubtedly disapprove of her outdoor antics. It would truly be a pity, but even Opal had some common sense. Her verbal jab had been intended as a joke, but Claude actually looked a touch hurt before quickly masking it with a smile.

But he couldn't fool his childhood friend; Opal had noticed it.

"Claude?" she asked.

Her tone carried a hint of confusion, and Claude, who also knew Opal very well, immediately understood what her question was really asking.

"Ah, you've simply reminded me that I still have three whole years at that boring university," he said. "And I've been given so much homework over my break that it's overwhelming."

"Oh, woe is me!" Opal replied sarcastically. "And? Whatever would you like for me to do? Speak words of comfort? Or shall I throw an angry fit at you rubbing it all in? You know that I'd *love* to go to a university. Just why is it that women aren't allowed to work or become educated?"

She fell into her usual expression of resentment toward society, a complaint Claude had heard many times before.

He smiled and took the book from her basket. "You might not be going to university, but you're still studying diligently. Trevor's teaching you all about how to manage the earldom, no?"

There was no fooling her childhood friend. Indeed, Opal had been learning how to properly maintain the earldom. Between their schedules the two childhood friends could rarely find an occasion to meet, but apparently Claude could still read Opal's mind very well, much to her frustration.

"When I turn twenty, I shall inherit the land my grandmother left behind," Opal insisted. "It may not be a big plot of land, but even if I get married, it won't belong to my husband. It shall be mine and mine alone. *My* asset. I'm currently having someone manage it for me, but when I'm twenty, I'll do it all by myself."

Claude paused for a moment. "Right. You've got land, don't you?"

"I don't mean to brag."

“I know. I may not have an inheritance, but I have my freedom. My potential is limitless, so to speak.”

Claude had inherited nothing and had no form of material wealth. In contrast, Opal had her assets. She might have sounded a bit arrogant just then. She hastily tried to correct herself, but Claude didn't seem to mind and just brightly smiled.

“Goodness, perhaps *you're* the one being a bit audacious,” Opal sighed. She was relieved but made sure to include a sharp remark. “I've got no freedom at all. Oh, I wish I'd been born as a boy...”

Claude smiled and tousled her hair, something he'd done since they were kids.

“The world's a troublesome place,” he said. “You're you, and I think you should live as you like, Opal. You've got the strength to push through with your own will.”

“Claude...”

Had he actually heard the rumors after all? Something about his words made her think so, tears welling in her eyes, but she managed to keep her composure.

“Good grief!” she complained, glaring at him. “My hair is all a mess! Argh! Marcia will scold me again! It's all your fault!”

“Sure, sure. I'm sorry,” he replied, sounding not at all apologetic.

The two burst out laughing and made their way back to the manor together where the maid, Marcia, was waiting to give them a good scolding. And once more, the pair of childhood friends giggled.

And despite Marcia's exasperation, she remained loyal to Opal, staying in and doing the mending while Opal and Claude enjoyed an afternoon of playing board games. Everyone was so kind to Opal; the countess's days were filled with happiness.

The following day, Opal and Claude embarked on a small trip to their childhood secret base, walking around a large boulder. They had invited the ladies-in-waiting to tag along as they picnicked and did some fishing. Opal had

never enjoyed herself so much.

Unfortunately, the fun had to end, and now, it was time for Claude to return to his university.

“Opal, you’re a strong lady,” Claude said. “But even you will have your moments of sadness and struggle. Remember you don’t have to endure it alone, okay?”

“Claude...” Opal murmured.

“What I’m trying to say is, just come to me anytime if you need anything. I’ll fly over to you in a flash.”

“Mm-hmm... Thank you. Truly.”

This man understood her more than her father or brother and cared for her so deeply. She hated to see him leave, but she mustered her strength in order to bury her feelings once more and gave a beaming smile.

“Take care of yourself,” she managed to say. “Study hard.”

“I know, I know. I’ll see you later, Opal.”

“Till we meet again...”

As she gazed at Claude’s slowly receding figure she realized that the smile had faded from her face. She wasn’t honestly sure if they’d ever get a chance to meet again.

This time next year, I could be married.

She was still under the command of her father, Count Holloway. If he gave his order, she had to marry anyone he chose; she had no right to decline.

But maybe, when the season opens again, I’ll meet someone wonderful. Opal had regained much of her energy at the earldom—she looked to the next season with a hopeful heart. And it was that very season that she’d realize she’d been far too naive.

3. Condemnation

Opal had been certain that her second year as a debutante would go much better, but she returned to the earldom with a heavy heart. The rumors of her promiscuity hadn't died down—far from it. She was now seen as a wild and unrestrained lady who did as she pleased.

Still, she'd done her best to go on morning walks with potential candidates, going out on the balcony with them, even giving them a kiss or two. But just as she'd experienced with the viscount's second son the year prior, the kisses didn't feel right, and she could only express her disgust, refusing to escalate the relationships any further. The men had had their pride shattered and, in response, escalated the original rumors even more by spreading outright lies about her.

In addition, the men Opal had refused to spend any time with at all spread *even more* rumors about her. Soon enough, Opal was firmly dubbed as a lecherous and lustful unmarried woman, an abhorrent lady. Her third year after her debut came and went.

Maybe I should just give up on marriage. Maybe I was meant to be free instead of trapped in a loveless marriage that would just drain my family's wealth.

By the time Opal turned eighteen and was still unmarried, she'd given up on her dreams of creating a warm and loving household. When she'd turn twenty, she'd inherit that small plot of land left by her maternal grandmother, Olga Kensington. The land was more than enough for Opal to get by without much issue.

Just as she'd told Claude, this land would forever be hers even if she were to marry, and now, she started to understand how her grandmother had once felt. Opal had heard from her mother that the countess's maternal grandfather was horribly strict and could often be seen carrying around a whip.

When Opal returned to her favorite manor, she decided to spend the rest of

her year studying rather than playing around. She requested the aid of Trevor, the earl's manager, and her butler, Alton. By shadowing their work, she was able to learn a great deal about managing the land and the manor. Some time later Claude returned from the royal capital, spotted Opal hard at work, and was baffled.

"Do you really need to study that much, Opal?" he asked. "The earl simply reviews Trevor's reports. Why don't you follow suit and hire managers and butlers to do the work for you?"

"It's disappointing to hear you say that, Claude," the countess replied. "Since I no longer plan to marry, I've decided to live off my grandmother's land when I turn twenty. I must be able to take care of the land on my own."

"You don't plan on marrying? Why?"

"Haven't you heard? There are awful rumors about me going around. Ah, but perhaps you haven't, since you're still willing to be my friend."

"Are you an idiot? Of course I've heard of them. I might be living in an all-male dormitory, but I'm not completely isolated from the world, you know. But it's precisely *because* I'm your friend that I know those rumors...are false. You aren't that kind of woman. Everyone at the manor feels the same; they've known you since you were a child, after all."

"Thank you."

Opal teared up when she heard Claude's words, but she did her best to keep any from falling. She wasn't the type to cry so easily. She hadn't cried when she fell from a tree and broke her arm, nor when her favorite pony died.

"Don't cry, my beautiful child. I always hope that you'll smile," Opal's mother had said on her deathbed.

And so, a young Opal had done everything she could to suppress the tears that were already streaming down her cheeks and the snot that sullied her face as she did her best to muster a bright smile. Her dangerously skinny and frail mother, who surely must've had no strength to do such a thing, had slowly managed to smile back. Opal had only been ten years of age, but ever since, she'd vowed that she would never cry again. As long as she gritted her teeth

and faced forward, people would undoubtedly smile back at her. Indeed, the people of the earldom did just that.

Opal didn't care what the nobles said about her. Once the next social season ended, she planned on moving to the manor that her grandmother had left behind. She still had about two years until she turned twenty, but she'd already have spent three years socializing without being able to find a marriage partner. Who could blame her for giving up so soon?

The estate administrator was a very kind person. Perhaps having heard the rumors, they'd readily accepted Opal's proposition. She'd handpick a few people to help her manage the land for the first few years, of course.

And so, Opal welcomed her fourth season with a rather sunny disposition. She could keep a smile on her face surrounded by gaudy debaucherous men or gauche women who didn't bother to hide that they gossiped about her. She locked eyes with the duke that she'd danced with once, during those innocent days of yesteryear, before the nasty rumors. She had been a tad attracted to him back then, but as he now glared back at her, she didn't care. Ever since that incident, whenever they met, he passed by her without so much as a word. It was as though the man was implying that Opal wasn't even worth talking to. Though quite the breach of etiquette, the duke was allowed to exhibit such uncouth behavior.

The social season was a few days away from ending, and Opal was already packing up her belongings. She decided to head back to the earldom's manor first before moving to the smaller abode that her grandmother had left behind. She'd already told the residents of the earldom her plans, and though they'd been sad to see her go, she'd quickly added that she'd only be a daylong carriage ride away from them.

All she had left was to attend a small concert hosted at a viscount's house, and her social obligations would end for the season. She selected her dress for the night and gazed at the rest of her garments still lined up in the closet. She would have no use for any of these once the social seasons ended, and she planned on leaving them behind at the earldom's manor. Opal knew that she'd still require some of the more sedate designs for future occasions and had them all packed up in her bags already.

It's finally over.

Just then, a butler arrived at her room.

"My lord is waiting for you in his study," he said.

"My father?" Opal asked.

"Quite so. He has asked you to visit him immediately."

"Very well."

The last time Opal had been called out to her father was over that fateful incident. She had been neglected ever since, and by this point she truly believed that her father had no interest in her. The fact that she was suddenly being summoned now didn't feel right. But she had no right to refuse his call, and she had no intention of doing so either. She confidently stood in front of his study and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice called.

Yet her presence went unacknowledged as she quietly opened the door and made her way inside. As usual, her father's desk was a mess, the mountain of documents piled on top hinting at how busy he'd been. Despite having been the one who'd summoned her, her father didn't look up and was busily writing away.

"Did you need me, father?" Opal asked, no longer able to endure the silence.

Her father grumpily looked up from his documents and let out a *very* loud sigh, placing his fountain pen down.

"A lady should never open her mouth first and, instead, should await the words of the master of the house," he said. "But I suppose I'm partially to blame for not educating you enough. I've been far too permissive with you, Opal."

"I apologize, father. But I must prepare for tonight's—"

"Silence."

Her father was never one to raise his voice, but he didn't listen to his own advice either. Opal very much disliked this aspect of her father. She had been

secretly suspecting that this was precisely why her older brother never came home—no one wanted to deal with their father. Opal was wary, but she did her best to modestly apologize, and her father immediately smiled happily, appeased. That smile was all it took to confirm Opal’s ominous premonitions.

“Rejoice, Opal,” he said. “Your marriage has finally been decided.”

Opal took a moment to process those words. “Pardon?”

“Not a bad partner either. I suppose it was worth it to wait three whole years. Had that debacle not occurred, we surely would’ve been able to seal this deal three years ago. You may be damaged goods, but I have no plans on handing you over to that brat or to those silly men who are only after your money.”

“Father, I don’t plan to marry—”

“I’ve already completed the contract with the opposite party, and I just received news that the marriage certificate has already been delivered. The ceremony will be in three days’ time.”

Opal was unable to vocalize her dissent; her fate had already been set in stone. Her mind was going a mile a minute, trying to find ways to wriggle out of this marriage, but a lady younger than twenty had no chance of doing so. Her father had let Opal do as she pleased because he’d had his sights set on this perfect marriage partner. No doubt her father had been waiting three years to grasp this man’s weakness and take advantage of him.

What kind of horrible person am I being married off to? Opal hurt with the news that her scandal meant she was no longer a virgin, and thus fated for a less than ideal husband. Could I divorce when I’m twenty?

“Father... *Whom* am I marrying?” Opal asked.

“So, you finally decided to ask,” her father replied. “Once you hear his name, I’m sure you’ll be grateful to me. Your husband will be Duke Hubert McLeod.”

“Duke McLeod?”

The moment Opal heard the name, her vision grew blurry and she felt faint. This was the very duke that she had danced with just once, three years ago. Opal had been a bit attracted to him, but he had ignored her ever since that

fateful incident, and he had glared at her just the other day.

“Why...am I being married to such a high-ranking noble?” she inquired.

“Duke McLeod lost his parents when he was young and has been forced to carry his title from a young age. He lacks experience and is a touch naive. He may have been able to save himself three years ago, but he’s a very proud man and likely couldn’t reach out to others for help. He’s so deep in debt now that he feels he’s completely out of options. And so, in order to keep his ancestral land, he’s decided to sell himself.”

“Did the duke agree to marry me to pay his debt?”

“Precisely. It was tough for me to lie in wait and see him fall so low from grace. But patience is key with investments.”

“Investments...”

“Try thinking about it. You’re marrying a *duke*. As the father-in-law of a duke, I shall become the future maternal grandfather of the household. I’ll be able to conduct more work. Listen carefully, Opal. I’ve let you do as you please until now, but from today on show more restraint. Tackle your problems with the duke. I’m sure you’d be able to find some enjoyment in it.”

Opal wasn’t sure if she was able to offer a response. She could only stagger out of her father’s study and return to her room in stunned silence. Only when her lady-in-waiting called out to her was she able to snap back to reality.

4. Marriage

Over the three days leading up to the marriage ceremony, not once had Opal met the duke. While this union had sent a shock wave throughout noble society, rumors quickly spread that Opal had seduced the duke and was pregnant with his child. Others claimed that the duke, struggling to maintain his vast plot of land, was likely in need of money. In any case, there was no end to the theories.

Hubert McLeod was indeed young for his title, but he was still a whole seven years older than Opal. *I'm turning nineteen soon, but how could I possibly coerce a man who's twenty-six?* Opal thought, giggling as her lady-in-waiting informed her of the wild speculations currently circulating. But the theories that mentioned the cost of maintaining Hubert's lands weren't entirely false. It seemed the duke had been skillfully keeping his debts under wraps.

No matter the reason for their marriage, Opal couldn't help but tremble with nerves as the ceremony quickly approached. What had Hubert thought when he accepted this marriage proposal? Opal's house could apparently pay off all of Hubert's current debts, and already her father had donated very generous amounts of cash to celebrate this joyous occasion. *Is he—or House McLeod—grateful to be free of such a burden?*

He didn't seem eager to marry Opal because of her tattered reputation. He hadn't offered her flowers or sent her any sort of gift before the wedding, and those actions were very telling. One of her ladies-in-waiting had stated that once Opal was married off, her ill reputation would no longer precede her.

Maybe everything will be okay, Opal thought. *I'm sure he's a kind man.*

Her father's words from last night echoed in her head. "Only a select few know this information, but McLeod keeps a mistress within his manor. As his wife, you should approach that situation to the best of your abilities."

At first, Opal had been shocked to hear this. But she reminded herself that over the past three years, she'd been told quite a number of shocking things by

many ill-mannered men. She managed to maintain her composure. Perhaps it couldn't be helped—he was a single man. But would he still keep his mistress even after getting married? Such a thing would implicate Opal as a lacking wife.

The more she thought about tying the knot, the more afraid she became, but as the music of the church echoed throughout the place and the bride was encouraged to enter, she knew that she couldn't flee. She could only strengthen her resolve.

Walking at her side, Opal's father looked unusually joyful. In front of her was the groom, standing by the altar, his back to her. Not once did he turn around to catch a glimpse of his bride. This only made Opal even more nervous about marrying him, but she mustered up her courage and stepped forward.

When she finally stood next to the groom, she was slightly out of breath, and her fingertips had grown cold. Still, the groom refused to even look at her once. This was very peculiar behavior, and some of the guests started to murmur in confusion.

The ceremony itself was according to Hubert's wishes and was thus very simple. All the guests were relatives of either the bride or groom. Neither Opal nor Hubert invited a single one of their friends.

The couple said their marriage vows and signed their names, ending the ceremony. At this point, there would generally be a party or a lavish reception after the vows, but no such banquet could be seen. The guests summarily left, grumbling in complaint. Even though it had only been attended by family, others would surely hear about this odd wedding soon enough.

"Um..." Opal started to say. *What are we doing now?*

"I don't feel like celebrating, so there's no need to, is there?" came an icy cold reply. These were Hubert's first words to Opal after meeting for the first time in three years.

Opal was disappointed, but she said not a word and obediently backed down. She was subsequently shoved into the duke's carriage without further explanation. Her belongings, which she'd initially packed to take to her grandmother's land, had already been sent to the royal capital where the duke's manor was located. It seemed Hubert didn't leave the royal capital even

after the social season and had spent the past few years there.

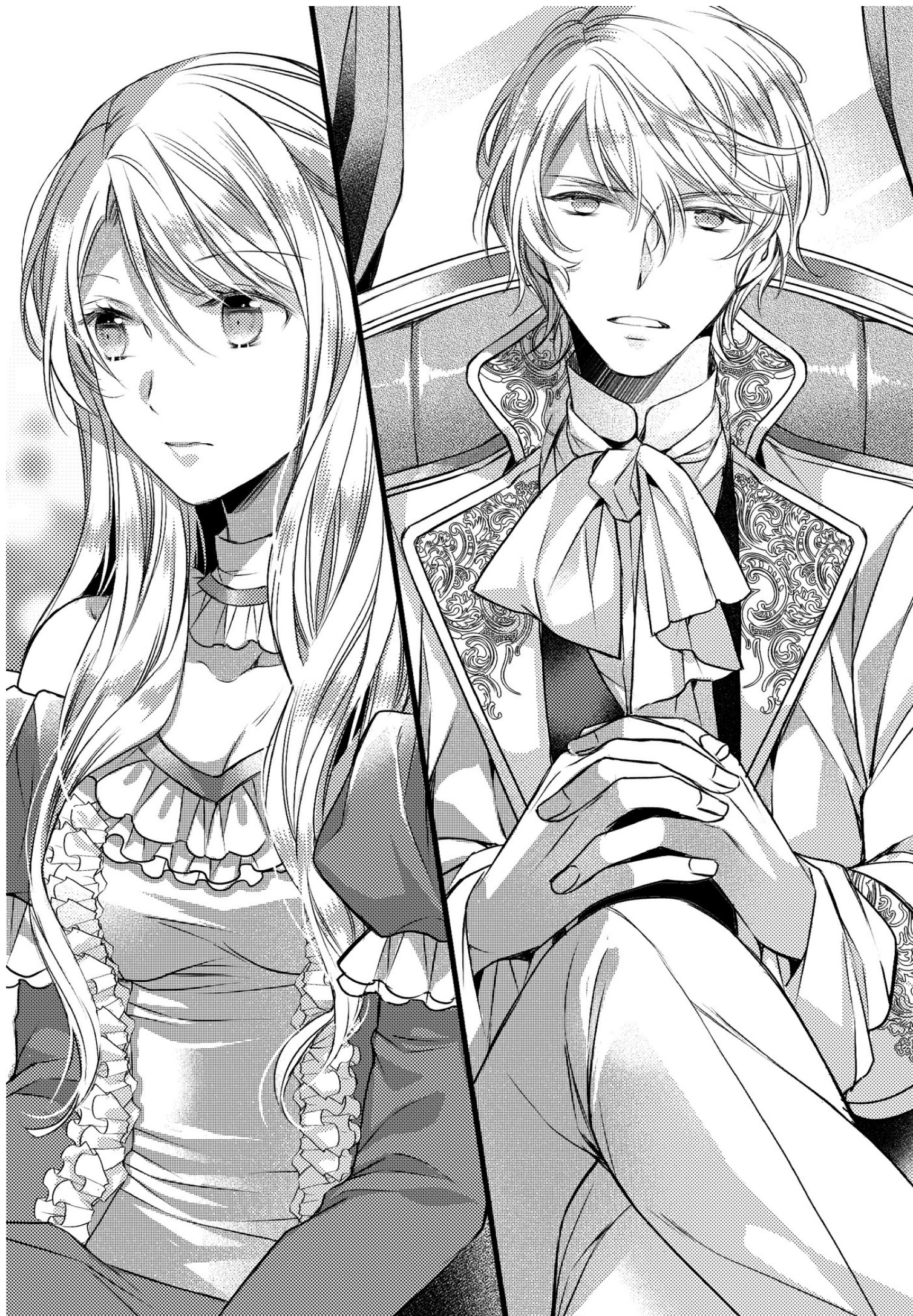
Seated in the carriage, Opal ran her hands along the newly replaced velvet fabric of her seat. Hubert, who was sitting across from her, gave a mocking snort.

“Satisfied, knowing how your money has been used?” he asked.

“My money, you say?” Opal replied.

“Your dowry was used to replace the seats. Sections of the manor have also been renovated. I’ve even prepared a room suitable for you.”

“Thank you.”



Hubert was brusque in his delivery, but upon learning of the renovations that had been done for her sake, Opal thanked him. However, her gratitude wasn't well received; Hubert frowned.

"There's no need for your thanks," he said. "I'm a man sold to you and your father, so it's only natural that I do whatever I can for your sake. However, there are some things that I cannot do, and I want you to listen well."

"Of course."

Opal was tempted to claim that she had no intention of purchasing him, but she knew that her words would just fall on deaf ears. It was wise of her to stay silent.

Hubert was clearly upset with his circumstances. Her father had told her he had waited three years to arrange this marriage with Hubert, but it was likely that in that same time Hubert had done whatever he could to avoid this kind of situation. And still, his efforts had fallen short.

In the end he'd been forced to reluctantly marry himself off for money, and his irritation at his new lot in his life was aimed at Opal. *I'm sure that, given some time to cool off, he'll find out I'm nothing like the rumors and change his attitude toward me. I must believe that.*

"You and your father may have given me money, but that manor is mine," he said. "I won't let you do as you please."

"But as the mistress of the—" Opal started to protest.

"That role has already been filled."

"Pardon?"

"Mrs. Notham, my father's cousin, is in charge. From the time my parents died when I was a child, she and her husband have looked after me. She lost her husband seven years ago, but he was like a father figure to me; just because I married you, I can't chase her or her daughter, Stella, out of the house."

"Of course. That goes without saying."

Opal had heard about Hubert's tragic past, and not once had she thought about evicting the people who had looked after him all this time. In fact, she

hadn't known that they existed until Hubert had just told her. Still, since she'd married him and by doing so became the mistress of the manor, managing the house was her responsibility. She decided to explain things to him later. Perhaps Mrs. Notham would tell him about it.

"And Stella is a very sickly lady," he continued. "She hardly goes outside and doesn't know much about the world. In general, I wouldn't want someone like you to meet her, but it can't be helped. Just do everything you can to stay away from her."

"How old is Miss Stella, if you don't mind me asking?" Opal inquired.

"She'll turn twenty this year."

Opal was stunned speechless. Nothing was more humiliating than being told that she could potentially be a bad influence to a woman *older* than her. And she had just been forbidden from even approaching her. Only then did Opal finally understand that she'd been taking this marriage far too lightly.

This might have all started with money, but she truly believed that, with time, the duke would see Opal as she truly was. *Maybe things will be better after our first night together. Maybe he can apologize to me tomorrow morning. I won't be coy and I'll forgive him immediately.* As hope filled her heart, the carriage arrived at the duke's manor. Hubert quickly stepped off, and Opal only did so upon borrowing the aid of a servant. She looked up and immediately gulped at the grandiose manor in front of her.

A residence this large is far too much for a vacation home in the capital. Maintaining this place must be a trial. And so, Opal slowly climbed up the steps to the entrance of the manor.

5. The Duke's Residence

"Welcome back, Lord Hubert," a butler said. "I've already prepared the rooms."

"Very well," Hubert replied. "Guide her there."

Opal had just finished climbing the stairs when she heard the two men converse; no one seemed to want to celebrate the newly wedded couple. The servants lined up to serve the duke and the new duchess gave icy glares, as though to appraise Opal's worth.

Do they realize just how insolent they're being toward me right now? Opal wondered, rage welling up within her. She managed to suppress her anger, knowing that first impressions were very important. No one would possibly want to serve a quick-tempered duchess. She made a mental note to call the head maid later and give a warning. The butler bowed and greeted her.

"Welcome to our residence, madam," he said. "My name is Romito, and I serve as the butler of this place. Should you need anything, please call for myself or Beth, who's right over there. Beth will be your personal lady-in-waiting."

The young lady who stood closest to Opal stepped forward and bowed. Opal, however, didn't miss Beth's look of dissatisfaction. What had Hubert said to these servants that made them treat her so coldly? She was tempted to curse the duke, but the man had already retreated somewhere deep within the manor.

"I shall guide you to your room, madam," Romito said. "I'm sure you're tired, so I shall have dinner brought to your room as well."

"Are you sure?" Opal asked. "I'm quite fine, really..."

"Mrs. Notham kindly insists on it."

"Very well."

Even the servants still saw Mrs. Notham as the mistress of the manor. And if Mrs. Notham's version of kindness meant holing Opal up in a room and bringing her food to her without even a smidge of celebration, she surely lacked common sense. But the duchess didn't want to cause a ruckus on her very first day and instead quietly followed Romito.

Regardless of size, most manors were constructed with similar layouts, and so Opal walked up the large staircase in front of her and quickly found the master bedroom. She thought she'd be sleeping there, but Romito walked past it.

Perhaps I was wrong...

Before she knew it, the pair had reached the end of the corridor, and the butler opened a door. Opal dubiously entered the room and found herself in a space that was clearly meant for guests.

"Romito, are you saying that *this* is my room?" Opal asked.

"That is correct," he replied.

"But this is the guest room. Has the master bedroom not been renovated yet?"

"Nothing of the sort. While this room is certainly the farthest away from the staircase, it has a washroom and a closet. Above all, the view from the window is absolutely spectacular, and you won't be bothered by any noise. Mrs. Notham has specifically chosen this room for you, madam."

"I appreciate her *kindness*, but I'm the duchess. I should use the master bedroom, wouldn't you agree? Please carry my belongings there immediately." Opal knew that her attitude was overbearing, but she couldn't be underestimated here. She thus reprimanded the butler and gave her order.

"I cannot do that."

"And why not?"

"The master bedroom—the one connected to Lord Hubert's room—is currently being occupied by Lady Stella."

"Excuse me?" Opal was stunned to hear this.

She hadn't thought she would be barred from using the master bedroom,

much less be confined to the corner of the manor. She felt the blood drain from her face, but she knew this wasn't the time to faint. She used her right hand to pinch her left and managed to utter a response.

"Is Miss Stella His Grace's mistress?" she asked.

It was Romito's turn to grow as pale as a sheet. "Goodness... Certainly not. Now, if you'll excuse me."

The butler, now astonished, shot the duchess a look of contempt and left the room. Opal was left behind with Beth, who at a glance was preparing a change of clothes like nothing was wrong. The maid said not a word, but it was clear that she had listened in on their conversation and was furious.

It seemed that an angel lived in this manor. And with a snake having suddenly waltzed right in, everyone was hostile toward it, fearing it—*she*—would bite the angel. Opal hadn't cared about her reputation since her second social season when she'd abandoned the idea of marriage. Unfortunately, this had now come back to bite her.

But didn't I save this manor from financial ruin? I've never even met these servants before today, so why are they treating me so horribly?

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, and the rage that she'd been suppressing started to bubble up once more. *She* wasn't the snake in this manor. She hadn't met Mrs. Notham yet, but Opal was certain that it was her controlling and manipulating the servants. *Maybe she thinks that with me here, her position is in danger.*

"How silly," Opal grumbled, as she changed out of her wedding dress into simpler attire.

Beth must've heard the duchess's words, but she remained silent. *Once I'm twenty I'll file for divorce. I doubt I'll ever be allowed to have a child in this situation.* At that moment she heard loud footsteps quickly approach her room—only Hubert was ever allowed to act so recklessly. The door to her room opened without even a knock, and indeed, the duke was standing there.

"Your Grace..." Opal started.

She had just finished changing, but she tried to scold him for not knocking on

the door. What would he have done if she was still changing her clothes? But the sheer wrath in the duke's face caused Opal to falter and fall silent.

"You vile, wretched wench!" he shouted, violently grabbing her arm. "You... You dare call Stella my mistress?!"

Opal almost cried out in pain, but she gritted her teeth and endured the agony. The duke spat out his complaints and immediately released her from his grip like she was sullyng him.

"You will never meet Stella," he growled. "Tell Beth if you ever want to leave your room—I would hate for you to even come across Stella accidentally. I won't stop you if you'd like to step outside, of course. But even if you become pregnant, I won't acknowledge your child. We may be a married couple, but I'll make a testimony to a law officer of the royal palace. You'd best keep that in mind."

Satisfied with his outburst, Hubert shot one last glare and left the room. Opal let her throbbing arm turn limp as she watched him leave. And Beth said not a word, silently retreating to a corner of the room.

6. An Angel

Opal ate dinner in her room as she was instructed, and once finished she quickly got into bed to try to fall asleep. But sleep did not come so easily, and when a wave of drowsiness finally did hit her, the sun had started to rise. She slept in until the afternoon. She used her bell to call for Beth, who reluctantly arrived. The maid, through her actions, seemed to subtly hint at Opal's indolent lifestyle. The duchess usually woke up rather early, even for nobles, but it was too troublesome to explain herself here.

She had much to do. First on her list was to speak with Mrs. Notham. She asked Beth to summon the lady. The maid begrudgingly left the room and did just that. Beth's attitude was appalling for a servant, but Opal decided to do the scolding later and awaited Mrs. Notham's reply.

A while later, there was a knock on Opal's door, and an unfamiliar lady stepped inside. From her appearance, it was clear that this was Mrs. Notham.

"I heard that you called for me," the lady said.

"Are you Mrs. Notham?" Opal asked.

"Quite right. I apologize for my belated introduction. I'm Talia Notham, the cousin of the previous duke, Joseph. Ever since Duke Joseph's passing, my husband and I have raised Hubert and have acted as his guardians."

"I see. My name is Opal. Please call me casually by my first name. I simply wished to talk with you. I didn't mean to summon you so formally, but as we've got the opportunity, may we speak for a while?"

"Most certainly."

Mrs. Notham quickly tried to sit down on a nearby sofa, but she suddenly remembered her social standing and froze in place. With a strained smile, Opal encouraged Mrs. Notham to sit. The duchess sat across from Mrs. Notham and asked Beth to bring some tea.

"I'd like to thank you for being the mistress of this household until now, Mrs.

Notham,” Opal said. “I understand that you’ve been doing this for quite a while.”

“There’s no need for gratitude,” Mrs. Notham said. “And what did you want to speak with me about? Resigning from my status as mistress and having you take charge, perhaps?”

The lady’s aggressive tone made Opal almost falter, but the young duchess was used to countering sarcastic remarks from older women. In truth, Opal wanted Mrs. Notham to do exactly that and resign, but Hubert’s words in the carriage flashed across her mind. She managed to keep herself together.

“I won’t force you,” Opal replied. “I’m still not used to this manor, and I just wanted you to teach me, Mrs. Notham.”

“I see.”

Mrs. Notham’s haughty response annoyed Opal a great deal, but she managed to keep a smile on her face. Had the duchess said that Hubert had declared Mrs. Notham to be the mistress of the manor, the lady would’ve undoubtedly been a lot more proud.

“I’m just a bit curious about the master bedroom,” Opal added.

Mrs. Notham frowned with obvious displeasure, but Opal wasn’t one to back down and stared straight into her eyes. Opal no longer had any feelings for the duke—any sliver of hope she’d held had been shattered last night. But she’d married into this house and would eventually become the mistress of the house; she might not have needed to maintain the manor, but being prohibited from the master bedroom was highly unusual, and she couldn’t let it go.

“I have no idea about your situation until now, but I’m the duke’s—His Grace’s—wife and married into this house,” Opal stated. “It makes me uneasy to know that your daughter, Miss Stella, is just a door away from His Grace and uses the master bedroom. I wonder what other nobles would say about this arrangement.”

“That child...” Mrs. Notham cried. “That room has belonged to that child for years now! But I won’t ever allow such rumors to spread about our manor!”

“But I might talk.”

Opal had simply spoken out of anger—she truly had no intention of doing so. Indeed, there was no way that she was willing to humiliate herself to such a degree. But Beth gulped nervously behind Opal, and Mrs. Notham started to tremble, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“That child...has always been supporting Hubert!” Mrs. Notham sobbed. “And now, Hubert’s supporting her in turn! If the two are ripped apart, that child will die!”

Opal was practically rolling her eyes at this blatant exaggeration, but Mrs. Notham was too busy wiping her tears with a handkerchief to notice.

“She’s gravely ill!” Mrs. Notham wept. “She’s been told that she might not live to see twenty, but Hubert’s devotion has supported her until now and she’s doing her best to live!” Choking sobs escaped from her mouth.

Opal quietly watched on in astonishment. She had never imagined Stella to be suffering so horribly. No one had told her a thing, and all the servants were too busy being hostile toward her.

“I’m sorry,” Opal said. “I’d heard that Miss Stella was frail from His Grace, but I had no idea it was that serious. I just wish I was told so from the start.”

But the duchess’s words of apology didn’t reach Mrs. Notham’s ears. Opal wasn’t heartless; if she’d known about this from the beginning, she wouldn’t have uttered a word of complaint, even if she still found it peculiar that Stella was permitted to use the master bedroom.

Miss Stella is so cherished that she’s permitted to use the master bedroom. Perhaps His Grace chose not to marry her because of her health? But simply being in close proximity to each other offers no support or protection.

As Beth went over Opal’s head and reached out to calm Mrs. Notham and lead her out of the room, Opal was calmly analyzing her surroundings.

A while later, thudding footsteps approached her door.

Ugh, again?

Once more, the door slammed open without a single knock as Hubert stormed into the room, red-faced.

“How much more horrible can you be?!” he bellowed. “Have you forgotten what I told you yesterday?!”

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Opal replied.

