

# I Swear I Won't Bother You **AGAIN!**



NOVEL

5

WRITTEN BY  
**Reina Soratani**  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
**Haru Harukawa**



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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

## CHARACTERS

### MILANIA DIOR

Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council vice president. Claudia's best friend.

### CLAUDIA ACRUCIS

First prince of the Kingdom of Duralia and heir to the throne. Third-year student at Tanzanite Academy and student council president.

### GIA FORTE

Prince of Sina and Yulan's friend since middle school.

### YULAN CUGURS

Violette's childhood friend. Part of a side branch of the royal family and son of the prime minister. First-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

### MARIN

The maid who serves Violette.

### ROSETTE MEGAN

Princess of the neighboring country of Lithos and second-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

### MARYJUNE VAHAN

Second daughter of Duke Vahan. Violette's half sister and first-year student at Tanzanite Academy.

### VIOLETTE REM VAHAN

Eldest daughter of Duke Vahan, imprisoned for the attempted murder of her half sister. Sent back in time. Second-year student at Tanzanite Academy.



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## Chapter 191:

### Next, I Threw You Out of My Life

**W**ARMING HER CORE with the hot milk Marin had brought, Violette sighed heavily, relieving the tension in her shoulders. Not even three minutes had passed, yet she and Yulan shared an understanding that neither could bear to stay for long. She set down her empty cup, rose slowly to her feet, and glanced anxiously around the room.

“Just tell me what big items you want moved, and I’ll take care of those later,” Yulan told her. “For now, just gather up small things you want to take with you today.”

“Things I want to take with me...”

Some time had passed since Violette last called this room hers, yet not much appeared to have changed. The decor didn’t reflect her personality. No cute little trinkets adorned the shelves, nor could one spot a single photograph. Violette’s scent hung in the air, yet not a fragment of her presence was embedded in the chamber itself. All evidence of the resident’s life was so diluted that nobody would’ve known this was her room unless told.

“Oh—!”

Jolted from her dazed appraisal of the room by a sudden recollection, Violette quickly made her way to the closet. Yulan, who stood waiting nearby, expected her to take out clothes or jewelry. This wasn’t an appropriate place for a young man like him to be, and he recognized that it would be prudent to avert his gaze or leave the room until Violette had packed the travel bag Marin gave them.

“Yulan—”

“Hm?”

Yulan had discreetly turned his back, but Violette returned to his side and

spoke to him, seeming not to care whether he peeked. A hesitant glance revealed that she hadn't brought over anything resembling clothing. Yulan half turned, assuming she'd instead taken jewelry or other small items from the closet.

The cheeks of the formerly ashen Violette were now faintly dyed pink above her soft smile.

"Did you find a treasure?" Yulan asked.

"I did. Do you remember this?"

Violette opened her gently cupped hands, smiling distantly. In her hands sat a transparent pouch. The memory shut inside had faded in color with the years but kept its shape.

"Is that...?"

"It's the Christmas gift you gave me, Yulan. I asked Marin to hide it someplace safe for me."

Yulan had crafted the drab Christmas wreath himself. He remembered presenting it to Violette triumphantly. His workmanship was terribly shoddy, however. The wreath was neither colorful nor large enough to compare to a store-bought one, and since he hadn't tied it with an adequate ribbon, it scarcely resembled a present at all.

At the time, he'd been satisfied with the gift, since Violette had seemed delighted to receive it. After the fact, though, his immaturity riddled him with shame and regret.

"Thank goodness nobody rummaged in my closet. Only Marin knew where this was hidden, and I just found it by coincidence."

Caressing the nylon surface of the pouch containing the wreath, Violette's eyes crinkled with her nostalgic smile. She was either remembering the day Yulan gave her the gift or the day she'd stumbled across it—it didn't matter which. It was more important that the gift made her happy enough to gaze at it



with such fondness.

“I definitely want to bring this with me. I’m glad I found it.”

She wouldn’t have been surprised if her room had been turned upside down the day she ran away. Truth be told, until arriving today, Violette had only imagined the worst-case scenario. Still, she’d held a glimmer of hope that—at the very least—her closet drawer would be spared.

In fact, Violette’s imagined concerns had been borne out. If Chesuit hadn’t stopped her father’s rampage, he’d have ransacked her room like a robber, thrown out all her things, and turned the chamber into a storage closet. Violette hadn’t been informed of Chesuit’s heroics, nor of his firing. There was no need to hurt her with yet another painful truth.

“You kept it...all these years.”

Yulan had just assumed his gift had been thrown out. Even if Violette cherished the wreath, there were far too many other risk factors in her home—particularly Bellerose. She’d still been alive back then, forcing Violette to look like the spitting image of the young Auld.

“I never thought I’d be reunited with the darn thing in this context,” Yulan said. “It’s just as awful as I remember. My knots are atrocious.”

Violette chuckled softly. “My only recourse was to hide it... Thankfully, it remained untouched that way.”

“Well, to me, it’s just one big embarrassment.” Yulan pouted, puffing his cheeks.

Violette giggled in her big-sisterly way. Her resilience was a relief to Yulan. Still, they were in enemy territory. They could reminisce over sweet memories *after* leaving this house.

“Vio, is that wreath all you need?”

“Yes. Between this and the things Marin and Chesuit already gathered for me, there’s nothing else I treasure here.”

“If you say so...” Yulan replied doubtfully.

“Oh! But I must bring my gemstone with me.”

“Gemstone?”

“A friend and I are having matching accessories made. That stone is also sort of the only valuable I’ll have to my name now.”

Her plan all along had been to sell her jewelry to repay her debts. In reality, Violette didn’t have a cent. When she got engaged and left the house, she’d given up everything. She had no claim to this estate.

As it was, she was already relying solely on Yulan, but she at least wanted to fulfill a personal promise. As for her other jewelry, she’d received it all from her late mother, and tradition dictated that she take the pieces as dowry. However...

“I don’t want any of those.”

All her mother’s heirloom jewels—necklaces, thick bracelets, rings set with giant gemstones—sparkled radiantly, drawing attention. To Violette, though, they were collars, shackles, and chains of bondage.

The jewelry should’ve been beautiful, but every piece felt like a fetter to her. Her father had likely felt similarly about her mother’s things and thus passed everything on to her. Even her parents’ wedding rings were shut away in their case in a closet, long forgotten.

“This house... My mother... I don’t want any of it.”

## Chapter 192: The Final Farewell

**V**IOLETTE DIDN'T NEED MUCH resolve to throw everything out. She'd been thrown out first, so it was only a matter of will. *You bastards cast me out. Now I'm casting you out.*

"Today is my last time visiting this house... I'll never set foot in here ever again," she muttered. "I swear, I'll never return."

She no longer dreamed of a potential *someday*. She and her family would never come to an understanding. She could never forgive them, nor ever love them. She wouldn't let such a day come. Violette had cast aside the name "Vahan."

She'd rejected her family to take the hand of the one she loved.

"I owe you everything, Yulan. I never even dreamed this day would ever come."

Breathing was easier now. Before she left her family's manor, she'd never known that such a simple sensation could feel so precious. Those long years when her only means of safety had been locking herself in this room, where all she could do was curl into a ball on her bed—those now felt so distant.

Violette used to think of this room as her one refuge in the house, yet as she looked it over now, she felt not a single regret about leaving it behind. In the end, the room had meant very little to her. She'd spent her entire life in the chamber, yet even now, she struggled to identify what made it any different from a prison cell without bars.

"So I'm fine," she concluded. "I don't need anything else from here."

With a refreshed smile, she hugged the old wreath to her chest. The jewelry case Marin shut in the trunk would be sold without even being opened.



“Do *you* need anything else, Marin?” Yulan asked.

“Thank you, but Chesuit already helped me get everything,” she replied.

She carried the pen Violette had given her everywhere she went, and she’d already reclaimed all her other sentimental items. There were still some things she’d purchased with her earnings in her room, but they weren’t worth going back for.

“If you’re both all right with it, I’ll just dispose of everything else in the room here and now,” Yulan said. “I wager only the furniture will remain. You’re both sure you have everything?”

“Yes. I’m done.”

“Yes, that’s fine, my lord.”

Receiving Violette’s consent, Yulan snapped his fingers. At that, the servants previously waiting like statues in the corners of the room moved as one. They handled the items with care, since they’d belonged to Violette. Still, the process was surreal to watch, knowing that everything was destined for the trash.

This room contained only necessities required for daily life, and nothing in it truly belonged to Violette. In a mere three minutes, all traces of any human being ever having lived there would vanish, as if Violette had never even existed.

“Well, we should head out,” Yulan said. “Let’s buy lots of refreshments and celebrate having finished.”

“Excellent idea, my lord,” Marin agreed. “I already acquired the tea you wanted.”

“Oh, right, the tea. Did you get enough for me, though?”

“We can also order coffee through room service.”

“Right. We can. But I guess I’ll buy coffee beans anyway. Can you look after them for me there?”

“As you wish, my lord.”

Though the pair’s eyes didn’t meet, they made arrangements briskly, not missing a beat. Too comfortable around each other for a master and servant, they acted more like old friends.

It was only natural that their surprisingly friendly banter stupefied Violette, but she was overjoyed to see the two people she loved most getting along. In reality, though, what struck her as a tender scene was only a businesslike conversation.

*Oh...*

Following the lead of the pair getting ready to leave, Violette took a final look at the room that was once hers. As her personal effects were quickly shut away in boxes, the room *should* have felt less and less like it belonged to her, yet she couldn’t discern the slightest difference.

Atop the highest-stacked box lay a single burgundy notebook. That was the diary she’d carelessly shut away and forgotten after the last time she had it out, neither hiding it nor writing in it. Her secrets, stowed in the second drawer of her desk.

“Vio, are you ready?”

That notebook was a record of Violette’s life at this house—memories that would no longer serve her.

“Yes... I’m coming.”

Releasing her former self, she took the hand reaching toward her.

## Chapter 193:

### “An Olive Branch” Could Be an Overstatement...

“THESE COFFEE BEANS ARE delicious—I think they just might be the best.”

“I’ll make sure to keep this brand on hand, then, my lord.”

“No need. I can have someone else bring some over later.”

“Is the coffee that good?” Violette asked.

“Either way, if I enjoy it, then you definitely won’t want to drink it, Vio.”

“Yes... I’m aware of that.”

With a pout on her lips, Violette sipped her own sweet milk tea. Since she was self-aware, she wasn’t about to raise objections. Still, she had a difficult time accepting her own disposition. Part of her couldn’t shake the idea that drinking black coffee was mature. She’d tried it once as a child, mimicking an adult to prove her own adulthood.

“I hope I didn’t get carried away and buy too much food. Think we’ll have too many leftovers?”

The confections Yulan had bought along with the coffee completely covered the table’s surface. He’d not only bought every scrumptious-looking dessert in the patisserie’s glass case, he’d also purchased treats that working-class children might like, and salty snacks as well.

Yulan’s mind was weary, but his body still had pent-up energy to expel, so he’d gotten carried away with his shopping spree. But buying each and every thing that caught your eye was bound to get you in a mess. Even with Marin helping them, these were far too many treats for three people to eat.

Violette giggled. “It seems we won’t run out of snacks for quite some time.”

There were indeed far too many goodies in the mountainous pile covering the



table, but the sight eased the tension her body had been holding. Although she couldn't relax completely, it felt as though a heavy burden had lifted from her shoulders.

It was so easy to breathe.

"You should stay and have tea with us, Marin. You've finished preparing everything, haven't you?"

"Yes, my lady, but—"

"Don't mind me. Just do as you please," Yulan interjected.

"Understood... All right, then, I'll just have some tea as well."

Marin set the teapot down on the table and went to get a teacup. Her things were in this room, so she'd return shortly.

"By the way, how did you do on your exams?" Yulan asked.

"I scored much lower than last time, but within the range I expected."

"Well, it was just one hardship after another for you during the entire exam period. You truly deserve a rest now."

"You too, Yulan. You worked a lot behind the scenes for my sake. Thank you for that."

"I *wanted* to help."

"Thanks all the same."

"Hmm...you're welcome? Is that what I should say now?"

The two shyly lowered their eyes and sipped their drinks. There was an indescribable sweetness in the air between them. It seemed impossible to fathom the chaos that had unfolded before them mere hours ago; they already felt completely detached from that mess. Thus, they had no feelings to spare on it.

After a minute, Marin joined their tea party, and a gentle atmosphere ensconced them as they enjoyed a peaceful chat.

“Ooh, this really takes me back!” Marin gasped over one treat. “I didn’t know they still sold these.”

“You’re familiar with those?” Violette asked.

“When I lived at the church, I was allowed one extravagance per month. I would choose a trip to the snack shop. At the time, I thought these were the height of luxury, but looking back now, I probably only thought so because you could buy so many so cheaply.”

“Maybe also partly because many shops sell them, and they’re easy to come by?” Violette suggested.

“Maybe so. Mm... I’m surprised the flavor holds up after all these years.”

“Are those sweet?”

“Well, I’d find it very strange if *you* liked them, my lady.”

“Yeah. My Vio likes *sickeningly* sweet desserts,” Yulan teased.

## Chapter 194:

### The Grand Denouement of Our World

**A**FTER A ROUND OF TEA, refreshments, and relaxation, silence suddenly fell on the table. All three of them had been tense when they initially sat down. But, after a relaxing teatime, they all sensed mutual calm once again.

“Well, we need to talk about the future.”

The soft smile in Yulan’s voice was so light that it could fly away at any moment. It wasn’t a product of whimsy but of his fresh resolve to finally get a heavy burden off his chest. It revealed an ease of mind that came from knowing that nobody had the right to stand in the way of their future—and that felt good.

“Preparations on our home are well underway, Vio. The land isn’t all that great, but it’ll be quiet and comfortable.”

“Our home... Do you mean—”

“The one I told you about, yes. The house I used to live in... Will that be all right? I was a baby when I lived there, so I mean, it’s not like I even remember it.”

Yulan had resided briefly in the mansion with his birth mother before the Cugurs adopted him. He’d told Violette about that once, long ago, but she’d never been there. Yulan hadn’t returned since his adoption either. In time, however, he’d come to realize that the lands and mansion didn’t belong to the crown, nor to the Cugurs family. They belonged to Yulan himself.

“Of course, you can keep living in this hotel if you wish. But after you graduate, you’ll have much more spare time, and there are only so many things you can do here.”

Ultimately, a hotel was no place to call home, but life there was comfortable.

For now, Violette found it convenient and easy that someone else looked after everything. Still, her sheltered upbringing had led to a love of the outdoors, which would surely make her feel constricted there eventually.

“I’ve only been over there to clean and inspect the place,” Yulan continued. “But I thought maybe you and I could go now and see what it’s like inside.”

Everything from the ground up was being arranged for just the two of them. The home Yulan was preparing wasn’t a dollhouse, nor a secret base in the forest. It was a real house. A place they could both call home—where they could live their lives.

“I think...that’s a lovely idea.” The soft warmth in Violette’s voice caressed Yulan’s ears.

She’d never known how fun it could be to discuss the future. Being bound together with her beloved, sharing life... She’d always thought that sort of happiness only existed in fairy tales. At the very least, she hadn’t even been able to fathom such a day ever dawning for her.

After all, she’d vowed to steal away to a nunnery because she hadn’t wanted to burden anyone...and hadn’t wanted to be near anyone.

“I’m sure looking forward to it,” Yulan chuckled. “We still have no furniture, so we’ll have to get that by the time I graduate.”

“I’d love to see the house before it’s furnished,” Violette replied. “Once we get into our half-day schedule, we’ll have plenty of time for that, I suppose.”

“Well...it seems like I’ll be serving on the student council, so I might not get any time off until the holidays.”

“Um...you’re joining the student council?”

“The president and vice president are graduating, and apparently, a number of people nominated me. They’ll still hold a vote, but it seems to be an unwritten rule that if you’re the president’s aide in your second year, you become president in your third year. They pass the torch right before the

graduation ceremony, so when the spring holidays roll around, I'll finally be able to relax."

"Oh... Well, I know you'll win anyway, but you have my vote, Yulan."

"Thanks."

Yulan wore his typical goofy smile, undercutting the significance of the appointment. The student council president had a heavy workload, but the role came with a lot of authority. The position was highly competitive, and while it was put to a vote, those who received the most nominations always found their way to the president's chair.

Truth be told, when Yulan entered his first year at the academy, he'd immediately been approached for the position. He adamantly rejected the continual overtures until Claudia ultimately had to step in and encourage the recruiters to give up. The only reason Yulan had now finally said yes to the desperate recruiter was simply that Claudia was leaving. It was his presence that had caused Yulan's initial adamant refusals. With Claudia out of the picture, he didn't particularly care one way or the other about taking the role.

"I brought the house's floor plan along, just in case," Yulan said. "Where should we put Marin's room?"

"I don't care, as long as it's the closest to Violette's room," Marin said.

"I guess that means you *do* care," Yulan quipped.

Violette giggled. "I'd feel safest with Marin close by too."

"All right, then, want to be hallway neighbors? You and I won't share a bed or anything until I graduate, after all."

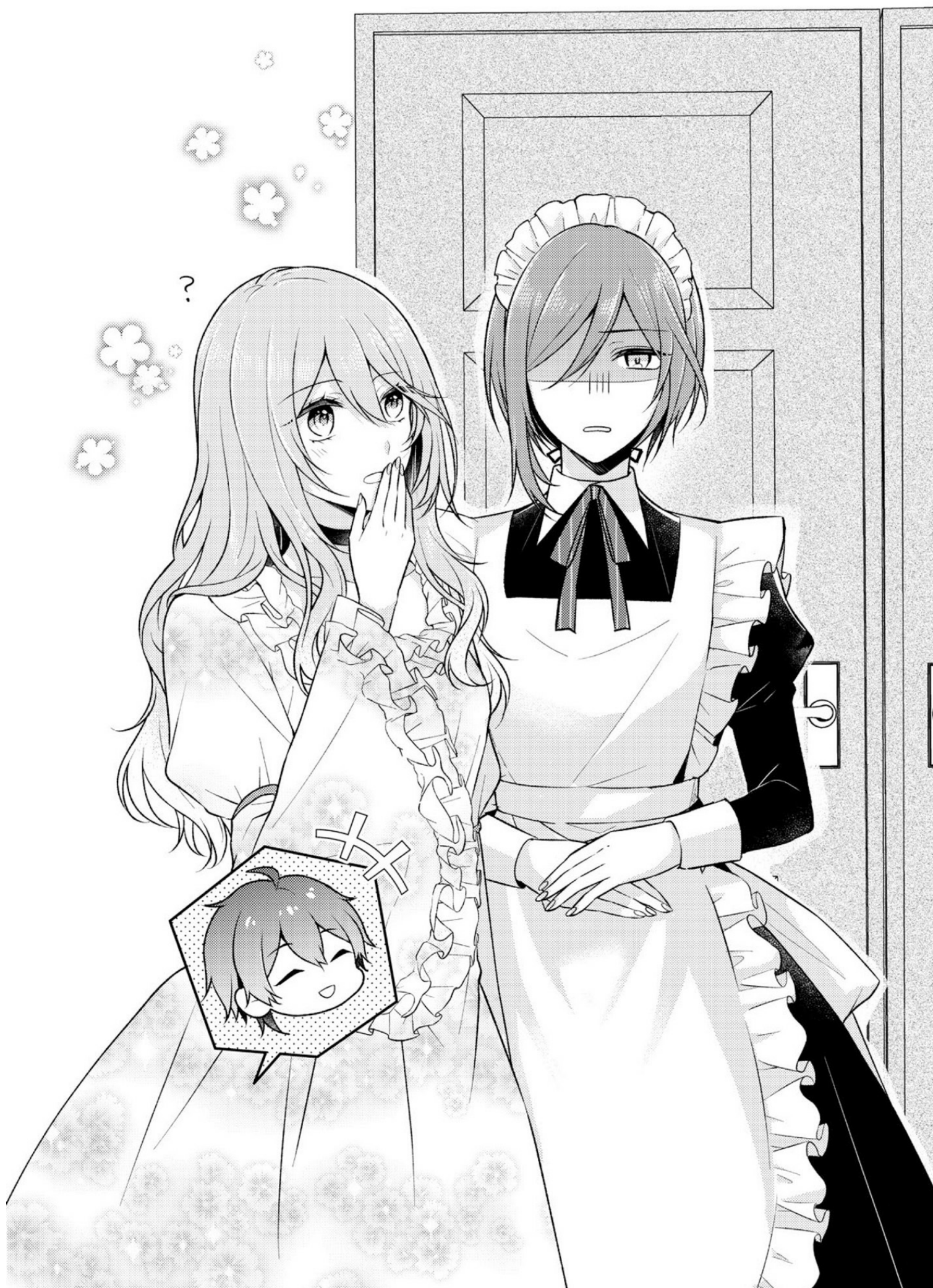
"....."

"Marin, your face has turned to stone," Violette said.

"I feel very conflicted right now," the maid muttered.

Yulan laughed merrily.





## Chapter 195:

### The Beast Prince

**W**ITH THE MOST IMPORTANT TASK—visiting the Vahan estate—out of the way, there was nothing left to do but relax. Claudia's graduation and the student council elections were getting closer, but Yulan couldn't care less about either. He had no interest in Claudia, and the elections were fixed anyway.

On the other hand, Violette seemed a little preoccupied with these developments, perhaps because her friend was Claudia's fiancée.

Gia leaned his elbows on the windowsill as he watched the hustle and bustle below. With an awed sigh, he said, "Dang. Graduation ceremonies sure are extravagant when a prince is involved."

Yulan followed his friend's gaze. His eyes narrowed into a glare as his icy voice echoed through the empty classroom. "Yeah. Still, the party afterward is the main event. Since it'll coincide with the prince's formal engagement announcement, it's bound to be a gaudy, well-attended affair."

"Ohhh. That must be why Pops said he'd swing by. Dang, Yulan... You look *crazy* annoyed."

"Probably because I *am* annoyed."

Yulan was aware of the deep crease forming between his brows as he frowned. He knew he should put on a happy face, but he couldn't help being irritated.

He disliked parties to begin with, and in light of the royal engagement announcement, the crowd would be even bigger than usual. He loathed crowds to begin with and loathed royal crowds even more. Everyone at that party was sure to scrutinize Yulan and his eyes.

*Why, he's grown into a wonderful man worthy of those golden eyes, their*

stares would say—as if his eyes mattered most, and Yulan himself was merely an added prize. As they fawned over him, they’d completely forget how they’d tyrannized such a “wonderful man” in the past.

“My engagement’s going to be announced as well, so I see annoying hobnobbing in my near future,” Yulan grumbled.

“Hang in there, buddy.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Hey, I was just tryin’ to console you, man,” Gia cackled.

Yulan shot him a death glare. Gia always got on his nerves, but he was in rare form today. Yulan wanted to smack him upside the head, but he knew Gia wouldn’t feel the slightest pain. Yulan might be taller, but nobody at this academy surpassed Gia in muscle and endurance.

It irritated him to admit it, but he knew there was no way he could ever defeat Gia in a fight. The fact that they weren’t enemies made fighting unnecessary, but if they ever found themselves in the same ring, Gia would easily beat him.

He was carefree, magnanimous, and impossible to restrain. He’d broken free of his shackles and dared to live life on his own terms; he was so much Yulan’s polar opposite that there wasn’t a single area where the two could relate. That was exactly what made Gia low-maintenance as a friend, but it was also why he irritated Yulan. He hated how their stark differences seemed to amuse Gia.

“Ah—actually, this’s great timing,” Gia said.

“Eh? For what?”

“Well, after graduation, I’ll introduce you to my pop.”

“Huh...?” Yulan’s listless gaze turned from the view outside to Gia, who was staring out the window beside him. His lips parted slightly, showing his surprise.

A sideways glance and snicker from Gia snapped him out of his stupor. Yulan’s gaze sharpened to fine daggers as he stared Gia hard in the eye, demanding to

know what he was scheming.

Yulan's death glare only made Gia snicker harder. Eventually, he burst out laughing. "*Damn*, if looks could kill! Ha ha!"

As he cackled uncontrollably, the look on his face was innocent and carefree, like a little boy after a successful prank. His boyish face looked even younger, which only fueled Yulan's suspicions further. You could argue that Yulan was just predisposed to such feelings; still, mulling over one's suspicions about Gia was a waste of time.

With another loud laugh, Gia stepped away from the window and closed the arms-length gap between himself and Yulan. The height difference made Gia look up at Yulan, but otherwise, his former traces of boyish innocence had all vanished completely.

His smile was elated to the point of being sadistic. "Yulan, I *know* you've been using me."



## Chapter 196: An Apex Predator

**G**IA WAS ON TO ME. *Well, it's not like I didn't notice.*

"Don't put words in my mouth," Yulan muttered.

"Oh dear. Did the word *using* offend you?"

"I never lied to you, you know."

"Fair point."

Gia's predatory grin vanished, and his usual flippant aura returned. His expressions always changed rapidly, yet they were all surely genuine. Unlike Yulan, he didn't don a mask.

"Oh—I ain't mad, by the way," Gia added.

"Do you think I care if you are?"

"Nah."

Gia plopped down on the windowsill and rested his feet on a nearby desk. He set his feet wide apart, arms clasping his knees, in a way that seemed distastefully ill-suited to the atmosphere.

"You said we're friends. That's all ya really did," he said.

More accurately, Yulan had only told someone else that he was friends with Prince Gia. That was the former head of the Vahan family—Violette's grandfather.

"Doing so was more effective than I ever could have dreamed. Thank you for that," Yulan said.

"Funny. Ya don't *look* very thankful."

Yulan surely understood Sina's significance as a nation better than Gia did.



The island empire, which was surrounded by ocean, rejected other nations' influence. For years, they'd preserved and nurtured their own independent culture and environs. Many other nations had tried to find a foothold in Sina through various means, but they'd all failed.

*But I'm friends with the royal prince, a personification of Sina itself.* That fact was more useful to a man than any gift could possibly be, although simple friendship didn't necessarily confer any further benefits; there was no guarantee that their connection would be advantageous to Duralia. For that matter, Yulan had never expected Gia to suddenly bring up the friendship. Not even today.

Despite all those uncertainties, Yulan's "friendship" with Gia was a hope worth clinging to. The empire of Sina was that important.

"So, what brought this on?" Yulan asked. "Are you seriously implying that I want to bridge the gap between Sina and Duralia?"

"Ha ha! No chance in hell. You'd never help this kingdom of your own free will."

"The same is true of you. Creating bonds between nations sounds like a boring headache with no upside."

"Well, yeah... It *would* be a headache," Gia acknowledged. "It wouldn't have to be boring, though. It could be *fun*."

He smirked as innocently as a little boy who'd just set a trap. It was the smile of a man who measured his entire life in "fun." He applied that metric to others' lives too.

"You have no designs on my country, I know that," he continued. "You just dropped my name to get what you wanted. Ya got no actual intention of exploitin' it further. That's why you don't want to give Duralia's higher-ups the slightest indication that you'll fulfill their hopes. Shame, really. Your connection with my empire could serve as a pretty powerful trump card for you."

As Gia drawled on, his tone of voice and the look in his eye were the same as always. Yet the young prince leaning back in his seat before Yulan's eyes now practically seemed like a being from another dimension.

"Sure, but that doesn't concern me," Yulan answered curtly.

Gia's disheveled school uniform, traditional Sinan accessories, skin and hair color—everything about him was foreign in Duralia, which was what made him so eye-catching. He obeyed no one and looked down on everyone—that was embedded in his lineage.

He was arrogant and insolent, narcissistic and vain, audacious and outrageous. He disregarded everyone and was bound by no one, yet his sheer existence entranced everybody.

The sweet, adorable smile on his face—one without a trace of kindness or softness—was the furthest thing from Duralian. Still, Gia's was the face of a prince.

## Chapter 197: International Relations

**G**IA CARRIED HIS EMPIRE on his shoulders flippantly, and he wasn't about to change his tune. It remained a mystery whether that was out of a different level of generosity or a fundamental difference in psyche. Either way, at present, Yulan's only option was to accept the words Gia threw at him.

"Look, Sina *technically* never pledged neutrality," Gia told him. "We just sized up our potential allies and weren't satisfied with any of them. And, in turn, they all made an informed call not to mess with us."

Sina had merely let other nations assume it was neutral and nonaggressive. Really, the country welcomed those who came and didn't mourn those who left. It was true that Sina was beholden to no one and didn't seek anyone's help, but perhaps it wasn't right to call it "neutral" on that basis.

Gia's homeland had nothing to gain by reaching out, and no reason to compromise either. So there it stayed, essentially set on a hill a comfortable distance away, looking down at the other nations that regarded it with a scrutinizing gaze.

"A plethora of possibilities lie in the unknown. But even if they realized that, most of the idiots courting Sina choked along the way. And not because we wouldn't accept them—because they couldn't *adapt* to our ways."

A smooth alliance couldn't form if both sides were loath to make significant compromises in the process. Part of Sina's general approach was the belief that whichever side didn't cave after a clash in opinions was in the right. They valued violence over kindness. Greed over reason. In a kingdom whose values were far too different, everyone cried when they thought of their homeland and, in the end, turned their backs. Nobody in Sina desired that.

"This system has mostly worked in our favor." Gia shrugged. "Even without

making diplomatic efforts, Sina can still establish itself. That goes for its people too.”

“All right, then... What will the point of introducing me to your father be?”

Even Gia, the embodiment of carefree capriciousness, would acknowledge that this certainly wouldn’t end once he’d innocently introduced his father to someone he befriended while studying abroad. Yulan didn’t know what Sina’s current monarch was like, but considering the empire’s *modus operandi*, it was easy to imagine he was a lot like Gia—carefree, self-indulgent, arrogant, and smart. Hedonistic, yet at times capable of greater cruelty than Yulan. Gia’s father likely wasn’t as extreme as Gia, but he was still the boy’s father.

“It doesn’t matter if there’s no point to it. But it also doesn’t matter if there *is* a point.”

Gia’s lips curled upward into a smile, his bicuspid protruding like fangs. Those were the mark of an apex predator. Did that make Yulan his prey?

As a drop of cold sweat trickled down Yulan’s back, he was angered by the revelation that part of him wanted to shrink back and hide. He was aware that Gia was overpowering him, but would he buckle in front of the intimidating boy? No. Yulan’s ego would never allow that.

“So...I guess you’re saying you took a liking to me?” Yulan asked.

“Guess so. At the very least, you met my minimum requirements.”

Yulan exhaled, relieving his body’s unwanted tension. In the time it took to blink, he’d already made up his mind. He’d knowingly sown the seeds; they just produced a flower bed bigger than he imagined. He never dreamed that Gia would be the one to approach him, but that was still within the realm of possibility.

Gia’s penetrating gaze slowly but surely rubbed Yulan the wrong way. He’d ordinarily want to smack the smug smile off the prince’s face. At that moment, though, they weren’t speaking as friends—they were confronting each other as

the prince of Sina and an aristocrat of Duralia. So Yulan needed to adorn his face with a handsome smile, not an angry look.

Yulan took a breath. “I’m deeply honored to hear that from the esteemed prince of a peaceful empire.”

“Ha ha ha! Jeez, that sounded so fake!”

If only Gia were the type Yulan could easily fool with the charming persona he’d grown accustomed to donning. To Gia, though, nothing seemed shadier than Yulan’s appealing smile.

“That’s exactly why I can trust ya.”

## Chapter 198:

### A Trump Card

**N**OBODY KNEW BETTER THAN VIOLETTE that Yulan's heart contained no pious feelings of kindness or goodness. It went beyond casting everything aside for Violette—Yulan never gave anyone else space in his heart. His staunch devotion approached fastidiousness. Compared to Violette, he'd consider anyone filthy and vile.

That was exactly what Gia liked about him.

“What Sina values isn't procedure or emotion. It's results. We don't care about emotional investment or effort either. Whether a common man works himself to death, or a genius effortlessly snaps his fingers, we only distinguish between their results based on the benefits those results yield.”

If someone worked himself to the bone and had nothing to show for it, while a genius succeeded with no effort whatsoever, and you chose the former out of pity, Sina's people would never trust you.

Sina's people were daring and dauntless. They were results driven, endorsing survival of the fittest. They valued cruel power over merciful weakness and combat over compromise. It was truly a miracle that they weren't at war with other nations. Sina apparently also had its fair share of daily domestic squabbles, but those disputes were so common that they were settled quickly.

They were a genuinely adversarial pack. Gia's father led them, and Gia was likely next in line to take his place.

“You aren't swayed by emotion either. You show no mercy. You stoically chase only what benefits you, with only one exception—Violette. You're much easier to understand than impartial philanthropists.”

Over the past year, never once—not even for a split second—had Yulan's heart driven him to act on behalf of anyone but Violette. Gia couldn't

comprehend how Yulan's heart was constructed, not even a fragment of it. Yulan was surely equally baffled by Gia's heart, which seemed guided only by carefree curiosity.

"You used me, so now I'm gonna use you," Gia announced. "It's a little give-and-take. I think this arrangement benefits you too."

Yulan had rejected the notion of being at all useful to Duralia out of hand, but he wasn't going out of his way to harm it either. It was Violette's home—that was all the reason he needed.

The thing was, the steps he'd needed to take to secure his engagement to Violette were forceful, to say the least. Given Yulan's unstable social standing, there was no better resource than several friends in high places. A diplomatic relationship with Sina was the most powerful trump card he could conceive of. Having been dealt that high card, Yulan was too smart to throw it away out of anger and resentment.

"Seriously...I hate you so much," he grumbled.

"Really?" Gia chuckled. "Well, I like you."

After the day Gia emotionlessly approached him, Yulan planned to keep his trump card hidden... But would he finally use it in the end?



## Chapter 199:

### One Year

INTOXICATED BY THE HECTIC HUSTLE and bustle, Violette retreated to the usual place for solitude. When she arrived at the little spot tucked away in a corner of the school garden, she remembered the day she'd met Rosette. If she hadn't visited the garden that day, the pair would've graduated without speaking to each other once. That really reminded her that one never knew which way fate's dice would fall.

*What would the Violette that day think of me now? She'd probably resent me for having such a good life, or suspect it was all feigned. At the very least, she wouldn't believe that she'd become part of Yulan's future.*

And, if the Violette of one year ago had seen her today, what would've devastated her? That Claudia hadn't chosen her? That, no matter how hard she wished for it, her family never loved her? That she entangled Yulan in her horrible life?

"Probably everything," she mused.

She envisioned each scenario easily. It made her laugh, although she was laughing at herself. She could imagine herself transformed into a monster, eyes popping out of their sockets, her hair a wild mess. In reality, she'd let bloodlust tempt her to commit murder, so it would be more accurate to describe that as a memory, rather than her imagination.

Now Violette could look back on those days with detachment—nostalgia, even. That was all because she'd been able to free herself from everything.

With a sigh, she fell into her thoughts.

*There's sure to be many hardships ahead. We've resolved the biggest problem, but a mountain of tasks is still left undone. The first trial I have to face will be meeting Yulan's parents. Then again, they already know me, and we've*

*spoken. So, while I'm nervous about that, I won't feel nearly as nauseated as I did visiting my own parents.*

The worried Yulan had forbidden Violette from being present when he met with her parents, so meeting with *his* was her best chance to show her strength and resilience.

Forgetting she was in public, she stretched and yawned. Interlacing her fingers tightly and stretching her arms to the sky was euphoric for her back. Then a breeze carried the soft fragrance of flowers to her. It was a pure, gentle fragrance she knew well.

"I thought I'd find you here," Rosette said.

"Oh dear. It appears I've been caught."

Rosette wore her usual smile, but it looked a bit more vibrant than before. Her new role as Prince Claudia's fiancée had its share of challenges. The official announcement would come after graduation, but the whole academy knew already.

"I'm so tired..." she sighed.

"Hang in there. I wish I'd brought some drinks out here."

"Oh, it's all right. I won't be here long. I imagine people will soon approach me to offer congratulations."

Another sigh escaped her soft pink lips. Her closed eyelids sparkled with light eye shadow. Rosette didn't ordinarily wear makeup, but as a prince's fiancée, she now needed to meet all sorts of people. A crisp, clean appearance no longer sufficed—her natural assets had to be enhanced to their fullest.

The look suited Rosette, and Violette thought she was very pretty. Still, the fatigue telegraphed by her sigh was something Violette couldn't approve of unhesitatingly.

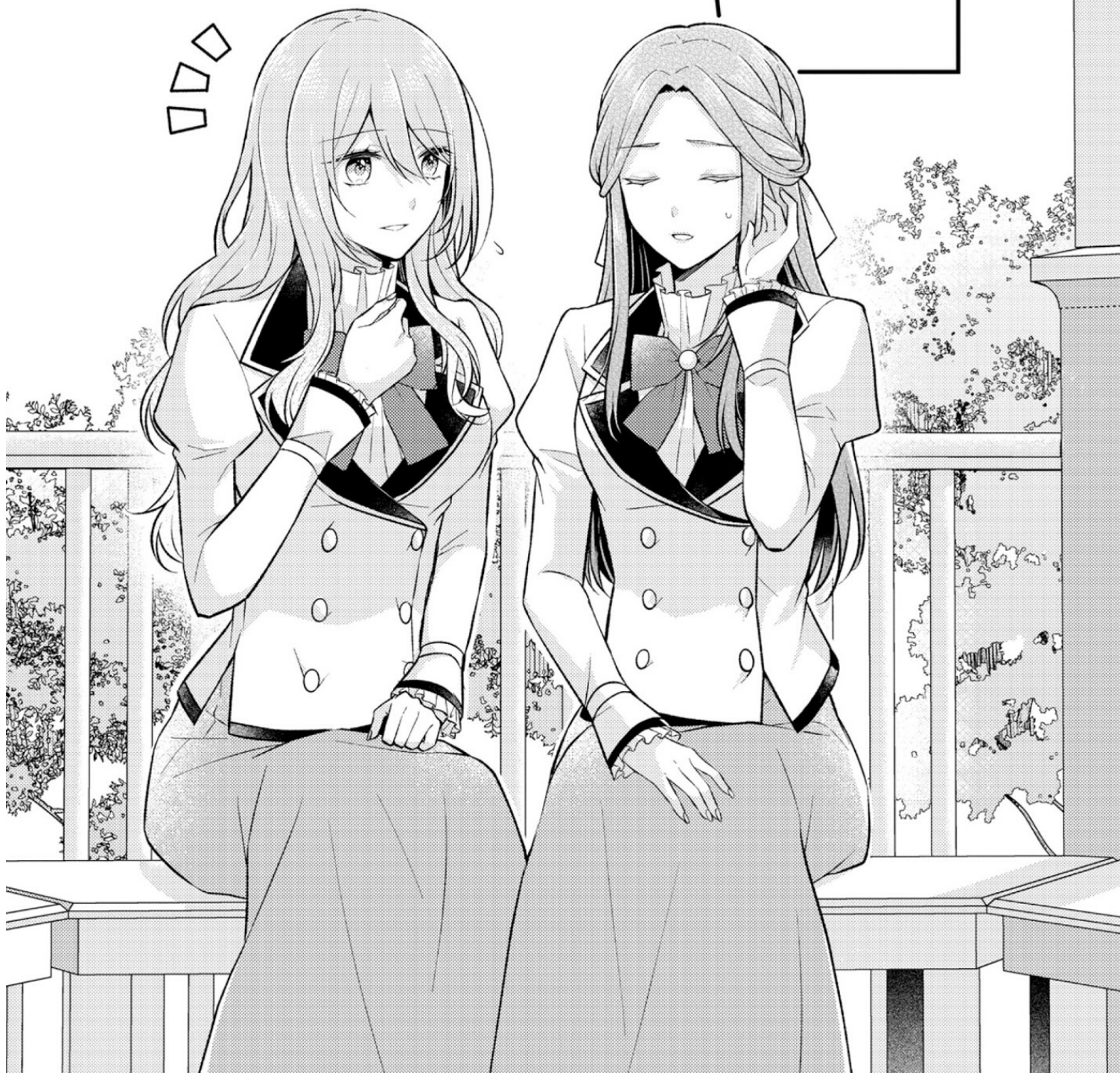
"You really do look tired. Will things be this way until the official announcement?"

“Once Claudia has more freedom, I think they’ll settle a little. At the moment, he has his final student council tasks to tend to, you see.”

“Right. He’s preparing documents to transfer leadership?”

“Yes. The election won’t be for a while, but he’s already chosen his successor.”

Yulan would succeed Claudia, so the person helping him with the documents was presumably the next term’s president. Since Yulan would be that person’s aide, Milania was likely filling him in on that position too. Violette had heard nothing about other members being present, so she worried that the two would butt heads. Yulan’s history with Claudia went without saying, but he and Milania weren’t really that compatible either.



“Do you suppose anyone else is joining the student council?” Violette asked.

“I think so. This year’s council somehow filled its vacancies with temporary help, but it sounded like they had many challenges.”

“Ah...I see.”

The reason the student council was so short on people that year was the sabotage that was Violette’s romantic self-promotion. She still felt guilty about that. Yet even after time reset, and she stopped lurking around the student council room, the council didn’t seek out more help. You couldn’t say that was entirely Violette’s fault.

“Once I get some free time, let’s have tea again,” Violette suggested. “When our class schedule lightens, we could even go out.”

“I’d love to! The prospect of tea with you shall help me persevere through all the hard work ahead.”

“Just don’t overextend yourself.”

Waving her hand, Violette thoughtfully watched her friend walk away, back up the path she’d arrived down. *I should find someplace to take Rosette once her schedule clears up. A nice, relaxing place where she can rejuvenate herself.*

There wasn’t much time left until graduation—the end of the year for the second time.

## Chapter 200:

### Courtship

**“V**IO? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?”

“I’m fine.” Violette giggled. “My wound’s been healed for quite some time now.”

“I know. But let me know if your feet start hurting.”

“I will, thanks.”

Although Yulan was walking around with Violette, he still couldn’t help but worry about letting her get hurt. Her cheeks had returned to a healthy color, but she still felt the anguish in Yulan’s apparently soothing gaze.

“Are you at all cold, Lady Violette?” Marin piped up from Yulan’s other side.

“I’m fine. Just relax, you two.”

Marin wasn’t wearing her usual maid’s uniform. She’d donned a simple jacket and slacks, and her arms were empty, since she’d dropped off their belongings in the car along the way.

Violette could never have imagined herself on an outing with these two. When Yulan suggested it the other day, she couldn’t believe her ears. But since the idea didn’t bother her, she still agreed to it.

She did feel a bit guilty that the date fell on Marin’s day off. The maid had already sacrificed her fair share of days off when they lived at the Vahan estate.

“Sorry we had to leave so early in the morning,” Yulan apologized. “But we could only get the place to ourselves at this hour.”

“To ourselves...?”

Violette initially hadn’t known where Yulan was taking them, but from the roads they took, she got a pretty good idea. Thus, it came as little surprise to

her when they reached the large cathedral's gate.

The day was so young that some people were still eating breakfast. Violette had assumed that was why the place was so deserted; she had no idea Yulan had rented it just for them. She was astonished that that was even possible, and even more curious to know *why* Yulan needed to rent it. She looked up at him inquisitively, but all she received in reply was his usual smile.

They stepped inside to find the cathedral empty. Not only were there no worshippers, even the priests and nuns were nowhere in sight—probably because Yulan had rented the place.

As he stood there in silence, Violette addressed him cautiously. “Yulan...?”

“Oops, sorry... Just noticing the designs of the stained glass.”

“Mm-hmm... But you’ve never set foot in a church, Yulan. Not even when you were little.”

“Yeah. They just didn’t feel like places I belonged... This is only my second time in this church.”

“You’ve been here before?”

Since Yulan had despised holy places ever since his youth, Violette just assumed he’d *never* been to a church. That said, two visits over his entire life in Duralia was already very infrequent churchgoing.

“Well, one year ago, on this very day...that’s when I came here.”

There was a hurt yet sweet smile on Yulan’s face. Not from his reminiscing but from the sting of an old, unhealed wound. What, Violette wondered, did he see in that stained glass?