“Enough! Now you want Mrs. Notham to resign as mistress *and* kick Stella out of the master bedroom?! Are you that heartless?!”

“I believe it’s all a huge misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?! Both Mrs. Notham and Beth have testified to this!”

“Is that so?”

The angrier Hubert became, the calmer Opal was, her heart turning colder by the minute. Her chilly attitude only enraged the duke even more.

“I truly wonder why I married someone like you!” he shouted. “You’re not only promiscuous, but you’re a cold wench too!”

“Then why don’t you cancel this marriage? Perhaps this manor will become peaceful then. Ah, but you must return my dowry and my father’s money, of course.”

“What?!”

“In response to your question about marrying me, you married me for money, is that not so? And as you wished, you received the funds to pay off your debts. Your house was able to save face, but why am I treated in such a fashion? The servants pay me no respect. As your wife, another woman occupying the master bedroom is naturally alarming to me. You never properly explained yourself, and when I ask a question, you shout angrily and try to silence me. Why is this? Not *once* have I asked for compensation from you or your house. What sin have I committed to be treated so horribly? I never wished for a marriage like this. I’ve only reluctantly done so under my father’s orders.”

“Reluctantly?”

“That’s quite right. Or did you assume that I begged my father to marry after having fallen in love with you?”

Opal had spoken in jest, but the duke’s face turned redder still; she’d apparently hit the nail right on the head. His foolish assumptions almost made

her laugh.

“I’m clearly not needed in this house,” Opal continued. “You only married me for the money. Then why don’t you kill me right this instant?”

Hubert gasped, his reddening face quickly turning white. Opal wasn’t sure if the duke was caught off guard or if he truly had such intentions.

“I’m sure the plan will go well,” she said. “It’s only been a day, but the servants despise me to an absurd degree. I’m sure everyone will testify in your favor.”

“Y-You’re mad! How *dare* you say that!” the duke stammered.

“Indeed, I might have gone a bit mad. I had some hope in this marriage, after all. I had thought that you wouldn’t see me just for my money and would respect me for who I am. But I understand very well now. I’m nothing but a nuisance in this manor. You may as well treat me as though I don’t exist.”

“What are you...?”

“You said so yourself yesterday, didn’t you? I shall live here and not meet your precious Miss Stella. I shall tell Beth whenever I wish to step outside. You’re satisfied with this arrangement, aren’t you?”

In truth, Opal didn’t mean to become this defiant, but the anger that she’d been suppressing since yesterday—or since her father had forced her to marry, to be precise—had reached its tipping point. Tit for tat.

Opal had had this attitude since she was a child, and both the people of her manor and Claude had always claimed she was more than just an average tomboy. Furthermore, she was stubborn and obstinate.

Hubert, possibly not expecting to be challenged so much, couldn’t utter a single word and simply listened. But once Opal had finished, he snapped back to his senses and pursed his lips.

“As long as you don’t trouble us, do as you please!” he shouted, sounding like a sore loser.

With that, he turned on his heel and left, slamming the door behind him. *I’m sure this ruckus reached the master bedroom.* Opal sighed, wondering if his

precious Stella's peace had been disturbed. When the duchess approached the window and looked outside, she realized that her worries had been for naught.

In the garden below, a beautiful lady in a wheelchair was enjoying the flowers, accompanied by Mrs. Notham. If the two ladies discovered Opal watching, the duchess knew that she'd get scolded by Hubert again. But just as she tried to step away from the window, the lady in the wheelchair looked up, and the two locked eyes. The lady smiled; her expression looked shockingly sinister to Opal. The duchess blinked back.

Is it the light? Or maybe it's because she looked up at me. Opal quickly stepped away from the window and rang her bell. She was willing to set her pride aside this time.

7. The Duke

“The attic, you say?” Hubert asked.

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Romito replied. “Madam called for Beth and asked for an unused room in the attic. She then requested the maid to lead her to the empty servants’ quarters.”

“You don’t mean to say that she’s planning on living there, are you?”

“Unfortunately... Because her belongings and the bath can’t be placed in the attic, she has claimed she will still use her previous room, but she plans on spending a majority of her time in the attic.”

“What’s her problem?”

Hubert grumbled, telling Romito to step back. Because the duke had ordered Opal to stay away from Stella, the duchess didn’t want to live on the same floor as the lady. This was surely her act of revenge.

She’ll give up soon, Hubert thought. He was in his study, hard at work, and gave an angry huff as he focused back on the account book in front of him. Just a month ago, he’d been neck-deep in debt and had no idea how to pay it all off, but he was now able to pay the servants and the maintenance fees of the manor with ease. It was all thanks to the dowry that Opal had brought. Hubert stopped writing with his fountain pen as he thought back to his new wife.

In the morning, he had heard Mrs. Notham’s cries and had angrily stormed Opal’s room, but he was now realizing just how ill-mannered that was. He’d barged into a lady’s room without knocking, ignored her greeting, and proceeded to shout at her. He might have had good reason to do so, but he knew that his actions were far from reasonable.

What’s more, Opal’s claims were all true. It mattered not how she lived; her dowry and her father’s money had allowed his house to live with ease, his money troubles vanishing almost instantly. With Opal’s money, he’d be able to afford Stella’s expensive medical fees.

Hubert recalled his first encounter with Opal, three years ago. She was timid and beautiful, and he had felt himself a bit drawn to her. However, he was forced to be in debt, and he had no time for romance, much less marriage. When he heard the awful rumors about her, he found himself utterly disappointed.

As Opal seemingly enjoyed her life freely and without restraint, the bedridden Stella had become weaker by the day. The world frustrated him immensely; it was so unfair. And when he absolutely no way of paying off his massive debt, Earl Holloway called out to him. Previously, Hubert only borrowed money from people he could trust to keep his debt under wraps. The earl somehow finding out, he assumed, was because Opal had snooped around in hopes of marrying a duke. And once more, Hubert felt rage in his heart.

However, the duke knew the truth. The fury that he had unleashed upon Opal was to hide his own shame and incompetence—he was simply taking it out on her. Still, he pledged to keep Stella away from Opal. The frail lady didn't have much life left in her, and he wanted to make her final moments glorious. He was deeply indebted to Stella and felt extremely beholden to her.

Hubert had lost his parents when he was only twelve. When he and his parents were headed for their duchy in the royal capital, one of the wheels of their carriage had broken off, and they'd unluckily fallen off a cliff. Hubert was the sole survivor.

It had taken two days to find him, and he'd spent that time alone in a broken carriage, surrounded by the corpses of his parents, his maids, the coachman, and the horses. To this day, he was unable to forget that visceral fear. He still had nightmares about it.

It was Stella who'd come to his aid. With the loss of his parents, Hubert had become a duke at the age of twelve and had to sleep in his deceased parents' bedroom, often struggling to fall asleep.

Stella would groggily enter his room and slowly quell his fears. She'd only been six back then, and when the rest of her family had fallen asleep, she would rub her sleepy eyes and visit Hubert's room. Oftentimes, she'd sing lullabies in her tone-deaf voice.

The two would usually fall asleep together, and though Mrs. Notham and her husband would quickly catch wind of this, they'd never scolded them, and let the children do as they pleased—for they were children, after all, and Hubert already had such a tragic past. Soon enough, Stella had begun to sleep in Hubert's late mother's bedroom.

Perhaps the Nothams had hoped that the two kids would get married one day. Hubert would never know their true thoughts. But if he'd been told to marry Stella, he would probably have done so, even if he only saw her as a younger sister.

When Stella turned ten, she had come down with a terrible sickness. She'd had an awful fever, and everyone had thought that she must've caught a nasty cold. She'd shown no other symptoms but continued to suffer from horrible, frequent fevers, prompting those around her to hire a renowned doctor.

The suspicions of her family were confirmed when the doctor diagnosed her with an incurable sickness. They'd been told that the fevers were the equivalent of her body ringing the alarm and that Stella's body and cells were fighting against the virus that plagued her. Unfortunately, the pathogen was very powerful—there was no known cure. As time progressed, Stella would gradually lose control of her legs and be bedbound, and, in the final stages, she would lose the strength to even have her heart beat properly.

Upon hearing the harsh truth, Mrs. Notham, her husband, and Hubert had all experienced their grief and sorrow. However, they couldn't let Stella intuit her grisly demise. And so, Hubert and the Nothams had come up with a story and—with the help of their servants—treated her very precious and dearly.

But fate was a funny and cruel mistress; Mr. Notham had passed away before Stella could. He had been managing the duchy and its finances in lieu of young Hubert, but when the duke had gone off to university, Mr. Notham had died of a heart attack, passing away on a particularly cold winter day. Both the manor and the duchy were filled with memories of Hubert's late parents, and the young duke couldn't bring himself to return to that place; Mr. Notham's passing in the manor simply added insult to injury, making the place seem only more ominous.

In truth, Hubert had wanted somewhere with fresher air for Stella's sake, but not only did the duchy seem to possess an eeriness, it was far away from any reputable doctors. Delivering her medicine to that location would also be difficult. He had no money to force an excellent doctor to immigrate with him.

As though nature wanted to rub salt in his already gaping wounds, four years ago, a massive flood had severely damaged the crops of his land, leading to extremely poor harvests. In addition, he'd been hit by an onslaught of misfortune; before he knew it, he'd been deep in debt with no way out.

Hubert had been tempted to sell off his land, but he couldn't do that either. And so, in an act of desperation, he had gone to his last resort: Earl Holloway's offer.

I'm sure that woman will leave the attic soon. When the time comes I suppose I can sit down and have a proper talk with her...

As he returned to the present, he arrogantly thought about talking with Opal. Indeed, it was his fault for not properly explaining Stella's circumstances. It would not be totally impossible to give in, just a little.

But Hubert's thoughts were in vain. A week had already passed, and Opal refused to leave her dingy room.

8. The Attic

It had been five days since Opal had moved to the room in the attic. She woke up, stretched out her back, and loosened her sore limbs. At first, she had struggled to fall asleep on the hard wooden bed, but soon enough she'd gotten quite used to it. Beyond her room could be heard the bustle of servants working and waking up for the day, and Opal found this to be the perfect time to move around in the manor; it was too early in the morning to run into Stella or Hubert.

While the servants ignored the duchess as though she didn't exist, if she called out to them they would still reply. She remembered her first day living in the attic—when she'd gone down to the first floor and called out to a servant, they'd failed to completely hide their shock.

The dresses that she had once planned to bring with her to her grandmother's property could be donned without any additional assistance. Opal had taken a few of those into her attic, and upon changing, had walked down to the lower floors. The first time she had called out to a servant was to locate the manor's library, and she regularly made trips to the library to take a few books up to her room and read the day away.

Aside from this short morning trip and returning to her originally assigned room to wash and bathe, Opal remained in the attic. She never went out for the rest of the day. She'd read books, stretch her body and do some light exercises, sew, and, when her eyes grew tired from sewing, exercise again. Three square meals were brought to her room every day. She ate well and went to sleep before the cycle started anew. She felt like a prisoner, albeit treated a bit more favorably. Indeed, this entire marriage felt like a prison to Opal. *But I'm not a prisoner, and it feels silly to remain stubborn,* she thought.

She'd already read all the books in the library that had interested her, and now Opal took a casual stroll between the bookcases. Hubert had stated that, as long as Opal never met Stella, she could do as she pleased.

Perhaps I can just leave the manor altogether.

While her idea to move to her grandmother's land after the social season was now no longer viable, surely she could return to the earldom for a short while. Neither her father nor her brother ever returned home, and she wouldn't need to meet them.

If she claimed that she was visiting home after her marriage, the residents of the earldom would surely welcome her warmly. And she would come without her husband because he was busy, simple as that. It wasn't a lie either. Oftentimes, Opal had gazed out through her small attic window and seen Hubert busily tending to Stella. She decided to tell the duke about her trip before the afternoon and depart the next morning.

She'd reach the earldom by the evening, and the coachman could stay the night before leaving the following morning. Hubert would only need to endure two days without a carriage. Worst-case scenario, she could hire a fiacre for her trip home. This was shaping up to be the perfect plan. Opal hummed a little tune as she walked through the shelves, and after a time her eyes fell upon a certain book.

It was a historical document detailing Duke Hubert's family history. When she looked around, she spotted a few other nearby books about his land.

Indeed, I know absolutely nothing about his duchy and where it is.

She grabbed the books and took them to her room. She'd married into his family, after all, and while she planned on divorcing him in a year or so, it'd do her no harm to learn a little about his family history.

And so Opal changed her vacation plans, instead spending the next few days completely engrossed in reading about the duke's household, the duchy's history, and the events that had surrounded his duchy. Something had caught her attention, and she spent that morning searching the library for a map of her nation, Socille Kingdom. She brought that up to her attic as well.

"It takes four days by carriage from the earldom to the duchy," Opal muttered to herself. "Even so, this is quite odd."

She already had a rough estimate of the nation's geography in her head, and

it hadn't differed greatly from the map in front of her. She once again opened the records of the duchy that she'd read the night prior. Opal was initially shocked that these records weren't kept in a study and were instead stored in a library, but that was the least of her concerns. A knock on the door signaled that Beth had arrived with breakfast.

Opal kept her nose stuck in a book and said to the maid, "You don't need to serve. Just put it over there, will you?"

"Certainly," Beth replied, clearly annoyed with the duchess's perfunctory remark. The maid, however, had no right to speak her mind.

Opal had no time to worry about such trivial issues.

The following morning, Beth once again brought breakfast, and Opal finally raised her head.

"Beth," she said.

"Yes, madam?" the maid replied.

"I'd like to speak with His Grace. Would you request for him to make some time for me as soon as possible? If he has a preferred time and place, I shall happily go to him. Please inform him."

"Certainly."

Opal firmly stated that she was willing to bend to his will in hopes of not repeating the ruckus with Mrs. Notham. The maid swiftly left, but as Opal waited, there were no signs of Beth's return. The duchess was fed three meals a day, so she would surely meet her maid in the afternoon; there was no need to become annoyed so soon. Opal carefully read the records that she'd carried out from the library and jotted her own notes down. The more recent the records were, the more cryptic they became, and the questions within Opal's mind only grew. *I should probably steel myself.*

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Opal hastily took out a different book, pretending to read it instead. Beth glanced at Opal and, perhaps irritated by how graceful the duchess seemed while enjoying her reading, frowned ever so slightly. *I suppose I should've scolded her for how slow she was to respond to*

my request. Opal internally gave a mischievous chuckle as she closed her book.

“Thank you, Beth,” Opal said. “Today’s lunch looks delicious, as always.”

In truth, the food was similar to what the servants at the earldom ate and was in short completely unsuitable to bring to a duke’s table. He was likely cutting down on food expenses. If Opal was fed in such a fashion, she was curious to know what, then, the servants here ate. She didn’t want to steal Mrs. Notham’s role, however, and decided to remain silent; the servants didn’t look like they suffered from malnutrition anyway.

House McLeod hadn’t hosted a banquet or a tea party in quite some time. There were rumors that Hubert didn’t like to mingle with others, and Opal had assumed that he didn’t want to invite outsiders to the manor while Stella was ill. But if this simply was due to Mrs. Notham being ignorant about what kind of mannerisms a true mistress of a duke’s house should have, then it made sense that there weren’t any events. And of course, their financial troubles played no small part in the lack of festivities.

A mistress of the house needed to both manage the internal workings of the manor and be an excellent hostess to guests. These were two different roles, but being able to fulfill both was the sign of the ideal mistress. Since Opal had married Hubert, surely, many nobles were hoping for more parties at House McLeod next year.

Ugh, what a pain... But if I don’t do anything, I’ll be mocked for my lack of skill as a mistress.

No one was willing to openly criticize the duke, of course, but all the nobles loved to gossip and spread rumors behind each other’s backs. The one saving grace of this whole ordeal was that the wedding had occurred *after* the social season.

Those nasty nobles can say as they please. I’ll divorce this man when I turn twenty anyway.

Opal sat down to eat, unleashing her anger on a boiled potato with violent stabs of her fork. She brought the morsel to her mouth and chewed slowly. The food tasted a bit bland, but it wasn’t awful and could still be eaten.

“Madam...” Beth started.

“Yes?” Opal replied.

“About Lord Hubert’s meeting...”

“Ah, yes. I did ask for something like that, didn’t I?”

“Pardon?”

Opal had been so completely engrossed in something else that her reply earned a confused glance from her maid. *You didn’t have to take so long, did you? Out with it already.*

“Nothing. And how did he reply?” Opal asked icily.

“A-After this meal, he asked you to visit the south tea room,” Beth replied.

“I see. And where is this room located?”

“I shall guide you there.”

“Very well. I’m counting on you.”

Opal continued her meal. She was a bit behind her initial plans, but since she planned on leaving the manor tomorrow anyway, it didn’t matter much. And since the manor had gotten what they truly wanted from Opal—her money—they cared very little for her in turn. After finishing her meal, she took a glance at her hair in her room’s cloudy mirror, not bothering to change her clothes or tidy herself up. Upon confirming that her face didn’t have any blemishes, she followed Beth and left her attic.

9. A Rupture

“Here is the south tea room,” the maid said.

“Thank you, Beth,” Opal replied.

The duchess entered the room and gave a small nervous gulp. The south side of the room was lined with large panels of glass, the sun’s rays flooding inside unimpeded. The weather was bright and beautiful, and it practically felt like Opal was outside.

The newly repainted walls were a lush, vibrant green reminiscent of freshly grown things. The room had two sets of furniture to welcome guests, and the white seats and table were a lovely complement to the walls. A few windows were open, allowing a refreshing breeze to blow through. Opal could only gasp in surprise. She’d never expected such a splendid room to exist within this manor.

Someone far too small to be Hubert was sitting by one of the room’s shaded walls.

Opal could tell that this person wasn’t asleep and gently approached them. “I’m terribly sorry. Have I bothered you?”

The person slowly turned around; the face came as no surprise to Opal.

“Oh, I’m fine,” the lady said. “I was just gazing outside. It’s such a lovely day today.”

“Will you not go outside then?” Opal asked. “You’re always walking out in the gardens, aren’t you?”

“It’s not really a walk since I’ve lost control of my legs. Aren’t you Hubert’s wife?”

“That’s right. So, you do know of me. Please call me Opal. You must be Miss Stella.”

“Correct. And I know that you know about me. You’ve often been gazing

down at me from your attic window, haven't you?"



Stella smiled, her curly golden locks fluttering around her petite frame. She looked like an angel. But Opal noticed the wicked twinkle hidden behind Stella's sapphire eyes. For the past years Opal's social seasons had been ruined by the torment of gossiping nobles; at this point, she could pick up on these sorts of cues quite well.

"I wouldn't want to intrude on you," Opal said. "I shall take my leave."

"Why?" Stella replied. "You're meeting Hubert here, aren't you?"

"I'm surprised that you know about that."

"Everyone's been whispering about you. I only need to eavesdrop a little to hear them talk in the corridor or beyond my window."

"Is that so?"

Stella's frail body didn't allow her to lead an active life, and though she might have been bored, to eavesdrop was still an undoubtedly crass thing to do. But Opal gave not a word of warning and turned on her heel to leave.

"You stole Hubert from me," Stella said, her eyes filled with contempt. "I was supposed to be his wife, but you bought him with your dirty money!"

"Then it's a pity that you're so poor," Opal replied coldly.

Just then, Stella started to violently weep and soon launched into a coughing fit. Opal was feeling stunned by the suddenness of it all when Hubert barged in and rushed to the frail girl's side.

"What's wrong, Stella?" Hubert asked. "Calm down. Take deep breaths. Breathe in... Very good. And now breathe out... And breathe in..."

As Stella's coughs started to die down, Mrs. Notham and Stella's ladies-in-waiting bustled in. Menservants entered to carry the sickly girl back to her room. When Opal and Hubert were finally left alone, the duke channeled all his anger toward her.

"What did you say to Stella?" he demanded.

"Nothing at all, really," Opal replied.

"How could I believe that?! She completely lost her composure! It might've

not been much for *you*, but it must've come at a huge shock to her!"

"Hmm, do you think so?"

"I told you to never meet Stella!"

"She was already here when I entered this room. What am I supposed to do about that? If you're so worried about such a thing, you should've never forced me to leave the attic."

"What are you...?"

This was Stella's usual lunchtime—she should have never bumped into Opal. When Beth had arrived to arrange a meeting, Hubert had assumed that Opal was finally going to apologize to him. And so, he'd thought it was best to prepare a splendid room instead of the cold study, but everything had been ruined. What's more, despite Stella suffering so much, Opal didn't seem at all apologetic. The rage that he'd been suppressing all this time reared its head once more.

"You truly disappoint me," Hubert spat. "You hurt someone so frail, and you neither apologize nor look at all worried."

"I'm worried about her," Opal replied. "But there are many people here who are far more concerned about her than I am. I concluded that there was no need for me to butt in."

"You're exactly right. No one's concerned about you! We don't need you!"

"Except for my money."

"H-How dare you say something so foolish..."

"Foolish? Is it now? But I'm here to alleviate your concerns. I'm here to tell you that I'd like to leave this manor, Your Grace."

"Leave?"

Hubert's face had been contorted with rage, but now he was astonished. His reactions were so juvenile that Opal understood that this man was far more immature than he looked. As a duke, no one had criticized him harshly, and he'd likely made it this far after doing the bare minimum required of him.

“I’d like to stay in the earldom for a while,” Opal said. “You could say I’d just like to visit my home after getting married. And if I’m gone, I won’t be torturing your *precious* Miss Stella, don’t you agree? I’ll try to prolong my stay there as long as possible, so please carry on as you were. I suppose we must discuss things when the social season approaches.”

“B-But what will your father say?” Hubert stammered.

“Nothing, I’d imagine,” Opal replied. “If I don’t tell him anything, he likely won’t even notice that I’ve returned. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I’d also like to borrow a carriage. I can make it to the earldom in a day, and I’ll have the coachman and the horses stay a night before sending them back. And if you don’t mind, may I borrow a few books from the library? I’d like something to pass the time during my trip.”

Hubert started to grow annoyed as Opal casually listed her plans. He was tempted to shout at her for daring to leave the place, but he managed to hold himself together and feign serenity.

“Hmph, it seems that everything in this manor is practically yours,” Hubert spat. “Take what you want! The carriage, the books, they’re all yours!”

Though his last statement showcased how enraged he was, he stormed out of the room with pride. He should’ve been happy that the new nuisance in his life would be gone, but it simply didn’t feel right to him. Deep down, he was having mixed feelings. He quickly waved it off as simple guilt. As she’d said, he was only after her for her money.

Opal watched the duke leave and sank into the sofa wearily. She didn’t really plan on taking much with her since the manor at the earldom was already equipped with her necessities. Packing would be quick. There was no need for her to rush.

Yet her heart was restless. Secretly, she’d realized that she had wanted the duke to protest her leaving. She *had* once been attracted to him, after all. The marriage had been a slew of disappointments, but she knew that she was partly to blame for being so stubborn. Perhaps she should’ve tried harder to be more cooperative. But regret would get her nowhere. If she had time to feel down, she’d much rather spend the time doing what she liked.

Opal had already decided to leave this place and divorce the duke by next year. With gusto she stood up and prepared for her departure.

10. Returning Home

“Oh my! Oh dear, oh dear! My lady!” Marcia hastily cried the moment the carriage with the duke’s family crest pulled up at the manor of the earldom. “I wish you had informed us of this in advance. If I knew you were coming home, we would’ve prepared a grand welcoming party!”

The servants rushed out to welcome her, opening the carriage door. Opal borrowed their help and managed to step down as her butler and Marcia ran out. The maid leaped out to hug Opal, causing the duchess to almost trip, but the servants were used to this scene and were prepared to support her. The duke’s coachman was stunned to see such a warm welcome.

This was the first time Kayve, the duke’s coachman, had ever left the royal capital. He had left early in the morning for the earldom riddled with anxiety. He’d be transporting a duchess famed for her wickedness along with her scant belongings. He’d set their route based on one he had meticulously researched the day before, and he had led the journey beset by nerves. All had been well until he reached the earldom.

When he proceeded down a fork in the road, he’d been signaled to stop the carriage and told that he’d gone the wrong way. When Kayve hastily apologized and tried to turn back, Opal had asked if she could step off the carriage.

He’d sheepishly complied, slowly opening the door and providing a staircase, all the while bracing himself for a good scolding and shouting. But nothing of the sort had come. To his surprise, the duchess had asked to sit in the driver’s seat with him.

“I know the way, so it makes sense, doesn’t it?” she’d reasoned. “It’s far more efficient for me to sit with you and guide you than gesticulate from within the carriage. Besides, it’s a beautiful day outside, and I’d like to enjoy the sunshine.”

And so, the duchess had done just that. She’d sat with Kayve and shown him the way while telling him all about their destination. She’d cared not about interacting with someone far below her station, nor had she been bothered by

the wind that blew through her hair. This was a stunning turn of events for Kayve, who had previously served a vastly different kind of noble.

The man had been fired from his previous workplace after having been accused of casting lecherous looks at his master's daughter. Mrs. Notham had picked him up and hired him to serve the duke. Needless to say, he had never looked at his previous master's daughter in such a light; he had coincidentally seen her dress flutter in the wind once.

Ever since he was unjustly let go, he'd assumed that all noblewomen were conceited, self-absorbed, and selfish. Only Stella, the angel of the duke's house, was the exception. However, Stella could never go outside, and as a coachman, Kayve had never met her. He hadn't talked to Mrs. Notham either, so he could only glean information from rumors. He only assumed Stella's character because the rest of the servants showered her with praise. It was said that both Mrs. Notham and Lady Stella didn't treat their servants like objects and saw them as family. The two were known within the house to be extremely kind.

Kayve had heard that the duke had been married to the daughter of a wealthy family and that the family had ensured the marriage by taking advantage of his money troubles. These rumors aligned with Kayve's previous beliefs about noblewomen. The servants had all banded together and had sworn to protect the kind duke and pure Lady Stella from the affluent, evil madam.

And so, many servants had been sympathetic with Kayve about the journey to the earldom and had done their best to cheer him up. Once Opal was transported to the earldom, the duke's house would be freed from the claws of the wicked duchess.

But Opal had completely defied Kayve's expectations. What's more, as he saw the servants of her manor greet her so warmly and happily, the duchess only smiled benevolently and waved back.

When the sun had started to set, Kayve was encouraged to step back into the carriage; it wouldn't be right for him to be present for the scolding the duchess was about to receive. The coachman couldn't possibly imagine anyone here scolding a high-ranking noble like her, but he obediently moved the carriage down the path as he was instructed.

Once he parked his vehicle, he was overwhelmed with a grand and warm welcome. Kayve was stunned by the stablekeepers' insistence that Kayve, as surely tired as he must be, leave the rest of his duties in their hands. After being tossed out from the stable entrance, he was guided by a manservant to the manor using the entrance behind the kitchen. He received yet another warm welcome within the break room made for the servants. To top it all off, the servants wanted to sate Kayve's hunger and brought out lavish dishes that he'd never had before. It was all so luxurious.

"This is far too extravagant for me!" Kayve cried. "I'm just a servant!"

"I understand where you're coming from," a servant replied. "When I first came here from a different workplace, I was shocked. But these are our meals here. My lady— I mean, she's the duchess now... Argh. It's a pain to keep correcting myself. Anyway, my lady improved the quality of our meals for us."

With such a rich meal in front of him, Kayve felt something well up in the back of his throat, and he desperately tried to calm himself down.

One of the servants misunderstood Kayve's thoughts and smiled. "C'mon, eat up. Don't hold back. These meals don't only go to the top table. We can eat them too. Eat lots. You can even get seconds."

Kayve gingerly took a spoon and sipped some soup before he quickly gulped the rest of it down. Everyone laughed, but one of the maids looked at the coachman worriedly.

"Does the duke's household treat the servants poorly?" she asked. "Has it not improved, despite my lady marrying there?"

"It hasn't been long," a servant reasoned. "I'm sure His Grace's manor is so vast that she isn't able to take care of it yet."

"But isn't it weird that she returned home amid those harsh conditions?"

"Indeed..."

Silence fell upon the cheery dining table, and Kayve struggled to swallow his mouthful of bread.

"Oh, I heard from Miss Marcia that my lady returned home because there was

something that she desperately wanted to check up on,” a maid answered.

“Is that so? Then I guess she’s got her own reasons,” one of the menservants said.

“Yep. Kayve, my lady is happily spending her days in the duke’s manor, isn’t she?” another inquired.

“I-I, er...” Kayve stammered. “I’m usually stationed outside, so I rarely can step inside of the manor... But I can only assume so...”

The coachman’s words lacked confidence, but it was true that he rarely stepped in the manor. He was frequently out of the loop on internal affairs, but even he had heard that the duchess was living in the attic. Servants claimed that her moving to the attic was a nasty bit of retaliation over Lady Stella using the master bedroom. But here, in Opal’s earldom, Kayve could only lie.

“We don’t have to worry about a thing,” a maid asserted. “My lady’s reputation plummeted because of those silly, false rumors, but the duke still chose to marry her! And she accepted his proposal, even though she had no plans to marry at all. I’m sure that they’re deeply in love.”

“Yep!” a manservant agreed. “No doubt about it!”

“A quick talk with my lady will easily dispel those nasty rumors!”

“You’re absolutely right!”

The servants of the earldom continued to discuss the duke and duchess’s budding romance, none the wiser of the truth. The cheery mood filled the dining table once more, and they resumed their meal in high spirits. Only Kayve sat there uncomfortably, shifting awkwardly in his seat.

11. Hometown

“Congratulations, my lady,” Marcia said, chattering away after greeting Opal with a warm embrace. “You’ve returned rather quickly. Has something happened? What about the duke? Did you two have a fight already?”

Opal felt tears well up, but she managed to hold them back and crack a smile. “Oh, don’t be rude! The duke is too busy to come with me, and I desperately wanted to check up on something. I planned on returning here once the social season was over, but since I got married off, I didn’t have a chance to greet everyone. I wanted to come home with His Grace, but I suppose that must wait for another day. So many things happened and I was in a bit of a rush.”

As the duchess slowly entered the manor, she hated herself for lying as easily as she breathed. But she didn’t want anyone to be worried about her; to that end she didn’t mind if she lied through her teeth.

“Is Trevor here right now?” Opal asked.

“He’s currently out, but would you like to meet him once he returns?” Alton, her butler, replied.

“No, not today, I think. This is very important, so I’d like to rest and ask for a bit of his time tomorrow. Would you ask him for his availability?”

“Most certainly.”

After giving her butler the order, Opal returned to her usual room. It had been kept neat and tidy so that she could use it at any time, and for the first time in months, Opal felt like she could breathe. She sighed in relief.

“Welcome back, my lady!” a maid greeted her. “Ah, I must call you duchess now, shouldn’t I?”

“Please don’t, Nadja,” Opal replied. “You can call me what you always have.”

The maid had stepped out of the washroom and, upon seeing her mistress, lit up immediately. Nadja was innocent and naive, and she was often scolded by

Marcia in regards to etiquette, but in truth everyone doted on the young maid. Opal was no exception; Marcia frequently scolded her for coddling Nadja.

Opal was really, truly home. The strength left her body, and she sank into a sofa.

“You look tired, my lady,” Nadja said. “The bath has already been prepared, and it shall be ready in a few moments.”

“Thank you,” Opal replied.

No doubt the maid had swiftly prepared a bath the moment she heard about Opal’s return. The duchess was so happy to hear it that her exhaustion left her at once. But Nadja’s next words caused Opal to jolt with nervousness.

“No problem at all!” the maid said. “We’re all happy that you’ve returned, even if for a short while! And truly, I am so happy to see you; when I heard that you married the duke, I was so shocked that I didn’t know what to say! I felt like the marriage must have happened for a reason!”

“Pardon?” Opal asked.

“Unlike me, you’re so smart and prudent, and then all of a sudden you got married,” Nadja replied. “I knew you must’ve had a good reason to do it. Was the duke so handsome that he swept you off your feet?”

“U-Uh, right, sure.”

“What kind of person is he?”

“Well,” Opal replied, hesitating. “I first met him three years ago and danced with him briefly. His Grace doesn’t seem to like mingling with others, and he rarely comes to societal occasions, so I was quite excited by that.”

“Oh my!”

“And I reunited with him just the other day. Before I knew it, I’d married him.”

“My, oh my! How very passionate!”

As Nadja cried with elation, the door to the washroom still open, Opal spoke slowly and carefully so that she technically wouldn’t be lying. Nadja jumped to conclusions all on her own, excited by what she heard. Guilt pricked Opal’s

heart, and she desperately tried to prevent any further questions from being asked as Marcia entered the room with a bowl of hot water.

“I knew it,” Marcia said. “You were troubling my lady, weren’t you, Nadja?”

“Was I?” Nadja replied. “But don’t *you* want to hear my lady’s love stories?”

“P-Pardon? *Rough* stories, you say?”

“No! You’ll never understand the heart of a maiden, Miss Marcia!”

“Good grief, enough. Hurry up and fetch the hot water.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Despite Marcia’s scolding, Nadja didn’t seem even the least bit down, leaving the room with light footsteps. Opal giggled at the usual antics of her servants. She was back home. She wouldn’t have it any other way, and she quite enjoyed the rowdiness of her maids.

“I’m sorry, Marcia,” Opal apologized. “I didn’t mean to return so suddenly. I know I’ve caused you all much trouble.”

“Whatever are you saying?” Marcia replied. “You can return whenever you like, and we’ll always welcome you with open arms. This is your *home*, my lady. Even if you’ve married into a different house, that won’t change.”

“This is my father’s home, isn’t it?”

“Ah, I suppose you’re right. I must have forgotten.”