He reached out and touched her hair, her cheek, her lips. Although his touch was rather platonic for a fiancé, it had too much weight to feel like a sign of playful affection. He traced Violette’s curves, as if to assure himself that she was warm...that she was there...that she was *alive*.

“Listen, Vio—”



Yulan's fingers slid down Violette's face, then found her hand and laced through her own fingers. Violette looked up to see not a smile but nervously parted lips beneath a solemn gaze.

"I...I messed up over and over. I made the wrong choices, and I hurt you, Vio. I wanted to do better...but I just couldn't."

To Violette, this was a confession of love—and to Yulan, it was a confession of guilt.

"But giving up wasn't an option. I'd rather have died. If I gave up, I'd live only to love you, until I could no longer breathe."

As Yulan slowly lowered himself to one knee, he brought their clasped hands to his forehead in a gesture of penance, entreaty, promise, and prayer. His fingers trembled slightly on top of Violette's. He was scared of something...of someone.

Before Violette could question any of this, Yulan looked up at her. When his lustrous golden eyes pierced her, her heart pounded louder and stronger in her ears.

"I don't believe in God, so I won't vow to him. I only believe in you, Violette. I vow to cherish you. I vow...to keep you happy for the rest of your life. I love you with all my heart. I will join your life if you'll join mine."

Something soft, yet slightly rough, touched Violette's hand, then parted with a darling little kiss. When Yulan looked back up at her, his usual smile had returned. It was all so natural, it took Violette a little while to realize what had just happened.

Her face abruptly burning, Violette knew without looking in a mirror that she was as red as a beet. Eyes wide as saucers, she opened and closed her mouth with silent gasps. Her eyes swam with every emotion from shock to shame to jubilation.

Yulan had known he'd get this reaction and didn't seek an answer from

Violette. Or rather, he took her blushing face as his answer. He rose to his feet, stretched wide, and yawned, looking as if a big burden had just lifted from his shoulders.

“During our wedding, I’ll have to make a vow to you in front of God. So I just had to tell you how I feel before then.”

“Well...I understand that—but—”



“I also considered holding a private wedding,” Yulan added. “But we need her as our witness as I vow to make you happy, Vio.”

It was then that Yulan glanced at the woman standing behind them for the first time. The word “her” made Violette spin around in a fluster, suddenly remembering Marin was there. Reeling from Yulan’s actions, she’d forgotten completely. In other words, Marin had witnessed the entire scene.

“Oh...ah...” Violette groaned.

“Gee, Vio. You’re red as an apple.”

Overwhelmed with embarrassment, Violette desperately tried to hide her face behind her hair. As far as Marin was concerned, though, this scene had been nothing new. Yulan had showered Violette with love every day; Violette just hadn’t noticed until now.

“Oh, Yulan... When did you become such a little scamp?”

“Um...I’ve always been a scamp.”

“True... How could I forget?”

Ever since they were children, Yulan’s spontaneity had surprised Violette. It was true that he’d always had a mischievous disposition, and that he hadn’t changed. The only difference now was that Violette no longer saw it through her “little brother” blinders.

“You’d suddenly clamber onto the windowsill and fall off, get stuck climbing up a tree, or bury yourself in picture books.”

“Er, why do you remember all the things I wish you’d forget?”

“Hee hee!”

Violette wiped tears from her eyes. Yulan broke into a smile. When she saw that, she couldn’t help but giggle. He was her sweet, precious little brother. Even though that sweet little boy was now a big, strong man, he was still the same inside.

“You know, Yulan, ever since we were kids, you’ve always had a knack for making me smile.”

## Chapter 201:

### A Debt Repaid From That Fated Day

**“W**HY'D YOU BRING ME ALONG?”

They were waiting for the car to take them home, Yulan's eyes on Violette's back as she gazed at the tidy rows of trees. Then that voice, only loud enough for him to hear, struck him from the side.

He and Marin didn't even give each other a sideways glance. The air between the pair was that of two complete strangers.

“You heard me,” Yulan replied. “I needed a witness.”

“I don't suppose *God* is the only thing you have no faith in.”

Yulan had said that he wouldn't vow before God because he had no faith in God. If he had no faith in humanity either, why would he vow in the presence of another person?

Yulan scoffed at the fair inquiry. He sensed Marin tense in response, but he hadn't meant to mock her. Quite the contrary—he agreed with her. He was laughing at himself.

“Good question,” he said. “At first, I thought all I wanted was to vow to Violette and Violette alone.”

She was the only person who needed to hear his vow. He never once wanted the approval of anyone else, and initially he thought their wedding ceremony should be just for the two of them. He might've invited Marin, but if she declined, he'd have carried out the ceremony without her.

The real reason he invited Marin was because he remembered how she'd clung to him, weeping bitterly.

“But I thought...I wouldn't mind you being there to witness it,” Yulan concluded. “That's all.”

The day Marin grasped at him, sobbing, numbly spitting out her murderous rage to Yulan—she remembered none of that. He didn't envy her a bit, nor did he resent her not remembering that day. Yulan was grateful that he hadn't forgotten, but for Marin, not remembering would be far more peaceful.

Still, she was his only comrade, the only other soul dyed black with rage and resentment from desperate days of constant struggle. In a world where everyone else condemned Violette, Marin was the only one who'd seen eye to eye with Yulan.

The way she'd wept and cursed with the same despair and rage as him—he couldn't remember that very clearly at this point. He didn't care enough for her to call her a friend, nor was their bond deep enough to call her a sister in arms. Still, he felt he owed a debt to the brave woman who'd fought and lost everything that day. This was one way he could repay it.

"Besides, she was happy to have you there," he added.

"Except when she turned bright red and cringed."

"She's so cute when she gets embarrassed."

"Indeed. Thank you for the lovely spectacle."

"Damn it... I can't wait to graduate."

"I won't ask what exactly you have in mind in saying that, but let it be known that I *won't* change rooms."

"Hey. I've got my limits."

"I serve *Violette*, not you."

As the two spoke without exchanging so much as a sideways glance, the once peaceful atmosphere between them froze so cold, a blizzard might've started howling at any second. They shared a faint bond of camaraderie, but Yulan hated to admit it...and Marin probably felt the same.

Violette finally approached the two, head tilted in curiosity. "Why so quiet, both of you?"



“No reason.”

“It’s nothing at all, my lady.”

The moment Violette arrived, the frozen air around them both warmed to a springlike temperature. They were truly so similar; it was that similarity that produced friction between them. Still, with one warm chuckle from Violette over their response in perfect unison, neither cared at all about their cold exchange.

“Ready?” Yulan asked.

“Yes. I thought those little creatures Rosette told me about would be here. As you’d expect, though, they were difficult to spot.”

“Well, we can’t know what would stand out to someone from another nation. We’re used to the ecosystem here.”

“I looked them up in the library, so I do remember what they look like. But if somebody asked me where to find them, I couldn’t say.”

“Well, Duralia’s a big kingdom. It’s actually been a while since I’ve been in this part of it. Anyway, why don’t we shop a little before we head back?”

“Sounds good. Maybe we should buy some things for our new home—”

Violette was interrupted by a tiny growl. A glance toward the noise revealed the nervous Marin. Her eyes darted to and fro, and the ears poking out of her blue hair were bright red.

“Oh dear...excuse me.”

Violette giggled. “Let’s get some breakfast first.”

“How about we check out that place we passed along the way?” Yulan suggested. “I’m sure they have a breakfast menu.”

“Think they have eggs Benedict?” Violette asked.

“Wouldn’t you prefer pancakes?” Yulan teased.

“Oh, yes. Those pancakes we had the other day were scrumptious. Where would you like to eat, Marin?”

“I’m fine with going wherever you wish, Lady Violette.”

“But, Marin, I’m asking what *you* want.”

“I don’t care, so long as it’s a big helping.”

Concealing her former embarrassment, Marin again donned her trademark poker face. Aloof as a cat, she exuded lithe beauty from head to toe. There was no longer a trace of the skin-and-bones waif she used to be.

Yulan trusted Marin. Since they more or less got along and cherished the same person, they were on the same page in many ways. Communicating with her was easy, since they could sense what each other was thinking without putting it into words. But neither would say they liked or cared for the other. Even what transpired today was merely repayment of a debt owed on both their parts.

Still, Yulan was genuinely happy to see Violette and Marin side by side.

*I’m so happy...*

For if Violette had ever seen Marin as heartbroken as she was on that fated day, she’d have gone mad with grief.

*I’m so happy you’re smiling, Violette.*

## Chapter 202: Our New Home

THEIR DAYS TOGETHER WERE quiet and peaceful. It was the sort of peace that used to make Violette feel trapped and brace herself for a coming storm. Now, however, she just knew that this peace was normal; that it was with her every day because the storm had finally passed her for good.

“Everything’s ready to go on this end, Lady Violette...”

“I’m ready too. Our ride’s already downstairs, so let’s go.”

“Are you sure you want me to come as well, my lady?”

“Of course. This’ll be your home too, Marin.”

“Since I’m a live-in servant, I suppose you *could* say it’s my home, in a way.”

“I already told Yulan you’d be coming along anyway.”

In the days leading to graduation, most of the students enjoyed some time off. Even Yulan came to a stopping point as he prepared for the student council’s transfer of power. It wasn’t until a few days earlier that the long put-off visit to his birth home had finally been scheduled.

Violette had heard about Yulan’s first home ever since they were children, but she’d never visited it. His birth mother was no longer there, yet Violette felt a bit of the same nervousness that hung over her when she visited the Cugurs estate. She didn’t need to feel uncomfortable, though; Chesuit had already taken up residence there as a servant, and Marin would be with her.

“You haven’t been there yet either, have you, Lady Violette?”

“No, I haven’t. I knew about Yulan’s childhood home, but even he didn’t seem all that interested in it.”

Yulan had only lived with his birth mother for a little while, and he’d spent

even less time in the home they were about to visit. Even though it was his property, it wasn't the kind of place they could've tramped carelessly to as kids. Thus, Violette had completely forgotten its existence until the house came up in conversation.

"It's not exactly deep in the mountains, but it's surrounded by greenery, and the air is clear," Violette told Marin.

Although the mansion was large, the commute to the city took much longer. It was the perfect place to hide one's mistress and bastard son. The residence was far from the outside world; if it vanished into thin air, nobody would even have noticed. Indeed, Yulan's mother hadn't left a trace of herself behind there.

"I hope you and the other servants won't find shopping too difficult, Marin."

"Well, I'm never leaving your side, my lady. And Chesuit has always cared more about the quality of groceries than the distance traveled to procure them."

"You know, that's right. He has."

Once, Chesuit had disappeared, then suddenly reappeared three days later. When eventually asked, he revealed he'd gone to the other coast to buy spices. Traveling several hours was no different from doing so for a few moments to Chesuit.

"I never imagined he'd quit working at the house either," Violette said.

"Well...he's a free spirit. Nothing he ever does will surprise me now."

"True." Violette giggled. "Still...I didn't think he'd come with us."

Violette had thought Marin would be the only servant who joined her. She'd known Chesuit longer than Marin, but because of that long association, she knew Chesuit wasn't easily swayed by sentimentality or personal loyalties.

Therefore, when Yulan told her that Chesuit had resigned from the Vahan estate to come work for them, she was quite surprised. When she learned that Marin had quit too, and that Yulan had hired her, the surprise escalated to

bewilderment. She was shocked that Marin had left the family estate, and equally shocked that Yulan had employed the maid. It only reaffirmed Violette's faint suspicion that all her closest associates were quick to bounce back after a loss.

"All this Chesuit talk makes me want to eat his chocolate tart again."

"I believe he's already prepared one for you, my lady. We're taking our lunch at the house, aren't we?"

"Yes. I wonder how long touring it will take?"

"I've heard that the garden, at least, is quite large."

The house had been prepared for a mistress, but by the crown. In a way, it had probably been her severance pay. One thing about the residence was certainly clear: It was far too grand a place for a woman to live alone with her baby.

"I'm not sure why...but I think I'm nervous to see this home now," Violette confessed.

"Me too, my lady..."

## Chapter 203:

### A Jewel Box

THEY GOT IN THE CAR and drove for about an hour. Just as Yulan had promised, there was nothing but trees outside the car window. The path was so devoid of human presence that the rows of manicured trees almost looked out of place. Then white pillars and an iron gate came into view, revealing a white-and-navy-blue color scheme in the distance. Violette and Marin pressed themselves against the windows in surprise, gazing at the trees as they passed.

As the car slowed to a leisurely pace, the once distant mansion stood before their eyes. The neat, symmetrical residence looked completely different from the Vahan estate—either due to its colors, size, or simply the state of mind of those who saw it.

The sight before Violette and Marin awed them. The chalk-white house was beautiful, like a jewel box. And Yulan had once lived there with his mother.

“Oh, Vio. You’re here.”

Yulan’s face popped out from behind the front door. Smiling, he approached them in welcome. He’d come to the door personally to see what was taking them so long. He’d told them to ring the bell, since the house was still understaffed, but they’d forgotten.

With a chuckle, he said, “From the way you’re both gawking, I assume you like the place?”

“Yes... It’s so very beautiful,” Violette breathed.

“Yeah. And I hear it was well maintained in my absence—that’s why the paint colors are still so vivid. When I saw it for the first time, I was just as surprised as you.”

“I know you already described this place, Yulan, but it’s more stunning than I

imagined it would be. The drive over was gorgeous too.”

“I had them remodel the gardens to my liking, so I’m glad to hear you say that.”

Smiling and wearing a long white cardigan, Yulan suited the house very well. The beautiful mansion so complemented the softness in his face that it was hard to believe he hadn’t lived there all his life. Yulan’s mother, whom he supposedly took after, had likely matched the house herself.

“It’s nice on the inside too, though it’s still not furnished,” Yulan said.

“Were the original furnishings no longer serviceable?” Violette asked.

“Perhaps half were salvageable. Some things were in good shape. Still, I figured I might as well seize the opportunity to get us all new furnishings, so most of the rooms are pretty empty right now.”

“You know, Yulan, you can sometimes be very eager.”

“Well, it’s important to be bold with interior design. I learned a lot about that, you know.”

The room Yulan escorted them into was even more beautiful than the mansion’s exterior. The walls and ceiling were pure white, making the red carpeting even more vivid. But as Yulan had said, not a stick of furniture adorned the house. This room was so empty that the sparkling chandelier didn’t look like it belonged there. He hadn’t been exaggerating about that.

“It’s incredibly...spacious,” Violette remarked.

“Sure is,” Yulan echoed. “The first time I came here, it was a real shock. It’s big inside, but the gardens are even bigger.”

“Gardens?”

“That forest behind the house is mostly my land. Even if I clear some of it for servants’ quarters, it’ll be too big.”

The idea of one adult and one child having all this space to themselves dizzied

even a born-and-raised aristocrat like Violette. She didn't know what the original furnishings had been like, but they were surely refined and beautiful. That would explain why Yulan removed them all.

"We can lock down the final floor plan little by little while we're living here. For now, let me show you our rooms, Vio. Don't worry, Marin—your room is very close to Violette's."

"Thank you, my lord."

"I already got you essential furnishings; they match Chesuit's. If you need anything else, though, I could also get you the same furniture Vio will have."

"I imagine furnishings like Chesuit's will be adequate."

"That's what he told me." Yulan smirked.

"That's right!" Violette remembered. "Chesuit already lives here."

She'd been looking around the room nervously, but as she listened to the other two talk, a lone man appeared in her memory—someone she'd known longer than both of them.

"He's making lunch right now," Yulan replied. "He said it needs to be simple, since the kitchen isn't entirely finished yet."

"Oh, everything Chesuit cooks is delicious. I can't wait," Violette said.

"He did make dessert a day early, though," Yulan added reassuringly. "It's a chocolate tart."

Silence.

"That's our Chesuit. He certainly knows my lady's tastes," Marin said.

"Hm?"

"My lady told me this morning that she longed to eat Chesuit's chocolate tart."

"It's been a while since I've eaten it," Violette said defensively.



“Well, today’s your lucky day,” Yulan chuckled. “After I show you your room, let’s have lunch.”

“Perfect. I can’t wait.”

They chatted as they made their way down the long, deserted hallway. Yulan had left this house before he could even remember it, which must mean it had been unoccupied for almost fifteen years. Unoccupied houses fell into disrepair easily, but this one was still beautiful everywhere you looked. How well it had been maintained all those years was obvious.

Violette’s heart throbbed with excitement, yet there was a shadow in her heart, faint but present. The shadow of a person whose voice she’d never heard and who she’d practically never heard *about* before that day.

*I wonder what she was like...*

The woman who suited this house...and who resembled Yulan. His birth mother.

*What drove her to vanish from this house? What was she thinking?*

## Chapter 204:

### What Became of the Jewel

**“T**HIS IS YOUR ROOM, VIO.”

It was a spacious, cozy chamber that received a good amount of sun. The walls and pillars were pure white with champagne-colored accent wallpaper. Three-layer beige, lace, and floral-print curtains covered the large windows. Those softer colors were a refreshing change for Violette after all the years in her room in the Vahan estate, which had been decorated in mostly dark shades.

Yulan’s room had a similar feel, the only difference being the presence of a sofa in addition to the curtains and chandelier. The sofa just had room for one, though, since most of it was draped with his dirty clothes.

Marin’s room was, as Yulan promised, as close as possible to Violette’s. It was fairly spacious, with a three-piece bath. Her furniture, the same as Chesuit’s, was quite simple. As far as Marin was concerned, all that mattered was that it was functional.

At lunch, though they’d been led to expect simple dishes, Violette’s favorite foods covered the table. She was surprised to find that table in one corner of the kitchen, rather than the dining room. When she learned that the chairs and table were the only ones in the house, though, she quickly understood.

“I’m simply stuffed...” she sighed after lunch.

“Yeah. You ate quite a bit.” Yulan smirked. “I hope I didn’t ask Chesuit to make too much?”

“Oh, no. I loved eating his cooking after going without it so long. Besides, you and Marin ate lots. We don’t have any leftovers.”

“I’m glad you liked it. I let Chesuit pick the entire menu, and he certainly delivered. He really knows exactly what foods you love.”

While Chesuit and Marin cleaned up after lunch, Violette and Yulan walked through the kitchen door to the beautifully manicured garden. Beyond it lay a sprawling forest, apparently also considered part of the property's gardens. The immaculately cultivated area was large enough to begin with, and if you tried to walk across the entire garden, including the forest, the sun would set before you reached the far end. Violette was curious to try that, but she was sure Marin and Yulan would worry.

The house was vast—incredibly vast. Violette thought it resembled a jewel box, and really, it was exactly that.

“Yulan, may I ask you a question?”

“Hm?”

“If you don't know the answer or don't want to talk about it, you don't have to.” Violette paused. “It's about your birth parents.”

She'd never once asked about them, and Yulan had never asked about her parents either. He'd avoided the subject out of kindness, while Violette's understanding was that it was never to be broached. She didn't want to be reminded of her parents' existence; meanwhile, Yulan's family tree was so complicated and scandalous that she wasn't even sure she was allowed to talk about it.

Seeing this house, however, she'd somehow reached a partial understanding of the mother who'd lived here, the father who'd provided the residence—and what they both meant to Yulan.

“Well, Vio, it's probably as you imagine it.”

Yulan smiled gently, warmly. This side of him was soft and androgynous. He'd told Violette that he took after his mother; she wondered now who'd told *him* that.

“This house was...a place to hide my mother away.”

## Chapter 205:

### Two Years

**Y**ULAN DIDN'T REMEMBER his mother well. Actually, it would be more accurate to say he didn't remember her at *all*. Not her name, what she looked like, or how her voice sounded when she called his name.

He just had one memory *related* to his mother.

*"You really resemble her."*

That's what his birth father had told him the only time Yulan was allowed to meet him face-to-face. He'd taken one look at Yulan, and without a shift in emotion, he'd said those words. Not out of anger toward his mistress, who'd disappeared, and not out of love for his own son. He had no interest in the boy; he merely said the first words that came to mind upon seeing the child.

That utterance from his birth father was the only thing said during their meeting, which had lasted under a minute. It was now the one piece of information Yulan had about his birth mother.

"I don't have any photographs, and nobody dares breathe a word about the king's mistress, so I don't actually know how much I look like her. But I imagine the resemblance is quite pronounced."

If not for Yulan's golden eyes, nobody would ever have guessed that he was related to the king—that was just how starkly different the two looked. Whenever Yulan listlessly beheld his own reflection in a mirror, he imagined his mother had looked just like him. Still, he didn't ever find himself missing her.

"My parents were never interested in me, and the feeling was mutual... Until I came to this house, I seldom gave them a passing thought."

When Yulan had learned about this mansion, and learned that everything inside was his, he'd felt no sentimentality. He'd only imagined that it could be

useful to him. He'd secured a home for Violette after rescuing her from the Vahans, nothing more. He didn't even attempt to search the property for information about, or mementos of, his mother.

But as he'd spent more time at the residence...an upsetting revelation struck him.

"This house contains *nothing* meant for a child."

"Huh...?"

"I was only here for a short time. But I was still just a baby, and there wasn't a nursery or even a crib."

The property had been maintained after he and his mother stopped living there, and not a thing was thrown out. The mansion was kept as it was—a castle for the king's mistress alone.

Every room was beautifully designed, but not a single item within indicated that a child was ever meant to live there. Without Yulan's existence to confirm that, nobody would ever have imagined that a newborn used to live in the house.

"This was essentially a place to put my mother. A box for my father to shut her inside. That's why not a single accommodation was made for *Yulan*."

Walking the empty halls of the castle his vanished mother had left frozen in time, Yulan discovered the truth about his so-called parents.

His father had loved his mother, but it was a possessive love. She was like a jewel to be admired and prized. Yulan didn't know how his mother had felt about that, but she surely must've had some feelings for his father, since she'd been willing to bear his son. She just lacked the will to raise a child.

Then she'd abandoned Yulan, and he'd taken on the Cugurs name.

"I don't know why my mother herself disappeared. I don't even know whether she's still alive. But I do know she's the sort of person who'd become a king's mistress and bear his child... So maybe she settled down somewhere, and

she's having a nice life. Hell if I know."

As Yulan said those words, laughing carelessly, he sounded far more detached than he'd ever thought he could feel. He was sure that if his mother appeared before his eyes in that moment, he'd react no differently than if she were a stranger. That was just how little interest he had in her. He possessed no faith whatsoever in the very concept of a parent.

"I see..."

Violette smiled, deepening Yulan's smile in turn. Her smile was out of pure happiness that Yulan had answered her question. His mother wasn't of any interest to Violette either, so long as Yulan was no longer hurting.

She'd cast him aside because she didn't want him; he'd simply cast her aside for the same reason.

It was a necessary action for him to take. This was a lesson the past two years had pounded into him.

## Chapter 206:

### A Single Vow

**T**HE MANSION, ONCE AN EMPTY shell, gradually took on character. It was exciting watching the rooms slowly get furnished and decorated. Whenever Violette looked back on those days in the forest, when she'd drawn a circle on the ground and proclaimed it her house to comfort herself, she teared up a little.

The beautiful, pure-white jewel box was transforming into a love nest for her and Yulan.

Violette had the chance to consider which furniture she liked best and what color schemes she wanted. She was able to shop for her own dishes, ponder the best shapes for their lamps. Every time she and Yulan exchanged a smile, so much joy filled her. Then she would remember.

Yulan's birth mother. The look on his face when he said she might've settled down somewhere nice. Like she was a total stranger to him.

"Ah, Vio. Found you."

"I'm not surprised... You're always the one who finds me, Yulan."

As Violette sat in the attic, looking at the stars through an open window, Yulan approached, a soft blanket in his arms. This was the one space in the mansion that hadn't yet been furnished. Violette wasn't sitting in a chair but rather on a stepping stool that was no longer used. This little corner, tucked back from the glamour of the mansion, was perfect for stargazing.

She looked up at a world of nothing, no people and no divisions.

"Are you warm enough?" Yulan asked.

"I could be a little warmer. Are *you* warm enough, Yulan?"

"I can tolerate heat and cold."

“I wasn’t asking whether the temperature’s *tolerable*.”

Although Yulan was bundling Violette carefully in the blanket, he’d just put on a thin cardigan to keep warm. Dressed only in a negligee, Violette was in no position to point fingers. Still, the sight of him made her shiver. There was no heat source in the attic, and the stars in the sky seemed to steal the very warmth from their bodies.

“Come join me,” Violette coaxed.

“No, thanks. I’m good. I don’t want to take that blanket away from you.”

“You won’t if we snuggle close. Come on. It’s cold.”

Goosebumps raced over Violette’s skin as she sat on the chilly wooden floor. She let Yulan join her under the blanket, and they held each other tight. They were both so chilled through that they’d have to hug for quite a while to get warm.

Violette giggled.

“What’s so funny?” Yulan teased.

“I’m just remembering the other time we did this. Do you remember?”

“That time we sheltered from the rain in our secret base?”

“Right. Except that time, we used a picnic sheet.”

“Yeah. And it didn’t do much to keep the rain out. I was so cold, I thought I’d freeze... But I had a great time. I’m glad it happened.”

“Even though you turned pale as a corpse?”

“When I’m with you, Vio, I don’t care about anything else.”

Violette’s cheeks reddened, but not from the cold. She smiled, savoring the moment. Ever since they were young, Yulan had often looked at her like this. Like she was so precious that he had to hold her to his chest, so as never to lose her—and like if he ever did lose her, he’d never be able to find her again.

*“If you’re happy, Vio, then I’m happy.”*



*“If you’re having fun, Vio, then I’m having fun.”*

*“If you’re content, Vio, then I’m content.”*

Each and every thing he’d ever told her had been an expression of his love, his longing, his truth. It was his feelings that had shielded her, taken her by the hand, and brought her to this moment.

The attic was dark, cold, and a little dusty. It was just like her dungeon in the other timeline. In that timeline, every tiny piece of her heart had been broken and crushed until the only feeling she was capable of was regret. She’d cast everything aside, given up hope, and waited for the end. She’d thought that was her only recourse. She’d believed that she and her very life were worthless on that fated day.

*Ever since that day, Yulan’s embrace has kept me safe.*

## Chapter 207:

### This Time, I Won't Let Anybody...

**S**LOWLY, THEIR BODIES CAME to a comfortable temperature, and they weren't cold anymore.

"Vio... Do you want to stay up here longer? If so, I can get us drinks and cushions to sit on."

"Thanks, but I'd like to keep sitting as we are for now."

"Really...? Aren't you uncomfortable?"

"Aren't *your* legs uncomfortable, Yulan?"

"Aw, I'm fine," he chuckled.

Yulan *should* have been aching from the way his body had contorted into a crouch. Yet he kept his lips close to Violette's ear, as if telling her his deepest secrets, as he reveled in the little world wrapped up in their blanket.

All her life, Violette had taken comfort in his kindness. Whenever she needed him, he was there for her, until before she knew it, he'd taken her far away from all harm. Unaware of his protective presence all that time, she'd given up on everything, almost leaving it behind. And she kept leaving *him* behind. This sweet boy.

"Do you like this attic?" he asked.

"I do... I can see the stars, and it's lovely."

"Then why don't we fix it up too? It should have a couch and a light."

"No... Keep this spot as it is."

"Huh? But—"

"I like it this way... Just like this."

Twining her arm though his, she rested her head on his shoulder, then reached out and touched his big hand. She pressed herself so close to him that nobody could ever come between them—they were together.

“I love you so much...”

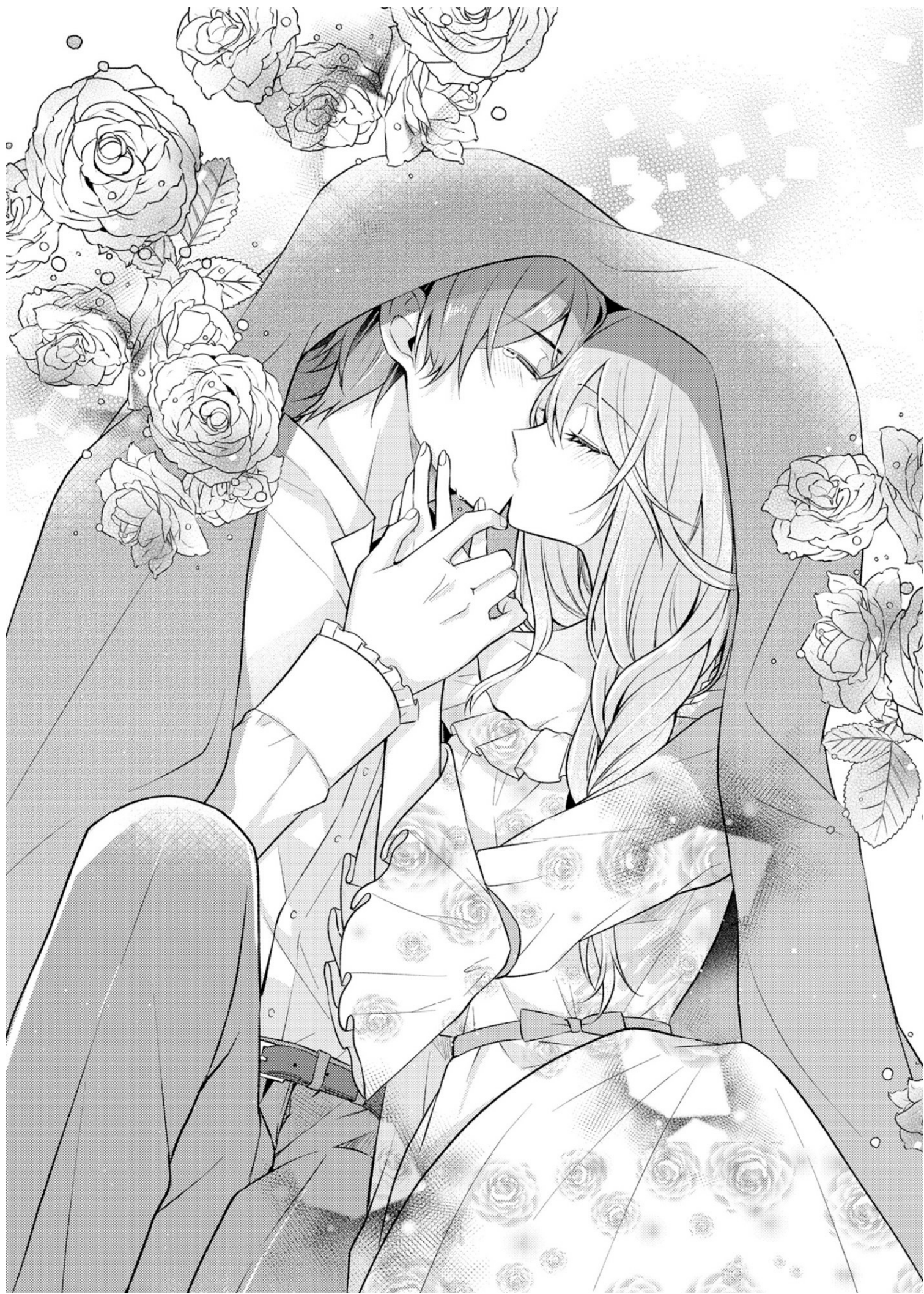
Voicing the words for the first time, she learned just how sweet they sounded. Her mouth and head both filled with sweet syrup, threatening to spill over. Yet it wasn't enough. Her heart screamed for more.

*Oh, my sweet Yulan... He loved me... He continues to love me... And he gives me joy. He's my treasure.*

She searched her mind for a way to repay all the blessings he'd given her.

“There just aren't enough words... That's how much I love you.”

Shooting stars twinkled and fell from the eyes gold as the moon. As Violette's fingertips caught the stars, more fell, one by one. Before she could contain them all, Yulan's large hand clasped hers. With reckless abandon, he pulled it until their two silhouettes were one.



Their first kiss under the stars had the subtle but sweet taste of tears. Then Yulan's slightly rough lips parted from hers, leaving behind a trickling tear that wasn't her own on her cheek. His golden eyes, sparkling with tears, were far more beautiful than the moon shining in the night sky above. As his shoulders shook with sobs, he looked pitiful—and unfathomably dear.

"I know why you were born," Violette told him. "To make me happy."

He'd lived his life abandoned by everyone and abandoning everyone in turn. It was a reality he'd resigned himself to so intractably that there was no room for tears anymore. But everything would be all right now. It didn't matter who'd birthed him or why, nor why they'd abandoned him. Those questions no longer needed to take up space in his mind.

"Oh...Vio..." he whimpered.

"Oh dear. Your eyes are melting."

Forgetting to hide his runny nose, Yulan hugged Violette tighter, refusing to let her go. They sat under the same blanket, noses almost touching, as they listened to each other's breath and heartbeats. It was as if the pair had become one being.

Violette giggled.

"Don't laugh at me," Yulan whined.

"Sorry. You're just so cute."

"Urgh..."

The palm of her hand cupped his cheek, which was cold from his tears. His eyes and cheeks were bright red too. He was sure to look a fright the next day. Just the thought made Violette giggle against her will.

"You know what else, Yulan? I was born to make you happy too."

*I was born for you.*

Violette's reason for living was Yulan, and his reason for living was Violette.

He'd put his life on the line to save hers, so now Violette needed to make the same commitment to him.

*To his faceless mother, to our king, and to any other wrongdoer who hurts Yulan—be warned of my hate, my resentment, my lust for blood. I bundle them all into this declaration of war.*

"I won't take the wrong path ever again... This time around, I won't make any mistakes. This time, I won't let anybody..."

*Our love...our happiness...I won't let anybody stand in the way of them.*

## Just an Ordinary Day

“**H**OW ABOUT THIS ONE, Lady Violette?”

“It’s lovely, but I suppose I find it a bit too garish.”

“It is indeed colorful, but in a dignified way. Besides, this is a special occasion. I think you’re allowed a little gaudiness.”

“But it’s *Yulan’s* graduation ceremony. What would be the point of adorning myself so?”

“To Yulan, that *is* going to be the main event.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Two years had passed since Violette and Yulan got engaged. Violette had graduated one year earlier and still lived in the house Yulan had prepared for them. Since moving there, she’d never once set foot in the Vahan estate. She spotted Maryjune a number of times at school, but they never spoke. Violette knew nothing of what had happened after the day she left, nor did she care to.

“Besides, my lady, I hear the audience will be packed, what with a prince of Sina graduating. Don’t you think you could get away with an even more ostentatious ensemble?”

“Ha ha! Just who are you trying to impress, anyway?”

“I just think this is a good opportunity to let the citizens of other nations know how beautiful you are, my lady.”

“They don’t need to.”

Violette took a sip of tea as she watched Marin tromp energetically around her closet. She usually favored simple dresses, but a special occasion required a little dressing up. She was mostly leaving the selection process up to Marin, who knew what suited her figure better than she did, and she was just glad to

see that her maid was enjoying herself. Marin had always loved playing dress-up with Violette, but she'd seldom been blessed with opportunities to do so back at the Vahan estate.

"Well, maybe we should seize the opportunity to order you a new wardrobe..."

"I have plenty of clothes, Marin. Yulan bought me a bunch of things I didn't need only the other day."

"Those were all everyday dresses."

"There's no need to add to my wardrobe. The clothes I brought from my old home are still serviceable. At this rate, some of my dresses will never even see the light of day."

When Violette first arrived at her new home, Yulan had showered her with gifts almost daily. She thought at first that he did so to comfort her, but she later learned that his pampering was partly for his own enjoyment. Even now, two years later, he regularly gave her heaps of clothing, jewelry, and sweets... But everything was to Violette's liking, so she was too touched to complain.

About one in three times, she'd scold him, but so far that was completely ineffective. And Violette had enough self-awareness to realize that, the other two times, she happily enabled the pampering.

"What about your accessories, my lady? You and Lady Rosette intend to wear your matching ear cuffs, correct?"

"That's the plan, yes. I'll wear my hair either down or loosely tied back."

"Long earrings will pair beautifully with that."

"I'll also wear a necklace the color of the dress...and this is the only ring I need."

A large gemstone sparkled on her left ring finger.

The day after Violette's graduation, Yulan had called a foreign merchant to the mansion and bought an engagement ring. That was a surprise to Violette;



she wasn't expecting to receive one. Indeed, she couldn't even imagine it, although it was the natural next step after getting engaged.

Scarcely after getting engaged to Yulan, she already lived in his house, and he already showered her with far too many gifts. The hollow, stupefied look she'd given him when he cheerfully suggested buying an engagement ring together was a memory that they laughed over to that day. In the end, Violette never pulled herself together then, and Yulan wound up making the arrangements all by himself.

"I still can't believe he chose a stone so big," Violette said.

"I still can't believe he chose *topaz*. The man sure knows his gemstones."

The gem glittered gold, just like Yulan's eyes. Its setting was also gold, and it was adorned with a spray of tiny diamonds. It truly was a darling little design. To Marin, though, the ring didn't look like anything but a symbol of possessiveness and restraint. It appeared heavy in a number of ways.

"But, when I wear it, it feels like Yulan's here protecting me. So I can't complain," Violette said.

"Well...as long as you like it, my lady, that matters most."

Marin wasn't so inept that she'd throw cold water on her mistress's innocent joy. Besides, if she did say anything out of turn, Yulan would be a hassle to deal with when he found out. As long as Violette was happy, Marin could overlook her concerns. She really was a hopeless fool when it came to her mistress.

"All right. We'll go with this dress and this jewelry... Now all that remains is your hair and makeup. My fingers are tingling in anticipation."

"I love to see you so full of life, Marin."

"But of course."

Violette was so beautiful when she giggled like that.

Yesterday, today, tomorrow, and every day from then on, she'd giggle happily beside her prince.



## A Tale of a Life Evolved, Yet Unchanged

**“W**HERE SHALL I PUT THESE things, Chesuit?”

“Aha—those’re going to my house.”

“For one of your new experiments? Please do be mindful of your consumption.”

“Yeah. The staff meals will be baguette sandwiches for a while.”

When Marin entered the kitchen, a large wooden box in her arms, Chesuit was standing in his chef’s coat, stirring a pot at the stove. Lunchtime was fast approaching, and Marin could tell he’d probably stayed in the kitchen since breakfast ended. The big pile of cut vegetables on the countertop was a dead giveaway.

“Need help?” Chesuit asked. “That must be heavy.”

“I’m all right, thank you. Shall I just leave these at your place, then?”

“Nah. Just set them down where you are. I’ll take ’em with me when I go home.”

Yulan’s private mansion, once empty and barren, had become quite a bustling place since they’d moved there with Violette. Marin had received a room next to Violette’s, as she’d requested, and the maid filled her days serving her.

It was the same for Chesuit. Yulan had given him free rein over the kitchen, so he’d had it customized to his liking—to him, it was the workplace of his dreams. He holed himself up there every day for such long hours that the bed in his room next door was collecting dust from lack of use.

After Chesuit moved in, it took about a month for his personal quarters to become overcrowded with cooking experiments conducted both for leisure and for practical purposes. When Yulan noticed that and offered Chesuit his own house, even the chef was shocked. Moreover, Yulan had an oven built in the

garden, which Chesuit used with wild abandon. He was quite ingenious—as Yulan himself had, of course, been in providing those resources.

“I see you’re hard at work creating new recipes again. Lady Violette told me this reminds her of the days when you tried to give her a culinary education.”

“Ha! Right... I remember that. I don’t think she learned anything, though.”

When Chesuit was a younger chef, he’d been so confident in his abilities that he’d had a tendency to show off. Even now, he was confident. And his confidence in his early days certainly hadn’t been unwarranted. That said, the sight of Violette gagging on his cooking had been more than enough to demolish his ego. From that moment on, he’d focused not on the food he cooked but on the fact that he was a *chef*.

“Rather, from watching her, I learned the hard way that forcing somebody to eat isn’t love, it’s abuse.”

After a thoughtful pause, Marin remarked, “Lady Violette said she was glad you were there.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. To be honest, I was at loose ends about what to do for her.”

Though Chesuit had eventually managed to cook a variety of foods that Violette could eat, those recipes had actually only been a succession of wild guesses. Even the worst gunman would hit his target if he fired enough times, so Chesuit had shot in the dark with sheer desperation. Luckily, he’d discovered foods that she liked, but he shuddered to think what would’ve become of her if he hadn’t.

“What sort of cuisine do you hope to make this time? I know you’ve been testing Sinan recipes.”

“I want to increase my repertoire of dishes that can be eaten with one hand.”

Marin set the wooden box down behind Chesuit. He handed her a spoon over his shoulder, and she licked it without preamble. A tangy taste immediately

filled her mouth. Looking onto the counter in front of Chesuit, she saw red rice; she also smelled a delicious aroma in the air.

Apparently, she'd just tried some chicken and rice. That meant they were eating omelet rice for lunch.

"You seasoned it a bit differently than usual," she remarked.

"Well, yeah. For the young master."

"You adjust the seasonings for each person?"

As a rule, meals in this house were prepared to Violette's liking, and Yulan never complained. That made sense, since he'd ordered them to cater to Violette's palate. Chesuit generally avoided sweeter flavors, though, since Yulan didn't care for them. Yet the young lord insisted that, as long as he didn't have to eat dessert, he was fine with anything.

"The young master always eats everything on his plate, but he doesn't seem to enjoy meals."

Marin frowned thoughtfully. "You know, you're right."

Whenever she watched Yulan, the memory of a girl green in the face flickered in the back of her mind. Marin never dreamed the day would come when she would've *preferred* that girl look away with a grimace.

"Anyway, I decided this dish was a good compromise, so I wanted to do it justice."

"That's why you've been testing out all sorts of flavors?"

"Nothing inspires me more than trying to please a harsh judge. Especially the young master—he doesn't mince words. He's the best foe a guy could ask for."

"And you're the only servant who could speak about his master that way, Chesuit."

"A job's easy when one's master is so tolerant."

Even while talking, Chesuit continued working. Before long, a fluffy rice-filled

omelet sat on the counter in front of him. He presented the beautifully plated omelet rice matter-of-factly to Marin.

“Wasn’t this for Lord Yulan?”



“I’m testing the seasonings. I’m gonna make his *actual* lunch now, while I make my lady’s.”

“Ah, I see.”

“If you ain’t hungry, I can always have that omelet for lunch. Either’s fine with me.”

“I’ll eat it. That taste I had earlier was delicious.”

“All right. Guess this’s how I’ll season your omelet rice from now on, Marin.”

Pressing her palms together in thanks, she heard an emotionless “Go ahead!” behind her. She dug her spoon into the heaping omelet and ate big bites. She felt sauce stick to the corners of her mouth, but she could always wipe it away later.

“Ah...that was delicious,” she sighed.

“Just leave your plate here.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll just go set the table now.”

“Sure thing. I’ll call ya when lunch is ready.”

“All right.”

Marin glanced at her reflection in a nearby silver platter, checking her uniform for stains. The gluttonous Marin faded, Violette’s personal maid replacing her. That elegant woman, worthy of her beautiful mistress, stared stoically at her reflection in the silver.

“Have a good service.”

“Thank you.”



## Relationship Talk, Such as It Is

**A**S A RULE, YULAN AND Violette's mansion didn't receive visitors. That was partly because they didn't have many friends. Yulan was also naturally wary of welcoming people into his personal space. The only person in his life who might invite himself over was Gia, and at present, Gia wasn't interested in Yulan's home. How the Sinan prince would feel about the mansion in the future, however, remained to be seen.

Given Yulan and Violette's isolation, today was very special: They would have a guest.

"Come on in, Rosette. It feels like it's been ages."

"It has been, Vio! Thanks so much for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming. This is quite far for you, isn't it? I've had a cold dessert prepared—I'll ask my maid to bring us all some later."

"You're too kind."

"Well, you're the future queen. Our friendship gives me no room to be careless."

"Yes... I know in my head that I'm to be queen. Still, it'll take me quite some time to get used to the idea."

"Oh dear, oh dear."