The earl hadn’t returned for many years, and Marcia replied in what was a witty joke between them. The two ladies giggled at each other. Just as the maid emptied her bowl of water, she gently tapped it as though she’d recalled something.

“Ah, I’ve forgotten to tell you,” Marcia said. “Alton has asked me to deliver a message. Trevor will be in his study for all of tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is that so?” Opal replied. “Thank you, Marcia. Then could you kindly bring my afternoon tea to his study tomorrow?”

“Most certainly. I shall do just that, my lady.”

“Thank you.”

Just as Opal was discussing her plans for tomorrow, Nadja and another maid arrived with more hot water, filling the bath. Opal cleaned herself up, ate some light dinner, and spent the rest of her evening relaxing.

Until now, she'd taken the kindness of her servants for granted. She truly was grateful for their service. She realized now that she was truly blessed and wondered if she really could part ways with Hubert.

It feels like I'm just running from him. Opal hated to lose, and as that thought sank in, she started to become frustrated. Only a coward would flee before a fight. *And it clearly makes little sense. Why do they hate me so much over there? My dowry is helping fund the medical bills for their little angel, isn't it?*

While Opal was genuinely sympathetic toward Stella and her condition, the attitude of the entire household was far too extreme. She didn't expect them to go on their knees and kiss her feet in gratitude, but she at least wanted the bare minimum of respect. Since it seemed widely known that the duke had been bought, it was clear that the servants weren't completely oblivious about their situation. Were they simply imitating their master in treating her so coldly? *He might've not wanted to marry me, but I didn't want this either! Argh! Dang him!*

Opal punched a nearby pillow numerous times to release her anger. She took a deep breath to calm herself down. It seemed being cooped up in an attic for some time had stressed her out. She decided to go horseback riding tomorrow and slept early in preparation for a hectic day.

In any case, I'm starting to understand my father's words. I can see it very clearly. His Grace is extremely naive!

The duchess gave a deep sigh. For the first time in a while, she was enveloped in a fluffy blanket. She closed her eyes. Exhaustion swept over her as she quickly fell asleep and went off to dreamland.

12. Land Management

“Hello, Trevor,” Opal said, entering the study with a bright smile. “You seem to be doing well.”

“It’s been a while, my lady,” Trevor replied. He’d been hard at work. “Congratulations on your marriage. I’m deeply sorry for being unable to welcome you yesterday.”

He raised his head and gave a wrinkly smile.

“Don’t you worry about that,” Opal replied. “It’s my fault for returning home without prior warning. And thank you for your warm wishes...is what I’d *like* to say...”

“Is something the matter?”

“Very much so.”

“Oh dear...”

Opal sat on a sofa of the study without express permission to do so, but Trevor wasn’t bothered one bit as he sat across from her. He was always calm and gave Opal excellent advice. Alton and Marcia were always composed too, of course, but they would sometimes—or often, rather—take Opal’s side, so she found it difficult to discuss what was on her mind. There was a knock on the door, and Marcia arrived with the tea.

“Thank you, Marcia,” Opal said. “Ah, this must be my favorite orange peel muffin!”

“But of course,” Marcia said with a joking twinkle in her eyes. “You wouldn’t leave the kitchen without being given a bite of one of these muffins, my lady.”

“Hey! I’m not a child anymore!”

“Indeed, I’m glad that His Grace thinks that way about you.” With that, she swiftly left the room.

Trevor gave a weary sigh at their exchange. “If you ever told Marcia that

something was amiss, I've no doubt that she'd rally up all the servants and all the residents of this earldom to raid the duchy."

"Goodness, please don't say something so scary," Opal replied with an exaggerated tremble. "I fear she might actually do that."

A smile danced on her lips as she took a sip of her tea and a bite of her muffin. Trevor fell silent and sipped his tea, waiting for Opal to continue.

"This marriage was decided by my father and Duke McLeod," she started.

"Ah, a political marriage," Trevor replied.

"Exactly. I wasn't allowed a word of protest. They quickly held a small ceremony, and I married the duke, but His Grace—my husband—and the rest of the servants of his manor all treat me like an intruder. What's more, another woman is sleeping with him in the master bedroom. I'm very angry, you see."

"How horrible. Favoritism aside, even I'd feel tempted to raid the duke's manor and give him a piece of my mind."

"Would you now, Trevor?"

Opal giggled. Trevor's tone was calm, but his aggressive words and hostility didn't suit him one bit.

He raised an eyebrow, looking a touch offended. "I may not make it seem that way, but you're very dear to me, my lady. Of course I treat you precious from the bottom of my heart."

"Thank you, Trevor. But you see, the woman in the master bedroom has been living in the duke's manor since she was a child. And she doesn't have much longer to live."

"I see. Even so, the duke has married *you*, not her. It's still unacceptable for him to be so close to another lady."

"Yeah," Opal said, "but I don't really care about all that. I had no idea of the situation, and so, when I asked if she was his mistress, I angered my husband and the rest of the servants. Everyone treats this woman very dearly, but I think they're partially to blame for not telling me a thing. I got quite stubborn about it all and decided to live in the attic so that they wouldn't have to see my face."

“How is your living situation? Are you comfortable?”

“It’s so-so.”

In truth, her living situation was horrible, but Opal tried her best to hide it. This wasn’t because she *wasn’t* hurt by this series of events, but she just didn’t want to worry Trevor. The duchess wasn’t here to vent her concerns and steal his time.

“What is your primary concern, my lady?” Trevor asked with a serious expression.

“As we’ve established, this is a political marriage,” Opal replied. “It’s a contract of sorts. My husband was able to repay his debts with my dowry, and my father also sent a generous sum of money in celebration of my marriage. The duke will be using that money to fund his daily needs.”

His eyes went wide with astonishment; the manager hadn’t expected this.

“Is the duke addicted to gambling?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” Opal replied. “My father didn’t say a thing, just that the duke is naive.”

“Hmm, but this is very curious. As far as I know, the land that Duke McLeod possesses should amass him extreme wealth. He should have quite a few assets. Surely, he wouldn’t need to be in debt.”

“Wasn’t there a massive drought a few years ago?”

“Indeed. The entire kingdom was dealt a heavy blow, but House McLeod should have had more than enough money to keep the duke afloat. In fact, I’d imagine he could’ve regained his profits within a year.”

“The following year, the duchy suffered from a flood, and the year after that, a bug infestation.”

“At the *duchy*? As you may know my line of work requires me to keep tabs on the weather of our earldom as well as the rest of the lands. Certainly, there were floods and insect troubles within certain spots of the kingdom, but I’ve heard of nothing of the sort at the duchy.”

Trevor immediately shot down Opal’s claims. But this was what she was

expecting. Opal produced two books that she had brought to this meeting and placed them on the table.

“What are these?” Trevor asked.

“They’re backup copies of the records of the duchy that I found at his manor,” Opal replied.

“Are you allowed to carry such important texts out of the manor?”

“As a matter of fact, my husband said that since I basically bought the place I could bring whatever I wished,” Opal replied, her chin raised in defiance.

Trevor grinned. “Oh, my...”

It seemed the duchess was as strong-minded as ever. Trevor was interested in the management of other lands, and so he picked up the older record of the two without hesitation. He scanned the pages, gleaning any information he could find. Every now and then, his hand would stop flipping through, but he made short work of the first book before moving on to the second. He likely wanted a closer look but tried to be as quick as possible to not keep Opal waiting.

However, as he got to the middle of the second book, he paused. He furrowed his brow, flipped a few pages back, then forward again, traced some letters with his fingers, and gave a pensive frown. Opal desperately fought against the urge to say anything and instead sipped her tea, patiently waiting for his verdict. He finally placed the records down and sighed.

“Someone has been cooking these books,” Trevor said.

“I *knew it!*” Opal replied.

“Did you notice it after flipping through them?”

“I wasn’t certain, but some of these records just felt...off. So I’m here to borrow your expertise.”

“Hmm, I’m going to have to check the weather records of the past few years to give a more accurate report. May I have some time?”

“Of course. I’m sorry, Trevor. I know I’m just bringing you more work.”

“Don’t be. As I’ve said earlier, you’re very dear to me, my lady. At this rate, all this poor management will cause the duke’s household to completely collapse. I’ll be sure to reveal this corruption and lighten your work as much as possible.”

“Thank you. I’m counting on you, Trevor.”

“Of course. Please leave it to me.”

This isn’t the place to cry but to smile. Opal suppressed her tears as she grinned at him and left the study.

13. The Duchy

A few days later, Trevor's investigation revealed that, indeed, someone had been fudging the records. And for quite some time as well—since the previous duke had passed away. Whoever was cheating the duke's household had only become bolder since Mr. Notham had died. The massive drought a few years ago had only further spurred this ongoing embezzlement.

"I've heard rumors that Duke McLeod's guardian, Mr. Notham, had occasionally visited the duchy, but the duke himself had never personally visited the place," Trevor explained. "In other words, whoever wrote these records—in other words, the manager—could've lied to their heart's content. Even so, as long as one carefully reviews their records, like Earl Holloway does, one doesn't need to personally visit their land. I can certainly understand why the duke has been called 'naive' by my lord."

"I knew it," Opal muttered. "The culprit is the manager of the duchy. The duke's completely wrapped around his precious angel's little finger."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, it's nothing. And what can we do? Can we file a claim to the duke?"

"That would probably be best. But before we do so, I'd like some concrete evidence. And I'm not sure about the number of culprits. Was this crime committed by one person or by multiple people?"

"Concrete evidence, you say?"

"Indeed. It's highly likely that there's a secret account, one managed under the table. I'm guessing that the official account is in the manor of the duchy, and I strongly doubt the culprit would keep their secret ledger nearby. Perhaps it's kept in the manager's personal room or in a different place..."

"The duchy," Opal said, murmuring to herself. "My husband's land..."

Opal mulled over Trevor's words as she sat in the study. She didn't really care about the duke's family, but that didn't mean she would ignore such injustice. It

didn't sit right with her to know this was happening and turn the other way, even if she was still planning on divorcing him in a year.

"Very well," Opal finally said. "Trevor, I'd like to make another, more demanding request. Would you be able to accompany me to the duchy? Or would that be inconvenient for you?"

"Not at all," the manager replied. "I do my work perfectly, and part of that means having enough people trained so that the earldom can be managed even if I'm away. It shouldn't be a problem at all, even if I'm gone for a short while. Besides, I wouldn't be able to rest easy at night knowing that I turned a blind eye to all this cheating. Please allow me to accompany you."

Opal laughed at Trevor's confidence. He was obviously exaggerating for comedic effect, and the thought came to her then that ever since she'd gotten married, she'd forgotten how to laugh. And now, ever since she'd returned home, her smile never left her face.

"Thank you, Trevor," she said. "Then I shall write a letter to my husband. I'll tell him that I'll be visiting his duchy and to inform the residents of my arrival."

"That would be best," Trevor agreed. "Since it's your first visit there, a notice would cause the least amount of trouble. In all honesty, a sudden visit would catch them off guard, and if you're alone, they won't be so alert. Please make me your manservant so that we won't raise any suspicion."

"I understand. Then I shall let you know once the date is decided."

"Of course."

Opal left the study and wrote a letter to Hubert. She received a response two days later to do as she wished.

"I expected as much, but couldn't he have said a bit more?" Opal grumbled. "Something like 'Are you doing well?' or 'Be careful' or *something*?"

She complained about Hubert's cold response while informing Trevor and Marcia that she'd be departing in five days. That gave more than enough time for Hubert to notify the duchy. In her letter she had told him that she wanted to transfer her things to the duchy's manor, a perfectly reasonable request that wouldn't arouse any suspicion. While Opal tried to be careful in order to not

alert the duchy's manager that she knew and have them hide their secret ledger in response, it was a commonly held belief that the vast majority of noblewomen weren't interested in land management anyway. Most simply assumed noblewomen were ignorant of things like numbers and accounts. All those factors gave Opal hope that the manager wouldn't suspect her at all.

And indeed, Opal had only first noticed the oddity of the records because Trevor had taught her some things about it, after she'd asked Trevor to teach her in preparation for taking over her grandmother's land. But if she were asked to point out what precisely was off, she couldn't do so.

Five days later Opal departed, with Trevor as her manservant and Nadja as her maid. It was a four-day trip to the duchy from the earldom. They'd been fortunately blessed with good weather, and there weren't any problems during their trek, but the moment Opal entered the duchy, she saw, in comparison to the earldom, how poorly maintained the fields were here. The residents' houses and clothes were also very plain.

"To be honest, this place doesn't seem well managed," Opal observed from the carriage window.

"But there aren't any signs of natural disasters either," Trevor added.

"It doesn't look particularly good *or* bad to me," Nadja chimed in, peering out. "It's very similar to the village that I once lived in. I think the earldom is just especially lush and blessed with greenery."

During the drought a few years ago, Nadja had been let go from her manor, and she had used her distant relative, Marcia, to score a job at the earldom. Because she'd been exposed to other lands, she was more knowledgeable in that department than Opal, who knew only about the royal capital and the earldom.

"Is that so?" Opal asked.

"Indeed, my lord is very severe with indolent people, but he properly rewards diligence," Trevor said. "He also funds us generously in order to further develop the land. If a bridge needs to be built, he will splurge for a sturdy one made of stone. When the residents' agricultural tools break down, he'll quickly replace them with new ones. Such behavior raises morale and encourages people to

work hard.”

“When you say it like that, my father sounds like a splendid lord,” Opal said.

Trevor gave a forced smile while Nadja remained silent. She had never met the earl.

“My lord is very astute,” was all he could say in reply.

“I agree.” Opal nodded. “He didn’t force his scandalous daughter to marry. Instead, he just neglected her for three years. His lack of pressure wasn’t freedom. He was simply waiting for the duke’s house to fall to ruin. Only then did he use his exorbitant wealth and daughter to force a marriage, further raising his rank.”

“You’re a fantastic lady,” Nadja said. “The duke is very fortunate to have you for his wife.”

“Thank you for saying that.”

The duchess smiled and thanked her maid but remained silent about the current state of affairs. She couldn’t predict how the servants of the duchy’s manor would act toward her. Opal shifted her gaze back out the window.

“They’re properly paying their dues to the kingdom, and if what we’re seeing now is the norm, there’d be no reason for the residents to complain,” Opal reasoned. “Which is why no one from the outside ever even noticed it.”

“Whoever did this is very skilled,” Trevor added. “It’s no wonder that the duke’s financial troubles went unnoticed.”

“My lady!” Nadja cried brightly. She was completely uninterested in what Trevor and Opal were discussing. “I see the manor up ahead!” She was gazing out the window opposite from the duchess.

Opal leaned toward Nadja and peered through the window. “It’s a very large manor,” she said. “Seems well maintained.”

“Quite so,” Trevor replied. “Had *he* paid a single visit here, he surely would’ve noticed how contradictory this is.”

The duchess remained silent. The entrance was wide open, and as they slowly drew nearer to the manor, the servants soon flooded out. Opal leaned away

from the window, sat up straight, and waited for the carriage to come to a stop.

14. IOU

Much to Opal's surprise, the people of the manor welcomed her warmly. The butler, Lind, and the housekeeper, Debby, along with her host of maids, were all inviting. None of them displayed even a shred of animosity. In fact, they were glad to see a master—or mistress, rather—visit the duchy for the first time in a long while. Quite naturally, Opal was given the master bedroom. None of them seemed to know about the duke's debts, and while the meals weren't lavish, they were of decent quality. Only Omar, the manager of the duchy, seemed a bit cautious underneath his sunny exterior. He was likely worried that Opal would notice the difference between this manor and the residence at the royal capital.

Opal feigned ignorance and, as she'd told Hubert, had brought her belongings from the earldom. She had packed the dresses she no longer wore and some other daily necessities inside her luggage. Omar suggested giving the duchess a tour of the land, but she declined, claiming that she wasn't interested.

She stated that she only wanted to do some shopping and enjoy some social activities. When she asked for recommendations for any shops nearby, he looked visibly relieved as he gave her an answer. He said that there weren't any cities nearby that were suitable for the duchess, and the best one was Nobori, a city located in the marquis's march. It would take two days by carriage to reach the city.

"A full two days?" Opal gasped. "That's quite the journey..."

"Unfortunately for this duchy, the series of bad harvests has made this land fall into poverty," Omar admitted.

"I see... How disappointing. I should probably return to the royal capital soon, then."

Opal continued to act flippant and gave a wave of her hand, ordering Omar to leave. *And now, I look like an arrogant duchess who's only interested in socializing and shopping.*

Once Omar left, Nadja whispered, “I shall go gather some information,” and left the room.

The duchess was left alone to her own devices and decided to visit the library to pass the time. Debby had given them a quick tour of the manor beforehand, and Opal had managed to catch a glimpse of the library through a door that had been left slightly open. When she was able to appreciate the library in all its glory, she gasped in awe.

Unlike the manor at the royal capital, the magnificent bookshelves were filled to the brim, their quality on par with the one in the earldom. A quick glance was all she needed to see that some books were rare and, if sold to a collector, could earn a pretty penny. All the books kept at the manor in the royal capital were worthless in comparison to these.

It was nigh impossible for the manor of the royal capital to have so few books while the manor in the duchy had an impressive collection; Hubert must’ve sold them off in hopes of securing some funds. Had the duke sold the books here, he would’ve been able to last at least one more year without marrying.

If His Grace had returned to this manor, he might not have had to be in such deep debt. At twenty, she could have been free. Her wrath toward Hubert only grew, appalled by his incompetence. But if he weren’t here, I might’ve been forced to marry a greasy, old, messy man instead. My father would do anything to heighten his social standing. I guess I should be a little grateful to the husband I actually have.

Hubert’s naivety might have actually saved Opal’s future, and she felt better latching on to that train of thought to cope. She might have been treated horribly at his manor in the royal capital, but he was never violent with her, and neither had he tried to force a kiss on her. Strangely enough, all the mysterious trickery surrounding these ledgers only made her feel motivated. To not rouse suspicion, she quickly took a few novels favored by women and left the library. *This is just my guess, but Omar probably doesn’t realize the worth of these books. It’s still too early to pin the crime on him, though.*

Two days later, Opal left with Nadja for Nobori. Trevor was left behind at the duchy, with the duchess insisting she would rather travel with a different

manservant, one more knowledgeable about the land. If possible, she wanted him to find the secret account while they were off to travel, and she initially suggested Omar to guide her on her Nobori trip. Unfortunately, he declined, claiming that he had much work to do.

Opal reached Nobori and learned the real reason behind Omar's reluctance to leave on her second day there. A man by the name of LeBeau arrived at the inn where she was staying. The duchess was at first hesitant to meet this unfamiliar figure, but as he politely took the proper steps to meet with her, she decided to give him perhaps a little of her time.

"Debt, you say?" Opal inquired.

"Indeed. I've got an IOU with me right here," LeBeau said, taking out a document signed with Omar's name and dangling it in the air.

The fact that he never let the paper out of his hand pointed to his cunning nature.

"And why are you telling me this?" Opal asked.

"Gathering information is an important part of our business," LeBeau said. "Seems like Omar can't extract much more from the duchy, so he hasn't come by here in the past few months. Probably scared out of his mind that I'll come to collect. I *was* planning on paying him a visit myself, but then I heard that the duke got married to a lovely lady, so I decided to give Omar some time. As long as we get our money back, we don't care who pays it. That's why I'm here: to visit a wealthy duchess such as yourself."

"How long has Omar been visiting this...gambling arena? And is he indebted to people other than you?"

"For over a decade, I'd imagine. At first, he only bet small amounts, but they gradually increased, and now, he's in quite a bit of debt. But Omar's a careful guy. I don't think he's borrowed money from anyone other than me. I'm rather well-known for being tight-lipped and trustworthy around these parts. Many gentlemen from across the nation have used my place for their enjoyment."

"I see..."

In short, Omar had started gambling a while after the previous duke had

passed away. His addiction had slowly grown over time, and with his position he embezzled money from the duchy to fund his lifestyle. To ensure that his debts wouldn't be exposed, he borrowed money from the most trustworthy man in the area, LeBeau. And so, Hubert had never caught on to this entire scheme. In fact, Omar might have even lied about his standing and position to LeBeau. As for LeBeau, he didn't care if Omar was a liar or an embezzler, as long as the debt was returned.

LeBeau had gone to Opal for the debt payment because he most likely knew precisely what kind of state the duchy was in. He wasn't about to miss this precious opportunity. At this rate, there might come a day where Omar might vanish without a trace.

"I've got some conditions for paying back the debt," Opal said.

"And what might those be?" LeBeau asked.

"Naturally, I'll have you hand that IOU over to me. I'd also like for you to sign a document stating that Omar has no further debts to you. Thirdly, I'm sure you've got a record of the money that you've lent. Please hand that loan ledger over to me."

"I can certainly give you the IOU and sign the document about no further debts," LeBeau said. "But no can do on the ledger."

"You're not planning on lending Omar money ever again, are you? He's got no method of paying it back, after all. I'd imagine the ledger would no longer be needed."

"Unfortunately, I can't provide it to you for free."

"Then negotiations have failed," Opal stated simply. "Why don't you go to Omar and have *him* pay you back? I won't get involved in this affair."

"You've got me," LeBeau said, finally conceding. "I doubt he can currently pay back his debt anyway. It'd be easiest if you did it in his stead, and I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore. Very well. I shall bring the ledger, so I ask that you go ahead with paying his debt off. I suppose I'll refrain from asking what exactly you plan on doing with the ledger, but I certainly see that you take after your father. Earl Holloway is famed to be the reincarnation of a certain

infamous king who turned everything he touched into gold.”

“My father has nothing to do with this,” Opal firmly replied.

By the next day, she had finished paying off the debt and had returned to the duchy. She no longer had any money with her, but she could simply ask her financial administrator to give her some money in advance. It wasn’t much trouble. *But what I’m about to do is nothing short of reckless, and I wouldn’t blame anyone for being against it.* Opal chuckled to herself.

“Did something funny happen, my lady?” Nadja asked.

“Well, I suppose I can tell you what I’m about to do,” Opal replied. “I’ll be kicking up quite the fuss when I return to the duchy.”

However, a fuss had already occurred before she had even returned. While the duchess was away visiting Nobori, Omar had tried to flee while taking anything of monetary value with him. Trevor had caught the man and restrained him.

“You were a step too late in trying to flee, Omar,” Opal said upon arriving back at the manor.

“If you hadn’t come here, it wouldn’t have turned out like this!” Omar shouted.

“Do you really think so? Because if I hadn’t come here, LeBeau would’ve prepared a worse fate for you. That’s why you were cowering here, isn’t it? In fact, I’d appreciate it if you showed me some gratitude.”

She raised the IOU that she’d purchased from LeBeau in the air. Omar immediately fell silent.

“Trevor, did you find the secret ledger?” Opal asked.

“I did,” Trevor replied. “It was simple, really. Omar tried to take it with him when he attempted to flee.”

“Oh my...”

Why didn’t you just burn it or toss it away? Opal gazed down at the corrupt manager, who was currently bound in place by a piece of rope. Omar sank to the ground in surrender.

“I’d love to toss you into jail immediately, but that judgment should be left to my husband, who’s the lord of this land,” Opal said. “Until then, I shall keep you in the earldom.”

A certain butler gasped and looked up, his face pale—Lind. He had trusted Omar for many years and worked with him to manage the duchy. Lind was clearly shocked upon seeing Omar’s true colors, but there was a chance that the butler was in cahoots with the manager. *I can look into that all I like later.*

“Trevor, how many people know about this—about Omar’s misdeeds?” Opal asked.

“Not many,” he replied. “Only Mr. Lind, the maid Miss Debby, and the two menservants we brought from the earldom, along with Nadja. That’s all...for now.”

“Lind, is this true?”

“I-I believe so,” Lind replied. “We never expected Omar to be involved in such corruption... We had no idea about the crimes that he’d been committing. In fact, this escape occurred in the dead of night, so I’m honestly quite shocked that Mr. Trevor noticed at all.”

Opal and Trevor each gave a forced smile. No doubt Trevor had only noticed the escape because he’d been snooping around to find the secret ledger and had coincidentally found Omar trying to flee. Trevor had often done a bit of farming alongside the rest of the residents, and that had worked in his favor, giving him the strength and agility to catch the culprit; for an estate manager he was unexpectedly brawny.

“I’m certain that my husband wouldn’t want this information to spread,” Opal said. “Lind, Debby, I ask that you don’t speak a word of this event to another soul. Do I make myself clear?”

“Your wish is my command,” Lind replied.

“R-Right!” Debby hastily added, her face just as pale.

I think I can trust these two. Opal was going purely by instinct as she ordered her two menservants to keep watch over Omar. Meanwhile, she’d discuss with Trevor their next steps.

15. The Plan

Opal was sitting inside of the carriage as she was confirming the details of their plan with Trevor. Omar would be under careful surveillance at the earl's manor while doing some work.

"It's no easy feat to flee, but it's not impossible either," Opal had said to Omar. "We're not planning on sitting around and tying you to a fence, so I'm sure you can find an opening or two to escape. But if I receive a report that you've been working at the earl's manor diligently, I shall ask my husband to lessen the severity of your crimes. I shall even request that you won't be hanged for your sins or spend your entire life in prison."

Omar gazed at her dubiously, but Opal didn't flinch. Instead, she smiled and continued. "You're currently penniless, you know. I already told LeBeau to spread the word that you have no means of repaying a loan. No lender worth his salt will give you money, so if you'd like to continue funding your gambling addiction, I suggest you beseech some shadier establishments."

Even Omar understood the implications of doing so. And if he still chose to borrow money and gamble away, that was none of Opal's concern. If it were solely up to Opal, she would have just stuffed Omar in prison as quickly as possible, but that would imply that Hubert's carelessness and lack of awareness had created this result. Only a bit more digging would quickly reveal Hubert's debts and why he'd chosen to marry Opal. The duchess was thinking multiple steps ahead and had generously taken this route.

According to Trevor, the duchy would have a good harvest this year. With this knowledge, Opal had decided to use her wealth to invest in the duchy and provide the farmers with newer agricultural tools as soon as she could. Once the farmers were able to take care of their land more easily and provide a bountiful harvest which would lead to profits, she planned on using that money to build houses and roads and maintain the duchy for them. Creating proper roads was a plan that would take multiple years, but Trevor had stated that the

duchy was in the countryside, and provided that there weren't any major natural disasters, building plans could progress smoothly. If Opal divorced Hubert next year, he'd simply need to take over without much issue. Even if this plan were to fail, the only thing lost would be Opal's personal funds.

When the duchess returned to the manor of the earldom, she told her butler, Alton, about Omar. Two days later, she left for the royal capital with Omar in tow. Perhaps Hubert might reevaluate his attitude and annoyance toward her as he relied on her money. Opal hoped that this plan would put him in good spirits. With hope in her heart, she arrived at the duke's manor of the royal capital, but only Romito came out to greet her. The duchess didn't seem to mind and entered the manor.

"Where is my husband?" she asked.

"In the south tea room," the butler replied.

"I see... Do you know of his plans for tomorrow afternoon?"

"I don't believe he has any plans..."

"Then will you tell him that I'd like to meet him in his study tomorrow, after lunch? I've got a very important matter to discuss, and I shall also be inviting a guest then. I'm counting on you."

"Certainly."

The butler gave a look of suspicion, but Opal returned to the drawing room that she had initially been given. She asked a reluctant Beth to prepare a bath for her before entering the attic. It seemed her room hadn't been cleaned one bit since she'd departed, and she ordered a maid to quickly clean it for her as she returned to the drawing room. Opal then sank into the prepared bath.

She had Beth help her get changed, ate dinner in the attic, and lay on the hard bed. It'd been a while since she'd been this uncomfortable, and she had trouble falling asleep as she tossed and turned while thinking about Hubert. The duke surely must've been notified of her return, but he neither came out to meet her nor called for her. She was disappointed in herself for feeling disappointed about it. *I thought he'd calm down a bit with some time and some distance, but I guess that was all for naught...* She gave a weary sigh before she finally fell

asleep.

The duchess must've been exhausted by her constant trips, for when she awoke, the sun was already high in the sky. Up until that point she had been in a deep sleep. She soon entered the drawing room and rang the bell, and Beth reluctantly appeared to help the duchess get changed. After eating a light brunch in the room, she waited to meet with Trevor.

Just yesterday, after Opal had stepped off the carriage in front of the duke's manor, Trevor had returned to the earl's residence in the capital. In the event that the earl were to scold Trevor for his absence, Opal allowed him to come up with whatever reasons he needed. However, it was likely that the earl was rather aware of all this and was enjoying himself watching Opal take care of these matters. This might have been one of the reasons why she had been forced to marry Hubert. The realization infuriated her; her father treated his own daughter's life as some kind of toy. But truth be told, she had given up on him.

I just hope, with this affair, my husband's naivety could be improved just a little, Opal thought as she scanned Omar's IOU, the past loan records, and the secret ledger of the duchy. A while later, she heard the wheels of a carriage and peered outside her window. A simple carriage from the house of Earl Holloway had pulled up at the entrance.

"This is it," she told herself.

She stuffed all her documents into a large bag and personally carried it down the staircase. The duchess bumped into Romito, who was stationed by the entrance to welcome the guest. She placed her bag on the ground, nervously waiting for Trevor to appear.

"Hello, Trevor," she said. "Thank you for coming all this way today."

"Oh, please don't be so reserved," Trevor replied. "It's all for your sake, my lady."

Romito looked visibly displeased—a fatal flaw, for a butler should never make his true feelings known, no matter the situation. It exasperated Opal to see such a blatant sign of just how dysfunctional the manor truly was, but she managed to keep her smile.

"Is my husband in his study?" Opal inquired.

"That is correct," Romito replied.

"Then I shall guide my guest there. Will you kindly prepare us some tea?"

There was a beat of silence, another display of his reluctance before he said, "Certainly."

As he turned around to leave, Trevor casually took Opal's bag and gave a soft chuckle. "It's far worse than I imagined," the manager whispered.

"It is, isn't it?" Opal replied. "You'd best prepare yourself for what we're about to do."

"It's no easy feat. That much I can see."

The duchess meant to give Trevor a warning, but he seemed to be enjoying himself for whatever reason. She was certain if Trevor weren't around, she wouldn't feel nearly as confident as she did now. The duke might have been unwilling to listen to his wife's story, but surely, he'd lend an ear to the manager of an earldom. Furthermore, they had concrete evidence.

Courage filled Opal's heart as she knocked on the door of the study and heard his answer. But a quick glimpse of Hubert's face, which she hadn't seen for close to a month, told her that this wasn't going to be so simple. He was clearly angry and displeased.

"Oh dear," Trevor muttered.

Opal almost flinched upon seeing her husband's glare, but Trevor's words allowed her to keep herself together. She couldn't show him any weakness.

"It certainly has been a while," Opal started. "I've returned home."

To be precise, she had returned yesterday, but she greeted her husband anyway. Hubert completely ignored her and rudely threw a question at Trevor.

"Who are you?" Hubert demanded.

"This is Trevor Litton, Your Grace," Opal replied. "He's the manager of my father's—Earl Holloway's—earldom."

"And what business does the manager of that earldom have with me?"

Hubert was a duke; he was indeed allowed to act this brash, but Opal was embarrassed to see that he didn't have even an ounce of etiquette when greeting someone older than him. And once he found out Trevor's identity, the duke's tone started dripping with condescending mockery. Hubert was obviously generous and kind to his own servants, but the moment he learned that Trevor was on Opal's side, he was immediately hostile. Even so, Hubert's intentions were so crystal clear that it was laughably juvenile. Opal held her tongue and cracked a smile.

"May we take a seat?" she asked. "I'd like to speak with you."

"Very well," Hubert replied begrudgingly.

He sat on a sofa and Opal sat across from him. Trevor, however, remained standing and stood beside his lady.

16. Exposing the Crime

Trevor must've intuited that it was best that he remain standing; at the very least, Hubert's attitude implied that the manager was of far lower rank. Romito arrived with the tea and shot Trevor a mocking glance for not sitting but quietly prepared three cups. Truthfully speaking, it was up to Opal, the mistress of the house, to pour the tea, but no one expected her to do it. Once the butler left the study, the conversation resumed.

"And? You even went so far as to invite a guest," Hubert said impatiently. "Do you have anything you'd like to say to me? Are you upset about the duchy? You were apparently disappointed by how poor the land was and skipped off to Nobori."

"Whom did you hear that from?" Opal asked.

"Omar. He wrote me a letter the moment you left for Nobori. He must've thought that he had a duty to report your movements to me. He's always been diligent about notifying me."

Opal almost laughed at Hubert's words. *Does he truly think sending reports now and then warrants trusting the person who sent them?* The duke was far too innocent and immature. Trevor turned toward the floor and coughed, likely stifling a laugh.

"Then I shall be frank," Opal said. "Omar cannot be trusted. For the past few years, there haven't been any natural disasters in the duchy. And so, I suspected Omar of embezzling some money and—"

"How foolish! Don't you *dare* say another word!" Hubert roared.

"But we've even brought you proof. Omar was embezzling money because he was drowning in debt from his gambling addiction."

"Is that all you'd like to say? With some help from that man beside you, surely you can fabricate that evidence. My late father dearly trusted Omar, and did ever since he was hired. I can't believe that you'd ridicule a man who has loyally

served our house for decades!”

Opal was the one who couldn't believe the words she was hearing. The man had no intention of listening to her and yelled instead, trying to wave this issue aside as a foolish matter. She was astonished. It seemed even Trevor was unusually stunned by this audacity, and Hubert only gained more confidence in his voice.

“While it's true that my land and this manor has been spared by your money, I'm the one with the title!” Hubert shouted. “Everything belongs to me and me alone, and it will continue to be mine in the future. I will be the one to decide whom to hire. I won't let you and your father do as you please! This discussion is over! Leave this room at once!”

“Very well,” Opal relented. “Please excuse me.”

Hubert must've been in a particularly bad mood. *Perhaps something has happened to Stella*, Opal thought, trying to view his anger as positively as possible. With some time, the duke might cool down and hear her out properly. But as she left the room, she saw Stella and Mrs. Notham at the end of the corridor, causing her to reconsider her thoughts. The two ladies had heard Hubert's shouting. Stella gave a malicious smirk while Mrs. Notham was smiling with satisfaction.

“Ah, are those two the rumored ladies?” Trevor asked.

“That's right,” Opal grumbled. “But I'm sorry. I cannot introduce you to them. My husband has told me that I must never go near the girl.”

“She seems like a very nasty angel. I apologize for even questioning this, but is she truly so close to death?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because she certainly doesn't seem that way. Perhaps her primary doctor is set in his traditional ways, and he must be quite up there in age. It might do her good to see another physician.”

“You're right,” Opal replied, considering. “I might suggest that when His Grace is in a better mood. But I'm truly sorry about this outcome. You've come all this way to the royal capital, and yet...”

Opal spoke in hushed tones as she headed with Trevor to the entrance of the manor. It was equally frustrating that Romito wasn't there to send him off.

"I don't mind," Trevor replied. "It was a good change of pace to go on this short trip. The earldom is doing so well these days that it's grown a touch boring. What shall you do? How will you go about convincing the duke? We can bring in Omar or perhaps have the butler of the duchy's manor, Lind, testify against him."

Trevor stopped when they finally arrived at the entrance. A manservant held the door open, as though encouraging him to leave, and quickly. Opal hesitated for just a moment before she smiled.

"No, it's fine already," she said. "But I shall head back to the earldom after a good while. I'd like you to spend that time thinking of a new potential manager."

"Certainly," Trevor said. "I—no, *we* are on your side, my lady. I'm rooting for you and hope you win this battle."

"Thank you. Be careful on your ride home."

She didn't know how much the manservant had heard, but she didn't care. And in the same vein, Trevor also made sure to speak his encouragement before stepping out of the manor. Opal watched him leave until his carriage rounded the corner, then immediately retired to her attic. No one appeared for her—neither a butler nor Hubert. Opal knew that her phrasing might not have been ideal and that she had to learn from her mistakes.

Since Omar had been hired by Hubert's late father, insulting him meant in effect insulting the late duke as well. Had the previous duke still been alive, however, Omar's fate might have been entirely different.

For the next few days, Opal agonized if things should remain as they were, but Hubert and the rest of the servants in his manor continued to act as though she didn't exist. Only Beth would interact with Opal, angrily carrying her meals while also helping her change and preparing her baths. And while she used only what little sunlight reached her through a clouded window to read, she could hear the happy voices of Stella, Mrs. Notham, and Hubert from outside.

It might have been odd to feel so isolated when it was her choice to remain holed up in the attic, but this isolation had steeled her resolve. Opal sat in front of her shoddy desk and wrote a letter. She received a reply the following morning, and while she was shocked by how quickly a response came, she swiftly opened the letter and scanned its contents.

“I shall be heading out this afternoon,” Opal said. “Will you kindly prepare my clothes for me?”

“Where to, madam?” Beth asked.

“Why must I meticulously report where I go to someone like you, Beth? I never thought I had to do anything like that,” Opal replied.

“I-I was being impertinent. Please forgive me.”

“Very well.”

Opal would usually never treat others so coldly, but she had had enough of Beth’s sullen anger and stubborn reluctance. The duchess wasn’t sure if the maid was literate, but surely Beth must’ve realized that the sender was a man and had therefore dared to question Opal. If so, Romito also must’ve noticed the same as Beth and reported it to Hubert immediately. And just as she’d predicted, once she had a carriage prepared and tried to leave, she was stopped by the duke.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“You were never interested in what I did,” Opal replied. “Why are you asking me now?”

“Because it’d be a problem if you went where you pleased with a carriage engraved with the crest of the duke. If you’re having an affair, be more discreet.”

“Apologies for failing to meet your expectations, but I’m going to my uncle’s manor. He’s been at the royal capital for a while and would like to meet and catch up with me.”

“Then do as you wish!”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Her uncle, who knew about the marriage, had invited Hubert as well, but she kept that part a secret. Opal knew that he'd decline, and she found the whole thing very troublesome.

And the duke truly seemed completely uninterested in her. Despite it being a so-called casual afternoon visit, Opal was carrying an unusually heavy bag filled with various documents, including an IOU. The duke hadn't noticed it, much less commented or made any movement to suggest he was suspicious of Opal.

And so, Opal visited her uncle's manor for the first time in a year. After such a long time apart, he was overjoyed to see her again.

However, when the duchess divulged her thoughts to him, he was stunned and vehemently against Hubert. She managed to assuage her uncle only by explaining her current situation and swearing that things would return to normal in the future. She promised to meet him at the earl's manor next time and returned to the duke's residence. The next day, she once again set off for the earl's manor.

Opal did ask for her husband's permission to leave, but Hubert didn't show even the slightest bit of interest. "Do as you please" was all he said. One glaring difference was the attitude of the coachman, Kayve. The man treated Opal as a proper duchess and paid her his utmost respect. She smiled at the irony of this, and her glum feelings started to improve when the manor came into view.

17. Separation

The day following her return, her childhood friend arrived to meet her.

“Claude! Oh my! It’s certainly been a while!” Opal cried.

“Yep,” Claude replied. “I didn’t think I’d even see you this year. I never thought you’d return to the earldom so soon, Duchess.”

It had been a year since their last meeting. Opal was ecstatic to see her childhood friend, but Claude seemed a bit awkward. Who could blame him? His childhood friend had suddenly gotten married with no engagement period and an extremely simple ceremony. The whole thing had completely blindsided him.

“Don’t say that, Claude,” Opal said. “Call me by my name, as you always have.”

“And where’s His Grace?” Claude asked.

“Well, my husband’s still at the royal capital. I’m actually here...on personal business. And you graduated from university, didn’t you? Congratulations.”

“I just barely managed to. Thanks.”

Opal felt awkward talking about Hubert and quickly shifted topics. Claude’s reply was coupled with a forced grin, but as usual, he told her the funny stories he had from school. But the tension was undeniable; after all, the two were now of vastly different rank. She was a duchess, while he was the third son of a baron. But the more time Opal had spent with him, the more she had grown to realize her own feelings. *I love Claude so much... I knew it.*

They had first met when the baron and his wife had been invited to the earl’s manor; Claude had been introduced initially to befriend Opal’s brother. Unlike her older brother, who didn’t want to look after kids younger than him, Claude was kind and mature, always making sure to include Opal in their activities. As time passed and, eventually, Claude went off to boarding school, a young Opal had cried for days out of loneliness.

Likely sensing her sadness, Claude had made sure to frequently send back letters and would always come by to visit her during his long holiday vacations. When Opal had lost her sickly mother, Claude had even taken a leave of absence from his school and attended the funeral, doing whatever he could to console Opal, who had been desperately holding back her tears. Suffice to say it had been only natural for young Opal to fall in love with him. But the two had been aware of their differences in rank, and she had continued to suppress her feelings for him.

Every now and then Claude would mention, sadly, how his mother had defied her family by marrying Claude's father and, as a result, was barred from visiting home. And so, he would note, she always looked a tad lonely. *Going against family aside, I'm sure Claude only sees me as a younger sister. But what if...?*

As Opal pined for Claude, she knew that she would realize her true thoughts once all was said and done. It didn't matter how much she regretted her actions; time could not be reversed but only moved forward, relentlessly. She, too, had to march forward. Once she decided on something, she would see it through until the end, even if it meant being abandoned by her precious friend. Opal steeled her resolve.

"I'll take my leave," Claude said.

"Thank you," Opal murmured.

"For what?"

"For coming all this way to meet me."

"It's nothing for you to thank me about. And besides, we likely won't be able to meet so easily next year."

"Why not? When the social season starts..."

"I don't want to do anything so stiff and formal. Since I've got the chance, I might go around and tour the world."

"The world?"

"Yep. I don't have money, so I'd have to work, but it sounds fun, doesn't it?"

"I guess so. But be careful."

“I know.”

Opal desperately suppressed the urge to hold him back and beg him to not leave. He tousled her hair roughly.



“Argh! Claude!” Opal yelled.

“Heh, my bad,” Claude replied, sounding unapologetic as usual.

He stared into her eyes, and Opal tried to speak, finding the silence uncomfortable. But Claude beat her to it, a gentle smile dancing on his lips.

“I hope you find happiness, Opal,” he said.

“Thank you. I wish you the same, Claude,” she replied.

“I’ll try my best! See you around!”

He burst out of the entrance with the same casual demeanor in which he spoke. He knew his way around well and headed for the stables while waving goodbye to Opal.

The duchess watched him leave. Claude’s residence wasn’t too far from here by horseback. Opal had wanted to offer a formal word of goodbye, but perhaps this was for the best. She sighed deeply and returned to the living room, where Trevor entered after a brief knock.

“Has Sir Claude been doing well?” Trevor asked.

“Indeed,” Opal replied. “But I suppose things have changed. He’s acting a touch reserved.”

“That can’t be helped. And in regards to the manager of the duchy...”

“Did you find anyone suitable?”

“It’s quite tough. First and foremost, since the duke hasn’t agreed to fire Omar, it’s quite difficult to openly search for his position.”

“I agree. Your subordinate is covering for Omar for now, but it’ll be an issue once a problem arises.”

“Then why not return Mr. Omar to the duchy’s manor?” Nadja chimed in innocently. “You just need to check up on him from time to time, Mr. Trevor.”

The maid had been obediently stationed beside them while they spoke. Usually, maids weren’t allowed to butt into conversations, but Opal didn’t mind. Unfortunately, Nadja’s plan was quite unrealistic.

“I think it’s an excellent idea, Nadja,” Opal said. “But I don’t think we can use it.”

“Why’s that?” Nadja asked.

“What we’re doing now is only a temporary measure. As the duchess, I’m borrowing the help of Trevor and his subordinates, but technically, Trevor works under my father, Earl Holloway. Managing the duchy on top of that would be a breach of contract, and managing multiple lands from multiple households would be seen as an act of insubordination to my father.” Opal was ready to throw in the towel.

“My lady is precisely right, Nadja,” Trevor added. “But thanks to that idea, I’ve thought of something myself.” A smile formed on his tan face.

“And what kind of plan is that?” Opal asked.

“As Nadja says, we should return Omar to the duchy. I reviewed past records, and when the previous duke was alive Omar managed the land properly. Since he’s got the skills, it’d be a waste to not put them to good use. And, my lady, *you* should be the one to look after him.”

“Me?”

“That’s right. His Grace doesn’t seem to be interested in his duchy, so it shouldn’t be a problem. And you don’t like the royal capital much, do you? Why don’t you spend some time relaxing in the duchy?”

“You’re right...”

Opal mulled over the suggestion. While the size was completely different, she’d originally planned to live on her grandmother’s plot of land and so had learned land management from Trevor. It might be difficult at first for her to do everything by herself, but surely she could keep tabs on Omar. And if all went according to plan, she’d be living at the duchy.

“I’m not confident in my skills, but I do think it’s worth trying,” Opal said. “And how has the man in question been doing? Is he hard at work?”

“He is,” Trevor replied. “Omar is still upset with the arrangement, but he hasn’t fled and is doing agricultural work. If he gives up his gambling habits, he’ll

become an excellent manager.”

“Then let us consider returning him to the duchy. Frankly, we need to ensure that he won’t try to run away again.” A sunny future for the duchy was now possible. Opal could find it in herself to crack a joke.

All that was left was welcoming her uncle tomorrow. He wasn’t totally against her plans, but neither was he in full support of them.

The next day, her uncle arrived as promised, and the servants at the manor joyfully welcomed him. He hadn’t visited the residence since his older sister’s—Opal’s mother’s—funeral, but he had once been a frequent visitor. Her uncle gave a troubled smile at the warm welcome, and Opal was reminded of how happy she had been when her mother was still alive. *If mother was still with us...*

Those were dispiriting thoughts, so Opal clenched her fists to try to cheer herself up. Trevor, Opal, and her uncle went to the study to discuss matters, with Omar joining in later. Together, they managed to wrap up negotiations.

That night, at dinner with her uncle, the duchess was entertained by stories of foreign nations. Beyond the ocean, in Taisei Kingdom, a plague had spread, causing even the king to pass away. The previous king’s illegitimate child had taken advantage of the confusion and was fighting for the throne against the king’s younger brother. The nation was on the verge of civil war. While the legitimate heir was the king’s younger brother, a few powerful nobles were supporting the illegitimate child.

“The plague has just died down. I just don’t think now’s the time to be fighting over who will rule the kingdom,” her uncle said.

“Are you all right? I hope you’re safe,” Opal said with concern.

“I’m all right. I went elsewhere before the plague had spread. But we’re not sure if that prince, the illegitimate child, is the real deal. Everyone’s got their suspicions. I’ve met His Highness, the king’s younger brother, once before, and he was a splendid man. Naturally, the more underhanded nobles think him a nuisance. The problem is that the prince spread a believable rumor about the king’s ill-fated romance with a commoner and used it to gain the sickly and exhausted citizens’ support. At this rate, I’m not sure if the king’s younger

brother is able to take the throne.”

“But I didn’t think that would lead to war...”

“Taisei Kingdom is rich with resources, and their technology is cutting-edge. Ruling it would be a boon. I suppose it’s only natural for the greedy to be eager about claiming the place, but if war *does* break out, it will affect the technological advancements of our nation greatly. I hope that we can, at the very least, avoid a grisly war...”

“Is there no way to stop it?” Opal asked. “If only we could prove that the prince is lying.”

“Now, now, Opal,” her uncle said. “We don’t know for sure if he’s lying yet. You mustn’t say such a thing to others.”

“I know. I’ve matured a great deal in my own way, and I won’t act so foolishly anymore. I’m not a child.”

Opal pouted and raised her chin comically, causing her uncle to give a strained laugh. He knew that she was referring to that fateful night at the banquet.

“I do think you’re still impulsive, but I do plan on establishing myself in this kingdom,” he said. “Be sure to rely on me whenever you’d like.”

“Thank you. That’s very heartening to hear,” Opal replied.

Opal lay in her bed that night, unable to sleep. She had rolled her dice. And yet, she still held a sliver of hope that Hubert would act in some way; she mocked herself for expecting anything from him at all. She’d know the results of her gamble in a few days. The only thing she could do now was wait patiently.

18. A Visitor

One morning a few days later, Opal, who had already returned to the duke's manor in the royal capital, heard the sound of a visitor. She made her way down the steps to the first floor, headed to the study, and knocked on the door. When she was asked to name herself and did so, Romito opened the door with a suspicious frown.

"I would like to ask His Grace a question," Opal said. "May I step inside?"

Left with no other choice, Romito stepped back, allowing Opal into the room. From behind his desk, Hubert looked up from his work with a glare.

"What business do you have with me?" he demanded.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Opal replied. "I saw someone arrive earlier. If you're planning on inviting guests over in the afternoon, I would like to know."

Hubert's face turned a slight red; he hadn't greeted his wife properly when she came in. He might have despised her, but it was humiliating to know that he had forgotten his manners. His wife's question caused him to frown once more.

"I don't need to tell you about my guests," he spat.

"Perhaps so, but I'm the mistress of this house," Opal insisted. "It's my role to welcome any guests of our manor, and if anyone is visiting, surely I should be allowed to know who."

"If the person is *your* guest, I shall let you know. But they are mine, and your hospitality is not needed."

"What kind of person are they?"

Opal was immune to Hubert's icy tone. Romito, who was watching over the pair, did his best to hide his elation under his thin veneer of indifference as he swiftly left the room. Hubert resigned himself to Opal's insistence.

"The person is here to deliver Omar's letter," the duke replied irritably.

"Then are they not a visitor?" Opal asked.

“A man called Jonathan Kensington will arrive with the documents along with another man. They simply require my signature. It has nothing to do with you!”

“Do you truly believe that it has nothing to do with me?”

“Ah, right. You accused Omar of misconduct, didn’t you? But I trust him, and that’s my answer. Won’t you leave already?”

Hubert knew that he’d gotten too emotional and let out a deep sigh, calmly ridiculing Opal’s questions. The duchess suppressed her disappointment and, instead, gave a serene nod.

“Very well,” she said, secretly praising her strength. Her voice hadn’t trembled at all while she spoke.

Opal soon left the study and returned to the attic. As the afternoon approached, she heard the sound of a carriage, implying that the visitor had arrived, but Opal didn’t leave her room. She simply sat there quietly. The duchess hadn’t been called for, and angry footsteps hadn’t approached her room. The carriage clacks faded into the distance, letting her know that the visitor had left.

Opal had thought that she’d steeled herself, but tears streaked down her cheeks anyway. She violently rubbed them away, determined to not cry here. That night, Opal went to bed without even eating dinner, much to the delight of Beth and the other servants. They believed that His Grace’s demanding attitude had finally put that intruder in her place—surely, she now understood her position in the attic.

Hubert, on the other hand, felt uneasy. His attitude this morning had been far too rude, and he realized that in general, he was being rather impudent to his wife. It was unjust. As he ate with Mrs. Notham, who looked unusually cheerful, internally he was at war with himself.

The following day, Opal proudly left her attic, as though yesterday’s events hadn’t happened, and headed for her uncle’s manor. Upon receiving the documents she had brought, her uncle could only offer her words of kindness. Surely, there was no need for Opal to continue this married life. But the duchess smiled and shook her head.

“Since I’ve gone off to marry, this must be some sort of fate,” she said. “I don’t plan on leaving him in this state. I shall do what I must.”

“Opal... Your kindness and generosity is lost on that foolish young lad,” her uncle reasoned. “He isn’t worth your goodwill.”

“Even so, I cannot abandon the residents of his duchy. For better or for worse, the residents cannot choose their lord.”

“I see... You’re just like my older sister.”

“I’m happy to hear such praise.”

As she smiled once more, the two indulged in a hint of nostalgia, sharing stories about Opal’s late mother before she left her uncle’s residence. But once she boarded her carriage, she became stone-faced once more and told her coachman, Kayve, that she wanted to change her destination. The coachman accepted her order without complaint.

It seems only Kayve isn’t hostile toward me... But his attitude might change in the future... The mere thought made her lonely, but as she planned on spending the majority of her time in the manor of the duchy, she knew that she wouldn’t be using the carriage as often.

She didn’t plan on living in the royal capital even during the social season, and she wanted to build her new, personal carriage at the duchy. When she finally arrived at her destination—the manor of Earl Holloway in the royal capital—she found herself warmly welcomed by the servants of the manor. She hadn’t visited this place once since her marriage.

“I’m sorry for my sudden visit,” Opal apologized. “I must’ve surprised you.”

“We’re beyond overjoyed to see you,” the butler assured her.

“Don’t be a stranger, my lady!” a maid added. “I’ve heard that you returned to the earldom numerous times since your marriage, but you haven’t visited us once!”

Surrounded by her servants, Opal felt tears well up in her eyes, but she did her best to suppress them. She was ecstatic to be treated so warmly. She felt so many different emotions jumbling her mind, and she was unable to verbalize

them well. A manservant tried to carry her bag, but she declined the offer and switched gears.

“Is my father absent?” she asked the butler.

“He’s staying at this manor today,” he replied. “He’s currently hard at work in his study and has asked for no one to bother him.”

“I see... Very well. Not to worry, I’ll tell him to not cast the blame on you.”

“My lady?!”

To her luck, her father was present, and she headed straight for the study. The shocked butler tried to stop her at first, but the duchess wouldn’t comply and gently knocked on the door. She opened it before she received an answer. Her father, likely hearing the fuss, wasn’t at all surprised as he raised a quizzical eyebrow and looked up at his daughter.

“As you may have heard, I burst my way into your study,” Opal said. “Please don’t blame anyone other than myself. The servants tried to stop me.”

“I know,” her father replied. “And? I hope you’ve got a good enough reason to be here. You won’t whine about how you can’t tolerate your newly wedded life, will you? I won’t listen to such foolish cries.”

“Unfortunately, I have yet to experience a newly wedded life. But I think I’ve got some information that would be to your interest. I also have a request.”

“Oho?”

It had been a while since the duchess had reunited with her father, but she didn’t even give him a passing greeting. Her father didn’t seem to mind. Nothing had changed between them; Opal had no reason to force a smile, and she didn’t need to hide her emotions. Once she told him the reason for her visit, she took out some documents from her bag and laid them out on top of the documents that her father was working on.

“As you’ve said in the past, my husband is naive, and I’ve got evidence,” she said. “Here’s the proof of the duchy manager’s misdeeds. I’ve got his secret ledger, and here’s concrete evidence of his gambling addiction as well as the money that he’d been taking.”

“I know that,” the earl replied. “And? Did your husband finally realize it too?”

“If he did, would you have these documents currently in front of you? The duke didn’t believe me even when I told him about the manager’s misdeeds myself. I even had Trevor accompany me to testify, but the duke’s convinced that you and I are working together to take over his duchy.”

“I see... So your husband is not only naive but a fool as well.”

“Please don’t call him *my* husband. *You* chose him for me. The entire marriage, quite frankly, had nothing to do with my wishes.”

Even the earl seemed shocked to hear his daughter’s bold words. In the past, he’d wished several times that she’d been born as his son instead. Though Opal might have seemed selfish at first glance, she was both highly intelligent and steadfast. The earl had been reluctant about having his eldest son, who was busy playing around at his university, take over the house. Opal might not have been able to succeed the title, but the earl had wanted his daughter to manage something—anything—that he had. And so, Opal had been educated not only as a lady but on a variety of other subjects that no lady ought to know about.

When she debuted in society, the earl had had no plans to marry his daughter off to men who were after her money or to men that he found to be utterly boring. He’d had a few plans in mind, but that fateful incident had ruined everything. At first, the earl had been infuriated by Opal’s reckless attitude, but afterward, when he’d calmed down, he had searched for an opportunity. The earl had noticed the attraction between Opal and Duke McLeod when they first danced together, and so, he’d shifted gears and had gone out on a gamble. If Opal could solve the duke’s debts and issues before she turned twenty, he’d planned on setting her free, allowing her to live as she pleased.

However, if the duke was headed for ruin and was unable to dig himself out of the hole, the earl had planned on using his support as an excuse to proceed with the political marriage. Opal would undoubtedly be defiant at first with this forced marriage, but the earl had believed that she would quickly notice the problems at House McLeod. Though Opal might have been stern and severe at times, she was equally compassionate and forgiving—she would want to help. The duke might suffer a blow to his ego and pride at first, unwilling to listen to

Opal's protests, but the earl had believed that the two would eventually work together to revitalize the duchy. Perhaps, as they embarked on this endeavor, love might sprout between them.

Unfortunately, the earl's predictions had been quite off. His eyes widened with astonishment as he gazed down at the final document that Opal had placed on his desk.

"Are you... Are you really sure about this?" he asked.

"I've...stopped dreaming about my ideals," Opal replied. "No matter how long I waited, no prince riding on a white horse came to save me. And if that's the case, I'll steal the horse myself and do as I please."

"What if this so-called prince of yours is simply being prevented from heading to you? Have you considered that?"

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. And what is your request?"

"First, I'd like for you to store these documents in your safe."

"Hrm... That's probably for the best. Very well, I shall do so. It seems like you've got more to ask of me."

"I do. My second request is that if His Grace comes to you for advice, I want you to help him out."

There was a brief pause before the earl answered. "Very well. Even if that foolish young lad finally opens his eyes, I'm unsure if he'd come to me, but if he does, I shall accept his request."

"Thank you. I'm counting on you."

Opal vocalized her gratitude before she gave a strained smile. Both her father and uncle had referred to Hubert as a "foolish young lad." Unfortunately, their words were nothing short of the truth, and she left the earl's manor to head back to the duke's.

19. Fraud

By the time Opal returned to the manor, it was already time for dinner, and Romito, the butler, looked visibly displeased. Opal didn't mind at all as she requested that he inform the duke that she'd be dining with him. The butler failed to hide his surprise when Opal requested Beth come to the drawing room to help her change clothes. She was also quite thirsty and asked for a cup of tea. The butler did his best to suppress his anger and left.

I suppose the fact that he's trying to hide his feelings is better than nothing, Opal thought.

A while after she entered the drawing room, Beth stomped into the room. She smacked the tray of tea down with a loud clatter.

"I don't know why you seem so irritated, Beth, but if the tea set is chipped, would you be able to pay for it?" Opal asked.

"His Grace never blames us servants for minor mistakes," Beth refuted her.

"Perhaps normal mistakes can be excused, but I'm sure he wouldn't be pleased by intentional violence, like your actions just now"

The maid said not a word, but her defiant gaze said it all. The look didn't bother Opal, and she took a sip of her tea before she frowned. The maid looked triumphant.

"You can't even brew a simple cup of tea?" Opal inquired. "This is very bitter and lukewarm. If these mishaps continue, I'd suggest you search for another workplace. I'll be sure to mention your poor tea service when I write a letter of introduction."

The duchess no longer felt the need to hold back and unleashed an overbearing attitude. She had never acted like this toward a servant before, but since the servants of the duke's manor didn't pay her their respects, she felt like she could do the same.

"H-How dare you act so high and mighty...?" Beth started.

“Excuse me?” Opal inquired. “I *am* high and mighty. My circumstances aside, I am the mistress of this house. *You* are a servant here. If that doesn’t please you, feel free to resign from your post. That way, you no longer have to care about meeting me on the streets *or* in the manor. You’ll have nothing to do with me, and you no longer will need to be ordered around. Go on, do as you wish. But I’d like to wear something scarlet for tonight’s dinner, so will you prepare it for me or not?”

Beth turned pale and trembled for a moment, but with a final vexed look at Opal’s orders she obediently headed for the closet and quietly started to make preparations.

“Ah, and before I forget,” Opal added. “If you’re planning on tattling about this to Romito later, please tell him one more thing. After dinner, while we’re all sipping on some tea, I will say some very important things to His Grace and Mrs. Notham. It involves you servants as well, so anyone interested, including Romito, may join us in the living room.”

Opal smiled as Beth, who was forcefully tugging on Opal’s hair while brushing it, froze in place. Beth found it highly suspicious that the servants were allowed to listen in on conversation between the duke and duchess. But as their eyes locked through the mirror, Beth pursed her lips and nodded.

“Certainly, I shall,” she said after a beat of silence, her voice small.

All too late, the maid finally caught on to Opal’s bold attitude and shift in demeanor. But the duchess was already set in her ways. It was imperative for her to convey to Hubert, Mrs. Notham, and the servants that she *hadn’t* resigned herself to her fate. Indeed, Opal had no intention of becoming a doormat. If anyone decided to change their attitude, she would treat them generously. Knowing that she was headed straight into a tangled mess, Opal almost faltered, but she managed to stand up and head to dinner.

When she arrived for dinner, Hubert stood up but didn’t escort her to her seat. Mrs. Notham remained seated, but Opal paid no mind as her gaze traveled to the duke’s clothes, her mind filled with needless thoughts. *Ah, he must’ve had his clothes newly tailored. They’re the latest fashion.* The moment she sat down, Hubert began his accusations.

“Who do you think you are?” he demanded. “I heard you threatened to fire Beth earlier.”

“You’re quick to be notified,” Opal replied. “But your information isn’t totally correct.”

“And how is it not?”

“It’s not a threat. I’m being serious. I’ve actually always thought this, but your servants are far too emotional and often are unable to fulfill their roles well. I’ve warned Beth multiple times in the past already, but she hasn’t improved, so I merely told her that this was my final warning.”

“What?! You don’t *have* that right—”

“Oh, but I *do*. I’m the mistress of this house, and it’s normally the duty of a lady to manage the servants and, by extension, the manor. It’s nothing for you to be worried about, Your Grace.”

“What?!”

Hubert was at a loss for words, taken aback by how unusually firm Opal was. She was clearly more determined than before. Mrs. Notham, who’d been grinning from ear to ear until now, looked equally stunned. The maids and menservants turned pale, and Romito, possibly to stop his hands from trembling, pulled back the bottle of wine that he’d been pouring into a glass. Hubert hastily cleared his throat.

“This isn’t a matter to discuss in front of everyone,” he declared.

“Oh? But you’re the one who brought it up,” Opal replied. “And you might’ve already heard, but I’ve got something important to tell you in the living room. Beth may have told you this as well, but it involves all the servants of this manor, so anyone interested is invited to join us. I pray for your patience and for your generosity on this matter.”

“What are you...?”

“You’ll find out in due time. For now, why don’t we enjoy our meal?”

Hubert had taken his title as duke for granted until now; no one had ever been this stern with him. He quietly resumed his meal but, unable to hide his

curiosity, sneaked glances at Opal. Mrs. Notham had seemingly lost her appetite, leaving much of her meal on her plate. The duchess, on the other hand, ate very well.

“Now then, shall we have some tea in the living room?” Opal suggested, standing up after her meal.

“V-Very well...” Mrs. Notham replied, nodding her head unsurely.

Hubert stood up as well. “Today, I shall head straight to the living room and have a cup of tea as well.”

“Is that so?” Opal replied.

It seemed the duke was dying to hear the duchess’s words and had decided to skip his alcohol for today. Opal had planned on fetching something very important beforehand and so now needed some time to return to her room.

“Mrs. Notham, I must return to my room at once to fetch a very important item,” Opal said. “May I ask that you prepare the tea in my stead?”

“O-Of course,” Mrs. Notham stammered. “I-I shall do so.”

Hubert narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but Opal turned her back on him and returned to her drawing room. She took out a few documents from her now-lightweight bag and returned to the living room.

“I thank you for your patience,” she said.

Romito, the housekeepers, Beth, the maids, the ladies-in-waiting, and a few other menservants were present and waiting. Hubert and Mrs. Notham were seated on the sofa, and they hadn’t touched their tea. Opal sat in front of a cup prepared for her, across from Hubert, and began her discussion.

“As of yesterday this manor, the duchy, the manor of the duchy, and all the duke’s assets have become mine,” Opal announced to Hubert and Mrs. Notham. She turned to the servants. “You may leave or stay. I shall give you five days to make your decision.”

Hubert was enraged. “What foolishness are you saying?! Have you gone mad?! Your dowry may have rebuilt this house, but you have no right to make such a claim! Don’t you confuse everyone here with your absolute nonsense!”

“Rebuild? Oh no, my dowry was but a temporary measure. The fact is you’ve blindly trusted Omar’s word that next year would bring a good harvest, while the entire time he’s been using the duchy as collateral to secure a loan. I’m sure the lender is very tight-lipped, but at this rate, you will be saddled with massive amounts of debt again.”

Opal remained calm while Hubert’s humiliation in front of the servants turned him bright red, and her icy gaze only enraged him even further as he raised his voice louder than he ever had before.

“Leave at once! Out! Get out! I’ll divorce you! Leave this house right now!” he screamed.

“Your Grace, if we file for a divorce, *you* will be the one who shall leave,” Opal replied. “Yesterday afternoon, you signed the papers agreeing to hand all your assets—your land and manors—over to me.”

20. The Documents

Opal's shocking words caused the room to fall silent. Hubert, however, quickly scoffed through his nose.

"Cease with your rubbish," he said. "The documents I signed yesterday were from Omar."

"Omar didn't create those documents," Opal replied. "You're free to trust him as you wish, Your Grace, but why didn't you at least glance at the papers before signing them? What do you *do*, cooped up in your study as you are? Your actions, quite frankly, have consistently perplexed and confused me."

"I-I'm studying... This may escape you but I've learned quite a bit from university, and one of the topics is quite intriguing to me, you see."

His words lacked confidence and gusto; now that Opal had pointed out his incompetence, the documents he'd signed must have made him anxious. The man was using his studies as an excuse to delay the inevitable, harsh reality.

"Indeed, academia and the pursuit of education is a truly wonderful activity," Opal said. "But we are soon leaving the era where established nobles can live gracefully without doing even a smidgen of work. You have people you must support, Your Grace, and land that you must manage. Are your studies worth casting all of this aside? Will your pursuits support you financially?"

"How gauche! All you believe in is money!"

"Oh no. Money isn't everything in this world. However, it *is* essential if you would like to survive, and *everyone*, nobles included, needs money. In fact, you married me to pay off your debts, and the money from my father has allowed you to survive for a while. But what about the future? What will you do when all that money runs out? Do you truly believe that your vast land—which you haven't laid a finger upon, I might add—will magically produce money for you?"

"E-Everyone said that the land would produce a good harvest this year, for sure."

“Everyone?”

“My friends. They’re a priceless treasure and people that I’ve spent my university days with.”

“Then I’m sure that these people are properly managing their land or have excellent managers. And I’m sure that they’ve been meticulously reading their managers’ reports.”

Quite frankly, Opal didn’t care about Hubert’s scholarly interests. The future was important. And despite her attempts to show him the kind of world they lived in—the cold, hard, materialistic world—Hubert remained determined to stay cornered, to run and flee. Opal suppressed her disappointment and placed more undeniable evidence in front of him.

“This is the paper that you signed yesterday afternoon,” Opal said. “The real copy is kept in a secure safe, so as long as no one here leaks the information, no one will know. As long as you don’t divorce me, that is.”

Hubert moved to talk back, but his gaze fell on the document and instead he gingerly picked it up, terrified at what harsh truth he would have to face. As he read through the paper, the blood started to drain from his face.

“Th-This can’t be true!” he cried.

“But it is,” Opal replied.

“E-Even so, you cheated me! How could this... How could the entirety of my assets be taken from me? His Majesty won’t forgive such an act!”