As the two girls giggled together, the scene was so beautiful that an observer could practically have seen flowers blooming around them. Or perhaps the brusque servants standing behind them in tidy uniforms only made the girls seem so beautiful in comparison. Including the driver waiting outside and her two bodyguards, Rosette had brought five guards total with her. That was actually fewer than usual, since she was visiting Violette.

"I considered the parlor, but since it's such a lovely day, would you like to join

me on the terrace?”

“Yes, please. It’s a comfortable temperature, and the breeze feels so nice. Besides, I’d love to look at your big, beautiful garden.”

Violette giggled. “Oh, please do. Unfortunately, not many flowers are in bloom at the moment.”

“Flowers are beautiful, of course, but I just love being immersed in nature.”

“Well, it isn’t exactly *that* overgrown... Next time you visit, I’ll arrange to take you into the forest.”

“Thank you very much.”

As Rosette smiled sweetly, one of the two guards behind her raised his eyebrows a little. It was unclear whether he was surprised by Violette’s proposal or Rosette’s reaction, but his companion didn’t even flinch. Upon closer observation, the latter guard appeared to be the first guard’s junior.

“Prince Claudia has kindly taken me all sorts of places...but never to an untamed forest.”

“I suppose he wouldn’t. I’ll be sure to tell him that I wish to visit my forest with you, just in case.”

Although Violette and Yulan had a basic, minimal patrol around their property as insurance, theirs was a forest of longtime natural growth. Chesuit planned to clear a small corner of the trees to start a vegetable garden, but that would still leave sprawling woods around the property.

“They truly are fantastic,” Rosette sighed. “Perhaps I should build a villa in a forest somewhere.”

“That would be nice, but I doubt you could get permission.”

“True, true...”

“Maintenance aside, you want to be as self-sufficient as possible, don’t you?”

“Well, I won’t be so greedy as to say I want to live in a protected tower.”

“That’s not the issue, and you know it.”

“Hee hee! Prince Claudia had the exact same reaction.”

Rosette sat in a dreamy daze, admiring the garden sprawling out from the terrace and the thick forest far beyond it. Violette was relieved to see her unchanged, despite everything the princess couldn’t control. While Violette spent her days relaxing in her little castle, Rosette was burning the candle at both ends preparing to be the future queen. She could only visit today because she’d crammed a window into her schedule. Their environments were so starkly different that, if Rosette hadn’t made that effort, she and Violette wouldn’t have even seen each other in passing. And, on top of Rosette’s schedule, environments themselves changed people.

“I really am glad to see you looking so well,” Violette said. “I’ve been away from high society for a while now. This place is so remote, rumors don’t even reach us.”

“I’m relieved to see *you* looking well too. I actually hear more than my fair share of rumors, you see, so I needed to see you with my own eyes before I could know what was true and what wasn’t.”

“Aha... I did think there’d be rumors about me.”

“Lord Yulan got ahead of some of them by spreading the truth. But people believe what they want to, you know.”

Rosette, who was smiling elegantly with a cup of Marin’s herbal tea in hand, was likely the target of her own fair share of unfounded gossip. It would also fall to her to politely set the record straight if any such rumors reached her. That sounded like a hassle to Violette, and Rosette had to adapt quickly. Whatever she did, people would talk. Rather than going out of her way to correct rumors, she found it was wiser to wait for the gossip’s novelty to wear off and for the focus to drift away from her. In high society, gossip was just part of the culture. It was much easier to accept that and to distance yourself from it emotionally.

“A little while ago, the gossip was about my history with men,” Rosette said.

“My, how indiscreet. That’s unusual.”

“Well, recently, there was a scandal about an illegitimate son-in-law from Lithos. The fallout from that spilled over to me. Formal recommendation letters for wives are still mailed to Prince Claudia—but addressed to me.”

“Even their methods are indiscreet.”

“Oh, I show all those letters to Prince Claudia. Including the senders’ names. I show him *everything*.”

The elegant smile on Rosette’s face as she said this made Violette’s own grin deepen behind her teacup. *She really hasn’t changed a bit.*

If Rosette were the sort of girl who buckled under pressure, she’d never have been chosen to be queen in the first place. Despite her soft exterior, the princess was still the same tomboy she’d been labeled in her childhood. She’d learned to don a mask, but she wasn’t the sort of milquetoast who’d run crying if somebody picked a fight with her.

“Oh my... I wager that upset the senders.”

“So it seems. But if they wish to propose to Prince Claudia, they should do so directly, not through me. It’s certainly a bother.”

“Well, they got what they deserved. They were dreadfully disrespectful to you, Rosette.”

Violette’s cool expression emitted quite an air of dignity. It was the dreadfully delicate smile of a mighty queen sitting on her throne, sneering at all those who knelt before her. Few people knew she could smile like that. Anybody who found out would want to get to know that side of her more intimately, bask in its glory, desire it only for himself.

*That’s exactly why Yulan keeps her tucked away so carefully.*

“How are things going with Prince Claudia?” Violette asked. “Are you treated well?”

“Yes, things are fine. I can’t speak for him, but I have more freedom than

before. I need only accompany him on official business—that's the bare minimum. And he rearranged my schedule so I could visit you today."

"I'm very glad to hear that. You never mention anything about your relationship in your letters, Rosette."

"Neither do you, Vio. You hardly ever mention Lord Yulan."

Beneath the roof that sheltered them from the glaring sun, the three-tiered cake stand was still full of an assortment of sweet treats, waiting impatiently for the moment those beautiful white hands would carry them to those soft lips. But the two girls longed far more for each other's conversation than the sweets.

"I've been waiting with bated breath all this time, Vio. Tell me about your love life."

Rosette gently rested her chin on her manicured, interlaced fingers. Her soft eyes were those of a young girl, brimming with mirth and curiosity. She was adorable—incredibly adorable. On the receiving end of such a gaze, however, Violette felt nothing but constrictive discomfort. During their friendship, Violette had learned that Rosette's sweet smile was deceptive—it could trap you before you realized it.

"There's...nothing special to say."

Rosette giggled. "You're *blushing*."

"Rosette!"

Violette, her cheeks lustrously rosy, reached for her teacup to distract herself. It would be obvious to anyone that her cheeks weren't pink from rouge. Rosette smiled knowingly at her; Violette responded with a pouting glare. That death glare, which might fill anyone else with panic, was merely an adorably obnoxious grimace to Rosette. Just as Violette had come to know the princess's idiosyncrasies, she had learned quite a bit about Violette during their friendship.

Violette sighed through gritted teeth. "Well, I've been looking forward to

hearing about you and the prince too.”

“There’s more than enough gossip about us to sate your curiosity.”

“I’m not in the habit of taking idle gossip at face value—especially if it’s about my friend.”

Every snippet of information about the future queen, from what time she woke to what time she took her meals, spread through the entire kingdom. Rosette gave out some of that information voluntarily. Sadly, most of what reached the public’s ears was either false or a bent truth. And while many newspapers’ lies could be exposed with a little pressure, debunking all the falsehoods would take far too much time and money. After all, they only existed in ink and paper. They’d be burned with the trash once the people lost interest. As such, the crown turned a blind eye.

“Thanks to Lord Yulan’s efforts, though, gossip has decreased quite a bit as of late.”

“Still, I’m sure that hasn’t been enough to stop it entirely. Royal gossip has always ebbed and flowed like the tide.”

“Indeed it has. It’s the same in Lithos; I’m quite used to it, really.”

“It’s a horrible thing to need to get used to. But as long as nobody gets hurt, I suppose that’s just a necessary evil. You seldom have to speak face-to-face with rumormongers.”

“Well, that’s where Duralia’s large size is an advantage. Lithos is rather small, so it’s easy to hear things directly from our subjects.”

“There are advantages and disadvantages to everything, I suppose. When there’s a greater distance between yourself and your subjects, responding to a problem takes much longer.”

“Prince Claudia is trying to determine what distance *is* suitable. He quarreled with Lord Yulan over that the other day.”

“Really?”

“Well, it wasn’t so much a quarrel as a talking down... Those two are polar opposites, as you know. Thankfully, Lord Mila can step in to balance them out.”

Violette understood immediately what Rosette meant. Yulan’s relationship with Claudia was unique; on top of that, their personalities were at odds. Yet, since they complemented each other’s deficiencies, they made a good professional team. When Violette pointed this out to Yulan, he’d only responded with a disgruntled frown. But he didn’t deny that she was right.

“I’m trying to figure out how I should navigate all this too. Still, I’m managing,” Rosette said. “It helps that Prince Claudia is much more flexible than I thought. If anything, I’m the stubborn one.”

“You’re tough as nails, Rosette.”

“Why, thank you for the lovely words.”

The thank-you from Rosette—a girl who’d left her own kingdom for marriage—relieved the unconscious tension from Violette’s shoulders as she sighed delicately. Violette thought of Duralia as her homeland. To Rosette, however, it was a foreign land that she merely happened to have lived in for the past few years. Violette was worried that Rosette struggled more with discrimination and culture shock than her letters let on.

“And I still have time now and then for a fun chat with my friend,” Rosette added.

“I’m glad to hear it. Would you like another cup of tea?”

“I’d love that! It’s delicious. Where did you get these leaves?”

“I’m not sure... Our chef imports groceries from all over the world.”

## And This Too Shall Pass

**W**HILE VIOLETTE AND ROSETTE chatted gaily, Marin was hard at work beside them. Bracing herself against the sun and warm temperature, she replaced their tea and snacks as needed and bustled about fulfilling any wishes they voiced.

She was deliberately putting ten times her normal energy into that day's tea service. After all, Violette had never invited a guest to the mansion before. And her very first guest was a princess from the neighboring kingdom who'd come to be the future queen, no less! Marin wasn't one to fawn to authority, but simply because Rosette was Violette's friend, Marin felt it was her duty to show the princess the utmost hospitality.

"I'd love to invite you to my place next time," said Rosette, "except we haven't settled on a home yet."

"The coronation won't happen for quite some time, will it? Where are you living right now?"

"Prince Claudia needs to travel a lot at the moment. I live here and there to stay close to him. I imagine we'll settle down eventually, but I might as well enjoy a variety of experiences while I can."

Violette giggled. "All right, then. Will you give me your address once it's settled?"

"Of course."

As Marin went about her duties, it took all her efforts to restrain herself from smiling softly at the sound of Violette's peaceful voice. The fond look in the maid's eyes resembled that of a proud mother seeing her daughter bring a friend home for the first time. It was a relief that the once guarded Violette had finally found a companion she could open up to. Marin was happy, though also a little sad.



It was *because* Marin knew firsthand just how hard it was to learn to trust that she felt relief, rather than loneliness, at Rosette's providential arrival in Violette's life.

"I'd love to have you over to my home, of course, but I'd also love to invite you to Lithos someday."

"I've been wanting to travel there too...but it'll be quite a while before I'll get the time off."

"And the journey there and back alone takes time. When you factor in lodgings, you might need a whole year for the trip if you started today."

"It'll take even longer once Prince Claudia is crowned."

"Yes, I suppose so... We can't exactly ask him to adjust his royal duties for our personal travel plans. And won't you be extra busy by that point anyway, Vio?"

"I guess I will... Yulan doesn't seem to want to take me with him, but once Prince Claudia becomes king, I doubt he'll have much say anymore."

"Since Lord Yulan's main duty is diplomatic relations with Sina, we'd have to take their culture into account as well... So who knows?"

As Marin listened to them talk, she realized once again that the world they lived in was leagues apart from hers. That gap in social status was something she could never fathom; each passing year in Violette's service thrust new revelations upon her. For a time, that frustrated her to no end. Now that Violette had made a friend in the same class as herself, however, Marin wouldn't need to worry about that anymore.

"Oh..."

As the wind rustled her skirt, Marin checked the sun's position. It wasn't yet dark, but the wind had picked up. Depending whether the two girls chose to stay outdoors or go in, Marin might need to adjust the temperature of their tea. And if they decided to stay outside, she'd have to bring them blankets.

"The winds have picked up, Lady Violette. Would you like to go inside?"

“Wow. I didn’t realize how long we’d been out here. Yes, let’s go inside before we get cold.”

“Good idea,” Rosette agreed. “Thank you.”

“I’ll escort us to the parlor. Marin, could you prepare more tea?”

“As you wish, my lady.”

Watching the pair walk through the door behind her, Marin quickly cleared the table, then headed to the kitchenette. She was going to have another servant clear up the terrace, but she wouldn’t let anyone else serve Violette personally.

*They just had herbal tea... Maybe I should make them some coffee. I’ve heard Rosette isn’t a fan of sweets, but as luck would have it, Chesuit has stocked the kitchen with a variety of beans suited to Yulan’s palate. I’ll make Violette some Earl Grey tea. I could always make her milk tea, but I think plain tea would pair better with the sweets she’ll eat.*

“Somebody’s sure having fun.”

“Oh, Chesuit—you’re back.”

Since the kitchenette had no door, Marin saw Chesuit as he walked by, apparently to start supper. He carried a wooden box filled with a number of vegetables of dubious origin—how many people he thought he was cooking for was yet another mystery.

“The young master found us a good supplier. It doesn’t look like I’ll need to travel far for groceries for quite a while.”

“It seems the young master noticed that you’ve transferred your freakish obsession with culinary education to him.”

“Gee, at least call it a *passion*,” Chesuit joked. “You know, I’m actually surprised he hasn’t made a stink about it. I’ve already pictured him making a sour face and ordering me not to overstep.”

“Well, that man isn’t interested in anything aside from Lady Violette.”

“I find his one-dimensionality kind of refreshing.”

Chesuit wanted to improve Yulan’s lack of taste. His desire to hear Yulan call his cooking delicious intensified his kitchen experiments—and the sharply intuitive Yulan caught on to that immediately. Chesuit wouldn’t have let any griping from Yulan stop him anyway, but Yulan saying readily, “Do whatever you like, so long as you don’t neglect Violette’s meals” was the last thing he’d expected. When that happened, Marin remembered being twice as surprised to see one of Chesuit’s rare jaw-drops. It wasn’t that Yulan was callous toward others—he simply had no interest in anything other than Violette. Naturally, Yulan himself was included in that “anything.”

“Violette has a guest, doesn’t she? What should I do about supper?” Chesuit asked.

“I imagine her guest will return home before then. They’ve retired to the parlor. Could you have somebody clean the terrace for me?”

“All right.”

Marin finished loading her tea cart and scuttled past Chesuit. The cart’s light rattle echoed down the hallway. Since their arrival, the mansion had filled up considerably, but there were still far too few people living in it for the number of rooms it had. She didn’t cross paths with other servants at work as one normally would, and in a little while, she arrived at the parlor door and saw a spray of red hair. It was Rosette’s youngest bodyguard. The girls had evidently chosen the room with the biggest windows today.

When Marin bowed to the redheaded young man, his eyes widened like a cat’s for just a moment before he discreetly nodded back. With traces of boyhood still in his face, he looked adorable rather than virile. He was probably no older than Rosette and Violette.

“I’ve brought the tea, my lady,” she called into the room.

“You may enter,” came Violette’s bubbly voice in reply.

She could tell just from Violette's tone that she was having fun. Marin's mind imagined the joy on Violette's face without Marin willing it to...and, when she opened the door, that exact smile awaited her on the other side.

Feeling her own cheeks lift with uncontainable emotion, the maid knew she wore the same smile.

## Chapter 1:

### Counting the Days on My Fingers

**H**AD IT BEEN ONLY A DREAM, she could've imagined it to be an expression of bliss.

But holding that bliss in her arms—that was the one thing she couldn't have envisioned.

\*\*\*

"Oh, good morning, Vio. You can stay in bed longer if you want, you know."

"Well, I'm awake anyway..."

"Sorry. I'll come in in a bit, all right?"

Violette stumbled out of the bedroom to find Yulan adjusting his tie before the mirror. Judging from his put-together appearance, he'd been up long before her. Once he finished with the tie, all he needed was a jacket, and his ensemble would be complete. She knew he was in no hurry to get to work, so he hadn't gotten up early; Violette had overslept.

Scooping his jacket off the edge of the sofa with one arm, Yulan approached her. He reached toward her hair, messy from her pillow, and gently ran his fingers through the wild locks as if petting a cat. Violette squirmed at the ticklish sensation, and Yulan smiled at her in amusement. He felt like a child again.

"I'll probably be running late tonight, so go to bed early if you like."

"All right... Be careful out there."

"I will. If you aren't fully awake yet, I'll have the servants ready breakfast for you. Go ahead and lie down a little while longer."

His soothing touch awakened the memory of what'd happened before she fell

asleep. Just as he'd caressed her hair as he told her goodnight, gentle warmth pressed her closed eyelids. The first night they'd shared a bed, Violette had been so nervous and shy, she'd thought she could never sleep. But now, her bed felt expansive and lonely without Yulan.

"Are you sleepy?"

"I'm all right..."

"Ha ha! I think I'll have them delay breakfast a little."

The drowsy sensation of the lines between reality and a dream blurring was nice, but Violette was determined to wish Yulan goodbye at the front door, so she rubbed her heavy eyelids to keep them from closing.

Violette seemed to revert to childhood when she was half asleep, but she probably wasn't aware of that, and no one ever told her. Yulan had only started seeing her in this state when they began sharing a bed, which had been a long time ago. Marin seemed to know, more or less, but Violette had usually woken herself up in the past, and she seldom let anyone glimpse her fresh out of bed.

She was scared to let anyone see her at her most vulnerable; by the same token, she let Yulan observe her like this because she trusted him.

"I'm seeing you off at the door," Violette insisted. "Wait just a minute."

"Thanks. I'll wait for you in the dining room. Should I fetch Marin?"

"No, thanks. All I have to do is get dressed."

"Well, you've got plenty of time, so no rush."

When Yulan shut the bedroom door, Violette brushed her hair and walked into the adjoining dressing room. At first, she'd used the bedroom closet, but Yulan kept buying her so many new clothes that the room next door had been converted to a dressing room. Yulan even installed a door connecting the rooms, although it would've made much more sense just to stop giving her so many gifts. The bedroom closet was now exclusively Yulan's. It held all his work clothes, loungewear, and everyday wear, but there was still plenty of room to

spare.

Marin had organized the room neatly to make it easier for Violette to navigate. She'd divided the rooms into sections so Violette wouldn't need to dump all her drawers out to find anything, which Violette appreciated greatly. There was still plenty of empty space in the dressing room, but considering the rate at which Yulan gave her presents, that space would be long gone before they knew it.

"I should probably stop him..."

The weekly gift boxes were starting to clutter not only the closet but the corners of their bedroom as well. That didn't bother Violette, but even she had to admit that the balance of supply and demand was just getting out of hand. The fact that the quantity of Yulan's possessions was almost insufficient in comparison only exacerbated that feeling. He gladly spent his money like water for Violette, but when it came to his own possessions, he was indifferent. They'd been married many years by now, yet the only things Yulan ever bought himself were work related. Meanwhile, he showered Violette with weekly gifts... Maybe it was time she put a gentle stop to that.

"I know that's what I should do. Yet..."

As she slid her legs past the hem of the dress he'd bought her only a few days prior, the look in Yulan's eyes that day returned afresh to her mind.

*"I knew you'd look great in that, Vio."*

His cheeks were faintly pink, and his eyes melted with love. That sweet look hadn't changed a bit over all these years. Years had passed since she'd gone from perceiving him as a cute little brother to the most wonderful husband in the world, and it was unfair that his smile retained traces of boyhood innocence. Yulan knew Violette could no longer voice complaints when he smiled like that. In fact, she'd be speechless. Just as Yulan had a soft spot for Violette, Violette was a sucker for Yulan's smile. When Marin teased them for being alike, neither could deny it.

Violette's reflection in the mirror Yulan had just used was a little too casual for company, but she was well-enough put together to see her husband to the door. The frizzy ends of her hair were the only part of her appearance that wouldn't cooperate, so she secured them in a simple side do.

"Sorry I took so long, Yulan."

"Not at all. Thanks for seeing me off."

Yulan was already at the front door, waiting for Violette. The jacket previously dangling off his arm suited him much better than one would expect once he donned it, and he'd changed into his work shoes too.

As Violette ran up to him now, he eagerly grabbed her waist and smiled merrily while gazing into her eyes—although, until his wife entered the room, he hadn't even twitched an eyebrow. The servants lined up to see their master off were used to this scene at this point—only Violette remained oblivious of the full daily morning routine.

"You really do look great in that suit. Is it comfortable enough?"

"Yeah. The fabric feels nice, and it's easy to move in. Thanks."

"Oh, thank goodness."

*Oh dear... Every time I see him smile like that, I'm speechless.*

However old he grew, however masculine his appearance became, his smile for Violette was the one thing that would remain forever young. And now that she saw the once undetected adoration in that smile, it always made her feel complete.

"Well, I'd better be off. Contact me immediately if you need anything."

Violette giggled. "I know, I know. Have a nice day. Take care."

"I will."

Their faces nuzzled together in a kiss. Then Yulan got into the car, and Violette waved goodbye. Their garden was so vast that he'd left her sight line before he



even stepped out the front gate. Violette stared at the empty garden for a while in a daze. She didn't know when it had stopped happening, but the breeze never made her cold anymore. She'd once needed to carry a blanket with her everywhere she walked, but now she was fine strolling the garden in just a thin jacket. Her ashen hair flowed in the breeze to the music of the leaves.

It was then that she realized: This would be her third year sharing Yulan's surname.

## Chapter 2:

### The Unchanging Garden

THE MONTHS PASSED IN A FLASH; time seemed to go faster, thanks to each day being more fulfilling than the last. Those fearful nights she'd lain in bed, wishing the morrow would never come, all just felt like a bad dream. That was just how blissful third year was.

As soon as Yulan graduated high school, Violette took his last name. The blurred flurry of preparations for the wedding persisted only at the beginning. After that, Violette's days were filled with sending Yulan off to work, welcoming him home, relaxing, laughing, and sleeping. Perhaps because they started living together while still in high school, very little changed after they became husband and wife—aside from the fact that they now shared a bed.

"Lady Violette, where would you like to take your breakfast?"

"Let me see... Since it's a lovely day, I suppose I'll eat outside."

"I'll get everything ready for you."