The servants, who were watching with bated breath and expecting Opal’s words to be nothing but a bluff, finally realized where they now stood. All too late, reality sunk in. They turned pale at Hubert’s words, some almost fainting and needing to be bodily supported by those close by. Mrs. Notham was shaking like a leaf.

“Unfortunately, that excuse won’t work,” Opal said. “I did some research, and while the laws for House McLeod certainly mention your peerage as a duke, there was nothing regarding ceding your manors and land. They therefore could be used as collateral for your debts until now. Those papers have been officially drafted by a legal officer of the royal capital, and you signed your name in front

of him.”

“A-A legal officer of the royal capital?”

“Don’t you know? Jonathan Kensington is a renowned officer deeply trusted by His Majesty. Per His Majesty’s orders, he’d been overseas for the past year, but even so, a man of your standing should know him not only by name but also by face. I’m rather shocked that you *aren’t* familiar with him.”

“B-Because Omar’s letter...”

Hubert went white as a sheet, his face twisting with agonized despair. Opal had once been attracted to this man, and it was a strange thing to consider as she remembered this.

“I believe Omar only said in his letter that two people would arrive,” she added. “Not once, I believe, did he mention his personal affairs.”

“How do you know about that? Did you plot all of this?!”

“Of course I did.”

“Huh?!”

Opal’s easy confession stumped Hubert, leaving him speechless. Some of the servants even glared at Opal, contempt writ clear on their faces.

“As I’ve said numerous times before,” Opal said, “Omar has been cheating you out of your money. I have proof of his misdeeds, and I’ve even paid off his debts for him. And so, I ordered him to write you a letter.”

“How cowardly!” Hubert shouted.

“Cowardly? Your insults are hardly accurate. You ignored my claims against Omar, Your Grace. Had you lent an ear to my words, surely you would’ve doubted his letter even a little. At the very least, I’m sure you would have taken the time to read through the document. Though it lists the name of your duchy and your estimated annual earnings at the top, seeing my name at the bottom surely would have alerted you that this was no ordinary document. Had you properly read through it until the end, you surely would’ve noticed that it was rather odd for my name to be in there at all.”

“I-I told you that I trusted Omar. You used that against me!”

“Of course I did. But I warned you and confirmed with you many times, didn’t I? I asked you if the people that visited you had anything to do with me.” Opal flashed a sad smile.

“Well, I... I would’ve never imagined that it had anything to do with you!” Hubert managed to shout back.

At once, Opal turned expressionless once more and sighed deeply. “You truly weren’t interested in me at all. You only married me for my dowry.”

“What are you—”

“Jonathan Kensington is my maternal uncle. And yet, you had no idea...”

“Th-Then your entire family worked together to trick me! I knew it was weird! I was given exorbitant amounts of money just to marry you! I’ll testify against you and file a claim!”

“As I’ve said before, that won’t work. I’ve provided you with the same document as you see here, and there’s nothing amiss. In truth, only one legal officer is needed for such a thing, but as Jonathan Kensington is my uncle and biologically related to me, he brought in a third party who has no relation to either of us. And you signed your name in front of them both and, by doing so, signed your agreement to this document. Please resign yourself to your fate.”

Opal looked at Hubert, now at a complete loss of words, with a gaze full of pity. The man was a fool, no doubt, but he had succeeded the title as a child after unexpectedly losing both his parents. It was clear that no one had formally taught him the duties and responsibilities that came with shouldering his title.

“I’m guessing that my uncle inquired about me when he visited,” Opal added.

Romito gave an audible gasp. When the two legal officers had been guided into the study, one of them had indeed asked Hubert where the mistress of the manor was. The duke, who had assumed that they were servants sent by Omar, hadn’t even listened when the two visitors introduced themselves upon entering the manor. If he had, he surely would’ve recognized one of their names, for Kensington had sent Opal a letter just the other day.

“While I hadn’t clearly vocalized my relationship with my uncle, had you met him, it would’ve been painfully obvious,” Opal reasoned. “Even if you didn’t

intuit that he was my relative, you should've doubted him a little and carefully read through the documents." Remembering the rumors that swirled around her, she added, "My uncle was against this scheme at first. But the claims were clearly written in the documents, and had you read through them, you would've surely realized what it was all about. He believed that you wouldn't miss it, Your Grace, and while he was angry at my plot, he was worried about you."

These words ensured that Hubert would feel humiliated upon recalling his encounter with Kensington. The duke hadn't recognized the name of a famed legal officer, had barely skimmed the document in front of the two, and had easily signed his name. His incompetence was displayed for all the world to see.

"As I've said earlier, if you wish to divorce me, I shall go along with it," Opal said. "What will you do? You now have nothing but your peerage. Shall you leave me as well? Will you remarry and gain another lady's wealth? Titles are one thing money still can't buy, so I'm sure someone will have you and turn a blind eye to the debts that you shoulder. Though will they be as generous as I have been with such defiant servants, I cannot guarantee. Neither can I predict if their relatives will stay quiet if they hear of any mistreatment. Or perhaps, you could even look for work? Surely, one of your friends can introduce you to a job."

Her words were the final thing needed for everyone present to fully open their eyes. Up until that point most of the servants had indulged in a fantasy of taking care of the pitiful duke and Lady Stella. When Kayve, the coachman, insisted that they all be more respectful to the duchess, the servants had all gazed at him pitifully, convinced that he'd been tricked by such an evil lady. And yet, Kayve had been in the right all along. The futures of the servants were in the hands of the lady who had practically called the duke a liability—it was the duchess who now held all the power. The room fell silent, and no one said a word. Some gazed at Opal now like she was some demon, visiting them in the flesh.

"I-I..." Hubert started.

"Oh, and one more thing," Opal said. "I've drafted a will with my uncle and another witness. Should I die under any circumstance, all my wealth will be donated to several charities."

“What?!”

Hubert’s reaction wasn’t toward the will but to Opal’s bold words. She was all but announcing that killing her in retaliation would be futile. It shocked Hubert to witness just how far Opal was willing to plan things through. The duchess, however, didn’t care and once again wore a mask of indifference.

“It’s time to choose, Your Grace,” she said coldly. “Will you divorce me and leave? Or will you stay here?”

21. Benevolence

“S-So you are going this far to remain married to me?” Hubert asked after a lengthy silence.

“Pardon?” Opal asked in astonishment.

She suddenly burst out laughing, unable to stop herself after hearing such stupid words. Hubert and Mrs. Notham couldn’t hide their shock. The duchess finally calmed herself down, took a few deep breaths, and managed to speak.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry,” Opal said. “Your words were just so...unexpected that I couldn’t help myself. To be honest, I’ve been looking for a way to divorce you from the moment we got married. But I didn’t reconsider because of you *or* because of my title as duchess. I shall be frank. I don’t care about any of you in this manor either.”

She glanced at Romito and Beth as she said those words. Despite the comfortable temperature in the room, the butler was sweating buckets, and the maid was as pale as a ghost, her eyes witnessing everything with a weak, wavering gaze.

“But for the innocent residents of your duchy,” Opal said, “I feel nothing but pity. I sympathize with them, for they, too, never received your concern. When I visited the duchy, they were living in poverty, leading far more frugal lives than those in the earldom. Agricultural technology has advanced in leaps and bounds over the decades, but your residents still use outdated tools. They waste their time and energy, much more than they should. And this is all thanks to Omar, the man you trust so much. I’ve decided to live in the manor of the duchy and properly manage the place. Your Grace, if you would like to remain married to me, please continue living here.”

Opal showed her indifference to a red-faced Hubert, who was humiliated and infuriated, but to Mrs. Notham, she pasted an exaggeratedly doting smile on her face.

“You may live here with your daughter, Mrs. Notham,” Opal said. “I shall permit it. If you choose to leave, however, I will not stop you.”

“You wretched woman. Stella’s ill!” Hubert demanded.

“I know that. I’ve allowed them to stay here and leech off of this manor, haven’t I?”

Opel knew her words were cold, but she steeled herself and spoke them aloud. This family must be forced into seeing their reality. It was imperative to put them in their place. And if they left, Opal was willing to support them until they could live on their own. And if any servants wished to leave, she was even willing to write them letters of introduction as well.

“I-I have nowhere else to go if I’m chased out of here!” Mrs. Notham implored with tears streaming down her face, encouraging others to sympathize with her. “I don’t mind, but please... I beg of you! At least allow Stella to stay!”

Opal found the display tiresome, but she didn’t dare vocalize her thoughts. Hubert stood up as though to shield the weeping lady from Opal.

“We...must stay here for Stella. We can’t have her go elsewhere,” Hubert implored. He sounded as though he were offering his head in sacrifice for the girl. “Please allow us to accept your benevolence.”

Romito, the maids, and Beth were all crying as they gazed at the scene. It was exhausting for Opal to see, and she fought to not roll her eyes in the face of such a silly farce.

“As I’ve said before, you are all allowed to stay. Good grief,” she said. “I do have a condition, however.”

She breathed a sigh of relief as she was able to get her point across, but the moment she mentioned a condition, Hubert and Mrs. Notham looked as though they had been told to offer their lives. *And what happened to the resolve of a moment ago? I don’t need it, but was that all a lie or what?*

“The primary physician of this house, Dr. Harrison, is getting quite old,” Opal said. “I would like another doctor to look after Miss Stella.”

“What are you saying?! Dr. Harrison has been looking after Stella since she was a child!” Mrs Notham cried. “No one else knows her better than Dr. Harrison!”

The woman who had been nearly weeping with tears a moment ago now transformed into a mother fiercely defending her child. For a moment, Opal faltered, but she had no plans on changing her claims.

“Even so, I’d like another doctor’s opinion,” Opal said. “I’m not saying that we should fire Dr. Harrison, but medicine has also advanced greatly in recent years. Some doctors are rather set in practicing more traditional methods, to the point where they’ve lost patients who could have otherwise been spared. Please, be at ease; I won’t be the one to choose the doctor. Perhaps one of your friends could introduce us to a physician, Your Grace.”

Hubert had his eyes narrowed with suspicion. He was desperately trying to see through her true intentions.

“Of course, I shall cover the medical fees,” Opal added. She turned to the servants. “Oh, and if any of you are planning on staying, I shall properly pay your wages in accordance with your work.”

All at once the anxious servants breathed a sigh of relief, with some moving to immediately voice their thoughts. A sharp glare from Romito, however, silenced them instantly.

“Now then, you servants are excused. Please leave the room,” Opal said. “And please make sure to tell me your final decision in five days’ time.”

Romito hesitated for a moment, but he quickly bowed and left the room. Opal, Hubert, and Mrs. Notham were the only ones left.

“Now then, let’s discuss a few more things, shall we?” Opal asked.

“You’ve still got more to say?” Hubert inquired.

“It’d be odd if I didn’t, I think,” Opal replied. “Now. How much money do you think we need to survive? We’re born with quite the privilege, but it’s not like money will magically appear out of nowhere while we sit here twiddling our thumbs. Are you aware of just how much money was thrown away into the gutters because you sat here doing nothing at all? If Omar had never gambled

away your money for his addiction, you would never have had to marry me, and you could've given back to the residents of your duchy."

Hubert fell silent. He looked grim and furrowed his brow, but it wasn't toward Opal. More likely he was coming to regret all his past actions. Opal sympathized for just a moment, but she quickly gathered herself. Hubert wasn't a child who'd just lost his parents—he was a twenty-six-year-old man, and one who should've been able to look after himself. If he didn't show his resolve here, he'd be a lost cause.

"As I've mentioned earlier, since the manor is now mine, I shall provide for both the wages of the servants and the maintenance fees for the manor," Opal said. "I shall also pay for your daily necessities—food, clothes, medical expenses, and the like. Your Grace, you'll require quite a bit more funds if you are to mingle in society, so I shall provide you with a hefty salary."

"A salary, you say?" Hubert asked.

"Or shall I call it an allowance?"

"Are you mocking me?!"

"I'm terribly sorry. I'm not quite sure how to describe the act of giving money to someone who has none. I felt like the word 'bestow' was a bit much... We are a couple after all, even if the wealth all belongs to the wife and isn't shared between the two."

Opal's words were chosen carefully. It sounded like she was discussing providing shelter for a man she was having an affair with, while "allowance" made it seem like she was speaking to a child. Her attitude was filled with contempt, and Hubert had never felt so humiliated in his life. Mrs. Notham, unable to sit still, restlessly stood up, then sat back down and nervously gazed at the door. She was surely hoping to leave. Ultimately, Hubert clenched his fists tightly and suppressed his anger, enduring the treatment.

"As I'm giving you this money, you may do with it as you please," Opal said. "You may go to a gentlemen's club, or visit a brothel, or harbor a mistress."

"Madam!" Mrs. Notham scolded swiftly. Opal's words were unfitting for a lady of her status.

It was the first time, Opal calmly realized, that Mrs. Notham had ever referred to her as a “madam,” and a smile danced across her lips.

“What else can I say?” she inquired. “While I may be His Grace’s wife, the marriage is only by name. This relationship won’t change, and I have no plans to accuse His Grace of adultery. I don’t want to make a fuss. But this is all rather silly and not the vital issue that must be discussed. I am referring to the future of the manor and the duchy.”

“Just say it,” Hubert said.

He no longer had the energy to be angry, and Opal found that to be quite boring. *Maybe I really do have a nasty personality.* But what she was about to say had nothing to do with her thoughts.

“While I’m alive, I’ve no intention of letting go of my assets,” she said. “But I’m willing to sell this manor and land back to you, and only you, Your Grace, for market price.”

“But the land and manor is originally Hubert’s!” Mrs. Notham cried.

“And what of it? It’s mine now. This is all due to His Grace’s naivety. What do you think would’ve happened if Omar’s debts couldn’t be repaid and I’d decided to form ties with an evil loan shark?”

The duchess’s sound words couldn’t be refuted. Mrs. Notham and Hubert had lasted long enough under this relentless barrage of reality. If Earl Holloway had wanted, he could have taken the duke’s wealth away *without* marrying his daughter off at all. In fact, the earl had no need for the title of being a father-in-law to a duke.

“As I’ve mentioned before, I will provide you with money every month, Your Grace,” Opal said. “You can try saving all that up in hopes of one day buying your manor and land back, but that should take an impossibly long while. I’d recommend you try your best to increase your wealth somehow.”

“Increase my wealth? Are you telling me to start gambling?” Hubert asked.

“I wonder... I shall leave you to make your decision. You may gamble it away or...invest. My financial administrator has been hard at work trying to increase my wealth, and they occasionally go to my father for advice, it seems. My father

will usually guide them to good investment options and advise when to back off. There have even been rumors in society that my father is the reincarnation of an infamous king who turned everything he touched into gold.”

“Are you telling me to beg your father, Earl Holloway, for advice?”

“That’s all up to you. You’re free to do as you please with the money that I’ve given you. But I’m sure that my father won’t decline your inquiries. Now then, I believe that is all. Please carefully mull over what I’ve said tonight and provide me with your response in five days. Now, do excuse me.”

It was finally over. Relieved that tonight’s discussion was officially done, she left the living room to return to her attic. While the servants used the staircase in the back, Opal took the large staircase in front to walk up to her second floor and found Stella waiting.

“I knew it. You’re a demon,” Stella said angrily. “You not only stole Hubert from me, but you even stole his wealth, and you’re about to take his home too!”

“About to? I already have, child,” Opal derided. “But I’m a kind demon, and I’ve shown you all benevolence. You don’t have to hold back. Freely display your gratitude to me.”

Though on the inside the duchess was worried Stella would fall sick from such a display, she seemed fine. In fact, the young lady was gritting her teeth bitterly, and her piercing glare at Opal showed that she had a healthy glow to her. *As Trevor said, it’s probably best if another doctor diagnoses her.* Opal smiled and walked past Stella.

The duchess finally walked up the servants’ staircase to get to the attic and saw that the room was warm, a mattress lay on the bed, and a fluffy, down duvet was waiting for her. Her drawing room must’ve been prepared for her as well. *I guess a few of the servants have made their decision.* And so, she lay on her small yet warm bed and rested her tired bones.

22. Decisions

Two days after Opal's declaration, Hubert visited her attic. He glanced around the room, perplexed, but didn't utter a single word. On the inside he was quite shocked by the low ceiling and cramped space, with only an old bed, desk, and chair crammed inside. Opal was clearly leading a very plain lifestyle.

"Your Grace, do you have any business with me?" the duchess finally asked.

"Um, er... I've been carefully thinking about what you said to me two nights ago," he said.

"And have you reached a decision?"

"I have."

Opal knew that he'd come to tell her his decision, but she encouraged him to speak; quietly waiting for his answer was a waste of her time. Hubert showed no hesitation, which was a point in his favor.

With a serious expression on his face, he continued. "This recent series of events has made me painfully aware of just how arrogant and foolish I was. In truth, I likely have no right to accept your generosity, but I'd like to turn over a new leaf. I shall receive your support, go to the earl for advice, and do what I can. I swear to buy the land back from you as soon as possible."

"I understand," Opal said.

Hubert still sounded a little condescending, but this was likely just ingrained into his character. His resolve was more important than anything else, and Opal was internally quite relieved despite how composed she sounded on the outside. Had the duke still refused to change, she would have had no choice but to corner him and force the man to listen to her. Needless to say, Opal wasn't sure just how serious he was about his oath, but she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and trust him for now.

"Then I would like to go ahead with the process, but is that all right with you?" Opal asked.

“It is. I’m...counting on you,” he said.

“Then I shall consult with you on the details at a later date.”

Hubert still seemed to have something he wanted to say, but Opal ended the conversation in a businesslike fashion. She breathed a sigh of relief once the duke left, and quickly wrote a letter to her father. She was more than happy to do so—Hubert had been pushed upon her, and so she was pushing the man back to her father. Tit for tat.

As Opal was feeling a bit better about herself, servants flooded into her room begging for forgiveness and swearing their loyalty to her. The duchess spent the rest of her day troubled by the servants that visited her. But Romito and Beth did not receive the same treatment from her.

Opal had already hired a new butler and a few other servants. Romito was free to quit, and if he chose to stay, he’d be working under a new butler, making him an assistant butler. Romito, who awkwardly arrived at the attic, looked visibly pale upon hearing the duchess’s words.

“A-An assistant butler?” he stammered.

“That’s right,” the duchess replied. “I hired a new butler. His name is Bart, and he used to serve as the butler at a duke’s household in Taisei Kingdom. The kingdom is currently having some internal strife, so he returned here. Not to worry, he was born here in Socille, so he knows our customs.”

“B-But...”

“I think it’s a great opportunity to breathe new life into this manor and completely transform the current workflow,” Opal said, continuing without acknowledging Romito’s interruption. “The servants here don’t know their place, and their mannerisms clearly show how much they neglect their duty. I’m sure everyone here will fix their attitude once they see Bart and the other new servants hard at work.”

Romito couldn’t find the words to refute her, and Opal’s final sentence only made his eyes grow wide with shock.

“Y-You’ve hired new servants already?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Opal replied. “My uncle introduced me to them, so there’s nothing to worry about regarding their work. I don’t plan on hosting parties even once the social season starts, but all the new servants work very well and won’t embarrass the house of a duke. There’s no need for you to worry about that. And what would *you* like to do? If you want me to write a letter of recommendation for you, I can certainly do so.”

“I-I... I shall learn whatever I can from the new butler.”

Romito’s pride was hurt, but at his age, no one would be willing to hire him. He could only accept Opal’s suggestions. Her chest panged with guilt, but she suppressed it all and gave a proud nod.

“Very well,” she said. “Do what you will. Bart and the other servants shall arrive tomorrow, so please assist them in getting used to the flow of the manor and provide them with any necessary details.”

“Most certainly.”

Usually, Opal would have detested taking on such a dictatorial attitude, but she had been far too lenient with the servants in the past. She was the true mistress of the manor now. As Opal kept reminding herself that, she saw Romito, who was older than her father, haggardly plod out of her room. Moments later, there was another knock on the door, and she welcomed Beth into her room.

“Do you need anything from me, Beth?” the duchess inquired.

“U-Um, I-I wanted to apologize to you, madam,” the maid started.

“Very well. Go right ahead.”

“Huh? Um, I mean... I hope you’ll forgive me for my countless instances of insolence against you. I’m deeply sorry.”

“I shall accept your apology.”

Beth, who was now unusually timid, breathed a sigh of relief. Truthfully speaking, Opal was still angry at Beth and the other servants, and she wasn’t generous enough to smile and simply let it all slide. But she knew it would be worse to hold a grudge. This was how Opal would end things, and just like she’d

told Romito, she informed Beth of her decision.

“I’ve already told Romito this, but there’ll be a new butler and a few other servants arriving tomorrow,” the duchess explained. “There are a few ladies-in-waiting and a head maid in the mix as well. I’d like for you to resign from your post as the head maid.”

“A-A new maid?”

“That’s right. I’ve got no plans on staying in this manor for long, and I won’t be inviting any guests over, so we won’t need many ladies-in-waiting. However, if you’ll be working here, you must know what it means to serve a duke. Can you do that?”

“I-I...”

Beth couldn’t speak, and her body started to tremble from the shocking news. She even worried Opal; for a moment, Opal was tempted to loosen up and reassure Beth that everything would be all right. But in the end she steeled herself and waited for Beth’s reply. Romito aside, Beth was deserving of some sympathy.

Mrs. Notham was clearly lacking as a mistress of the house, and as the manor experienced misfortune after misfortune the servants had been treated as family instead of employees. Everyone had thus worked together until now to make it this far. It was Romito’s duty to manage the servants in lieu of Mrs. Notham, but he was so emotionally invested in the immature duke and the angel—Stella—that he’d forgotten his position. He was, and would only ever be, a servant of the duke. But his carelessness had resulted in the servants’ haughty attitude toward Opal.

“If you’re upset with my decision, as I’ve said before, I shall draft a letter of introduction for you,” Opal said. “I’m sure that you’ll have plenty to learn if you serve another household.”

This wasn’t a biting remark but the duchess’s true thoughts; she wasn’t going to completely undermine Beth’s character and was sincerely willing to write a positive letter about her. But Opal’s threat from before had proved effective, and the maid hastily shook her head.

“N-No, please let me work here!” Beth cried.

“I see... Very well. Then you may leave,” Opal replied.

“A-As you wish.”

Once Beth lifelessly left the room, Opal breathed a huge sigh. There was someone she had to meet, but she hadn't been able to do so since *that* night.

The angel apparently came down with a fever that night and has been stuck in bed, or so I heard... I should find a new doctor soon. Opal sighed once more, thinking about Stella and Mrs. Notham, who was now completely glued to the lady's side. The duchess wasn't fond of the angel, but she did want Stella to get better soon.

Hubert had lost his parents and his uncle. He'd suffered enough. There was no need to add on to that. The duchess thought about her late mother and then about Claude. Her chest panged with guilt. She remained in her seat and pressed a hand against her aching chest, but she soon picked up her writing utensil to draft a letter.

The next day, as promised, Bart arrived as the new butler along with several other servants, including a new head maid and a few ladies-in-waiting. The manor awaited the newcomers nervously. Bart, who'd been told of the situation by Opal beforehand, didn't seem at all fazed and greeted Opal and Hubert before swiftly working to fix the servants' attitudes.

The duchess was relieved to see him get right to work and, after giving him a few more details in the attic, finally left the manor of the royal capital.

“Whew, that felt good,” Opal muttered to herself in the carriage.

Hubert, the new butler, and all the servants watched her carriage leave. Kayve was responsible for delivering her to the duchy, and she'd doubled his wages. The coachman apologetically tried to refuse, but in truth, he hadn't received a proper salary until now, and what Opal now paid him was average. She left Bart to assess the rest of the servants and left knowing that the duke's manor would transform soon.

In the end, five days passed without Opal meeting Mrs. Notham and Stella again, but she wasn't dying to greet them and didn't mind. There was a duchy

waiting to be reformed by her, and Opal knew that this was a job worth doing. Her first order of business was to change Omar's mindset, and so she headed for the manor of Duke McLeod's former duchy.

23. Reform

"It's been a while, Omar. Have you been well?" Opal asked.

"All thanks to you," he replied.

The duchess had spent a night at the duchy's manor and had called for Omar to meet her the next morning in her study. Omar was flanked by two stalwart men, dispatched from the earldom. The men had likely been told by Trevor to keep an eye on the shifty manager.

"It certainly seems that way," Opal replied. "You look a lot healthier than before."

"Yeah? Because *you've* been working me to the bone, I'm entirely sore," the manager grumbled.

"*You*?" Opal inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Madam, I mean," he quickly rephrased.

Omar must've been working quite hard in the earldom. His face was tanned by the sun, and his figure was brawnier than ever. According to the reports Opal had received, at first Omar had been restless and itching to gamble, but he had calmed down considerably since. Opal nodded, signaling the two men from the earldom to leave, and upon doing so encouraged Omar to take a seat on the sofa. She sat across from him.

"Peculiar, isn't it?" the duchess said. "Not too long ago, this used to be your room."

"Are you mocking me?" Omar asked.

"You may take it as you wish. I may be the owner of this room now, but based on your work, I could be persuaded to give it back to you."

"You will, madam? Not His Grace?"

"Are you mocking me?" she parroted with a smile. "You know very well that the duke hasn't visited this land for many years now."

The manager's eyes went wide with shock. Lind arrived with the tea, and the duchess encouraged him to take a seat beside Omar. Though Lind had made enough tea for three, as ordered by Opal, he had never imagined that meant he'd be making tea for himself. He was clearly caught off guard.

"Perhaps I should remain standing, madam," Lind protested.

"Oh, this might take a while, so I do suggest you take a seat," Opal replied.

"As you wish."

Lind uneasily sat next to Omar, and even the manager looked anxious.

"What I'm about to tell you requires both of your cooperation," Opal said. "I'll be working to completely reform the duchy."

"You, madam?" Lind asked.

"That's right. Because I am a woman, many will not trust me. So it's imperative that I borrow the assistance of you both."

Lind, being utterly astonished, couldn't be blamed for what he'd asked. Among men, it was merely common sense to think women were incapable of managing complex tasks and that they certainly didn't have the knowledge to manage land.

"D-Did His Grace make this decision?" Lind asked, unable to believe it.

Omar awkwardly bit his lip and remained silent, most likely out of guilt for the paperwork that had changed ownership of the duchy. Opal didn't tell Lind any of the details, only giving him the bare minimum of facts.

"Surely you know the duke has been neglecting this land," Opal said. "He currently has his hands full trying to survive in the royal capital. He shall focus on the duchy after his business settles down. Until then, I shall be in charge, and as I've said previously, I will require your cooperation. Can I count on the both of you?"

"O-Of course," Lind replied enthusiastically.

Omar, on the other hand, refused to nod his head.

"Does following my orders dissatisfy you, Omar?" Opal inquired.

“N-No, that’s not it... It really isn’t...” the manager replied. “But how will you go about this reform?”

“I’ll discuss that later. All I know is from books—I need you, Omar, *your* experience, to make up for where I lack.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” Lind asked. He was a butler and had no experience reforming land; he had no idea why he was here at all.

“Lind, I need you to reform the manor,” Opal said. “That may be a bit of exaggeration, but I’m sure there are a few spots that require your assistance. I’d like for you to work with the housekeeper, Debby, to provide me with a list of your concerns along with the budget that you’ll need for improvements. This reform also requires us to befriend others, along with our neighbors. Would you also be able to create a registry of all the powerful people around this region?”

“Most certainly,” Lind said, clearly hiding his delight.

The butler had spent his days in inactivity and so was quite excited to receive a new task at hand. He was eager to spring into action, and after carefully listening to Opal’s orders, he left the study. But just in case, he left the door open a crack. Opal gave a strained smile; she was no longer an unmarried woman and didn’t need such thoughtfulness. She turned back to Omar.

“The main issue is reforming the land,” the duchess said.

“Ah, and *now* you discover the issue at hand,” Omar replied sarcastically.

“Where do you think the issue lies?” Opal asked with a smile. “We may ignore your past indiscretions, if you like. Do tell me anything that has caught your attention.”

Omar turned bright red; it seemed he felt some embarrassment at what he’d done. He cleared his throat and sat up straight.

“The biggest issue is funding,” he said. “This duchy is blessed with excellent weather and rich soil. But despite all the revolutionary advances in agricultural technology, we do not have the funds to buy new tools. And it is because of that that our production does not increase.”

“I see... Anything else?”

“We lack livestock. We have more than enough land to house more animals, but unfortunately, we can barely scrape together enough feed for the animals to last the winter. And so when our animals give birth in the spring, we only keep what we can afford and give away the rest. We keep horses despite their expense because they are desperately needed for farming. But by doing so, we put acquiring cows and goats on the back burner.”

“But we need cows and goats for food.”

“We aren’t allowed such luxuries. Hence, there’s poaching...” Omar gasped and stopped himself, but it was too late. Opal had heard it loud and clear.

“Poaching. I see... Then we must act against that too.”

Opal actually wasn’t completely against poaching—when a lord and a small accompanying group hunted in the forest—but it was illegal. She would leave it up to the lord of the land to determine if anyone had actually committed a crime, as she had done with Omar. But should word spread that poaching was rampant in the duchy, it would imply Hubert’s incompetence. Yet the duke cruelly punishing those just trying to fill their empty stomachs would not do. Opal needed to act quickly and find a loophole in the law. She let out a sigh and returned her focus to Omar.

“Firstly, this reform can’t be done in a year or two,” she said. “This will take several years. But I promise that within five years, I’ll double the production rate of our farming and triple the number of livestock that we have.”

“And what method do you have in mind?” Omar asked. He gulped nervously but quickly regained his composure. “I cannot act unless you tell me.”

Opal gave a mischievous smirk. “Your biggest issue can be solved. If it’s money you need, I’ve got it.”

“The funds we require are certainly exorbitant. Frankly, we require a lot of money. It all depends on the extent of your reform, but within five years? It seems like a tall order...”

“Omar, why do you think the duke married a wanton woman like me? He married me for my money, of course.”

“I don’t think you’re as the rumors say.”

“Oh? Why, thank you.”

Opal maintained her smile and gave a confident response, but on the inside she was quite pleased to hear this. If even Omar was able to change his mind, it was truly a pity that Hubert had his head filled with prejudice and was unwilling to do the same.

“Aside from my dowry, I’ve got money that I can use freely,” Opal said. “And it’s quite a bit, I might add. And on top of that, I have an investor.”

“Someone’s willing to fund us?” Omar asked.

“My father. He believes in the potential of this land and has given me his word.”

“Earl Holloway has? That’s quite promising.”

“Isn’t it? And reforming this duchy is, in truth, not that difficult. The earldom was transformed, after all.”

The earl’s name was very effective; up until this point Omar had been hesitant, but now he eagerly leaned forward, seemingly now on board with Opal’s plan. Opal remained haughty, but she internally mocked herself, knowing that she required her father’s assistance. Before she had gotten married, Opal had found her father dogmatic and disliked him, but now she realized that he was more than that. Now, she knew that it was money that gave birth to more money.

It was only natural that money was required to make a land flourish, and when it started to flourish, more funds would be required to add even more improvements. Her father didn’t monopolize the profits and keep them for himself; he properly rewarded his residents and allowed them to live more lavish lives. Opal had thought that this simply was the way of things, but it was only when she had visited other lands that she’d discovered that it was anything but. *It seems that I’ve been protected by the earldom this whole time.* Her father’s greatest mistake, it seemed, was sheltering Opal: feeding her knowledge without practical experience and selecting the wrong attendants during Opal’s debut. These mistakes could be redeemed.

Perhaps another error he had made was underestimating the stubbornness of

both Opal and Hubert. While he couldn't force the wedded couple to reconcile, he could help them grow and mature. To reform the entire land was a major undertaking, one that both Opal and her husband normally would have done together. Opal would be lying if she said she wasn't scared, but she smiled and suppressed her fears and, instead, relayed to Omar her future plans.

24. The Letter

I've never seen a young man as proud and stubborn as McLeod.

Though he isn't dull, he is quite rigid and set in his ways.

Wearing him down will be no easy feat. It will most certainly be a trial.

I very much understand why you went forward with such forceful measures.

This will no doubt be a struggle, but a promise is a promise.

I shall give him advice such that he can purchase his duchy back in five years' time.

Opal folded up the letter that she had received from her father, returned it into the envelope, and placed it on the table. She opened the other envelope to read what was within.

I had two doctors look at Stella. One was introduced by my friend and the other was introduced by Earl Holloway.

It seems Stella can improve! A new medicine was discovered a few years ago! Mrs. Notham and the rest of the manor are overjoyed by the news. It's all thanks to your advice and support.

If Stella's body agrees with the medicine, she might be able to walk again. Of course, that would require her to regain her stamina and work hard. In any case, you're Stella's savior, and I cannot thank you enough.

It is because of that that I'm thinking of excusing your father's behavior. He was rather arrogant with me and it was clear he didn't know his place. Though perhaps since I am the one seeking his guidance, it is I who should be more respectful of my elders.

Even so, I find him to be a touch insolent. I'm the fifth-generation duke of House McLeod, and the blood of the royal family itself flows through my veins.

Opal stifled her laughs and returned Hubert's letter to the envelope. Both he and her father had jotted down their thoughts without thinking about Opal's position to them both. *Perhaps they're related by blood somehow... They're quite similar.* She envisioned the earl's family tree in her head, and while she wasn't sure, the possibility of a biological relationship wasn't zero. Just then, a knock on the door snapped her out of her thoughts. When she welcomed the visitor, Omar entered the study.

"Welcome back, Omar. How did it go?" Opal asked.

"Very well," the manager replied brightly. "All the farmers will have scythes before the harvest. They'll probably need some time to acquaint themselves with them, since they're so used to sickles, but with two or three days of practice they should be able to wield their scythes without issue. It'll increase our productivity immensely. We should be able to harvest our crops twice as fast."

"Splendid. I'd like to install a thresher too, but we can't change everything all at once. The adjustment would be too steep."

The duchess breathed a sigh of relief at the good news that had come her way. It'd been almost half a year since she'd tricked Hubert into handing the duchy over to her; so far, she was on track to fulfill her previous promise.

To kick off her reform of the duchy, she'd replaced all the sickles that were used to harvest wheat with scythes. She was well aware that the blacksmiths in her duchy couldn't produce all the tools in time and had placed orders to smiths elsewhere. She had then sent Omar to confirm if they were on schedule. She

had additionally increased the number of horses to till the fields and sow the seeds for autumn. While she wasn't able to give every farmer an extra horse, the rate of tilling had increased exponentially.

She'd wanted to install a seeder and thresher, luxuries that the earldom enjoyed, but abrupt changes would cause the farmers to become confused and feel left behind. She'd carefully discussed her steps with Omar and decided to implement changes gradually.

"When I visited the Earldom of Holloway to check up on our orders with the smiths there, I dropped by the manor as well and chatted a bit with Mr. Trevor," Omar said. "The new seeders are apparently very easy to use. He said that the residents of our duchy might be ready to use them in the spring."

"Is that so?" Opal mulled. "Then I shall leave that part to you. And perhaps it's now time for me to return this room to you, Omar."

"Oh no, not yet. I'm not worthy," the manager replied.

"Oh? Make no mistake, I'm planning on working you to the bone," Opal said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Omar chuckled, but then he fell silent, pondering over her words. He turned to her solemnly. "Then shall we make a bet for your chair over a game of cards? A little gamble, so to speak."

"Of course. I don't mind."

Omar was shocked by the duchess's swift reply. He gave a wry smile, his expression troubled.

"I'm very grateful to you, madam, and I'm deeply indebted to Mr. Trevor and Lind as well," he said. "For what I've done, I should have been thrown into prison and lashed before getting shipped off as a criminal to do heavy labor somewhere. I tricked the duke; even if I were sentenced to have my hand cut off, I would have no room for complaint. And even if my embezzlement hadn't been uncovered, I've no doubt that LeBeau would've forced me to suffer a grislier fate. For all my suffering, I'd only have myself to blame. But you, madam, not only repaid my debts but also continued to keep me around as manager. You even join Lind and the rest of the servants at night for a few

rounds of card games because of my bad habits... I truly cannot thank you enough. I can't find the right words."

"Then you don't need to say a thing," Opal replied jokingly. "Show me your gratitude through your actions."

Omar's words warmed Opal's heart, but she didn't want to let it show. As for Omar, he took Opal's joke seriously and returned a solemn nod. While the nightly card games were a means to prevent Omar from falling back into his bad habits, they were also a way for Opal to forget about her loneliness. Lind and Debby were very kind to her, but in this unknown place she still felt isolated, and at night, her anxiety and nerves only grew. A few housework duties or recordkeeping responsibilities were gambled in lieu of money; at first, Omar had been restless, fighting the urge to gamble large amounts of money, but he'd gradually lost interest in doing so. Of course, he still wasn't completely worthy of the duchess's trust, and the manager knew that very well. Hence, he often gave her words of gratitude.

"You had me work in the earldom under Mr. Trevor so that I could learn the farming techniques there, correct?" he asked.

"Omar, you're overestimating me," Opal quickly corrected him. "The real reason was that at the time, I didn't want you to know my secret."

The duchess had had no intention of teaching Omar such things in the beginning, but as Omar had said, she *had* asked Trevor to be in charge midway. But it was all in her own self-interest; it was quicker to rehire a man who was familiar with the land instead of going through the painstaking process of hiring an entirely new manager. While Opal had not broken any laws, she'd basically tricked Hubert and stolen his assets; she wanted to keep a close eye on the people that knew her secret.

Opal wasn't a saint—she wasn't so noble as to have Omar and the rest of the duchy residents revere her so. In truth, she was filled with anxiety, and every now and then, as though a dark fog loomed over her, she couldn't see the future. Occasionally she was tempted to return to the earldom and to everyone there, but she held herself back—she knew they would spoil her to bits.

But she had no one by her side in the duchy and no one to support her when

she was down. This lonely reality terrified her, and she couldn't bring herself to return to the earldom and thus confirm that life was such. Opal masked her moment of weakness and discussed a few plans with Omar before he left. Once she was alone in her study, she let out a deep sigh. She placed Hubert's letter into a drawer. The duchess would need to write a response to her father and Hubert soon, but she couldn't bring herself to do so just yet.

As she rummaged through her drawer, she froze upon finding a certain letter—one from Claude's mother, the baroness. A while after she moved to this manor, she'd written a letter to Claude about how she'd stolen Hubert's land; it had been written like a confession, and she had regretted writing it soon after she'd sent it off.

She had just wanted someone to vent to, but now she believed that even her childhood friend would be exasperated with her antics. She'd anxiously waited for a response, but the letter she'd received was one from his mother instead. In it she'd written that her son had stated a desire to travel the world and thus had left home. Not once had he sent a letter or any sort of response back to his family. The baroness was deathly worried about her son and had promised to send over Opal's letter once she knew where he was. There hadn't been a peep since.

Opal had heard that the neighboring kingdom of Taisei across the sea was embroiled in a fight over the throne. Recently, this internal strife had escalated to the use of military force, and a civil war had broken out. Opal was often kept up at night, worried sick at the possibility that Claude might be in Taisei. *If only I knew about this... I should've asked him to take me with him.* She quickly shook her head free of these foolish thoughts. If she'd done so, she'd have been causing trouble of unimaginable proportions to Claude, the baroness, her father, and Hubert. *If only I had acted earlier and without care for my social status...*

Opal stifled a laugh. She didn't even know how Claude felt about her. She knew he treated her dearly, but that might only be as a man treats his younger sister. Even so, if she had voiced her wishes to him, she was sure that he would've done anything to sneak her out of her situation. She closed her drawer, stood up, and gazed out the window. In the end, it was because she

had her fair share of regrets that she was determined to transform this vast duchy. This alone gave her strength and courage. *Then maybe my choices until now weren't a mistake. Maybe this was for the best.*

She thought back to the smiles of Omar, Lind, Debby, the rest of the servants of the manor, and the ones who patrolled the duchy. At the same time, she also thought back to how awkwardly Claude had smiled the last time they had met.

Please be safe, Claude. I hope that you're well. Opal placed a hand over her chest, closed her eyes, and prayed. When she opened her eyes once more, she returned to her usual confident demeanor and sat in front of her desk to write replies to her father and Hubert.

25. Results

It had been three years since Opal had moved to the duchy. The duchess placed her cards on the table and sighed.

“I lost. I can’t beat that hand,” she muttered.

“So it seems,” Omar replied. “Then you shall be the recordkeeper for this month, madam. I’m counting on you.”

“I can’t believe this. Please remind me why I pay you all such high salaries.”

“To motivate us servants, I’d imagine.”

“Is that so? Yet you seemed not to hold back at all during this game.”

“One must never hold back in a match.”

Opal let out a groan, and she wasn’t sure if Omar was consoling her or gloating about his win as he gathered the cards on the table. These games had become routine since she’d arrived at this manor, and the tradition had only continued. Omar’s addiction had died down, and the occasional card games seemed to bring him great joy instead. He was an excellent manager, and if he put his mind to it, he was good at his job. He was also gradually repaying Opal for his debts. She had given his room back long ago.

“Oh? It sounds like someone has arrived,” Omar said.

“Is it a letter, perhaps?” Opal wondered.

After a game of cards to break up the day’s work, she had been ready to return to her duties until the clattering of a carriage alerted her to a visitor. The sound of the wheels implied that it was a delivery carriage or something of the sort. Food was often delivered through the back entrance, and so, Opal had assumed that a mailman had arrived, since it was the front entrance that was being used. She decided to wait in the study.

Opal had hardly left the duchy the past three years. She didn’t attend any events when the social season had started, leading to more rumors about her.

Since Hubert's struggles to manage his lands were well-known, it was widely speculated that his marriage to Opal was purely for her money. Some rumored that the once wanton duchess was now trapped within the duchy, while others still theorized that the duke had been deceived by Opal and prevented her from leaving the duchy out of jealousy. *Either way, it sounds like I'm being trapped here.*

When she heard the rumors, Opal only laughed, completely unbothered by them. In truth, Hubert had invited her to the royal capital numerous times during the social season, and her friends had also invited her to visit them during the rest of the year. The duchess declined them all. It wasn't that she couldn't step away from the duchy over the past three years. Quite the opposite—Opal's wealth had secured funding for maintaining the place, and Omar's excellent management made the land run like a well-oiled machine. Every development progressed smoothly.

The duchy was blessed with good weather, and Opal could regain her investment much sooner than she anticipated. She found socializing to be nothing short of troublesome, and she didn't care how she was viewed as a duchess. But even still she started to see Hubert in a new light and was impressed by what he'd done.

In a surprising turn of events, Hubert had managed to repurchase the manor in the royal capital and thirty percent of the adjoining land within three years. He had bought them back from Opal. Needless to say, she was greatly relieved to learn that she no longer had to worry much about him. In fact, it had taken only a year for Hubert to regain control of the manor and a scrap of the land; it was his first purchase. When Opal had returned to the royal capital for the first time in a while to sign the rights of the place back to him, she had been greeted very warmly and had been provided with a lavish room fit for a mistress.

"Remember when I said that I wanted Stella to move to an area with cleaner air?" Hubert had asked. "There was a small plot of land with a manor up for sale near the royal capital. It's near a farming area, but I purchased it and had Stella and Mrs. Notham move there. They took Romito, Beth, and a few other servants that they were familiar with."

"I see..." Opal had replied.

“I cannot thank you enough. If you hadn’t recommended a different doctor to Stella, she would’ve been... No, in any case, I’m just so glad that we found the right medicine for her. Thank you so much, Opal.”

“She’s important to you, isn’t she, Your Grace? I only did what was expected of me.”

Hubert had only repeated what he’d said in his letter, clearly implying how important that little angel was to him. Dr. Harrison, their primary physician, simply hadn’t known about this new medicine and had been using outdated methods to provide medicine at exorbitant prices. It was later uncovered how Dr. Harrison had actually tended to the poor for free—it was only to the rich that he had charged exorbitant fees. And of course, he hadn’t known a thing about Hubert’s financial troubles.

Hubert had been benevolent upon this discovery. He had been indebted to Dr. Harrison since his youth, after all, and while the doctor’s methods were questionable, his generosity toward the poor was well received. The physician had simply been fired from his post and hadn’t been forced to pay for what he’d done.

Opal hadn’t said a word about the series of events concerning Stella, but she found herself a bit perplexed when Hubert became warmer and kinder with every visit the duchess had made to the royal capital. Thanks to the new butler, Bart, taking charge of the manor, and Romito and Beth being sent away, the attitude of the servants had improved dramatically. But even with these changes Opal had remained uncomfortable whenever she came to the manor and never stayed unless it was absolutely required that she do so, keeping an entirely fake smile plastered on her face and leaving for the duchy as soon as possible. She had been honestly quite happy that Hubert was able to regularly purchase land back from her, requiring her to make frequent visits to the royal capital. Even Earl Holloway had been rather shocked.

The earl had initially been ready to give up on the duke, but the earl’s recent letters showed his begrudging acceptance of Hubert’s abilities. The duke’s initial letters to Opal had been filled with arrogance and annoyance, but still he had worked very hard to fulfill his pledge to her. Not only did he no longer require Opal’s financial assistance, but he had repaid the year’s worth of aid that she

had given him.

Rumors about Hubert's successful investments had spread throughout the nobility, increasing his popularity with the ladies. The noblewomen were desperately trying to find a way to get close to him; he'd join societal occasions every now and then but without his wife or any other lady. He had often mingled with the men to discuss business. Furthermore, while the duke had never been seen with his wife, he had gotten friendly with her father, often discussing matters at nightly meetings or at a gentlemen's club. This had only spurred the rumors even more.

As Opal heard Lind greet the visitor at the door, she was in a bit of a daze, but Omar paid no heed and quickly got to work. The land that Hubert had purchased was being managed by Omar, who would occasionally make visits to the royal capital and give advice on how to manage certain areas. There was nothing to worry about. At this rate, Hubert might be on track to purchase half of his land back by the end of the year.

So he was able to do it if he tried. He just didn't, and neglected his duties because everyone had spoiled him. Naturally, luck was also on Hubert's side. The war within Taisei that had occurred three years ago had died down in six months.

The kingdom now required supplies to replenish what they'd lost, leading to Socille's healthy economy. *It's a little infuriating to know that the economy is doing well because of the war, but apparently their conflict was mostly confined to their royal palace, and the citizens themselves didn't suffer much loss. The fact that the king's younger brother managed to claim the throne with very little casualties is a victory in and of itself.*

Taisei had been actually a kingdom with a wealth of resources and had been on the cutting edge of technology. Unfortunately, much of that had been lost with this war, coupled with the plague that had occurred years ago. The new king—the former king's younger brother—had been trying his hardest to rebuild what had been lost.

Her mind was filled with thoughts of Taisei when Lind knocked on her door. He had brought a tray with a letter nestled inside.

“I’ve got a letter for you, madam,” he said.

“Thank you,” Opal replied.

As she’d thought, the carriage that she’d heard earlier had been a mailman. She took the letter, flipped it over to check the sender, and immediately was disappointed. Neither Omar nor Lind said a word. Everyone in the manor knew that Opal had been eagerly awaiting a letter from a certain someone for the past three years. While the servants had no idea who, they never brought the question up. Omar and the rest of the servants had come to revere and like Opal so much that they didn’t want to pry in her personal affairs and simply wished for her happiness.

“Oh dear...” Opal said upon scanning the letter.

As the sender had been Hubert, she’d assumed that he had wanted to purchase more of her land, but her predictions had been wrong.

“Is something the matter?” Lind asked with worry. He knew who the sender was.

Omar froze in place, worried for the duchess, and received a glance from Lind to confirm that the sender had been Hubert. While Lind and Omar had been a bit awkward around each other at first, their trust and friendship had been rebuilt once more. Lind had blamed himself for failing to recognize Omar’s misdeeds after the passing of the late duke and his wife. Omar had occasionally left the duchy under the guise of managing the land, and the butler had assumed that the major drought had caused much work. Only when Opal arrived and uncovered the truth had Lind understood what had actually occurred.

When Omar had returned as the manager, Lind was infuriated, but as he saw Omar diligently work away and excellently do as he’d been told, the anger had subsided.

“His Grace...will visit this manor soon,” Opal muttered grimly.

“It can’t be,” Lind murmured.

The duchess whirled to face her butler in shock; he was normally calm and composed, so his dismay came as a surprise to her. Omar opened his mouth to

explain.

“His Grace...hasn’t visited our land for the past seventeen years,” he said. “He hasn’t been here ever since the previous duke and duchess, his parents, passed away. When Sir Notham passed away in this land, His Grace seemed to despise this place. It was like he thought that this duchy was haunted in some way. So we’re quite shocked...”

His face turned red as he struggled to continue; he’d only been able to embezzle money precisely because Hubert hadn’t visited the duchy since he became an adult.

“Um... When the previous duke was killed in the accident, His Grace was only twelve,” Lind added. “It took us two days to finally find him in the carriage, and he spent that time all alone, trapped with the corpses of his parents.”

“How awful,” Opal said, looking pale.

She’d indeed heard about the death of Hubert’s parents and how he refused to visit this place, but she had never imagined that he’d gone through such a traumatic experience. She recalled the time when she’d called her husband irresponsible without understanding his reasons.

“B-But the fact that His Grace is planning on visiting this land may mean that he’s trying to move past it,” Lind hastily added. He was worried after seeing how shocked Opal looked. “We must do our best to help His Grace forget his terrifying past.”

“You’re right,” Opal said with a smile. “I’ll leave the preparations to you. I must tell Debby about it too.”

She left the study and headed for Debby, the housekeeper. As she did so, she thought about young Hubert and bitterly regretted not trying to learn more about his tragic past.

26. Investment

The day of Hubert's visit approached, and though the manor had already been prepared for him, everyone had been bustling around since the morning. Only Omar knew that most of the duchy belonged to Opal, and so everyone was simply excited to meet their lord for the first time in seventeen years. Only Opal was holed up in her room, staring outside in a daze.

Why the change of heart? What triggered him to come here? Did he finally make enough money to buy this manor too? Opal's impression of Hubert had changed considerably since she'd learned about his traumatic two-day experience. It was no wonder that everyone was overly protective of him. If he'd started living with Mrs. Notham and Stella after the passing of his parents, it was no wonder that the angel was so precious to him.

It was incredibly painful and awful to lose someone so dear. When Opal had lost her mother, she was filled with grief. She had only been able to maintain her calm and reminisce about her past because of the people who had supported her. Yet one of her pillars of support during that time—Claude—was nowhere to be seen. Three years had passed since that letter from his mother, and she hadn't the faintest idea where he was.

She had written a few letters to the manor of the earldom in search of clues, but Alton had stated that he knew nothing and was equally worried. She didn't care if she could never see her childhood friend again; she didn't mind if that letter had made him hate her. All she wanted was for him to be alive and doing well. She wasn't sure if she still loved him, but he was undoubtedly someone very important to her.

Perhaps His Grace feels the same way about Stella...

When Hubert's investments had gone well, he'd prioritized using his profits to buy a new home for Stella; he had bought her a home before even buying back the manor. Indeed, the lady must've been someone truly irreplaceable to him.

Even if they couldn't convey their thoughts, if Stella could be just a bit

happier, it might lead to Hubert's happiness as well. Opal let out a loud sigh as she spotted a lavish carriage sporting the family crest of the duke roll up to the manor. She headed for the entrance to greet him.

"It has been a while, Your Grace," she said. "How was your trip here?"

"I-It really has been a while, Opal," Hubert replied. "I was luckily blessed with great weather."

"That's very good to hear." She calmly smiled and welcomed him warmly.

She had already carefully spoken with the rest of the servants beforehand to ensure that this visit would help Hubert forget his traumatic past as much as possible. Many were more elated than Opal to meet their lord for the first time in over a decade. The duchess immediately stepped back for Lind and Debby to step forward. The entire manor rejoiced at this seventeen-year reunion, and Lind and Hubert exchanged a firm handshake. Seeing everyone's smiling face made Opal feel happy as well—so much so, in fact, that she felt tempted to return to the manor of the earldom. It'd been a while for her too.

It seemed like Hubert had fully moved on from his traumatic past. That night, the chef gave it his all to line the table with the most extravagant feast he could muster, and for practically the first time, Opal and Hubert partook in a meal joyfully.

However, these times came to an end the following day. Hubert had divulged his plans to Opal in the study, causing the duchess to freeze in a stupor. Her vision started to blur. While incapacitated so, she tried her best to ask for more details.

"Your Grace, could you kindly repeat what you just said?" she asked.

"As I said, I purchased a plot of land in Manthest," Hubert replied. "It's a huge oversight that no one is doing the same."

"And...*where* did you obtain the funds to do so? It hasn't been long since you purchased some land from me, I believe..."

"Don't worry about that. The land might seem barren, but I know for certain there are mines there. There's even a railroad constructed midway, and if we finish building it to the city, we can make plenty of money."

“The money! I ask again: *where* did you get the funds to buy that land? If memory serves, that place is very expensive! How in the world did you manage to find the money to purchase it?”

Hubert simply replied with comments that were well-known in investment circles, and Opal was unable to hide irritation at his blatant refusal to tell her about the money.

“I used the money I had with me and set up the manor and land in the royal capital as collateral, of course,” the duke replied.

“Your Grace... You know *why* that land isn’t developed, don’t you?” Opal inquired. “Indeed, that plot of land has mines that could generate wealth, but carrying out any mined ores would require an immense amount of money and technology. Many people before you have tried to mine that land and gone bankrupt from it. The rough terrain is filled with steep valleys and ravines and so building a railroad there would be extremely difficult. Our kingdom currently doesn’t have the technology to build through the place! And even if it did, the costs would be through the roof! How in the world will you fund it? Even if you were able to, it would take a very, *very* long time to turn a profit.”

Had civil war not erupted in Taisei, Manthest might have developed more smoothly. The kingdom’s technology and engineers would’ve surely been able to construct a railroad through the valleys. However, the plan had ultimately been aborted and the land had been left untouched for three years. It was now such a risky investment that many investors couldn’t bring themselves to take the plunge.

Even Opal’s father was hesitant to do so, determining that it simply wasn’t worth the funds and resources.

“I’m planning on bringing in investors to develop the place,” Hubert reasoned. “And I require your help.”

“What did my father say?” Opal asked.

Hubert’s face turned slightly red, telling her all she needed to know. “The earl...said that he’d consider it when a trusted engineer is secured. Since he couldn’t single-handedly fund the project, he stated that I’d require a few more investors on board. But if the earl offers his money, everyone else will happily

follow suit. So, there's nothing to worry about."

There's everything to worry about. Whatever is he talking about? Securing an excellent engineer was currently almost impossible. With the plague and internal strife in Taisei, their numbers had dwindled considerably. And under the new king, any skilled engineer wanting to leave Taisei would find it extremely difficult. It was then that Opal realized something critical—Hubert's current assets and capital were nowhere near the purchasing price of Manthest, the mountain of treasure.

"Your Grace, did you truly only use your assets to purchase Manthest?" Opal inquired. "Or did you happen to purchase only a portion of the land?"

"I...used the entire duchy as collateral," Hubert admitted.

"The entire...duchy?"

It took Opal some time to process his words. In truth, she didn't *want* to understand what he was saying.

"You don't mean... You don't mean to say that even this manor and the land under my name are part of this collateral?" Opal asked.

"You stole it all from me," Hubert insisted. "And if this goes well, you'll be more than satisfied with the profits. Is that not good enough?"

"This is a crime! You can't use what's mine as collateral without my express permission!"

"The crime is what you did to *me*!"

"Absolutely not! These are two different matters entirely!"

"As long as you remain silent, this won't be an issue!"

"How could you...?"

Hubert's firm words caused Opal to feel dizzy once more. The thing was, she had believed that these three years had changed Hubert—that his arrival in this manor was proof that he had finally moved on from his past. But it was clear that while Hubert's talent for investing had bloomed under the instruction of the earl, his arrogance was as plain to see as ever. Even geniuses felt the sting of failure; Opal had witnessed her father occasionally fail in his investments.

However, he was still able to ultimately come out on top because he always accounted for the worst-case scenario.

Opal, too, had made a critical error in the past, causing her reputation to plummet. And it was because of that painful experience that in all her planning, even if she aimed for the best possible outcome, she always had a backup plan ready to implement.

“Your Grace, if...if this investment fails, what will you do?” Opal asked.

“I don’t plan on it failing, but if it should, I’ll live with Stella in the land outside of the capital,” the duke said. “I’ll use the funds that I’ve given to Stella and begin my investments once more to build up money again.”

“Is that so?”

Hubert peered into Opal’s eyes as though he hoped to find his answer there. While Opal had indeed tricked the duke out of his land, to society at large the land was still considered to be under the duke’s ownership. He likely had been able to offer it as collateral even without the proper documents; the title of Duke McLeod held that much value. However, Opal didn’t care about that. She only cared about the land and protecting the citizens within it. It was with a deep sigh that she slowly stood up and left the study, Hubert and all.

27. A Plan

From her bedroom window, Opal watched Hubert and Omar leave on an open carriage. She'd spent the entire night thinking about a plan and had caught just a few winks of sleep in the early hours of dawn.

She'd awoken upon hearing the sound of the two men departing. *His Grace did mention last night that he wanted to tour the duchy...*

Her mind was still in a daze. For the past three years, thanks to Omar's management skills and Opal's generous funding, the duchy had been able to regain its former lush glory. She had just recently regained enough money to cover all that she had spent on the land. But the duchess cared not for profit; she had grown fond, rather, of the land and its residents. The people here were all kind, and not once had they expressed their ire at the years of neglect they'd experienced. Instead, they'd expressed their delight in how easy their lives had become and respected Opal very much.

And yet, she might now need to let go of this land entirely.

She knew that she'd eventually hand it all to Hubert one day, but she had never thought that she'd need to use the land to pay off a debt. Opal had thought that she'd planned for every contingency, yet it seemed that she was still naive. The duchess couldn't give up here, though. That evening, she discussed returning to the royal capital over dinner.

Hubert furrowed his brow. "I finally returned to the duchy. If you return to the capital now, what will people say?"

"You don't have to worry about that," Opal assured him. "There are already rumors going around that our marriage isn't going well, Your Grace. What we should prioritize is how happy the residents of the duchy are to see you return. Please stay here as long as you can and watch over this place, Your Grace. I shall go to my father and request him to invest some money into Manthest."

"I see. I'm sorry. I..." Hubert started awkwardly before trailing off.

Opal was a bit surprised to hear Hubert apologize. “Your Grace?”

“Um, I said too much yesterday. It’s because I’m able to do all this, but it seems I’ve reverted to my arrogant ways. I apologize for that.”

“It was my fault for being so cheeky as well. I’m sorry about that.”

“You have no reason to apologize. But, er...be careful on your trip home.”

“Thank you.”

Indeed, Opal had stolen the land from the duke—Hubert wasn’t totally wrong with his claims. If he’d already used the land as collateral to gain funds to invest in a new plot of land, Opal had only one thing to do. She decided to put all her efforts into ensuring Manthest was successfully developed.

The Hubert of the past would’ve never apologized; perhaps the past three years hadn’t been totally useless after all. The two spent the rest of their evening at an enjoyable dinner, and Opal returned to her room to prepare for her trip to the royal capital.

The next morning, she departed on her personal carriage. It was a smooth trip, luckily, and she arrived in the royal capital within five days. Unfortunately, her father was out of the city for work and would return in two days’ time. She’d sent a letter before she departed, but it was clear it hadn’t arrived in time. It was with disappointment that Opal spent the next two days in the earl’s manor, lovingly welcomed by all the servants.

When her father returned, she asked the butler to schedule a meeting. Since she was the one asking for a favor, she couldn’t afford to be bold. On top of that, she had no idea how her father would react to the news. Though she had been his daughter for the past twenty-three years, her father was as opaque to her as ever. She had no idea what went on in his head.

The butler returned, telling her that a meeting could be arranged tomorrow afternoon. Opal tried her best to think of convincing arguments as she spent another sleepless night. *Why can’t I sleep when I have to?* Her father was a formidable foe, and she needed to be well rested to use her brain to her full capacity. She couldn’t argue with him while being sleep deprived.

In the end a good night’s sleep eluded her, and she was only able to doze off

occasionally throughout the night. By the time she woke just before the start of the afternoon, she still didn't feel fully recharged. But she needed to wake herself up, and so she selfishly asked for a bath to be drawn for her. She hoped a quick soak would wake her up, and upon feeling quite refreshed indeed, she ate well.

All right! Let's do this! As the meeting time arrived, she entered the study in high spirits but was immediately shot down; upon requesting for her father to invest in Manthest, she was immediately denied. "It's true that I've got money," the earl said. "But I'm not one to throw it away in the gutters."

"Your money won't go to waste," Opal insisted. "Treasure lies within Manthest."

"You may be able to mine it, but if you're unable to carry out the ores, the place is nothing but a storage facility. Surely, you know that, Opal."

"All we need is an engineer, one skilled enough to build a bridge or path between those ravines that can support a freight car. Then we can mine all we'd like."

"But this engineer doesn't exist within our kingdom. Even Taisei won't have anyone that excellent. Trying to develop Manthest at this stage is rather premature. But I see that McLeod completely ignored my warnings. I haven't the faintest clue why he's so impatient. It's baffling, really. While you're alive, the duchy won't belong to anyone else, so what's the rush?"

Only then did Opal realize this. Indeed, things had been going smoothly, and it was odd for Hubert to take this gamble and bet it all. Investing was a gamble, but if one weighed the risks carefully enough they could successfully come out with a profit, more often than not. And Hubert undoubtedly had the talent to weigh his risks. *I was so focused on gathering money that that thought hadn't crossed my mind...* As her father's voice reached her ears, she snapped back to reality. He had been peering at her as though he were trying to read her mind.

"U-Um, but if the time came, the land could be developed, correct?" the duchess hastily asked. "If that's the case, as long as we can pay back the money we borrow, we can surely manage the land..."

"Stop it, Opal," the earl said. "Where are you going to get those funds? You're

not planning on using your assets, are you?”

“But I’ve used them until now for the duchy.”

“I wasn’t against that because I knew we could recoup our money—it was a short-term investment. Believe me, I’ve also considered purchasing Manthest in the past. It was priced cheaply because of how difficult it would be to develop, and with my wealth, I could buy it without asking for a loan. But it’d take at least five years just for the construction technology to improve in our kingdom. It’d take at least another five years to build a railroad. In other words, it’d take at least a decade for the nonperforming asset to turn into a performing one. Only then can you finally hope to rake in money. Naturally, the future cannot be predicted, but at the current rate, even if every step goes smoothly, it’ll take at least twenty years for the land to finally turn a profit.”

“Twenty years?”

“To put it bluntly, even if everything went well and I could start recouping my investment, I’m not sure if I’d be alive by then. I’m not against leaving the two of you my wealth, but quite simply I would like to see the project come to fruition with my own eyes. That’s how investors are. And the ones with enough wealth to purchase and develop that land are all old. Opal, I’m offering you my kindness here. You’d suffer a great loss, but I strongly suggest you tell McLeod to quickly sell his plot of Manthest land.”

The earl sighed as he saw his daughter fall silent. If Hubert hadn’t lent an ear to the earl, he certainly wouldn’t listen to Opal either. The earl had always regretted going forward with this marriage, realizing all too late that their union was a mistake. But for his daughter, he was willing to lend her a hand and help the duke with his thoughtless endeavor. There was one thing he needed to confirm before that.

“It matters not how wealthy McLeod becomes if you don’t have an heir to inherit the money,” the earl said. “If you aren’t planning on fulfilling your greatest duty as a duchess, I suggest you two divorce soon. What’s McLeod’s plan in regards to a child?”

“I haven’t the faintest clue,” Opal confessed. “Until now, I have told him numerous times that I’m willing to divorce him if he wishes to marry someone

else, and continue to sell him back his land. But he doesn't seem to have anyone in mind. If rank was an issue, I have also said that I was willing to claim his illegitimate child with another woman as my own. This might be a bit tough, but the child's biological mother could certainly become the nanny."

"I see... McLeod aside, I understand your thoughts very well." He stared straight at his daughter, and Opal desperately tried her best to maintain her firm composure under his piercing gaze. "In any case, should McLeod go bankrupt, that shall be his fault, and no one else's. All you will lose is that duchy, one that only a flimsy piece of paper states you are the owner of. You don't need to do anything more. Just wait and see."

"Then may I make one last request?"

"And what might that be?"

"If his plan ends in failure, and the profits from the duchy aren't enough to pay off his loans, the land will be up for sale. I'm planning on buying the land back with my money, but if it's not enough, will you help me purchase it?"

"It's a foolish request, but it's far wiser than investing in Manthest. Very well, I shall give you my word."

"Thank you!"

Opal might not have been able to receive funding for Hubert's project, but she had been able to avoid the worst possible scenario. She left the study with a sigh of relief. As her father said, this was Hubert's idea—his responsibility and, thus, his consequences. Opal had nothing to worry about. Her residents' futures were also secured. *I'm...so exhausted.*

It had been three years since her wedding, and six since that fateful incident—Opal had constantly put on a strong front. All the fatigue she had accumulated up until this point started to show; she could barely stagger back to her room. The moment she entered the safety of her chambers, a wave of dizziness swept over her, and she quickly sat on a chair.

For the next twenty days, she found herself unable to leave her bed.

28. A Benefactor

“Opal, are you sure you can remain standing?” Hubert asked.

“I’m good as new, Your Grace,” Opal replied. “I’m simply staying here out of precaution for my health, but I plan on returning to the manor soon. I apologize for troubling you and having you visit me all the way here.”

“But of course...”

Opal had been horribly sick from the flu. For ten days, she had been struck with a fever. Her exhaustion had worked against her, decreasing her strength and her immune system, making it even more difficult for her to recover. Even when she had finally been able to leave her bed, the servants of the manor had been very worried, and she had ended up staying at the earl’s manor for close to a month. Hubert had heard the bad news via a letter from the earl, and all the while he’d sent letters of well wishes and flowers while she’d been ill. She’d declined to meet him, fearing that the flu was contagious.

“I heard that you’ve gotten better, so I’ve come to meet you,” Hubert said. “And I’ve brought excellent news with me.”

“Thank you,” Opal replied. “And what is this excellent news?”

Hubert smiled and handed her a bouquet of flowers. The last time he had smiled this warmly was when he’d showed his gratitude in regards to Stella. Opal received the flowers with a not insignificant weight of trouble in her heart.

“An investor appeared!” he cried.

“For the Manthest project?” Opal inquired.

“That’s right. For the past month, I’ve been visiting Taisei.”

“You were, Your Grace?”

“It’s not like I made this decision without any thought. I went to the kingdom in hopes of directly negotiating for an engineer to come to our land. The earl introduced me to a man called Marquis Roussel. The marquis has helped me

quite a bit, and thanks to that, I was even able to meet with His Majesty. What's more, the marquis convinced His Majesty, and the king agreed to send an engineer over to our kingdom! In addition, the marquis agreed to invest in my project!"

"That's...wonderful."

"It really is! I'm sorry for making you worry, Opal. Your father also agreed to invest, and I'm sure things will go smoothly!"