As time passed, the once white-all-over mansion gradually dyed itself Violette's favorite colors. It started with the furniture and spread all the way to the flowers now blooming in the garden beds. Yulan built his castle with care to ensure his wife was happy indoors and outdoors—and his efforts were paying off in full to that very day.

Violette's favorite recent additions were the new outdoor dining furniture and the garden around it. Sitting there and admiring the flowers in full bloom had recently become part of her daily routine.

She sighed in the sunbeams while the breeze carried a cozy scent to her. Everything touching her was so soft as she contemplated what she might do after breakfast: read a book or embroider some. If she started that morning, she could finish a relatively large embroidery project by evening, so she was

leaning toward that. She knew she had a blank handkerchief lying around somewhere.

“The weather has become quite comfortable, hasn’t it?” Marin remarked.

“It has. I don’t even need a blanket anymore.”

“No. Still, I’ve been instructed to leave one in every room just in case you do.”

“Isn’t it annoying having to wash them all? Maybe I should tell Yulan to relax a bit.”

“Well, I’ll put most of them away, then.”

The blankets, which had been added to every room as the result of a solitary sneeze from Violette, were changed and laundered regularly. But since Violette carried her favorite blanket around with her anyway, she rarely used the ones in the rooms. All they resulted in was more laundry. But, since nobody raised a complaint, it was clear where this house’s priorities lay.

“What an interesting aroma that is.”

“Yes. Chesuit’s experimenting with spices recently.”

“What happened to his mushroom obsession?”

“Oh, he’s obsessed with *cooking* first and foremost. All the subgenres come second.”

The aroma tantalizing Violette’s nose was unfamiliar, but she knew that she’d like whatever Chesuit cooked her. Since he wasn’t the type to explain all his gustatory choices, she didn’t know what dish he’d use this intriguing spice in. If he deemed it suitable for Violette’s palate, though, she knew it wouldn’t be unappetizing.

“Have you already eaten, Marin?”

“Oh, I was practically forced to eat until I burst at the staff meal.”

“Oh dear, oh dear...”

“But thanks to our efforts, breakfast will be delicious. I can vouch for the

flavors.”

Violette giggled. “Well, I’m looking forward to that.”

Soup and golden bread adorned the breakfast table. The plaited bread rolls were piled high in their basket, the accompanying soup was full of large bite-sized morsels, and the dessert eagerly awaited its chance to pop out of the icebox to shine.

Given the greenery around Violette, this felt like a picnic. The gardens were so spacious that all one had to do was change location to have an entirely new view.

“I’m going to take it easy after breakfast,” Violette told Marin.

“Good idea. Today is so lovely. Shall I bring you something to do afterward?”

“Yes. Let me think...”

Violette pondered as she popped a piece of the sliced bread into her mouth and chewed. The sun felt so nice, and the twittering of the birds in the distance was just as lovely. If she tried to focus on a task in the soft sunlight, she might fall asleep; still, she wanted to do something meaningful with her time. If she did nod off, Marin would wake her for tea, and she didn’t expect visitors today (as she wouldn’t any day).

“I think I’ll read a book. There’s one with a bookmark between its pages in my room—could you bring that, please?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Violette had seen Marin smiling with her teapot enough times during the past three years to get used to that too. They’d often smiled together like this back at the Vahan estate, but most of those smiles had required a great deal of effort.

Violette’s days were filled with gentleness now. Though nightmares loomed over her, threatening her with the end of these days, there was someone to rub her back, smile at her when she woke, bring her happiness like this every single

day. If she said “I love you,” he returned the words with a strong embrace. It was all right for her world to be this small—she was entitled to live out her days in this spacious yet cozy little box garden of sorts.

*My own little world...never changing. My unchanging days.*

*They're all full of endless love.*

*And they were all made just for me.*

## Chapter 3: Celebratory Cheers

**P**EOPLE SHOW CHANGE in the length of their hair, their height, their physique, and their facial structure. Change happens day by day, however subtle. Be it growth, aging, or deterioration, every change, no matter what it is, shows.

So, when someone steps out of their small, unchanging world, the three years spent in that world will have a human impact that shows just how long those years were.

Violette was reading in her room when Marin popped in with a beautiful purple envelope for her.

“Lady Violette, you’ve got a letter.”

“Thanks.”

Just seeing the lovely color of the paper in Marin’s hands immediately told Violette whom the letter was from.

“Is it from Rosette?” Marin asked.

“Yes. The big day is almost here, so she won’t be able to reply for a while. She’ll send me a letter once things settle down.”

“Wow. It’s that time already.”

“Yes. Yulan told me that before. Still, time does fly.”

Violette opened the envelope with a golden letter opener to find a much shorter message than usual; it contained a brief update. They’d been corresponding by mail for several months, and the last time they’d seen each other was before then. At that point, Rosette herself had been unaware of how things would unfold, so naturally Violette hadn’t known either.

“What shall we do to mark the occasion?” Violette asked.

“Master Yulan says he’s making arrangements.”

“But I want to give Rosette a present just from *me*, not from our household. I know her little bundle of joy will probably receive piles of gifts, but I still want to.”

“I understand... Shall I call a merchant, my lady?”

“I’ll think about it and tell you.”

After Marin left her room, and Violette was alone, she opened the desk drawer. A pile of stationery of the same color sat there. Beside it sat a freshly opened stationery set.

Atop her desk lay a shiny amethyst-hued fountain pen. That was one of the pens she and Rosette had promised to get during their school days; Rosette had its twin. When they wrote each other letters, they always used those special pens. They hadn’t set a fixed frequency for those messages—over the last year, the twice-monthly letters had waned to one every month or two. The reason was quite simple: Rosette was with child.

“Her first baby...”

In Rosette’s third year as crown princess, news of her pregnancy spread all throughout Duralia. Ignoring the complaints elders hurled at them about rushing irresponsibly, Rosette and Claudia poured themselves into their public duties as a married couple. Once Rosette had acclimated to Duralia and her life in it, she sent a letter to Violette informing her of the happy, surreal news.

Violette had a hard time imagining it. That was partly because she was never around pregnancy or babies, but somebody her own age being pregnant was even more difficult to fathom. That was exacerbated by the fact that she never saw Rosette. Ever since the princess had shared the news with her, Violette had sometimes gotten updates from Yulan, who did see her friend occasionally. Although the two girls didn’t see each other face-to-face, they exchanged gifts now and then. And Violette recalled Rosette mentioning in a letter a while ago how she was so overprotected that just strolling in the garden was an ordeal.

*Yulan is preparing a special gift for the crown prince and princess from the Cugurs, but I want to give Rosette something just from me...*

She wanted to give a gift not to the crown princess but to her friend. What would she like, though? Flowers or jewels were typical, but Rosette didn't particularly care for such things.

Violette sat in her desk chair, letting her sinking body weight spin the chair around. Leaning against the backrest and crossing her legs, she resembled a mob boss. The intense aura she exhibited even when she was slouching hadn't diminished one bit over the years.

"Wow... It's already been a year."

Technically, it had been a little less than that—ten months. She and Rosette hadn't seen each other for a long enough time for a baby to come to term.

Even the day she'd stood far off while the rest of the kingdom erupted in celebratory cheers was a faded memory now. Very soon, Duralia would raise a glass to a new blessing, the celebration of which would extend beyond its borders. Violette felt like the whole thing was just a dream, and she was watching it as an outsider, far, far away.



## Chapter 4:

### Golden

**W**HEN VIOLETTE LEARNED OF Rosette's pregnancy, her first emotion wasn't jubilation—it was worry. Claudia and Rosette's marriage was political, but they'd gradually fallen in love over time and were very happy. Claudia wasn't the sort of man who would make his wife carry out all the child-rearing duties, and Rosette wasn't the sort of woman who'd sacrifice herself for motherhood.

Violette's worries weren't over them but over their child-to-be.

Many people concerned themselves with what sex the child would be. While nobody would be foolish enough to openly complain if the baby were a girl, unbearable vitriol would obviously be uttered behind closed doors.

Even a baby boy wouldn't mean smooth sailing. Would he be genetically healthy and able-bodied? Would his eyes have a beautiful golden hue? Should his eyes be Rosette's amethyst purple, the already griping elders would blame the crown princess in righteous vindication. It would be no exaggeration to say that they'd regard her not as a brave woman who'd given birth but as a broodmare whose sole purpose was to carry on Claudia's genes.

All the fuss over eye color was ridiculous—that was the sane opinion. But in their small, archaic world, such sanity was perceived as mere naivety. Some people *were* cast aside for their eye color.

"Vio, got a minute?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"It's our baby gift—I picked out some options, and I want you to look over them."

"Of course. Sorry you've been handling all this."

"No worries. I do this sort of thing at work all the time."

Yulan's kind, smiling eyes were gold—the color valued above all others in this kingdom. It was because of that color that Yulan had been cast aside.

The kingdom was abuzz over Rosette's pregnancy at present. Working beside Claudia in the public eye, Rosette observed and felt that atmosphere firsthand—unlike Violette, who was safely tucked away. Everyone eagerly awaited the baby's arrival; every day, Rosette received letters of congratulations, and all her subjects voiced their excitement. It was mostly Mila and Yulan who fielded all that anticipation.

*How does this fervor look to Yulan? How does it feel?*

"Any chance you know Rosette's palate?" Yulan asked. "Has the pregnancy changed anything?"

"I'm not sure... I know she isn't a fan of sweets, but maybe this changed that."

"Oh yeah... All right, let's think of something besides food, then. As long as it's something impermanent, anything ought to do, really."

"So we're getting her something impermanent?"

"Yeah. I think she'd prefer that anyway. She's probably up to her ears in presents right now."

Yulan's eyes ran casually over his planner. Violette watched him from the side. He looked no different to her. He spoke of Rosette's baby just like he would any other casual topic of conversation around bedtime, no particular emotion on his face. He wasn't interested—that was the best way of putting it.

"Will you be there for the great reveal, Vio? Everyone should be so obsessed with the baby, you'd probably be able to relax."

"That's true..."

"I'm sure the crown princess would love to see you in person too."

He was looking forward to it. Violette could see it in his smile. Where did that feeling come from? She knew he felt not a trace of emotion toward the coming baby. Not joy, anger, jealousy, nor envy. He was indifferent to the newborn

who'd be his niece or nephew by blood. Was it really reasonable to feel nothing whatsoever, positive or negative? Was it all right for Violette even to ask that question?

She didn't know; she'd sat back, passively accepting the happiness that had been brought to her.

## Chapter 5:

### Those Standing Beside the King

**“A** BABY’S ON THE WAY.”

“Ooh, congrats.”

“That didn’t sound sincere.”

“That’s because it wasn’t.”

Yulan didn’t so much as lift his gaze; his posture, which demonstrated that he was prioritizing work over conversation, didn’t falter. Mila had made a point of announcing the pregnancy concisely, but Yulan didn’t grace the big news with even a superficial inquiry. He seemed virtually as disinterested as if he hadn’t so much as heard.

“Lady Rosette is *with child*. We can’t yet assume the pregnancy is viable, so it hasn’t been announced yet. But set the wheels in motion for that.”

“Understood. Who’s on the list to be informed beforehand?”

“The crown princess herself will tell all those individuals by letter.”

“Right. I’ll schedule an announcement date, so be sure she sticks to that.”

“Just make certain she’s spread the news before we do, or we’ll have egg on our faces.”

“Sure, I’ll adjust as needed. There’s no telling who might leak it, though.”

With a glance, Yulan’s eyes pierced Mila. Even his gaze seemed inorganic; not a flicker of light shone in it. Yet Mila had grown accustomed to it over the years. Yulan’s golden irises were like gold ore set in a doll’s eyes, not a trace of blood flowing behind them.

“For that matter, you probably shouldn’t have told me,” Yulan added. “The elders won’t like that.”

The young man was beautiful enough not to look out of place in the ornate castle, but it was his beauty that had driven him from the castle. His eyes were a shining gold, so those who valued golden eyes had cast him aside.

Though years had passed, and Yulan now carried Duralia's future on his shoulders, some in the government still didn't accept him. Those who distorted the events around his birth were once again looking to overpower him and ruin his life. Having foreseen this, Yulan had gone to careful lengths to raise his worth before coming to work at the castle. Now, the potential repercussions of crossing him were far too great; nobody dared lay a finger on him, however they secretly loathed him.

"Well, how could they not tell you? It relates to your work."

"They could've waited until the big announcement. While they're keeping the news to a small circle, they only needed to tell you."



Under Yulan's emotionless gaze, his mouth alone twisted, but it didn't hold enough emotion to be called a scornful smirk or a fake smile. That was the mask Yulan wore those days. He no longer needed the friendly facade of a nice young man to win people over. Whoever he spoke with or about, he wore the same face, spoke in the same voice, and played it safe with his duties, putting neither too little nor too much effort into his work. He could be trusted, but he didn't trust anybody—that was the type of disdain he practiced.

After a pause, Mila said, "Claudia wanted me to tell you."

"Hunh."

"Come on. At least give me *some* reaction."

"It's all just so predictable that I *can't* react more than that."

When Yulan stopped scribbling, closed his ledger, and finally looked up, his expression was still as emotionless as a doll's. Yet Mila sensed a hint of frustration behind Yulan's words, and he was certain he hadn't imagined it.

Yulan was constant, like the water's surface. But whenever Claudia was involved, slight transformations took place. They weren't so much ripples on the surface as changes in temperature. It cooled rather than warmed.

"He probably thought he should tell me out of familial duty or whatever. I wish he'd just stop bothering."

"It does you little good to tell *me* that. Besides, him treating you like this has protected you from certain disaster."

"I'm saying that protection from disaster is all I really need, although it's the thought that counts."

"Well, if Claudia's social skills were so well-honed that he knew that, you and I would be out of a job."

Sometimes Mila thought about how easy life would be if only he possessed a cowardice that could make peace with simply accepting profit. For Mila's part, he wasn't naive enough to respect Claudia's purehearted honesty. Yet if the

crown prince lost that purity, there'd no longer be meaning in his carrying Duralia on his shoulders. That was exactly why, if he put the other "golden" man in his place, the kingdom would profit considerably.

"Well, sorry to disappoint, but I don't consider that familial duty of his a virtue."

"That perspective doesn't bother you, Yulan? At any rate, / consider it a virtue. That balances it out."

"You really are insufferable, you know?"

Mila chuckled.



## Chapter 6: Beyond the Delusion

**H**OW MANY TIMES HAD he imagined the day he was born?

Was he welcomed, or was he shunned...? Probably shunned. But he couldn't help holding out hope that, just maybe, somebody out there had rejoiced at his birth.

Innocent, ignorant, and pure children had crushed his hopes to pieces. The little boy who'd once dwelt in innocent illusion could never come back from that.

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"Ah. You're here."

"Most people say 'Welcome home.'"

"Welcome home, young master."

"Meh..."

Yulan had slipped through the front door and walked down the hall past the row of servants welcoming him reverently. As he'd done so, a familiar man in a chef's coat had been about to slip past him, a paper bag in his arms. Chesuit met Yulan's eyes to acknowledge his return but didn't bow his head. He'd been instructed to act deferentially in front of guests, but the only guest the mansion had had so far was Violette's friend, so that order was probably pointless.

With the upcoming birth of the crown prince and princess's child, Yulan's household had gotten proportionally busier. Chesuit was under no obligation to welcome his master home at this hour, since it was late at night; Yulan wondered why he was still up. (One look at the bag the chef held, filled to the brim with vegetables, gave him a general idea.)

"I don't know why you came out to greet me at this hour. I don't want a

second supper.”

“I ain’t that shameless, and you know it,” Chesuit snorted. “I got some good spices in. I thought I’d make preserves and prep tomorrow’s breakfast while I’m at it.”

“Ah. That makes sense...”

Though Yulan wished his chef would just finish up and go to bed, he wasn’t interested enough in Chesuit’s life to suggest that. Chesuit wouldn’t heed his advice anyway.

“Want a midnight snack?” Chesuit asked.

“Sure... I’ll be getting back to work after my bath, so bring something to my study then.”

“Very well, my lord.” Chesuit loosened his tie roughly and cracked his neck.

Yulan’s study felt farther away that night, probably because he was walking slower than usual. He knew that the weight in his shoulders was from fatigue, not gravity. In addition to his normal duties, he needed to respond to the congratulatory cards the crown prince and princess had received, as well as contact many more people all over the world. He felt pressed for time to complete all that, although he was sacrificing sleep. Since he could function just fine on very little, his main source of stress was only getting to admire his wife’s beautiful face when she was sleeping.

He didn’t use the study reserved for his work too often. This was partly because he rarely brought work home. As a rule, once Yulan came home, he wanted to spend as much time as possible by Violette’s side. Instead of bringing work home after hours, he preferred just going to work earlier. That sentiment hadn’t changed, but at the moment, he no longer had the luxury of following that schedule.

“Damn it... I just know those old government farts are doing this on purpose.”

Yulan tossed a bag onto the sofa; it contained a bundle of papers that

should've been somebody else's work. Every movement he made, down to the way he tore off his suit jacket, expressed his headspace. His mouth and fingertips were rough and wild, especially since he had nobody to take his mindset out on.

He lowered himself into his desk chair, which still had a brand-new luster after years, and released a long, long sigh. Covering his eyes with his arms, he let his head hit the back of the chair. With the light obscured from view, the backs of his eyes started to relax. When one was fatigued, the eyes were the first place to feel it. Next were the arms, shoulders, and neck.

His work wasn't all that nerve-racking, but there was a mountain of it that he slid farther and farther down every day. A sure percentage of the elders—who cockily brandished their outdated experience—had opposed Yulan's very birth. Yulan's adoptive parents prioritized logic when it came to life and death, but Duralia's highest figures were devout followers of the color gold, especially the ancient ones. Because they worshipped golden eyes, they couldn't allow anyone outside the royal family to possess them.

*I wonder how the ones brazenly calling for my murder back then feel when they have to look me in the eye now?*

"Maybe we could just kick them all out until he's enthroned..."

Yulan's brain was starting to hurt. To make Violette his, he'd let himself act recklessly in all kinds of ways, but he'd forbidden himself any recklessness *after* he got her. He didn't know what stray attacks might hit her. If only people would just complain to Claudia directly. All the endless energy poured into continually tormenting Yulan would be better spent confronting and disposing of him directly. If they really felt their beliefs were correct, they should act on that and point the finger of judgment at him, shrieking for his death.

*That'll all be over once the baby's born... At least, I hope so.*

A new member of the royal family resided in the crown princess's womb. If everything went smoothly, that child would grow up to carry Duralia on their

shoulders.

Above and beyond the number of children and their sexes, the most important question was whether any would have golden eyes. And what if Rosette couldn't give birth for some reason? Or was unable to have more children? Ideally, her firstborn would be a golden-eyed boy, but the beginning of a life was always outside human hands. Until the moment that baby cried, nobody could affect that little life.

Even if Rosette's firstborn was a girl with eyes of another color, there were ways to remedy that. In simple terms, Claudia only needed to father children until he produced a prince with golden eyes. If Rosette was incapable of that, he could take a concubine. Yulan knew all too well that that was how some golden-eyed boys were born. Unfortunately for them, their very existences were stifled if a boy with golden eyes had been born before them. If a golden-eyed prince *wasn't* born first, they'd be welcomed with open arms. The only hurdle of that practice was that it required one to ignore logic, morality, and basic human rights.

As somebody whose own life proved that a man could be raised without regard for such human rights, Yulan didn't balk at that, but the purehearted prince was fundamentally poorly suited to that method.

"And messy international incidents are such a hassle..."

Leaning on the chair's armrest, Yulan fell into thought. The only people who would simply be happy about the baby's birth, regardless of other facts, were Duralian subjects, one portion of the fanatics. Since Yulan was among those handling the situation, he needed to consider all the possibilities and have countless backup plans. Since he'd experienced a similar matter, he was especially good at imagining every potential scenario—even scenarios Claudia and Mila overlooked.

A sharp knock at the door stopped his thoughts cold.

"Young master, may I come in?"

“Sure.”

Chesuit popped into the study carrying a pot and a large soup cup. Not much time had passed since Yulan saw the chef, so Chesuit must’ve warmed leftovers—something Yulan could eat with one hand while working and not get his fingers dirty. This consommé had become a late-night staple in the mansion; Chesuit had strained all the solids out just for Yulan.

“Take that bag with you,” Yulan said.

“All right. Boy, it’s heavy.”

“Yeah. It’s a stack of documents. Waste of paper, if you ask me.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Thanks,” Yulan drawled. “Any changes with her?”

“She and Marin are deciding what to get Princess Rosette. She’s doing well, but she worries about you.”

Yulan didn’t respond.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut about your work habits, but at least make sure you get enough to eat.”

“I really hate that bossiness, Chesuit.”

“You’re welcome.”

## Chapter 7:

### Hearts at Odds

**Y**ULAN DIDN'T RETURN UNTIL late into the night, but he'd leave for work the next morning when the sun had barely begun to rise. The sky was a beautiful dark blue, with traces of night remaining, but he had no time to appreciate it.

He showered and got dressed; he'd take his breakfast in the car. Chesuit was determined to hear Yulan say "That was delicious!" after a meal, yet he'd received no feedback thus far aside from "Make me convenient food I can eat with one hand." All Yulan cared about was having Violette's wishes met; he didn't care what Chesuit did in the kitchen beyond that. Still, it astounded him just how obsessed his chef was with impressing such an impossible critic. At least Chesuit was enjoying his daily recipe testing.

Yulan grabbed a random tie and put it around his neck, then he quietly pushed the bedroom door open. Even the doors of the old house glided open elegantly with little effort. When they'd first moved in, those doors had squeaked unpleasantly now and then. Now, though, the house seemed lived-in anywhere you went inside it. That was a testament to just how long they'd resided there.

The surface of the warm lump in the bed appeared to move up and down gently. Just the sight made Yulan's whole day seem blissful before it even began. It was a peaceful, content feeling, like warm softness filling his chest. He couldn't help but smile, reveling in the coziness. He shook his head at himself for being so simpleminded, scorning his foolishness. Then he realized he didn't mind being a fool for the rest of his life.

*She's sound asleep...*

He tiptoed carefully to the bed to see Violette's hair trailing out from the light-pink sheet, seemingly melting into it. He traced her tresses with his eyes

until he saw snow-white skin. Her downturned eyelashes vibrated faintly with every breath, but there was no sign of stress or anguish. She breathed daintily, the space between her nose and mouth hidden by her hand.

Sleeping under the soft covers like that, curled up like a little child, was a longtime quirk of Violette's. But even when she fell asleep this way, when Yulan woke in the morning, he always found her curled in his arms. He'd asked once if that was uncomfortable for her, but she said she crawled into his arms in her sleep, so there was no need to correct it.

He sat beside her pillow, yet she didn't wake. Yulan couldn't remember how long it had taken her to learn to sleep through this. He'd always been a light sleeper, but Violette was extra sensitive to human presences. When they'd first started sharing a bed, they often stayed up all night reminiscing about the past, unable to sleep. Yulan still remembered well the pathetic panic he'd felt when Violette, worried about his lack of sleep, suggested separate bedrooms.

"Maybe she's a bit pale..."

His fingertips traced her eyelids, barely touching them. He watched Violette sleep like this every morning, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her awake. Her complexion looked a bit white, and he had a feeling it wasn't just because she was asleep.

He knew how much she worried. Not only about her friend's upcoming delivery but about how Yulan would feel about the baby. This wasn't because she was deeply perceptive; Violette and Yulan shared a past, so it was easy for her to imagine how he felt. She knew what it was like to suffer abuse from the people whose hopes you'd dashed; her life story was the same.

He felt incredibly guilty. For making her feel lonely, for concerning her. He thought it was a real shame. She shouldn't need to worry about any of those things.

"You have the heart of an angel, Vio..."

His fingertips were cold, very cold, so he surely wasn't touching her. Yulan

couldn't feel her warmth, so he would stay cold always. But he'd take her cold away everywhere, endlessly.

Whatever the baby was like, and even if it was tragically stillborn, it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter whether it had golden eyes, whether it was a boy or girl, whether it was a joy or a disappointment, whether it hurt people. He neither loved nor hated it; he didn't resent it; he didn't even envy it.

He didn't care. He had no interest. Even now, it just didn't matter to him.



## Chapter 8:

### Former Trash

**A**S FLOWER BUDS OPENED into the balmy spring air, the entire kingdom celebrated, for a baby boy had been born. The baby prince had golden hair, white skin, and long eyelashes above beautiful amethyst eyes.

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The celebration would be best described as dazzling; it was carried out with the utmost opulence. As Rosette and Claudia held the infant a few months of age in their arms, a massive crowd of guests surrounded them. Rosette smiled elegantly in the distance. This was Violette's first party in a long time, and the atmosphere was strangely exultant.

"This is crazy, man. What a fuss over a baby."

"Gia, aren't you a state guest? Are you sure you should be here with me?" Violette asked.

"Eh, it's all good. I just tagged along with my pops anyway. Besides, Yulan asked me to be here."



“I’d be fine by myself.”

“Yaaaah... Even I can tell you wouldn’t be.”

Standing beside Violette—who’d transformed completely into a wallflower—was Gia, whose arms somehow held a large amount of food of dubious origin. Violette hadn’t really partaken of any refreshments aside from drinks, but just the sight of all that food made her stomach heavy.

Gia saw Yulan often during diplomatic meetings; to Violette, however, the Sinan prince was an old, familiar face she hadn’t encountered in years. He spoke to her with such familiarity that it was hard to believe the chance reunion wasn’t a mere extension of the last time they’d seen each other. That was probably part of why Yulan had asked Gia to look after her.

“Yulan’s in high demand these days too, isn’t he? Did he lose weight?”

“So it’s that obvious?” Violette asked.

“Poor guy’s been busy as hell with Princess Rosette’s baby, I imagine. Hasn’t had time to see me at all.”

“Me neither. He’s gone to work every day before I wake up and come home after I fall asleep.”

“Ah. That explains the super-stressed look on his face.”

Gia’s carefree cackle was exactly the same as when he was a schoolboy. He was his nation’s heir apparent, yet at a glance, he was still the same charming boy. Relations between the countries had improved ever since Yulan assumed a diplomatic role, but that was likely because he wasn’t fooled by Gia’s flippant appearance.

Undeterred by the impolite stares shot at him, Gia stood proud and strong. He was like a beautiful wild beast. In a nation where strength was everything, he was a man who knew without a shadow of doubt that he was the best; he couldn’t possibly be an ordinary boy.

“Man, Duralia’s such a drag.”

Violette had no reply.

“Everyone here’s dumb too.”

Tiny bubbles popped in the champagne glasses. It was just alcohol. It was just...the color gold. But everyone in Duralia had been intoxicated by that color since the nation was founded.

“First they hate my people’s skin color, now they hate the eye color of their own prince.”

“Is that why Yulan asked you to attend?”

“Nah. He figured if I stood with you, everybody would give you space. Guy sure doesn’t mince words.”

No Duralian pointed at Gia’s dark skin with scorn, but not a soul could overlook how their eyes clouded with suspicion at the sight of him. It was too late to make amends—Sina’s people had experienced generations of prejudice and discrimination. Duralia’s establishment hated what was different; they hated change. Saying that all came down to experience might’ve sounded good, but in the end, it was still merely a distillation of their most conservative attributes. Now their judgmental gazes were directed at a baby.

Yulan’s soft brown hair fluttered in the distance. His towering silhouette, which could never be lost in a crowd, stood proud without faltering, even surrounded by prostrated people. It was obvious even from a distance that his smile was fake, but Violette and Gia were sure that nobody bowing around him noticed.

“He’s in the worst mood ever,” Gia mumbled. “I can pretty much imagine what they’re all saying about him.”

Yulan, a baby with golden eyes, had been cast aside for the good of Duralia. Now, for the good of Duralia, everyone was reaching out eagerly to him.

“Ha ha! They’re like filthy insects,” Gia spat.

“...Agreed.”

The thin arms of those swarming around the color gold were the same arms that had pushed the young Yulan away. The elders—who were like dead, withered trees—probably still thought of him as a poor orphan boy begging for salvation.

The merciless tide of old age came for everyone, even those who spent their lives holding up a nation. And the baby whose life didn't belong to him was now nowhere to be found.

## Chapter 9:

### Shouldering the Burden of the Era

**I**F LIGHT ATTRACTED MOTHS, then the crowd fawning over once discarded trash were flies. Yulan could imagine nothing more annoying than the onlookers and the way they'd been buzzing around him. Their merciless greed shone through the flimsy smiles they wore. Their facades were pathetic, and it irritated Yulan that they thought those paper masks could fool him. Even now that he'd risen above them all and gained popularity and power, they looked no different to Yulan than they had on the day they'd senselessly cast him aside.

He didn't care a mite that they'd misjudged him. Failing to measure a person's talent correctly was a common side effect of stupidity. What he found most troublesome was that they expected him to behave as they wished.

"Say, Yulan, don't you agree, my boy?"

The overly flattering voice interrupted Yulan's brain as it carried out the required head count of the waiters. It made him sick. Looking at the smirking face of this man, the same age as his middle-aged parents, was so unpleasant that it only made him want to vomit even more. Yulan could've made a show of twisting his face in disgust, but now wasn't the time. This was supposed to be a celebration of the new prince's birth. He'd worked very hard, sacrificing his time with Violette for this day. He needed it to be successful. Otherwise, all those times he'd made her lonely would be for nothing.

Truth be told, he hadn't heard a single thing up to this point. He'd spent the entire celebration busily working the crowd. And, from the moment he'd for some reason been apprehended for a chat, Yulan's brain had been stuck in work mode. Yet, although he hadn't heard anything the others said, he still knew *what* they were saying.

"You're a superior specimen."

“Your blood is genuine.”

“You have what it takes.”

“You have just as much right as he does.”

“*You* have golden eyes too.”

Their tongues wouldn't stop wagging. All the old bastards seemed to have forgotten the grand declarations they'd made twenty years ago. It was because Yulan had golden eyes that Duralia wished to forbid his existence.

“Prince Claudia's also gifted... But I'm just *saying*.”

“He's a well-behaved gentleman, but politics isn't always about civility.”

“Sometimes you need to bargain.”

“In that regard, you have a gift for negotiating with Sina.”

They were abominable attempts at flattery. It was true that Claudia was overly upright, and that Yulan was gifted in the art of determining someone's true intentions, but did those old farts really believe such clumsy ass-kissing would sway him? If so, they really did look down on him.

The thought of entertaining their sycophancy with a cynical laugh seemed stupid to Yulan. He'd humored them more than enough; he wanted to get back to work. He gave them a glance to signal this, but his intentions were misunderstood. The creepy smile on the first man's face creased even deeper as he bent down like a snake and whispered.

“*You're* best suited to be the next king.”

*Augh. Seriously. These bastards must think I'm really stupid.*

## Chapter 10: Sweet Poison

IT SEEMED THAT, IN THEIR MINDS, Yulan was still the abandoned son of a whore—a plucky, pitiful young lad seeking his kingdom’s approval. Having been mocked so thoroughly, Yulan was tempted to laugh loudly in their faces. It truly took extreme talent to participate in such a banal conversation.

“Ha!”

The corners of his mouth rose in a cynical smirk. Even without looking in the mirror, he knew it could come off as nothing more than a sneer, so he was pleased by the way the old man’s shoulders flinched. He knew his message had been well received. *Good. Do us both a favor—understand that you just made the stupidest suggestion in the world.*

“I advise you nip that thought in the bud.”

*Make me king? You only want that so you can keep your power.*

“I could never be king—don’t we both know that?”

*I’ll never let you bastards have your way.*

Even if Yulan *had* wanted to be king, he’d never have cooperated with them. The elders adorned their scheming with flowery words, but their plot was easy to deduce.

They were practically commanding Yulan to father a baby with golden eyes. At some point, they’d devised a scheme: Disregard the dignity of Yulan, not Claudia, and force *him* to father such a child. Then, once that golden-eyed baby was born, it would be raised as the crown prince and princess’s own. There was no way the beautiful prince would accept such an idea, but once they declared the good news around the kingdom, he’d have no choice but to buckle.

Being looked down on to this extent was almost refreshing. Did they think



he'd gleefully nod in agreement if they offered to crown him? They probably did; otherwise, they wouldn't have made such a proposal at an event like this. They thought Yulan would fume with jealousy and envy at the sight of Claudia and Rosette's celebration, and that he'd eagerly lap at the sweet nectar they offered in the palms of their hands.

"What a pity I can't put what you just said on the record," Yulan added.

The other man's face filled with either anger or panic. Anger at being spurned by the former trash he'd ridiculed, looked down upon, and tried to make his puppet, or panic at the thought that Yulan might rat him out. It didn't matter which; Yulan's answer and actions would've stayed the same regardless.

Slipping past the swarm of old government officials, he thought through the work tasks running late. Everything in the party hall seemed to be going smoothly. Still, aristocrats from many nations had gathered here. A diplomat like him would ordinarily avoid being restrained for too long by something trivial.

Then again, that was probably part of the elders' plan. They thought any number of men could do Yulan's job in his place. Maybe they even planned to replace him seamlessly, then take his offspring and drive him out. If Yulan could do the job, anybody could. Such contempt and scorn for him ran so rampant that he stumbled over it wherever he walked.

"Mila, a word?"

"Ah, Yulan. I was about to fetch you. The emperor of Sina has come to pay his respects. We need you to receive him."

"I have to tell you something later. Whether you tell Claudia is up to you."

"Understood."

Yulan appreciated that his colleague was quick on the uptake. If Milania had been about to fetch him, that meant he realized where Yulan was and whom he was with. Knowing Yulan's origin and recognizing the man he'd been talking to,

Milania could easily grasp what the conversation was about.

*I made the right call asking Gia for help.*

It irritated him to no end, but he couldn't compromise on Violette's safety. He kept his cursing silent, preparing to meet his friend and his friend's father.

## Chapter 11:

### Beloved

CLAUDIA WAS A PUREHEARTED MAN. A righteous, beautiful human being. Few people deemed him to be of unworthy character to carry Duralia on his shoulders as king. But the few who whispered tempting words in Yulan's ear knew Claudia's purity might be a liability; that was why they sought to make a pawn of Yulan, not Claudia.

If the government officials said his firstborn infant couldn't take the throne, and commanded him to keep producing children until one had golden eyes, he'd surely explode in fiery rage. He'd do so as a loving husband and as somebody with compassion for his half brother Yulan, who'd been cast aside *because* of his golden eyes.

Claudia was unstained. That was painfully obvious if you spent any time with him. He'd been born innocent and raised in innocence. He would be a purehearted king, the king Duralia needed, and the kind his subjects wanted. Even the government elders, despite foreseeing difficulties due to Claudia's purity, still didn't want him to *lose* it. It was, after all, the kingdom that had raised him that way. So, logically, it followed that they'd accept Claudia's son as he was. Yet if they were that flexible, Yulan would never have been cast aside.

"...So, that's the gist," Yulan said. "I'll let you decide what to do about it."

Milania heaved a sigh. "I guess the worst-case scenario I imagined came true."

"It was actually the best-case scenario I imagined."

"See, *that's* what scares me about you, Yulan."

"Well, the carefree nature that makes you call this a *worst-case* scenario gives me the creeps."

Now that the party had ended in success, and their busy days were behind

them for now, Milania sank into the sofa. But the news Yulan had brought him under the pretense of casual conversation weighed heavier upon Milania than any of the hardships he'd endured that day.

Claudia's baby was a boy...but with purple eyes. Those were the two facts that had troubled Milania's and Claudia's minds for the past few months. Naturally, both believed that the newborn was worthy of love, whatever it looked like. Its sex or eye color didn't matter. And in Claudia's heart, he'd worshipped the beautiful violet eyes just like Rosette's from the moment the prince was born.

But once reality melted his elation, he was confronted with the old delusion. Golden eyes. By now, those fanatical about the trait were likely in the minority, but the tie between golden eyes and the throne was still strong.

Naturally, neither Claudia nor Milania believed for a moment that a person without golden eyes couldn't be king. But they knew all too well that deeming the prince's eyes to be of no consequence would bring about tragedy.

"I don't want to be king," Yulan said. "Nor do I want to have a son and surrender him to the crown prince. If somebody has to do the dirty deed, let it be him."

"Nobody's going to force you to father a child or give him up. That would basically be human trafficking."

"I know. I've experienced it firsthand."

"...So you have."

Once something like that had already been done, doing it again was significantly more viable. And Yulan himself had undergone such dealings. To outward appearances, he'd been brought up a healthy young man—in a way, he'd accidentally become a success story that supported a foolish approach tantamount to human sacrifice. Yet the fools who espoused that couldn't even imagine the scars hidden beneath his glittering golden eyes.

"For now, I'll let you handle this," Yulan said. "Including what to tell Claudia.

He's free to respond however he wants, but if any harm comes to me and mine, I won't go easy on him."

"I know... Right now, if anything, he's surprised that he received a deferment. A child of yours would be Violette's child too, right? I wouldn't be surprised if you destroyed such a proposal without debate."

"...That could happen."

When Milania hurled the innocent question at him, Yulan hadn't avoided answering by complaining. All he could do was look away, which was just as baffling to him.

He was annoyed to find himself still being stepped on after all these years. Still, anger didn't well up inside him—even though Yulan's child would mean *Violette's* child, and if it had golden eyes, they'd be forced to give it up.

Well, he took that indifference for granted at first, since he had no interest in children. Yet if it was Violette's baby, carrying her genes, he couldn't possibly assign it the same value as anyone else. A life that Violette nurtured; a life that Violette birthed by sharing hers. His own child, loved by Violette.

"Aha... Now I get it," Yulan muttered.

"Hm?"

"Nothing. I just finished a long, huge job. I'm going back to my normal schedule."

"Ah, yes, of course...I understand. You know, you could just take some time off."

"I'm not taking any time off until this problem with the elders is resolved. There's no telling what they might try to pull."

"Understood. I'll get you results as quickly as I can."

"If you take too long, I'll just wind up helping."

"Seriously, please stop. That isn't funny."

## Chapter 12:

### Freedom

**H**E TRIED IMAGINING IT. He reflected on Rosette over the past year...then superimposed Violette's image onto the crown princess's.

Her flat belly slowly growing. Lying down pale in the face, sleeping too much, sleeping too little, her palate changing what foods she could and couldn't eat. Caressing her round belly and smiling, imagining who the baby would take after. Praying that the baby would grow strong and healthy.

He imagined such a pregnancy. But however hard he tried, he couldn't picture that version of Violette from the neck up.

"Yulan! Welcome home."

"It's good to be back. It's been a while since we had this exchange."

"Well, you've been busy all this time. Gia and I were talking about how you've lost weight."

"Well...I ate like normal, but I was doing more work than I'm used to, so that makes sense."

"Now you deserve a good rest. I mean it."

*Ahh, what bliss.* He admired Violette as her cheeks lifted into a soft smile without her even knowing it. Yulan was sure his expression was the same. Watching her sleep made him quite happy, but it didn't sate his hunger to hear her voice and see himself reflected in her open eyes.

"Have you eaten supper yet?" Yulan asked. "Oh, wait. You probably want a bath first. If your feet are sore, I can massage—"

"I haven't eaten supper yet. I wanted to eat with you. And you need a bath and a foot massage far more than I do, Yulan. You've been working yourself to the bone for a very long time. You need your rest."

“I’ll be fine. I missed not seeing you, but the work wasn’t a big deal.”

“Don’t say that. If you overwork yourself, you’ll wind up like Chesuit.”

“Hey, I’m not *in love* with my work like he is.”

“All the more reason to nip this in the bud.”

He couldn’t detect any grief in her eyes as she pressed her hands to her mouth and giggled. Sighing in relief, he knew then that he’d been right to ask Gia to take care of her. He hated the idea of thanking Gia, but if Violette’s safety had been ensured, a little unpleasantness was small potatoes. If you wanted to keep people away from your wife, no bodyguard was more talented than Gia.

“The party today was lovely.”

“Thanks. We went all out, since it was a formal introduction and celebration. Are you tired? You probably didn’t get to talk to Princess Rosette...”

“I figured I wouldn’t have a chance to talk to her today anyway. Once things settle down, we’ll visit each other at one of our houses.”

Wanting to regain all that lost time to caress the aches in each other’s hearts, they talked nonstop. They smiled over their delicious supper, then sank into their bedroom sofa (it turned out they really were exhausted from the party) and drank the tea Marin brought while having a cozy chat about their recent fancies. They took the time to talk through everything they’d been wanting to say until it was all said.

Their piled-up hopes and wishes conquered, all that remained was to find a way to bring up a subject that was touchy for both of them.

“Listen, Vio...”

An air filled with gentleness and nothing else flowed between them. Yulan’s touch received a warm touch in kind. There was nothing to fear, but he felt incredibly tense; he was scared that he might hurt her by mistake.

“I’m fine either way,” he told her.

Would such wholehearted devotion become a burden or a pair of wings? Did he want to fly free or be bound in chains? When discussing the future, Yulan still didn't know how much emphasis he ought to put on the subject.



## Chapter 13:

### Love's Spearhead

**V**IOLETTE HAD THOUGHT THAT life would get harder, heavier, more painful. She thought that Yulan's smile would have the same hint of melancholy as hers when they talked about the future together. After all, a woman's duty was to pass down the bloodline.

*But who cares?*

As Yulan smiled gently, the sweet scent of tea embracing them, he didn't push Violette toward any choice. He just put everything...everything in her hands. Whether good or bad, whether the answer was yes or no. He said not a word about it, waiting for Violette to speak.

"I...don't know."

"All right."

"I don't think...that I *don't* want children. That's certainly not how I feel. If I held my own baby in my arms, I know that I'd be happy."

"Uh-huh?"

"But then why...why can't I imagine it at all...?"

Rosette smiled when she held her baby. Merely superimposing her daydreams onto that image was enough to cause Violette to assent. She could've avoided the difficulty of mulling over whether she really wanted a child. When she painted a future in her mind in which she held a soft bundle in her arms and smiled with Yulan, she couldn't even imagine how happy she'd be.

Her flat belly would slowly grow round, she'd get morning sickness and anemia, she'd sometimes get moody and cry for no reason, and she'd pray every day for her baby to be healthy and strong. That was a common vision of happiness that you saw everywhere... Yet Violette couldn't seem to see it for

herself. The happy mother she envisioned never bore her face, however hard she tried.

“Of course I don’t *not* want a child. I’m not refusing to give birth either. But no matter how hard I try...I just can’t bring myself to desire one. I just can’t... imagine myself loving one.”

*Somebody caresses her bulging belly. Somebody hugs her fussy baby close. Somebody caresses her baby’s hair. Somebody...somebody...somebody. But not me. Somebody else. A faceless woman...showers love on her faceless baby. Some man stands beside her. A tall man with brown hair... A faceless man.*

Till death did them part, in sickness and in health, they’d vowed to spend their lives together. Violette would make Yulan happy, and Yulan would make Violette happy. The love they’d pledged each other would never change as long as they lived.

They loved each other and had become husband and wife. Yet no matter how hard she tried, starting a family was the one thing Violette couldn’t imagine.

“They’re wrong,” Yulan said. “A child isn’t a symbol of love.”

“Huh...?”

“We know that, Vio. You and me both.”

Falling in love, growing attached to one another, becoming husband and wife, and transforming that love into another human life. That was the norm—a baby *not* born under those conditions was the anomaly. And a child had to be loved unconditionally to thrive.

*That was why I assumed I could embrace love. I thought I could...*

“Listen, Vio... If I had a baby, I wouldn’t love it.”

Yulan’s voice flowed softly like a gentle river. In a kind tone that could never hurt anybody, he bared his soul. His was the face of a young man who knew defeat, a boy who had nothing, a baby abandoned by everybody.

“I don’t care for anyone. I don’t even care for myself. So I wouldn’t care for

my child either. I'm not interested in one. You're the only one I care for, Vio. You're the only one I can love. So I really don't care about anything else. I couldn't love it unless it was *your* child, Vio."

Yulan used to find the notion of bearing a child with golden eyes and surrendering it to Claudia ridiculous. If Claudia wanted a golden-eyed child, he should just father his own. But that was only because Yulan couldn't imagine the child's mother being *Violette*. After all, he wouldn't want a child with anyone other than her.