Opal felt a weight lifted from her shoulders upon hearing this unexpected news. At the same time, she was curious as to why Hubert was acting so aggressively. Was he so impatient that he personally needed to go to the neighboring kingdom? But she didn't vocalize her thoughts and listened intently to Hubert's story.

The duke was in high spirits, and as he spoke about the future, he was filled with determination. Obviously, profits couldn't be made right off the bat, but with Taisei's technology, the plan would progress much faster than the earl had initially projected. This also meant that profits could be made a lot sooner as well.

It wasn't just the mine that could reap profits. If a railway was to be built, that would attract both people and profit; a city would be born. When the railroad was complete, the miners and other people would gather, developing the city further. Manthest was close to Taisei, making it an ideal place to trade with the neighboring kingdom, and that was most likely why Marquis Roussel was so willing to help Hubert. Taisei, which had finally had its internal strife laid to rest, would need to rebuild its relationships with other kingdoms. Three years ago, the marquis—a former earl—had spent quite a bit of money and supplies to support the new king, and he was said to have been greatly involved in assuring the king's victory.

His efforts had been rewarded, and he had been bestowed with the rank of marquis. He was still greatly involved in restoring the kingdom, and it was rumored that he might eventually be made into a duke. Fortunately, Marquis Roussel was a friend of Opal's father. For the past month, Hubert had searched for investors in Socille, but no one had offered him a hand upon learning that

even Earl Holloway, his father-in-law, was unwilling to make an investment.

But the Taisei marquis, having received a letter of introduction from Earl Holloway, hadn't missed the opportunity that Manthest had to offer and decided to take a gamble on the land's potential. With his support, the earl finally came on board, and Hubert guessed that many investors would now pour in.

"Do you require more investors even after securing Marquis Roussel and my father's funding?" Opal asked.

"To be precise, the marquis financed the money for the land with a very low interest rate," Hubert replied. "He said that he didn't mind if I paid back only the interest for now. And his rates are so generous that the land I possess could cover it all. The earl, on the other hand, has agreed to fund a majority of the development—but not all."

"It sounds almost too good to be true. Is the marquis a trustworthy man?"

"You've asked a perfectly reasonable question. I had the earl check the contract, and he also said that it wasn't a problem. I just need to sign it."

"I see... In that case, I shall fund the rest of the development. That was our initial promise, wasn't it?"

Plans were progressing a little *too* smoothly, and Opal was worried that Hubert was being tricked again. But if her father had greenlit the contract, then she had nothing to worry about. Though Opal was relieved and offered to be an investor herself, Hubert awkwardly shook his head in reply.

"Could you forget about all that?" he asked. "I was in the wrong back then. The Manthest land was so cheap that I panicked, and I didn't want anyone else to buy it. I used your land as collateral without your permission and said horrible things to you. I'll immediately annul the part of the contract that uses your land."

"Your Grace, that aside, I genuinely want to invest in this project," Opal insisted. "You'll be the one choosing the investors, so if you insist that I cannot offer my aid, I shall defer to your wishes."

"Choose? I'll welcome you with open arms. I know this is odd for me to say,

but I don't want you to force yourself. Manthest may be a mountain of money, but there are no guarantees that this plan will succeed."

"Thank you for your warning. But I believe I shall be fine. As you might know, I'm rather wealthy."

Opal smiled, relieved that Hubert had regained his cool. He still had numerous obstacles in his way, but she was sure that he could overcome them. Opal was finally able to trust him, and as she watched him leave the earl's manor, her mind was at peace.

She was overwhelmed with paperwork and was unable to return to the duchy for a good while. However, the more she spent time in the royal capital living in the earl's manor instead of the duke's, the more rumors began to swirl about. The most popular rumor was that the two were finally planning a divorce. Opal refused to stay at the duke's manor, but Hubert had frequented the earl's residence, implying that they needed to fill out the paperwork to finalize the divorce. It also became common news that Hubert was sheltering his mistress in a residence just outside of the capital. Stella was actually his distant relative, but as she was of age, there was no end to the gossip. At first, Hubert had angrily denied those rumors, but he'd already given up on doing so. To Opal's surprise, he came to apologize to her instead.

"I'm simply harboring my relative and her mother, who have no one else to rely on, but society loves to gossip," Hubert had said. "I suppose that's how the nobility see me. Then it's only natural that you questioned me when we first married, and I overreacted to your query. I'd been horrible enough to you and yet... I'm sorry, Opal."

"I was also rather rude when I posed my question," Opal had replied. "Please don't be so bothered."

She only had a fleeting memory of her time at the duke's manor, when she'd first arrived after their marriage. The duke must've finally understood how cruel society was. Stella's condition had improved leaps and bounds thanks to the new medicine, and the doctor recommended her to start pushing herself to walk. Unfortunately, her rehabilitation underwent frequent pauses, as Stella often broke out into crying fits over fears of not being able to walk.

She'd received a few marriage proposals, and though Mrs. Notham was on board with them, Stella stubbornly refused every suitor. It was tough for her to get married. Perhaps it was only natural that she would fear marrying a stranger, and it was likely that her suitors were hoping to form a connection with Duke McLeod through her and assumed that his mistress was as good an opening as any to worm their way into the duke's inner circle. *Honestly, it's probably best if His Grace marries Stella, but if he needs an heir...*

The lack of an heir was indeed a cause of worry for Opal. She knew that love would never blossom between her and Hubert, and she had no idea what was on his mind. A knock on the door echoed throughout the room, and Opal allowed the person to enter. The butler arrived with a tray of multiple letters. While the social season was over, the people remaining in the royal capital sent her invitations to parties every day. However, there were other letters among the mix.

"My lady, this letter has been forwarded from the duchy," the butler said.

"Thank you," Opal replied.

She quickly received the letter and turned it around to check the sender, worried that something might have occurred in the duchy. The letter had been sent by Lind. The butler of the earl's manor placed the rest of the letters on the desk as usual and quietly left the room. Opal swiftly opened Lind's letter and swallowed nervously. Inside was a sealed letter, sent by a certain baroness—Claude's mother. The duchess hastily undid the seal and scanned the contents before sinking to the ground. Claude was safe and sound. After many long years, the baroness had written a letter to deliver the good news—she'd finally received a letter from Claude, stating that he was all right.

He had apparently been wandering around, and though it was difficult to pinpoint his address, Opal didn't care about that. He was safe, and that was all that mattered. All she wanted was for him to be safe and sound. She clutched the letter close to her chest and, for the umpteenth time, prayed to God, offering her heartfelt words of gratitude.

29. The Ceremony

Four years later, the railroad had finally been completed. The mine was connected to the city, and there was another track that was linked to the port. Opal was attending the ceremony to celebrate the new railroad. There was still a long road ahead to secure additional funds, but so far development had progressed smoothly, and there had been no major obstacles so far.

It had been a trial to stop Hubert from running wild multiple times during this project, and though he didn't listen to Opal, he obeyed the advice of her father and Marquis Roussel. And so, one of the largest hurdles for Manthest had been overcome.

I wonder why almost all the men assume that women can't do work, Opal thought. I've produced excellent results, so I wish His Grace would, at the very least, lend an ear to my opinions. She'd once grumbled about it to her father, and he'd given a strained smile.

"He won't listen precisely because it's you," he'd said.

It would hurt a husband's pride to have his mistakes pointed out by his wife. Opal had always thought this was silly, but society still viewed women as people who had to rely on the wealth and strength of their husbands. That wouldn't change for a while. In truth, many women were hiding under the guise of their fragility and leading bold, strong-minded lives.

Opal glanced at her husband—now surrounded by women—and sighed. The value of Manthest had skyrocketed, and Earl Holloway, along with Hubert, had joined the elite circle of wealthy investors. Many women expressed interest in the duke, paying no heed to the fact that he was already married.

Naturally, some of the attention spilled over to Opal as well, and men and women of all ages were desperate to find a reason to approach her. Young men, especially, would try to invite her out, trying to use past nasty rumors to their advantage. Opal found them to be nothing short of annoying.

She was fed up with this current situation and was planning on shutting herself away in the countryside when this ceremony was over. She was only reluctantly attending this celebration to thank the marquis, but unfortunately, Marquis Roussel wasn't present for this event. She had asked her father and Hubert on numerous occasions to get in touch with the marquis, but ultimately, she had never been able to make direct contact with him. Both the earl and the duke acted as messengers for her.

Perhaps Marquis Roussel also believes that women can't work... This plan was a success due in no small part to the marquis, and she had hoped to meet him directly today to thank him, but her wish couldn't be granted. He apparently didn't like to appear in front of others much, and the earl had mentioned that the marquis had been elated to conveniently receive a matter to tend to, allowing him to skip this ceremony. *Maybe I'm just fated to never meet the people I wish to.*

It had been four years since that one letter, but Claude hadn't said a peep to Opal. She only knew that he'd been sending the baroness letters of his safety from time to time, and the duchess had to find relief from that. She was sure that Claude would suddenly pop in one day out of nowhere, as though nothing was wrong. He was starting to anger her, in fact, but the loud music from the band suddenly snapped her back to her senses.

It's almost over. I can go home... As she gazed at Hubert, who now shined as bright as a star in her eyes, all she desperately wanted was for the celebrations to end.

Opal didn't like noisy places. When she first made her debut to society, she had been excited by all the bustling, rosy scenes she'd been invited to. When she realized that she far preferred to live quietly in the countryside, it had been all too late. She hated to lose and stubbornly acted like she enjoyed societal occasions, but in truth she found them all to be very silly. Her newly wedded life was completely different from what she dreamed about, but she was satisfied by the tough work she had to do.

She hadn't planned on living in the duchy, but it brought her real joy to see the smiling faces of the duchy's residents while she reformed their land, living among them in the countryside. *But it's not like my countryside life is coming to*

an end. It didn't matter how warmly welcomed she was; Opal had no plans to attend societal occasions strictly more than necessary.

And so, as Opal attended the party after the ceremony, she waited for an opening and sneaked out. The venue had a newly built hotel, and Opal was staying in the most expensive room that the building had to offer. Of course, she was sharing the space with Hubert. They were a married couple, after all, and this arrangement couldn't be helped, but they had two bedrooms, and she thought that she didn't need to worry much about it. She went ahead with the hotel's proposed lodgings.

When she entered the room, she called for a maid, and undid her hair while removing her dress. Her once constricted hair and body were let loose, and she breathed a sigh. Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Opal, are you all right?" Hubert called.

"I-I am. Why do you ask?" Opal stammered.

"You left the venue rather early, so I was worried that you'd fallen ill..."

"Ah... I apologize for making you worry. I'm really fine, so please return to the celebration, Your Grace."

"I've got no plans to head back. I'd actually hoped to speak with you, so would you kindly come out?"

As they conversed through the door, Opal and the maid exchanged a shocked glance. This was an unexpected invitation.

"I shall be out in a moment," Opal quickly said. "May I ask for a bit of your patience?"

"Of course," Hubert replied.

He must've returned to the living room, and Opal hastily changed into her usual, more casual dress, hoping to not make the duke wait for long. She told the maid that she could leave her hair down, and as the servant quickly got the duchess dressed, Opal swiftly combed her hair. After she had finished changing, she made her way to the living room.

"I'm sorry for making you wait," she apologized.

“Not at all. I’m also sorry for suddenly calling for you,” Hubert replied.

She was perplexed by his unusually restless demeanor. Opal sat down on the sofa. She was offered a drink, but she declined, and Hubert poured himself a glass of brandy. He sat across from her.

“Um... This project has finally allowed me to acquire funds to purchase all the land back from you,” Hubert said.

“I see,” Opal replied. “Congratulations. But you will need quite a bit more money in the future. And I—”

“No, it’s not as though I’d be using all my wealth. So, I’d like to buy back the entire former duchy.”

“Very well. I believe we won’t require a contract for this purchase. I shall immediately hand the documents back to you, so you may destroy them.”

Opal had decided to do so back when she had deceived Hubert and taken his land from him. In truth, when he was able to purchase half the land—half of the duke’s assets—she had been planning on returning the rest of the land to him. She planned on giving him the money he had paid to her to repurchase his duchy and the funds that she’d gained from her investments. She was willing to hand it all to him. Had Hubert not purchased Manthest, she could’ve returned it all to him much sooner.

One could say that the past four years had been wasted because of his impulsive purchase, but Opal had been able to live in the countryside as she’d wished, all because she could insist that she had a husband. That was good enough for her. The duke had also been able to become one of the greatest investors in the kingdom, so perhaps this outcome was for the best.

Opal was calculating the wealth that she had amassed until now and the process she’d need to take to return the land to him. But as the nervous voice of Hubert entered her ears, she snapped back to reality. Before she knew it, the duke was down on one knee in front of her, gazing at her with a face as red as a tomato.

“I’m sorry,” Opal said. “What did you just say?”

“Um, er, would you officially marry me, Opal?” Hubert said.

As Hubert's shocking words finally registered, the loud sound of a bell rang through her head, enough to cause a headache. *This must be what a bolt from the blue truly means*, she thought, her mind completely elsewhere.



30. A Proposal

“Officially marry you?” Opal asked. “We’re already married, aren’t we, Your Grace?”

Opal spoke the truth, just managing to eke out the words in her shock. Hubert’s face—which was already quite red—turned even redder, and he raised his voice slightly as he spoke.

“B-But until now, our marriage was merely political,” Hubert insisted. “And in the beginning...I was horribly cruel to you. I know these can only sound like excuses, but my mind was so filled with my debt and with Stella that it practically drove me mad. That’s all I can say. I’ve been attracted to you since we first danced together a decade ago, and it shattered my pride when we were forced to get married the way we did. I know I was being a fool, but I took it all out on you. And for that, I’m truly sorry.”

“I...don’t mind anymore,” Opal replied. “I stole your land from you. I’ve also done terrible things.”

“That doesn’t bother me anymore. Had you not done so, I would’ve never opened my eyes to reality. I hated you at first, but eventually I understood why you did what you did. I had been terribly narrow-minded, and the moment I realized that was the same moment I realized just how wonderful you really are. My instincts weren’t wrong; it’s no wonder that it took only one dance for me to be captivated by you. But I knew that I had no right to propose to you in my current state. I decided that I would ask for your hand in marriage only when I was able to buy back all my land from you.”

Hubert’s confession put his hasty purchase of Manthest in a whole new light. Opal now regretted how she had acted back then. If she had just supported his decision from the start, instead of arrogantly testing him, maybe he wouldn’t have taken such a huge risk. Hubert had mentioned living with Stella as part of his plans, so Opal had just assumed that his investment had something to do with his little angel somehow.

But now that I think about it, he only mentioned living with her if his investment failed. In truth, Opal hadn't thought about Stella for a while.

"I...had assumed that you were in love with Miss Stella, Your Grace," the duchess murmured.

"Stella? Of course not! She's practically a younger sister to me!" Hubert said. His face turned yet another shade of red upon seeing Opal's shock, and he hastily added, "I love Stella very much, of course. But I love her as *family*. It's completely different from how I feel about you. You know, I even once had the foolish hope that Stella would one day be jealous of you."

"I...see."

"I love *you*, Opal. Would you please marry me, officially?"

Hubert had never proposed to her before. As he knelt by her feet, Opal took a good hard look at him. Long ago, she had dreamed of this very moment. But it was far too late now. In the past seven years, the duchess's resolve hadn't changed.

"I'm so sorry, Your Grace," Opal apologized. "I cannot accept your proposal."

Hubert couldn't believe his ears. He stared at her in utter shock.

"When I stole this land and manor from you seven years ago, I made a decision," Opal continued. "I vowed that the moment you bought back half the land that I'd taken from you, Your Grace, I would return the rest of your land to you and divorce you."

"Y-You don't have to do that," the duke stammered. "I'll buy it all back. So..."

"Please divorce me, Your Grace. Please set me free."

"Free? Why are you... Why?"

"To be honest, when I first danced with you, I was also very attracted to you, Your Grace. Had you proposed to me back then, I would've been utterly ecstatic and would have accepted immediately. But I was dragged into a scandal instead. I hadn't done a thing, but society was unforgiving. I decided to dig my heels in and pretend I enjoyed the company of others, despite all the nasty lies and gossip that swirled around me."

Hubert was stunned to hear Opal's confession. All Opal could think was that she'd been a fool back then—they had both been young and foolish.

"I was told that when I turned twenty, I would receive my grandmother's inheritance and would be able to live as I pleased," Opal divulged. "I dreamed of living a quiet life in the countryside, and then I was ordered to marry and endure a life with you. I think, when I first arrived at the manor, I was rather spiteful and defiant."

"That's not true," Hubert insisted. "As the older of the two of us, I should've acted more mature. I was deeply indebted to both you and your father, but I acted quite heartless toward you."

Hubert was on his knees, begging for forgiveness, but Opal stood up with a sad smile.

"Opal?" he asked.

"Your Grace, please sit," she said. "I shall be right back."

Opal left for her room and returned to the living room with a stack of documents, which she placed on the desk. Hubert quizzically gazed at the documents in front of him and widened his eyes in shock.

"I planned on giving this to you after today's celebration was over," Opal said. "I used the money you gave me to buy back your land to invest in Manthest. It's just as I've said; I always planned on giving back to you everything I took. So please, I ask that you sign these divorce papers."

Next to the documents about the land that she'd taken was a divorce contract. Hubert, unable to process how things had changed so rapidly, simply looked at it, silent.

Opal smiled, the movement straining her face. "Of course, I'd suggest you read through it carefully before you sign it. But you'll see that these are simple divorce papers and nothing more."

"Is marrying me...truly impossible?" Hubert asked.

"You stated that Miss Stella is like a sister to you, Your Grace. I feel the same way about you. I no longer consider you a person of romantic interest. But this

divorce is ultimately up to you; if you refuse to sign these papers, I'll have no choice. I know you require an heir, so—"

"Stop!" cried a haggard Hubert, interrupting the duchess. "I'm begging you, please don't say anything more."

Opal had been kind with her words, but in truth, ever since she had taken Hubert's land he had become a troublesome little brother in her eyes and nothing more, even if he technically was older than her. Replacing her initial attraction was an odd sense of duty, a hope that she could transform him from an ill-tempered child into a splendid duke. Four years ago, she had been disappointed in him but unable to cast him aside and have him fend for himself. Opal had only been able to produce these papers under the belief that Hubert had finally come into his own.

Opal had prepared for the worst. She had already requested for someone else to watch the duchy in her stead. But Hubert required an heir, and in the event he desperately insisted on this, Opal had been willing to help him in this too—willing to endure it. Until now Opal had thought Hubert despised her. She'd never imagined he would have fallen in love with her. She had only thought about how to act should she be asked to birth a child. Stella was too frail to give birth, and Opal had braced herself, afraid that she'd be forced to produce an heir for him.

"I'm sorry, Opal," Hubert said weakly. "I'm a little tired today. Could I give you a response tomorrow?"

"Of course," Opal replied firmly.

She quietly stood up and left the living room, leaving Hubert, devastated, staring at the ground. Opal left without saying a thing, having decided silence would be a better choice. Opal called for her maid and removed her makeup. In truth, she had wanted to take a bath, but she held herself back, put on her nightgown, and slipped into bed.

She was so tired that she could surely fall asleep once she closed her eyes, but faint noises from the living room kept her awake and alert.

But she seemed to have fallen asleep somehow, as her next conscious sensation was of sunlight trickling onto her face. It was rather late in the

morning, and the maid claimed that Hubert had already left the hotel, leaving only a letter behind. Opal took the large envelope that had been offered to her and scanned the contents—Hubert’s signature was on the divorce papers. But there was nothing else. The documents she created when she had stolen the land were gone, and there was no letter from Hubert either.

Opal sighed deeply and got herself changed. She ate a hearty breakfast and left the hotel, headed for the duke’s manor in the royal capital. She opted for a carriage instead of the railroad and used the commute to prepare to end things once and for all. Truth be told, meeting Hubert again would be awkward, but there were a few things she had to do before submitting the divorce papers.

A few days later, a resolute Opal arrived at the duke’s manor and was told that the duke hadn’t returned yet. She was both relieved and worried. She had nothing to worry about; Hubert was already a grown man. *I shouldn’t worry about him anymore*, she thought to herself as she told Bart—surprised by the sudden return of his mistress—to gather all the servants once more.

Stella appeared, her wheelchair pushed by Beth, and Mrs. Notham and even Romito arrived at the scene. The little angel glared at the duchess.

“Why did you return here?” she demanded.

“Hello, Miss Stella,” Opal replied. “It’s been a while. You seem to be doing quite well.”

“Unfortunately, Hubert isn’t here.”

“I’m glad to see that the medicine has been working for you.”

Beth and Romito froze at the two ladies’ conversation. They clearly weren’t clicking, and they’d never seen Stella be so harsh and icy before.

“Stop that, Stella!” Mrs. Notham quickly scolded. “You’re being rude.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Opal replied casually. “But might I ask why you all are here?”

“U-Um, Stella has been staying here about once a month so that the doctor can do a routine checkup on her.”

“Ah, I see. I don’t really mind. You can stay here for as long as you like.”

Stella clearly didn't know her place, having been spoiled by servants all her life, but Opal only pitied her; the girl would spend the rest of her life clinging to Hubert, depending on him for everything. Soon enough, Bart appeared with the rest of the servants.

"Madam, I have gathered everyone in the manor," he said, still confused.

"Thank you," Opal said with a smile.

She slowly cast a sweeping glance at the servants. It was a shame that Kayve wasn't present, but perhaps, one day, she'd be able to meet him again.

"Thank you all for gathering here. It's a shame that I can't greet each and every one of you, but I've come to say my farewell today," Opal started.

Everyone gulped, and the older servants all trembled nervously, misunderstanding the situation. They feared that Opal was firing them.

"You see—" Opal started.

"Stop!" Stella screamed. "How could you be so heartless?!"

"Heartless?"

"Everyone has been working in this manor for years! How could you fire them all?! You're horrible!"

"Miss Stella..." Romito and the other servants said, holding back tears at the words of kindness.

Opal had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. This girl hadn't changed one bit, but the little angel in the wheelchair no longer looked frail and fragile. Time was equal to all, and she was no exception.

The duchess sighed deeply and said, "You all seem to be assuming that you're getting fired, but it is I who am leaving."

"Huh?" Stella gasped.

"I have decided to divorce His Grace. All this time I've endured the state of things, but now I can be free. So, go on, celebrate this news."

Opal smiled, her face dazzling like never before, and all the servants at the manor gasped in surprise. Only Bart, who'd had an inkling of the news, received

Opal's words with a faint smile. The duchess gazed at the stunned Romito and Beth, then stared intently at Stella, and finally, turned back to the servants who had served the manor for years.

"My husband—I mean, Duke McLeod will likely remarry soon, so I hope that you all treat the new mistress with kindness and respect. The new wife might be young and not used to the work, but I hope you will all support her."

Opal knew that her last words were a touch mean, but surely, she was allowed to be a little thorny. It was only a sentence, but it felt like with those few words she had let out all her pent-up rage from the past several years.

"Thank you all for the past seven years," she said. "There were some fun times there, honestly. Goodbye!"

Stella, Romito, and the rest of the servants stood there with their mouths agape as Opal turned on her heel and walked out the front door. It was a beautiful day outside, improving Opal's sunny mood even more. Needless to say, she'd never kept any of her belongings in that manor. When she approached the stairs of her personal carriage, she turned around to catch one final glimpse of the building.

As she gazed high above, she could see the dirty, clouded glass window of the attic that she'd lived in. She had lived there for only a short while, but while she had, she had stubbornly, insistently holed up in there. *I was so young and reckless back then...*

Opal shook herself out of her brief reminiscence and switched gears, climbing inside her carriage. Her final destination was the land set aside for her by her grandmother, but she planned to drop by the duchy to say her final farewell. The place *could* be called her home—after all, she was far more fond of the duchy than the manor in the royal capital. Saying her goodbye there would be tough, but even still, Opal saw a sunny future ahead for her. With hope filling her heart, she headed for a new chapter of her life.

31. Reunion

It'd been a while since Opal had returned to the earldom. She climbed the tree that she often had when she was young, and gazed into the distance. Yet the rolling plains and calm scenery weren't enough to put her at peace; her mind was elsewhere.

Two days ago, she had been called by her father to visit his manor, and Opal had been shocked to hear what he had to say, far more than the time she'd found out she'd be forced to marry Hubert. It'd been over a decade ago, her father prefaced, but when Opal first made her debut and had been involved in that horrific debacle, Claude had asked the earl for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Back then, her father had chased away the university student, but three years later, he'd appeared once more and again asked to marry Opal. Furthermore, despite being the son of a baron, he had made money by working hard and had used those funds to make investments. In the years since Opal's father had shooed him away, he apparently had amassed a sizable amount of wealth.

Of course, his money was minuscule compared to the earl's savings and hadn't even reached thirty percent of Opal's dowry, but the earl had been moved by Claude's determination. But Claude had been too late; the earl had already signed the contract marrying Opal off to Hubert.

However, it mattered not the amount of money Claude had, nor the fact that he could live with Opal without relying on her money. The difference between marrying a duke and the third son of a baron was crystal clear. Opal required no help anyway. With that in mind, the earl had stated that his daughter was set to marry someone else. Claude had only given a word of congratulations and promptly left.

"He may seem like a chivalrous fellow, but even if you married your childhood friend and were on good terms with him, I had thought that you would quickly get tired of him and regret your decision," the earl confessed. "I thought you

were more suited to marrying the duke and facing adversity with him.”

“Why are you telling me this *now*?” Opal asked.

“I knew that when you turned twenty, you planned on retiring to the countryside without marrying. If I forced you to get married, I thought the defiance and anger you’d feel would be funneled into you stubbornly trying to make it work with the duke. But I made a grave miscalculation. You acted completely different from my assumptions and wasted the past seven years of your life instead, practically living as a hermit in the rural regions. And you’ve still got other options; you’re brimming with potential.”

“But...I *chose* to live like this.”

The earl had said nothing when she divorced Hubert, and despite her surprise, Opal had remained undaunted. Now, Opal felt like she was suffocating—like her chest would cave in at any moment. The last time she’d met Claude, he had congratulated her on her marriage. If back then, she hadn’t been so stubborn and had instead told Claude honestly what the situation was, would he have tried to save her? The question bounced around in her mind, and she was exasperated by her own foolishness.

This whole time, her knight in shining armor had been beside her, and she’d pretended not to notice. To beg for his help when she was in a tough spot was beyond audacious. As she’d thought, she’d taken the best course of action in the end. She didn’t want to cause trouble to Claude or to the people around her. Her seven years of marriage with Hubert had been rough, but the people of the manor were no longer living in poverty, and the man himself had been able to mature into a proper duke.

It was as though her unreliable younger brother had finally learned to stand on his own two feet, and she felt somewhat accomplished. A year had passed since she’d divorced the duke, and the news was still a hotly debated topic among the nobles. While rumors of divorce had been spreading for years beforehand, the couple had managed to continue remaining together, and they had both attended the railroad opening ceremony as well. The sudden news had come as a shock.

Most of the nobles had concluded that the duke had decided to leave Opal

because she had failed to conceive a child after seven long years of marriage. Surprisingly, Hubert had personally gone to deny these claims. When the opportunity arose, he'd declared that the rumors about Opal had been complete lies and that the marriage itself was her way of extending *him* a helping hand. She had only ever tried to spare him from an awful fate. After they had married, she continued to support and devote herself to him. He'd even gone on to claim that he was only here now thanks to her, and while he had asked to continue this marriage, she had rejected him. He'd ended his speech with a forced smile.

While the nobles had been completely stunned by the news, they'd had no choice but to believe his words. Some still had their fair share of suspicions, but no one had the gall to deny the words of a duke, and no one had seen Opal act lasciviously since her marriage. In fact, it was true that for so long during her marriage she'd been entirely cooped up in the duchy. Her reputation had thus improved, but she no longer cared about any of that. She only wanted Hubert to quickly remarry and become happy; that was all. It shouldn't have been difficult for a man like him. Hubert was famed for his wealth now, and that made him a highly desirable marriage candidate. Unmarried women and their mothers were throwing themselves at his feet.

Hubert was growing older, and he would need an heir eventually. He'd need to get remarried soon. It was rumored that he'd gotten quite friendly with a certain woman. She was young but had a good head on her shoulders and was very dependable. The earl had said that "strong-willed" was a better descriptor for her.

"What's more, she has a powerful, bad-tempered mother," the earl had continued jovially. "If he marries that lady, House McLeod might be taken over by those two."

Opal sighed upon remembering her father's words. The only issue left was Stella's existence. While Hubert claimed that the angel was like a sister to him, she clearly felt very differently. How would Stella react to Hubert's new wife? How would the duke control the situation? *But that has nothing to do with me now*, Opal thought, ridding her mind of these thoughts.

The former duchess was now leading a humble life in the land that her

grandmother had left behind—what she had intended to do until getting married. She wasn't sure what had happened to the deed, but the duke had paid for the entire manor and land in the royal capital. In fact, he had also bought back the duchy as well. Jonathan, Opal's uncle, had acted as a mediator, but Hubert had stubbornly insisted on paying the amount in full. Ultimately, Opal had caved and allowed for the money to be paid to her.

Perhaps Hubert's letters had stated as much; he'd sent several ever since their divorce. Opal knew that she was being cold, but she'd asked the duke to speak with her surrogate instead and had sent back all his letters without ever opening the seal. She would never know what those letters said. But since the letters had subsided after the monetary affairs had been settled, she felt like she wasn't too far off with her suspicions with what they were about. Opal took all the money she received from Hubert and put it back into the investments for Manthest.

She planned on using any profits generated to improve the work environment for the workers in Manthest. A healthy work environment would lead to good work and, ultimately, would reap even greater profits. When Opal was reforming the duchy, she had personally seen the difference that a good work environment could lead to. Any other profits that Opal gained from her investments would be used to create an organization to support fellow women who were also looking to become independent. *It's quite unreasonable for one to be denied a job or a loan just because she's a woman.* With a new goal in mind, Opal was brimming with determination.

What her father had revealed to her had made her a tad emotional, that was all. Opal resolved herself once again, and that was when the sound of someone approaching from behind reached her ears. Opal whirled around, hope in her heart, and she gulped.

"It's been a while, Opal," a familiar voice said. "Guess I don't have to ask if you're doing well."

"As you can see, I'm energetic enough to still climb trees," Opal replied. "It's been *far* too long since I've last met you, Claude."

She couldn't see her childhood friend's face well from the tree. His footsteps

hadn't changed, but it sounded like his voice had gotten a touch lower. *Or perhaps he simply changed the way he talks.* Opal desperately suppressed her tears and pressed a hand against her nose.

"Come on down, Opal," he said. "It's been a while, so I'd like to take a good look at your face."

"But I went through all this effort to get up here," Opal insisted. "Why don't you climb up instead?"

"Don't be unreasonable. The tree won't be able to handle both of us in it. We're not kids anymore."

"You're right."

She knew she was being cheeky, but she didn't want Claude to see her face, clearly on the verge of tears. She decided to be stubborn, but he only gave her a forced laugh.

Indeed, they were no longer kids, and she couldn't find the right words to refute him. They used to often climb this exact tree together and gaze into the horizon, but they couldn't do that anymore. She had grown in other ways as well; her younger soul, who had once been tempted to throw her arms around him in unfettered joy as he returned to her after spending many months in the dorms, was no longer with her. And with her father's story still ringing in her ears, she felt so pathetic that she wasn't sure how she could face him now.

"Come on down," Claude insisted, trying to tug on her legs. "Or I'll pull you down."

"H-Hey!" Opal cried as she was nearing the bottom of the tree, her feelings completely disregarded. "All right! All right! I'll come down! Stop that, Claude!"

She managed to evade his hands, but he grabbed onto her skirt instead and started to tug gently. Opal immediately threw in the towel, stopping all resistance, and Claude finally stepped back and waited patiently. When she looked down, she saw his grinning face, and at once her sorrow from before completely dissipated. If she pushed herself, she could climb higher up, away from his grasp, but her pride didn't allow her to do so. And because Claude knew her so well, he was mischievously smirking while waiting for her to come

down.

“If you’re a gentleman, you should turn away while I descend the tree,” Opal said.

“Why?” Claude inquired. “You never asked for that in the past.”

“Because I was able to climb down more easily in the past. It’s a bit of a trial for me now.”

“Then I’ve *gotta* keep watch. If you’re in danger, I’ll help you out.”

“Thank you.”

This obedient response was unusual for someone as stubborn as Opal, and Claude raised a bemused eyebrow but said nothing more. Opal raised her knee inside of her skirt and clung onto a large branch, her body facing the trunk. She’d done this countless times in the past, and as she prayed that he wouldn’t see underneath her skirt, she tried to energetically jump down as she always had. But she slipped and lost her footing, and Claude quickly reached out, using his arms to support her. She was easily lifted into the air and brought to the ground.

“Thank you, Claude,” Opal said with a smile.

“I didn’t think that I’d really need to jump in and save you,” he replied. “Your skills have dulled.”

“More like I’ve just aged and lost my stamina. I’m already twenty-seven.”

She stepped away from him and gazed up at his face. It’d been a long while since their last meeting, and his boyish charm was long gone, replaced with the face of a charismatic man. He’d become more charming than ever, and while Opal observed, she wondered to herself how Claude saw her now. She shifted her gaze to the ground, but that immediately felt like she was hiding, so she quickly looked back up at him, staring straight into his eyes.

“I guess I don’t need to ask if you’re doing well either.” Opal grinned. “You saved me back there. Thank you.”

“Yep, I’m doing well,” Claude replied. “But it’s nothing for you to be so grateful about, is it? Did something happen?”

“Of course! So many things happened. You haven’t given me a peep for the past eight years, and I’ve been so, so worried about you. And yet, you were apparently conversing with my father on a regular basis.” She clenched her right fist and gently pounded it against his chest. He didn’t dodge her attack and instead gazed down at her with a furrowed brow. After a brief moment of hesitation, his lips finally parted.

“So you’ve heard about me?” he asked.

“I most certainly have heard of you,” Opal replied, “since you are indeed Marquis Roussel of the Taisei Kingdom.”

32. The Truth

“Ah, so I’ve been found out,” Claude replied casually. “I was planning on telling you about it later to shock you.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Opal said, raising her fist at him. “If you wanted to shock me, you would’ve been there at the ceremony. If you showed up, I might have collapsed from the discovery.”

As she gently swung once more, her fist was caught by the palm of his hand.

“Feisty as always, aren’t you?” Claude asked.

“It’s because I’m angry,” Opal replied.

“I didn’t want to worry you.”

“And *I’m* telling you that I was worried sick!”

As her right hand had been grabbed, Opal raised her left to hit Claude, but her attack was easily blocked once more. She glared at him bitterly, her cheeks turning redder by the second, and Claude released her hands from his grip with a troubled smile.

“I didn’t want to make you cry either,” he said, stroking her cheek. He wiped away the tears that were streaming down her cheeks.

But she continued to glare at him. “Of course I’ll worry, and of course I’ll cry! If you’re going to explore the world, at least have the sense to avoid dangerous areas! How could you go out of your way to visit a kingdom that was in the midst of a civil war?!”

“They weren’t at war when I arrived.”

“Don’t try to talk your way out of this! I’m... I’m just so glad that you’re safe.”

She violently wiped the tears from her cheeks and took a deep breath, stepping away from her childhood friend. She sized him up, staring at him intently.

“You didn’t get injured, did you?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “I never went to the war zone.”

Opal felt a wave of relief wash over her at his words. He seemed fine.

“I see... I’m glad,” she said before quickly furrowing her brow. “War is never good, though.”

Claude smiled, glad to see that his childhood friend hadn’t changed. The whole thing really was no laughing matter, and he made sure to reassure Opal, but in reality, he had actually been involved in a few small scuffles. He was fine and well now, and he didn’t want to tell her and cause her to worry needlessly. Claude had both always been in love with Opal and always known that he’d never have a chance with her, so when he learned that she was off to marry someone else, he had temporarily indulged in self-abandonment out of despair. He’d cared not at all for the risk, and so, he’d taken his hard-earned money to Taisei, where their political affairs had still been shaky. Going around the world hadn’t been a complete lie on his part.

“You know that my mother is from Taisei, don’t you, Opal?” he asked.

“I do,” Opal replied. “When she was studying abroad, she fell deeply in love with your father—the baron—and she went against her family’s wishes to move here, if memory serves.”

“To be precise, she was disowned, really. She wrote letters to them numerous times, but not once did she receive a reply. So I decided to drop by the kingdom and check up on them before I left on my journey.”

“Even so, you didn’t return for so long...”

“It’s not like I planned everything in advance. I had no intention of introducing myself to them, and I just wanted to hear some rumors about my mother’s family before I went on my merry way. So, I headed to the royal capital and aimed for Earl Roussel’s manor.”

“Ah, so the baroness hailed from the house of an earl.”

“Yep. She was the youngest daughter of a stubborn old man.”

Opal nodded, finally understanding the link between Claude and the house of

the marquis, though she still had more questions in her mind. However, she knew that she couldn't be standing here for long.

"Claude, how about tea in the manor?" Opal offered. "Marcia will surely weep with joy."

"I'm grateful for the invitation, but can we head somewhere else first?" Claude asked.

"You don't mean...the large boulder, do you?"

"I do."

"But..."

The boulder was a decent walk away, located at the foot of the mountains. Multiple large boulders were scattered about in the area. The two had often played around there as their secret base, and before Opal had gone off to marry, she had gone on a walk with him to visit the place.

"But what?" Claude asked, suddenly testy. "Are you afraid to be alone with me?"

"No, of course not," Opal replied. "It's just that...I'm not sure I could climb those boulders anymore."

Her hesitation spurred Claude to be a little mean to her. In truth, even if Opal had already been married once, it was a bit of a scandal to be alone with a man. This wasn't anything new for the pair, and no one in the earldom was bitter enough to spread such nasty rumors. She was more afraid of her failing stamina, and Claude burst out laughing when he heard her honest thoughts.

"You're afraid?!" he chuckled. "That's not like you at all."

"I struggled to climb this tree, you know!" Opal cried. "You saw me almost slip when I tried to get down. I'm so disappointed in myself!"

"Then wanna call it quits?"

"Of course not."

Opal was happy that she could converse so casually with Claude, just like the old days, and she happily accepted his challenge. He laughed while walking

beside her. Only then did she realize that they had gone on a complete tangent.

“And how is the baroness’s family? Are they doing well?” Opal asked.

“Unfortunately, almost all of them died from the plague, which triggered the whole battle for the throne,” Claude replied. “Only that old man’s alive and well.”

“Goodness... How truly pitiful.”

“Yeah. I agree, but that’s about it. I might sound cold, but they were pretty much strangers to me, so I can’t feel too sympathetic toward them.”

“Claude...”

Even so, he’s gone through enough suffering, Opal thought, reaching out to hold his hand. Claude firmly squeezed back. She wasn’t the only one who had struggled these past eight years.

“In the end, though I initially had no plans on meeting the family, on a whim I decided to drop by,” Claude confessed. “I’d heard that only that old man was in the manor, so I couldn’t help myself. Honestly, I thought I’d be chased away at the door, but apparently, I share a lot of features with people from House Roussel. The butler looked shocked, but he allowed me inside, and he even let me speak with that shitty old man.”

“A *shitty* old man, you say?” Opal asked.

“Oh yeah, he’s a real piece of work. When he met me, he ordered me to go to the royal palace. He told me to swear the loyalty of Earl Roussel to the king’s younger brother.”

“How forceful.”

“He’s just arrogant.”

“But you accepted it, didn’t you? You always listened to my requests even while you called me selfish. You’re actually quite kind.”

“No, I’m really not.”

Claude gave a forced smile. Opal’s “selfish wishes” were actually all very tame, and more importantly, he was more than happy to grant her everything

she asked. He loved doing so. Whenever one of her requests had been granted, she'd always happily smile and express her gratitude—an impossibly adorable sight to him. Claude sighed, still clutching Opal's hand in his. He'd simply accepted his overbearing grandfather's orders because frankly, he didn't care.

The plague had just died down in Taisei, but with a fight for the throne occurring so soon afterward, the kingdom had remained in constant turmoil. Claude had been involved in numerous dangerous situations in Taisei, but he knew that the royal palace only upped the ante, possibly endangering his life. However, luck had been on his side. He'd been able to utilize the earl's name and been granted permission to speak with the king's younger brother. Claude had proceeded to pledge the loyalty of House Roussel and hand the man a letter stating as much. *Honestly, I can only say that I was extremely lucky back then*, Claude thought.

A series of delightful coincidences had allowed him to directly speak with the royal—the current king—and Claude had been charmed by the man's character. His grandfather's loyalty aside, Claude had thus chosen to support the king's younger brother from the bottom of his heart and had worked to get rid of any opposition to his bid for the throne.

He had used the funds that he'd saved as well as the money of the earl's house and had used the network that he'd built at his university to take control of the goods circulating in the kingdom. He had also received much assistance from Earl Holloway, Opal's father.

"Claude, are you all right?" Opal asked worriedly as he remained silent.

He hastily flashed his usual smile. "Of course I am. I was just thinking about that rotten old man. Once he made sure the king's younger brother firmly took the throne, the old man practically went up and died. He even left behind an unnecessary will."

"Is that the reason you took over House Roussel?"

"Yep. But isn't it weird no matter how you slice it? He had other grandkids, and if he wanted my family to take over, he should've asked my older brother. And yet he left things to me. By that point, I'd even received His Majesty's trust, and I couldn't leave."

When the news about his succession broke, the remaining members of House Roussel had been vehemently against it. During the war, they'd claimed that the late Earl Roussel had grown senile, and filed numerous complaints about him providing funds to the king's younger brother. However, the new king had silenced all these voices of dissent.

Because House Roussel had no viable heir other than Claude, the new king had confiscated House Roussel's title and assets. The king had then proceeded to present Claude with the title of marquis along with the assets that were once taken, and even bestowed a new plot of land as well, made up of property formerly owned by nobles who had lost in the civil war. Thus, the people of House Roussel had been unable to utter a word. They'd known that if they kept protesting and complaining, soon enough they'd be treated like rebels and suffer the same fate as other nobles labeled as such. It had been best, therefore, to let Claude take over and have their dignity maintained in the process. They'd had no choice but to reluctantly back down and admit that House Roussel had supported the new king greatly.

Claude had managed to evade being suppressed by his relatives while he worked to restore the exhausted Taisei Kingdom. It hadn't all been smooth sailing. His life had been constantly at risk by the remaining factions of rebels opposed to the new king. At times, he'd even had to jump in and help the countryside regions that were ready to revolt from the horrible famine that had ensued.

His first three years in Taisei had been nothing but dangerous; Claude had been constantly fighting for his life, and he'd kept making excuses to himself about not making Opal and his family worry. However, in truth, he hadn't contacted them because he'd been afraid that his will might waver and he'd find himself in a moment of weakness. Despite feeling backed into a corner, Earl Holloway alone had not only lent his aid but had even introduced Claude to numerous investors so that he could get his foot in the door.

While Earl Holloway hadn't mentioned Opal in any of his letters, many investors would often share information. Claude had indeed been aware that Opal's husband was Duke McLeod. The new marquis hadn't thought that he had much to worry about; if the duke had the support of the earl, then it was safe to

assume that he and Opal would get along well. This fact had made Claude happy, even as it made him a bit lonely.

The marquis had continued to toil away, working to aid the restoration effort for the citizens of Taisei. Once the kingdom had started to settle down and everyone could rest for a breather, Earl Holloway had sent Duke McLeod with a letter of introduction to the marquis. And as Claude discovered that the duke in front of him was the very man who was married to Opal, he'd had to use every fiber of his being to stop himself from punching Hubert squarely in the face.

33. Reminisce

“Oh? How odd,” Opal murmured as they reached the large boulder.

“Is something wrong?” Claude asked. Opal’s voice had snapped him out of his silent pondering, and he hastily turned to face her.

Opal didn’t seem to mind one bit as she pointed to the rock.

“The boulder looks a lot smaller than I remembered,” she replied. “When I came here around a decade ago, it looked impossibly large to me. I haven’t really grown since, so this is quite strange...”

“Then can you scale the boulder more easily?” Claude inquired.

“Is that a challenge?”

“What do you think?” He gave a mischievous grin.

“Hmm... All right, then. I’ll race you to the top!”

“Huh? Hey!”

Opal bolted for the rock after feigning being pensive. The two had often raced each other, and though Opal always tried to trick Claude so she could get a head start, she always lost to him. And now she was able to leave her stunned childhood friend behind and get a massive lead, but in the blink of an eye he caught up to her. They used some smaller rocks as their footing and jumped up, finally making it to the top of the largest boulder. The two collapsed to the ground, completely out of breath.

“What...*are* we doing?” Opal managed to ask between huffs.

“You...started it,” Claude said, trying to catch his breath as well.

“But you’re...the one who...challenged me. I’m twenty-seven, you know.”

“And I’m thirty.”

In the face of their actions—fully regrettable, with no regard for their health—the two of them burst out laughing. They were so out of breath that it even

hurt to laugh. After they caught their breath, they gazed at the view in silence, overcome with nostalgia; their ages and social statuses had shifted dramatically, but as they sat together, it felt as though nothing had changed. But Opal knew that they couldn't stay like this forever. After exhaling, she looked up at the man beside her.

"Claude," she called out.

"What?"

"Thank you for investing in Manthest. Had you not sent over an engineer and put your money into the project, the duke would've been bankrupt already. You shouldered a huge risk yourself... I'm truly thankful to you, though I know just thanks aren't enough. Thank you."

"There's no need to be so grateful. I invested because I was certain I could turn a profit with Taisei's technology. Though I admit that my initial investment was quite large, I'm able to slowly recoup my money, so I guess this gamble wasn't a mistake after all. And you know this, do you not? You're one of the investors, after all."

"Right... It was a huge risk and it's true that investing often feels like a gamble. I don't want to ever go through that again."

She was convinced that if Claude hadn't invested back then, Hubert would've gone bankrupt. It'd been five long years since, and Taisei had stabilized enough to dispatch their own engineers while other nations were raising excellent ones of their own. It wasn't difficult to develop a railroad, but those who had invested in Manthest in its early days had profited immensely, precisely because back then things hadn't been as stable. Opal sighed once more and braced herself for the reality that she didn't wish to face.

"So...have you returned after so long to introduce your family and...your wife?" she asked.

"Huh? My wife?" Claude inquired.

"I thought you were married."

"Where'd you hear that lie from?"

“Huh? N-No, I didn’t hear about it, but I just assumed...”

“And why did you assume that?”

“B-Because you’re a marquis and you’re already thirty.”

Though Opal hastily answered Claude’s slightly angry queries, internally, she was overjoyed. But Claude being single didn’t change things one bit. Opal wished for his happiness, always, and if that meant he would marry a woman she didn’t know and live somewhere she’d never been, so be it. In fact, she much rather he marry a woman she didn’t know.

“Don’t talk about my age,” Claude replied. “I just...wasn’t on board with marrying until now. After many years, I’m finally able to bring my family—my mother—back to Taisei, so I came to pick her up.”

“Are you going to immigrate there with your family?”

“Probably not. My mother came to this kingdom with my father fully prepared to die here. Still, Taisei’s her hometown, and while her close family may have died, I’m sure she’d want to visit their graves. She might even want to return to the residence she was born and raised in and visit the manor of the royal capital. And some of the servants who knew her are still alive and well. Of course, it’s been forty years since she’s been there, so I’m sure she’d be surprised by how much has changed. We’ve got a railroad built to our plot of land now.”

He spoke happily. His smile hadn’t changed one bit since he was a young boy. Opal was excited to hear all the good news, but she frowned once more, knowing that she had one more thing she had to tell him.

“Even so, it was not very good of you to contact the baroness without telling her your address,” she said. “She was very worried about you, you know.”

As the words left her lips, Opal remembered the letter that she’d once sent to him and felt a tad awkward. Claude, too, looked uncomfortable by Opal’s scolding.

“I’m sorry, Opal,” he said. “To tell you the truth, my mother actually knew my whereabouts the entire time.”

“The *entire time*?” she asked incredulously.

“For the past four years, to be precise. Until then, I had my hands full trying to restore the kingdom with His Majesty, and I feared that if my mother found out I was in Taisei, she’d worry, so I asked Earl Holloway to keep that a secret. As the kingdom started to settle down and Duke McLeod arrived to meet me, I finally decided to contact my mother and the rest of my family. I sent her a letter.”

“Then why didn’t she or anyone else in your family tell me as well...? I was also so worried about you.”

Opal slumped her shoulders, looking down. She had thought that she was on good terms with the baron’s family and didn’t expect them to keep secrets from her.

“I’m really sorry about that,” Claude apologized. “I’m sorry, Opal.”

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked.

“Because I asked my mother and everyone else to keep it a secret. I told them to not tell anyone, including you, Opal.”

“Is it because...of that letter I sent you?”

“The letter?”

Opal had assumed that the letter she’d written, confessing her sins, was the reason Claude hadn’t contacted her. *I’m sure he’d scorn a woman who stole all her husband’s assets*, she’d thought. However, Claude just looked befuddled.

“You know, the one I sent you eight years ago,” Opal added. “I didn’t know where you were, so I asked the baroness to send it to you in my stead.”

“Oh, that! The one where you said you stole the duke’s assets!” Claude cried.

“H-Hey! Don’t say it so loudly!”

“Who’s listening? And besides... Can I be honest with you?”

“O-Of course. Go right ahead.”

“I’m sorry, but I nearly cried laughing when I read that letter.”

“You *what*?”

“I thought you were kidding at first, but I knew that you were telling the truth. I mean, it’s *you* that we’re talking about here.”

“You’re not going to shun me? You don’t think I’m a horrible woman?”

Opal had spent the last eight years regretting ever writing that letter, even as she told herself that it was for the best. She’d been agonizing over it and was shocked to hear that Claude had laughed upon reading it. She was still stunned as his amusement faded and he grew serious, gently stroking her head just like he had when they were kids.

“I didn’t just laugh,” he added. “I was pretty angry too.”

“At me?” she asked.

“Nope. At the duke. You were pushed to do something so extreme, so there must’ve been a good reason for it. And yet, I couldn’t do a single thing to help you out. I was angry at myself too.”

“But you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, I felt like I shouldn’t have left Socille at all. But it was too late for me to return, and you must’ve worked very hard on your own. I know you went through your fair share of hardships, but look what you’ve done. The current Duke McLeod has amassed enough wealth to match Earl Holloway, I’ve heard. You’ve accomplished something worthy of praise and respect from all. Hold your head up high, Opal. You’re the best.”

“Claude...”

Opal had sworn to her mother that she’d never cry again, but she’d already let tears spill from her eyes numerous times. She’d cried earlier, and she couldn’t suppress the large beads of tears streaming down her cheeks now.

“You’re an *idiot*,” she sobbed.

“Why’s that?” Claude asked.

“You made me worry so much. So, so much...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I really am, Opal.”

As she put her head down and placed her hands on the boulder to weep,

Claude drew her close to him. It was a bit of a bold thing to do, on top of a boulder where anyone could see, but Opal didn't say a word and allowed herself to be embraced. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been hugged and soothed in this manner.

I think the last time was seventeen years ago...

Indeed, back then, it wasn't her father nor her brother who'd held her close—it was Claude. And just as she'd felt when she was a child, she felt at ease now, protected by his arms. She wanted to stay in his embrace forever, but she suppressed her desires and kept telling herself to step away from him. Yet, her body wouldn't listen. She wanted to act a little spoiled, so she simply continued their conversation.

"Why did you keep your whereabouts a secret from me?" Opal asked.

"Because I was weak," Claude replied.

"You?"

"I couldn't steel my resolve, so I couldn't reach out." Before Opal understood what his words meant, he whispered in her ear. "Opal..."

"Wh-What?"

"Will you come with me to Taisei?"

34. The Confession

“Are you inviting me to visit your family?” Opal asked, shocked by the question.

She freed herself from his arms and stared at her childhood friend.

Claude forced a smile and shook his head. “Not exactly. I’m asking if you’d like to marry me.”

Opal touched her ears, wondering if she’d misheard what he’d said. She hadn’t, and as she looked visibly shocked, he continued his confession.

“I love you, Opal. I’ve always been in love with you. But our social ranks differed so much. I never planned on confessing my love for you. Still, I’ve actually asked the earl twice already for your hand in marriage.”

“I...” Opal said.

“You heard from the earl, didn’t you?”

“I-I did, just the other day...”

Claude’s confession made Opal’s chest feel full, and she was far too distracted to find the right way to verbalize her thoughts. When she first heard Claude had asked to marry her, she had been ecstatic, but she’d eventually come to regret her past foolishness and had convinced herself that Claude had wanted to tie the knot out of sympathy for her. She hadn’t been able to express her joy, but now, she had finally heard Claude’s love, and she was more than happy—she was satisfied.

“I thought I did the right thing back then but in truth, I just didn’t have the courage to confess to you,” Claude said. “That’s why I’m telling you directly now, and I’ll tell you as many times as you wish. Opal, please marry me.”

“We...can’t,” she finally said.

“I knew it. Am I being a bit too audacious now?”

“No, nothing like that! But...”

“But what? You only see me as a friend?”

In truth, Opal was so happy to hear him propose to her that she couldn't believe her ears. She was so excited that she felt like she could leap off this boulder right this instant. But still, she looked down, cooling her head while refusing his proposal.

Yet Claude wouldn't budge.

“Do you hate me?” he asked.

“How could I?! Absolutely not!” Opal quickly insisted.

“Then do you like me?”

“Claude, we're not kids anymore. We can't have this immature discussion and —”

Opal's attempt to persuade Claude was cut off as he leaned in to kiss her. It marked their first kiss, and it was so comforting that it had Opal wondering if this was what a real kiss—one filled with love—should feel like.

“Claude!” she cried, snapping back to her senses.

“Did you not like it?” he asked.

“E-Everyone can see us from here!”

“I know that. It's both a convenient location and a stalwart landmark.”

“What would you do if someone saw us?!”

“You're worried about your reputation?” Claude didn't seem to mind one bit.

“I don't really have a reputation to be worried about. But you're different. You have to marry someone...” Opal was busy feeling angry, then sad, and as she trailed off, Claude put her in another tight embrace.

“If you're marrying me, I'm sure everyone will be a bit more lenient about our actions.”

“Were you listening at all to what I just said?”

“Yep. I know that you always hated lying, even when you were a kid. When you absolutely had to lie, you'd always avert your gaze and change topics. So

that means that I know that you like me and you want to marry me.”

Opal jolted, knowing that he’d hit the nail on the head, and instinctively tried to flee. She pushed Claude aside to try to jump off toward another large rock, but as she was already on top of such a large boulder, she couldn’t find stable footing and was caught by Claude again once more.

“Hey, don’t push yourself,” he said. “We aren’t young anymore. You said so yourself, remember?”

“That’s right,” Opal replied. “And that’s why we can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

They weren’t completely out of breath, but they were still panting a little hard. In Opal’s case, however, she wasn’t losing her breath simply from exertion; she was being hugged tighter than before, and that made her heart pound louder than ever. She wanted to be freed from this torture, but Claude refused to let her go.

“You’re a marquis now,” she said. “You’d need an heir, wouldn’t you? And I’m already twenty-seven. I can’t—”

“All I need is *you*, Opal. Not an heir,” Claude insisted. “And I want *you*, not an heir. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“That’s not the issue.”

“That’s precisely the issue we’re talking about. Stubborn as always, aren’t you? Just give in and say that you’ll marry me.”

“No.”

She hadn’t been bothered about producing an heir for Hubert, but she couldn’t remain as calm and composed toward Claude. If possible, she wanted to birth a child with someone she loved—she wanted to have a child with Claude. Yet her age made her afraid of producing an heir. Still, Claude refused to back down.

“Then do I need to give up my rank?” Claude asked. “That’s all I need to do and things will be fine, right?”

“It will *not* be fine!” Opal cried. “What will the baroness and the rest of your

family think?! I know you can become a fine lord. If you surrendered your title you'd only trouble your residents!"

"But I'll be troubled if you don't marry me."

Claude simply escalated his arguments, Opal's rage proving totally ineffective. He didn't seem to realize it, but even as he remarked on Opal's stubbornness he too was stubborn in own right. She took a deep breath and tried to persuade him again.

"I've got a small plot of land to manage, you know," she said. "And I've got a dog too. And I've got a mountain of work ahead of me..."

"Then I'll live here with you, and I'll return to Taisei every now and then," Claude said.

"Then I should be the one occasionally visiting Socille instead."

"All right, then that's that."

Opal couldn't convince her childhood friend and instead had agreed to a different matter entirely.

"I haven't accepted your proposal yet," she said.

"But you *will* marry me, won't you?" he asked. "Face me already, Opal."

She tried to flee, but Claude's tight embrace stopped her from doing so. She had no other choice but to surrender. When she finally looked at him, he smiled, face beaming with happiness, revealing small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes that he didn't use to have. Out of a helpless sort of frustration, Opal divulged one of her darkest secrets.

"I named my dog Claude," she said.

There was a brief moment of silence. "Can you change that name?" Claude asked.

"Nope. He's still mischievous and is being trained, but he's finally remembered his own name. The more clumsy a child is, the more endearing they are, it seems."

"All right, fine. You can keep your dog."

Claude was resigned, while Opal smiled. He gave a frown lined in amusement before he hugged her tightly and kissed her once more. Opal knew that this wasn't a small peck but a real kiss, though it seemed Claude was holding himself back since they were outside. She wasn't used to kissing and had no idea what to do; she only let him do as he pleased. After exchanging a series of deep then small kisses, she was finally released from his embrace as she gasped for air.

"Opal," Claude said, a rascally smirk dancing on his lips.

"What?" Opal asked.

"You're quite the horrible kisser, aren't you?"

"Ugh! I can't believe you!"

She slapped his cheek at his insensitive remark, and as he flinched, she used that opportunity to slip out of his grasp and jump off the boulder. The soles of her feet tingled from the impact, but she was so embarrassed and angry that she paid no heed and dashed across the plains. But of course, Claude soon caught up with her, drew her close, and hugged her as she staggered.



“Sorry. I’m sorry. I love you,” he said.

“And I *hate* you!” Opal shouted.

“I know. But I love you. That was insensitive, I know. Sorry. I was just so happy...”

“Happy? I don’t understand you.”

She was hurt by his callous words earlier, but as she was hugged by her beloved and he whispered in her ear, there was no way she couldn’t forgive him. As her words also turned into a whisper, Claude hugged her tightly.

“You’re smart, strong, hardworking, and unstoppable,” he murmured. “But I was happy to learn that I can at least teach you how to kiss.”

“Huh?! Y-You don’t have to teach me anything!”

A red-faced Opal felt him lick her ear, and she turned around to protest, but his lips pressed against hers once more. He released her quickly and gave a happy smile.

“Sorry. Your ears turned so red, and it was just too cute,” Claude confessed.

“H-How could you find ears *cute*?!” Opal demanded.

“Oh, dear Opal, this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Opal had been married for seven years, but when it came to romance, she was a total novice. As he flashed a smile of satisfaction, she thought only one thing: *I could never marry this man.*

35. Departure

Opal and Nadja were both excited for their first trip on a boat. It was the first time they'd ventured outside of Socille, and they were stunned to see how Taisei was flourishing, to see how they even had a railroad for tourists now, connecting the port to the royal capital. Taisei had always been known for its power, but it seemed as if both the devastating plague and the civil war they'd gone through nearly a decade ago had had no effect on them; the kingdom was thriving.

Opal had thought that she understood how technologically advanced Taisei was when she saw the engineers in Manthest, but she realized that she'd been too naive. It was no wonder, then, that the engagement between Opal and Marquis Roussel of the Taisei Kingdom had sent a shock wave through noble society. She had been living quietly until now, but the engagement had caused letters and invitations to once again flood toward her. It was clear that they all wanted to get close to Marquis Roussel, and Claude and Opal chuckled as they declined each and every one.

It seemed no one had realized that the marquis was actually the third son of a Socille baron—not a single letter had arrived for Claude himself. Hubert had also been confused, and the duke had apparently approached Earl Holloway numerous times to inquire when Opal had had the opportunity to even get close to the marquis. The earl, however, had said not a word and claimed that his daughter was living her own life which was none of his business. He'd ended the discussion with a warning, telling the duke to worry about his own family. Hubert had looked dejected ever since. The nobles had started to circulate a few nasty rumors in order to suss out the truth, but Opal and Claude chose to ignore them all.

I don't want to, but I probably have to join in on a few societal occasions with Socille's nobles. And I'll probably bump into the duke one day. I'm sure he'll find out Marquis Roussel's true identity at some point. Since Opal had invested in the Manthest project, she couldn't completely steer clear from Hubert.

She was also planning on setting up an organization to support women, so she'd likely need to rub elbows with the nobility to gather donations. *I'll just talk only when I need to.*

The railcar pulled into the station, and as she got off, she parted ways with the three carriages that Claude had prepared for the baron and his wife. Claude, Opal, Nadja, and Claude the dog all boarded a carriage for Marquis Roussel's manor in the royal capital. When they finally arrived, Opal and Nadja couldn't hide their awe at what they saw from the carriage window. Opal's dog had been kept in a cage during the boat ride and railcar journey, and now he was lying on the seat, his head on Claude's lap.

The marquis felt a touch awkward about the dog who shared his name, but he suddenly remembered a topic to discuss before marriage.

"I forgot to tell you," he said. "When I went back to Socille, I told His Majesty in Taisei that I wouldn't return until my childhood friend agreed to marry me."

Opal whirled around in shock at this confession. Nadja, perhaps being considerate or simply not interested in the conversation, continued to peer out the window.

"Then what would the baroness and the others have done?" Opal asked.

"They're all adults," Claude said. "If I made the necessary preparations, I was sure that they could act on their own. But I did plan on wooing you without giving up or holding myself back. I thought hard about how I might free myself from my childhood friend status. If everything failed, my plan was to kidnap you and woo you here."

"Kidnapping is a very serious crime."

"Oh, don't worry about that. His Majesty himself had said, 'Then kidnap your childhood friend if you need to. You must return to Taisei.'"

"I'd heard that His Majesty of Taisei is a splendid man..."

"Oh, he is. But that's not what I wanted to tell you."

"Is there something else?"

"It's not a huge issue or anything, but as a condition for leaving this kingdom, I

was told I'd be bestowed the title of duke upon my return. The debacle from before shaved off quite a few of the nobility here, so we've got some titles just lying around."

"Extra titles don't really seem to be an issue. But, Claude, does that mean you'll become a duke?"

"In Taisei, yes. So you'll become a duchess again, Opal. You'll have more land to manage again, and I'd be grateful if you could help me do it."

"O-Of course. I'll do my best, but that makes me nervous."

"You've got nothing to worry about. We'll stick together, won't we? And you're good at managing land. I'm blessed to be marrying you."

"You're becoming a duke and gaining more land... This isn't a small issue at all."

Opal was trying to wrap her mind around it as the carriage pulled up to the manor of Marquis Roussel. She took Claude's hand and stepped out while the baroness had a tear-filled reunion with the butler and servants that she hadn't met since she was young. With the thought that he could leave more familiar matters to his mother, Claude stayed close to Opal, standing next to her while she observed the residence. Claude the dog was happily running about the steps.

"This is a manor that House Roussel has owned ever since they were bestowed an earlship," Claude explained. "Half of the servants haven't been replaced. And though I'm sorry for my mother, I went ahead and renovated it a little to fit more modern tastes since it was a touch inconvenient."

"It's very...magnificent," Opal managed to say, lost in thought.

"I'm happy to hear such praise. But I'm sure you'll run into a few issues once you start living here. If you've got any concerns, be sure to let me know at any time. I'll fix them."

As she took in the manor, the memories of her final day at Duke McLeod's residence flashed across her mind.

"I'm sure I won't have any issues," Opal said confidently. She smiled brightly

and turned to him. “And...the attic here looks very comfortable.”

“Yep,” Claude replied, an eyebrow raised in befuddlement. He knew her very well—it was clear to him that her words carried some deeper meaning. “Even an attic should be spacious and have a large window for fresh air if it’s going to be used as a room, right?”

“You’re right. I couldn’t agree more.” Opal paused and added, “I just thought that it’d be fun to hole myself up in the attic every now and then.”

“Then I’ll hole myself up with you.” He smiled, completely unfazed by her words.

His words were so fitting for his character, and Opal couldn’t help but burst out laughing. With Claude by her side, she was sure that she could enjoy her future with him, no matter what might happen. Her memories and her time of stubbornness when she’d cooped herself up in the attic was a story she’d save for another day. Surely, Claude could laugh it all off as one silly tale. For now she needed to look to the future.

Opal and Claude smiled as they slowly climbed up the steps to the manor, heading closer and closer to their bright future ahead.

Afterword

Hello, it's nice to meet you all. I'm Mori. Thank you for picking up *Duchess in the Attic*. And for those who haven't made their purchase yet, I'm sure the illustrations of Huyuko Aoi grabbed your attention. Their cover illustrations along with the other images throughout the book were absolutely stunning and supported my clumsy words very well. In fact, this book was written for these images, so please, if you're still considering that purchase, head straight for the register! Thank you so much.

Now, to give you a brief summary of the book, it's about Opal, a daughter of a wealthy household, forced into a political marriage with Hubert, a man who has high social status but is poor because of financial mismanagement. She hammers him into shape and raises him into a splendid man. Wait... That's not entirely the right summary, is it?

I'd be delighted if you could read the book and figure out the nitty-gritty details for yourself. For those who have read the web-novel version, I've added to and revised the book quite a bit, so I think you could enjoy the reading experience as well. For those who have already read the book, thank you very much for sticking with me.

I'm always wondering what to write in these afterwords, but it's also a time that I feel very happy, and if you could gain even a bit of enjoyment out of this book, it would make me happier than ever.

I'd like to thank Huyuko Aoi for all the adorable illustrations. The expressions of the strong-willed yet sympathetic Opal, the arrogant Hubert, the older brother-esque Claude, and the other characters were all portrayed very well. Thank you very much.

I'd also like to thank my editor for giving me excellent advice, the entire editing department, and everyone involved in the making of this book. Thank you to everyone who has also decided to pick up this book.

Mori

(Brief introduction of the author: When they first decided to use Shosetsuka ni Naro, they were still a student, and their pen name was a little cringe. When they wrote their first novel, they decided to change it, but it's so simple that they've started to regret it, all too late.

They have a pet turtle and rabbit. The turtle is allowed to roam free, and when its name is called, it runs as fast as it can toward its owner, which is a very soothing sight. The rabbit tries to run every chance it gets.)

Author: *Mori*

Illustrator: *Huyuko Aoi*

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Duchess
in the **ATTIC**



Dutchess *in the* ATTIC

Presented by: *Mori*
Illustrations by: *Huyuko Aoi*



Get out!
I'll divorce you!

Your Grace, *you* will be the one
who shall leave. Yesterday afternoon,
you signed the papers agreeing
to hand all your assets—
your land and manors—over to me.



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Duchess in the Attic: Volume 1

by Mori

Translated by piyo Edited by Dan-Tran Cong-Huyen

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