But then, how would he feel if that child *was* his and Violette's? If they parented a baby boy with golden eyes? Just like Yulan, that boy would be taken by adults he didn't know and raised to be someone else.

If that happened, Violette would grieve. She'd cry and hate herself for letting her baby go. Yulan couldn't allow that. He could never let anybody take Violette's baby from her—it would be wrong. He'd never allow any path that made her cry.

But what if Violette didn't grieve? What if she wanted to let the baby go?

Then he wouldn't really care either way, as long as she could relinquish the infant easily and forget about it. He could easily imagine *himself* forgetting it.

"So I really don't care either way, Vio. If you want a baby, that alone will make me care for it. But, if you don't want a baby, I don't need one either."

## Chapter 14:

### Lemonade

**W**HAT COULD SHE POSSIBLY CALL this feeling welling up inside of her? Neither on the verge of tears nor laughter, Violette felt as though she wanted to let her entire being sink deep to the bottom of a body of water. What would someone call this? Degradation? Dependency? Delusion? That was probably how people would describe the feeling, as if it were the symptom of an illness.

But to Violette, this illness was true love.

“What will we do about an heir...?” she asked.

“Maybe there’s a branch family. I’m out of the loop—I don’t know whether there is or not. If there isn’t, they can always get an heir somewhere else. Introducing me to the family ended the bloodline anyway.”

“What if we have a baby, but don’t love it?”

“Somebody else will love it for us.”

“As far as I’m concerned, I have no mother.”

“What a coincidence. Neither do I.”

“I might become like *her*.”

Giant teardrops bounced off the back of Violette’s hand. Each drew out a memory filled with the distorted face of that woman. That red, red woman. Violette had thought that the woman with eyes red as the thread of fate that bound them would kill her. The hands that caressed her cheeks, the warm arms that wrapped tightly around her. It all felt so disgusting that she could taste bile.

She was the only family Violette had known. The only parent. The only mother.

“Don’t worry, Vio.”

The big hand caressing her cheek, the slightly colder arms wrapped around her, the gaze directed toward her—they broke through the shadows of her past, revealing him. He smiled, and as his golden eyes sparkled at hers, their noses almost touching, the girl raised as a boy cried.

“Neither of us knows how to be loved, but we do know how to *love*, how to cherish.”

And Yulan had taught her all of that. When Violette couldn’t cherish anything—could only imagine destroying everything—he’d simply loved her, so she’d learned how to love too.

Their fingers interlaced, and their hands clasped; Yulan’s arms folded, holding her safe against his chest. As his entire being slowly but surely sank into Violette, he’d gradually melted her frozen heart. And she’d been able to fall in love with him, sinking willingly instead of drowning.

“Just because we’ve made our choice doesn’t mean the choice disappeared. We could make the opposite choice tomorrow or stick to the same one every day; you’re free to choose, Violette.”

Tears like giant pearls rolled down her cheeks to her jaw until Yulan’s knee absorbed them. Sheltered in her own little world, she’d thought that happiness would rain down on her if she simply sat there with her mouth open. For all Yulan’s gestures toward making her happy, she was scared that *only* she was happy. She certainly had her doubts too. Even if people pledged eternal love before God, they could betray so easily. She was scared that Yulan couldn’t love her forever if she were like a mere baby chick, sitting and waiting with her mouth open.

*How foolish...*

“Now I see...”

If a baby were born of their love, that would be one form of prosperity. On the other hand, if their lives ended with only the two of them in their family, that most definitely wouldn’t be a heartless ending. Desiring a child wasn’t

proof of love.

It wasn't that Violette didn't want to see the life her love with Yulan might produce. They might someday bear a descendant, and they might remain barren for the rest of their lives. She didn't wish for a child, but it wasn't the case that she wanted *not* to have one. Until such a day came, she wouldn't make any decisions one way or the other.

That was for the best. It was only natural that somebody who'd never had a family couldn't imagine starting her own. And the idea that having a baby would make Yulan happy was just too shallow.

Yulan chuckled. "Your face is bright red. Want me to bring you a towel?"

"No, I'm all right. My head does feel a little fuzzy, though."

"I wouldn't call that all right. What if I bring a cold drink instead?"

"Yes, please. Chesuit has been making a new syrup recently, and it's very good."

"Oh? What flavor is it this time? It was sweet peach before, I remember."

"You might like this one, Yulan. It's a sweet-and-sour lemon syrup."

## Chapter 15:

### The Snow Begins to Melt

THE LITTLE PRINCE WAS NAMED RADIA. He grew up surrounded by love and expectations. As he moved from sleeping to crawling to bear-crawling to walking, the entire kingdom watched him grow with joy. The elder nobles' archaic thoughts, which had worried Claudia and Milania, still hadn't dispelled. However, Yulan had begun advocating for the royal couple lately. The day the golden-eye fanatics would retreat was no longer a distant dream.

That would take some time, especially since Claudia frowned upon forceful methods. But by the time his little prince without golden eyes gained an understanding of his position and the future it entailed, things would surely be different.

"I never dreamed Lord Yulan would advocate for us... But if he's doing this for you, Vio, I can easily understand."

"I didn't know he'd be doing that either," Violette told her friend. "He never talks about work."

"Well, it's not an exciting topic, to be sure. I only know about this because I'm involved in some of that work. Claudia never speaks with me about the matter, though."

"You do have your own royal duties, Rosette... I hope you're managing to take some time off."

"Only as much as I can, with Radia to care for. Then again, there's not much to do besides put him to bed, feed him, and change him."

"All right, then. Just promise me you won't strain yourself."

Rosette giggled. "I won't, thank you. Besides, I get enough free time to come visit you like this, Vio. And I have quite a large staff helping me. I'll be fine."

A brilliant yellow shone in their clear glasses. Bubbles spurted up through pulp, popping once they made contact with the outside air. The sound of the ice in the cups clinking against itself and the tangy, refreshing scent was identical to that of the lemonade she'd drunk with Yulan that night so long ago.

"This drink is very good," Rosette said. "I think it would be tasty even mixed with ice water. Or hot water."

"Isn't it? It's so good, it's practically all I drink. But they keep telling me to curb my sugar intake."

"Well... In my case, I have such low blood sugar that my chef keeps sneaking sugar into my food."

"That's right. You mentioned that in your letters. It's been very helpful to reread them."

"I'm glad I could help. I was surprised when you gave me the news, but I'm truly very happy for you."

Rosette's graceful smile was already that of a proper mother. They said that a woman's facial features changed with pregnancy and birth, so perhaps Violette was already showing some changes herself. The only one she felt so far was her clothes fitting more snugly around her belly, but that could easily have been mistaken for healthy weight gain.

Nevertheless, beneath Violette's soft skin, the pulse of a life that wasn't hers was beating.

"Congratulations on your pregnancy, Lady Violette," Rosette said formally.

"Thanks... It still doesn't feel at all real to me."

"It never does. I still can't believe I'm actually a mother."

About one month after Radia's formal presentation to the kingdom, Violette's pregnancy had been confirmed. In other words, on that fateful night she and Yulan had discussed the matter, she'd already been with child. If anything, the depression, anxiety, and fear she'd felt that evening might simply have been a



hormonal imbalance.

“It really shocked me that the first person to guess was my chef,” Violette said.

“*Chesuit*, was it? Pregnancy does change a person’s tastes. Still, could he really tell just from that?”

“Apparently so. I didn’t notice I was eating any differently myself.”

“Well, he must keep a very watchful eye on you, Vio.”

“Yes, he does... He’s looked after me ever since I was a child. But I didn’t know he was that sensitive to changes in me.”

Chesuit was very observant and precise in matters of cuisine, but in everything else, he was a rough slob of a man. He interacted with his master Yulan no differently than he had when he’d worked at the Vahan estate, where Yulan was known as “Violette’s childhood friend.” Even now, he called Yulan “young master” and was trying to give him a culinary education. Yulan seldom acted bothered by that, and Violette was never one to complain, but it wasn’t clear whether their chef was daring or indifferent to their feelings. Therefore, when Chesuit noticed Violette’s pregnancy faster than anyone, Yulan had felt an indescribable mixture of shock and resentment.

“When it comes to food, he’s stoic almost to a fault, so it was certainly in character for him to notice a change in my palate. But still...”

“What a feat...” Rosette marveled.

“After the doctor confirmed the pregnancy, I could see that there had been signs all along, if I’d been paying attention. They were all so subtle, though. It wasn’t until later that I noticed a physical change.”

“Morning sickness?”

“Basically, but mine manifested as a bigger appetite rather than vomiting. I suppose Chesuit felt inspired by that.”

“Are you gaining enough weight?”

“Barely...”

Rosette giggled. “Don’t worry. In the third trimester, you’ll gain plenty, whether you eat a lot or not.”

Since this was their first tea party in a long while, conversation bloomed lush at their table until the ice in their glasses melted, and the once clear glasses had a stained yellow tint from the lemonade. Not until Radia started fussing in the maid’s arms did they notice the clock for the first time during that visit. Without even looking at the clock hands, they could tell from the orange sky out the window that it was time.

“My, how late it’s gotten... I’d better be on my way,” Rosette excused herself.

“Sorry to have kept you so late. I had a lovely time.”

“Likewise. I’m so happy I finally got to visit after so long.”

Out of reluctance to part ways and concern for Violette’s health, they moved to the front door slowly. When the door opened for Rosette, a car was parked at the entrance. The driver opened the door, and out stepped a tall, slender man. His face, a sculpture of icy beauty, slowly glanced over Rosette to where Violette stood behind her. Then his icy gaze melted for just a moment to shine warmly on one person, as always.

“Hi, Vio. Going home, Princess Rosette?”

“Welcome home, Yulan,” Violette replied.

“Thank you for having me over,” Rosette said politely. “I was just leaving.”

“That’s too bad. Well, take care, and do come again soon.”

With parting words to Rosette so shallow they might as well have been read from a script, Yulan quickly took Violette’s arm. He didn’t seem even to have spared the crown princess a glance. He didn’t treat her as if she didn’t exist, but it was obvious even without looking that Yulan was showering his attention entirely on Violette.

Ever since the day Rosette had first spoken to him, his eyes, ears, and entire being had existed only for Violette. By persevering without compromise, he had at last grasped the one he longed for. The obsession and hunger Rosette had glimpsed in Yulan that day still made him the man he was now. At his core, he hadn't changed, nor would he ever.

"Are you feeling all right? Are you warm enough?" he asked Violette.

"I'm fine. I feel too hot, if anything."

"Oh, I see... Still, don't let yourself get too cold, all right?"

"I'm just a little flushed. Don't worry."

Yulan's eyes wandered dreamily as he walked eagerly beside Violette, like a yipping puppy at its master's heels. The tense, stern boy who hated everyone, everything, and even himself—the boy who'd seemed to wear a cloak of death—was now the type of doting husband you'd see anywhere, smiling at his beloved wife.

That atmosphere around them told more of their happiness than any words ever could.

## Chapter 16:

### A Bouquet of Bluestars

**A**FTER SAYING GOODBYE TO ROSETTE, the pair strolled to the parlor to wait until supper. “Strolled” was a misnomer; Violette walked, and Yulan followed closely behind like a bodyguard.

Ever since Violette’s pregnancy had been discovered, Yulan had become even more overprotective of her. If he had his way, Violette would’ve been in bed from “good morning” until “good night,” and he’d have done everything for her, from changing her clothes to feeding her meals. The look in his eyes when he told her that revealed that he was anything but joking. He only gave up the idea because it was physically impossible; in his heart, that was what he wanted.

That said, he only reined himself in about ten percent. Sixty percent of him was still committed to following through on his plans. He finished work earlier, stuck to Violette like glue the minute he got home, and unleashed the full power of the protective eye on Violette that he’d nurtured since his youth. Before Violette realized it, she scarcely had to lift a finger when he was around.

“You’re tired, Yulan. Why don’t you lie down in our room?”

“Hm? Are you worn out, Vio? Want me to carry you to bed?”

“I said *you*, not *we*.”

“Oh, I’m just fine, Vio.”

“Liar. I know you went back to work last night after I went to sleep.”

“Ack. Sorry. Did I wake you...?”

“No, I noticed when I got up to use the restroom. Even when you’re exhausted, you never let it show in your face, Yulan.”

Violette puffed her cheeks to signify anger, but Yulan just smiled softly, thinking that the sight was adorable. From their long association, Violette

already knew that Yulan wasn't the sort to heed advice. She also knew that he didn't look after his own health because he didn't think that was necessary.

That hurt her sometimes—she even told him so, once or twice—but however much she pleaded with him to care, he only made efforts to correct himself “because Violette was unhappy.” And she was aware that Yulan bettering himself for that reason alone meant that, in the end, he'd never change on a fundamental level.

She decided to give up thinking about it. If Yulan wouldn't cherish himself, then Violette would cherish him instead. Luckily, she had many years' experience in indulging him as his childhood friend, his lover, and his wife. Emotions weighed heavily upon them both, and if they each comforted each other with their entire beings, they completed each other.

“Oh, you... Hey. Come here,” she said.

“Huh? Agh!”

As she tugged his arm gently, he pitched easily forward. Flustered, Yulan threw his arms around Violette. They sank into the large sofa together, until both had completely settled in. Even though she'd caused him to push her down into the couch, Violette knew he'd never crush her. Yulan answered her trust by rolling onto the edge opposite the backrest, so that Violette couldn't roll off, even by mistake. They gazed into each other's eyes at the same height, which was a refreshingly new feeling. Even when they slept together, Yulan usually drew her into his arms, so she always looked up at him.

“What brought this on?” he asked.

“Somebody gets lonely sleeping alone. Let's take a nap together.”

She stroked his back in an even rhythm, and Yulan emitted a pouty yet sleepy grunt in return. Their shared body heat was quite warm, and he surely was sleep-deprived. As his heavy eyelids drooped shut, the sun sank lower and lower in the sky.

Violette giggled. “Sweet dreams, Yulan.”

“Mm...”

Yulan’s long eyelashes cast shadows on his cheeks as his breathing became soft and even. Leaning against his chest as it rose and fell gently with each sleeping breath, Violette felt his heartbeat where her body touched his. A heart just like the one inside Yulan’s chest was forming right now in her own body. Everything that gave a person life—a heart, blood, bones, skin—was doing so. Every component had Yulan’s genes mixed in, and inside Violette’s belly, fragments of her and Yulan would come together over time to create one life. They said life was a miracle, and that was absolutely right. Even if Violette had ripped herself open and seen with her own eyes, she still could never have comprehended what was happening inside of her.

She took her hand off Yulan’s back and pressed it to her still-flexible midsection. She’d done that many times since learning that she was pregnant. But there was no definite sensation in her abdomen; the action merely confirmed the slight rounding of her stomach and the transformation of her body.

Even now, knowing she was pregnant, she still couldn’t picture the face of the baby’s mother. The family in her imagination would probably stay faceless forever, and she’d remain unclear about whether this was something she desired or not.

One thing was clear to her, though—that she wanted to see the baby.

To call that impersonal interest “love” would’ve been irresponsible. She wanted to see what the baby she had would look like—that was why she’d decided to do this. Rather than relying on a love she was unsure would ever bud, she’d decided to embrace the definite curiosity she felt in that moment.

*How will its face look? How will its voice sound? What color will its eyes be? Its hair will probably be silvery. Which of us will it take after? What sex will it be?*

“I can’t wait to meet you, little one.”

As she gently caressed her belly, she could've sworn she felt a tiny heartbeat against her palm.

## Beloved Loss

I'D LOVED HIM EVER SINCE I'd first laid eyes on him. I *knew* that I was put in this world to be with him.

Tall as a pillar of ice, eyes as sharp as stone. Even from a distance, he was beautiful. Not only I but every woman in the venue stared at him with lust. The very attention he commanded was exceptional. It was as if everyone standing near him was there to accent him, and make him and him alone shine.

I wanted him to be mine. No—he *was* mine.

I'd been put in this world to be with him. I knew the same was true of him.

\*\*\*

My father had been born for this kingdom's sake. He would live and die for the kingdom, and he accepted his fate willingly. His kingdom was all he loved—he'd chosen my mother, and produced me, for the kingdom's sake. He was a slave to this kingdom, and vexingly, he believed every member of the nobility should follow his example.

My mother respected him for that. The only person who could've loved a man whose assets were limited to power and money would have been another zealot who adored the kingdom as much as my father did. And when you offered someone love, it was only natural to expect love in return. When my father refused to notice my mother as she wanted, the collapse of their marriage was all too predictable. If that marriage had been a fairy tale, it would've been branded drivel.

My mother brought lovers home shamelessly, while my father had eyes only for his kingdom. A handful of faceless servants raised me—I think they were switched out every day. On one occasion, a servant would be a young woman. On the next, it would be an older man, and then on the next, a *different* older man. As a little girl, I mistook butlers and maids for my parents. I think I even



called some “Mother” and “Father” by mistake. I don’t remember what any of them looked like, though.

I didn’t dislike my father, nor my mother. I got to live and spend as I pleased. I wasn’t foolish enough to think I survived through my own hard work, and even without them nurturing me, I could live without constraint. Enough money smothered even the occasional pangs of loneliness I felt. My parents might’ve been able to stop my loneliness too, but they were never around, so I didn’t have the luxury of asking.

Anything I wanted came into my hands effortlessly. It was given to me even if I hadn’t asked for it. That was how I was born and how I was raised. If I demanded love, I received it.

“Hey. Father. I want that man to be mine.”

*Now you’re mine, my love.*

\*\*\*

The handsome man’s name was Auld. Even his name was beautiful. Up close, his eyes were sharper, resembling drawn daggers. If those eyes touched me, they’d pierce my skin. The danger in him felt like power and made me want him more.

His hair and eyes were a faint ash gray. *Ah. Even your coloring is like a blade. Like a noble sword nobody can touch. So beautiful—oh, so beautiful!*

“Welcome to the family, Auld.”

“Yes... Thank you for admitting me.”

*Ah, he’s mine now. No, he’s mine once again. He’s meant to be mine—he’s back where he belongs, by my side.*

My, how easy it was to marry him. Truth be told, I didn’t think my father would accept him. I’d been mentally prepared to marry whoever my father chose for me, so I’d resigned myself to just taking Auld as a lover on the side. But I was right—he and I were fated to be joined as one. We’d both been put in

this world to love each other. The world itself had blessed our union!

*You love me just as much as I love you. I know you love me. And I love you too. Oh, I love you so much. I love only you; I worship only you.*

*You...only you...are the one I love.*

\*\*\*

What sort of wedding should we have? That question tormented me for a very, very long time. Truthfully, I wished it could just be the two of us. After all, he was so beautiful. I didn't want anyone else to see him. My beautiful, my beloved—anyone would fall for him at first sight. He was the man I'd fallen in love with, so naturally he was the most wonderful man in the entire world.

But I wouldn't allow someone else to fall in love with him. How dared anybody have feelings for the man born to be with me? Only *I* was allowed to love Auld. He was *my* beloved, all mine. *Would you understand these feelings of mine, my sweet?* Yes, he surely felt the same anguish as I did. Auld was the only man I could love, so he *knew* that I was the only woman he could love. Yet those feelings swirled inside me like a vortex; was it possessiveness? *If you felt possessive of me, nothing would please me more. Just you and me—that's all my world needs to be complete.*

*But you will succeed my father and become head of the duchy. I must meet with as many people as possible to make your job as easy as I can.* I decided my father's good name as a pillar of this kingdom must not be in vain. I was my father's offspring. I would see his legacy through.

*But while I am my father's daughter, I am your wife first, my sweet. It is only natural that I would want to keep you all to myself.*

*I love you. I cannot help myself.*

\*\*\*

Ahh. As I feared, the gazes directed at my beloved were full of lust. Those jackals spit in the face of his destiny—*me*—and conspired to ensnare him. It was

simply *ludicrous*. Auld was *my* husband. He loved only me. *In your gazes, in your hearts, there lies no meaning whatsoever.*

*Why, yes, I understand why you feel the way you do.* He was beautiful, charming—I knew that better than anyone. *But listen, you harlots! You disgust me. How dare you defile my beautiful treasure with your filthy, whorish gazes, you filthy, filthy...filthy...!*

Auld was a kind man. He was the perfect gentleman. That was why he hesitated to swat them away. He didn't wish the harlots to lose face. However much they sickened him, he was forced to answer them with a smile. What a sublime human being; what a merciful human being. *Your kindness is so beautiful.*

That was why *I* needed to do it.

\*\*\*

Auld was angry. He demanded that I stop, demanded to know why I was doing this.

Oh, sweet, gentle Auld. He pitied everyone who was hurt—even if they *deserved* to be hurt.

*Yes...yes...my ever-beautiful beloved. Your kindness is so very sublime—but, you see, you don't understand those girls. They take advantage of your kindness; they conspire to strike you through it. I'm sure you can tell. You can see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices, sense it in their behavior. They use politeness as an excuse. You mustn't let your guard down simply because they have husbands. Please understand. My gentle sweetheart, I know you don't want to hurt anyone. I know you can't turn your back on someone when she cries before your very eyes. But helping her will do nothing to serve you.*

*Please...please try to understand.*

\*\*\*

*You don't understand, you don't understand, you don't understand. Why*

*won't you understand me?!*

*I do everything I do for you, Auld. Why won't you understand?*

*I'm the only one who can protect you. I can't let anyone fall in love with naive, vulnerable you. I'm the only one allowed to love you. I'm the only one allowed to love you. It's fate. You and I only have each other. We must only love each other.*

*Please... You know I'm right.*

\*\*\*

*"Who were you with?"*

*"I was at work."*

*"Liar. I know you were with that harlot!"*

*I knew everything. Everything. I knew the woman by his side. I knew her name, her face, her age. I know where you saw her today and what you talked about. I know what you shared a laugh over. You wouldn't bring me with you, yet you had the audacity to smile with a woman other than me? That's insanity. You're my destiny. We were born to be together. That's why you can only love me. You care only for me. Your kindness, your chivalry—only I need know your virtues. Your beauty belongs only to me.*

*Please...tell me you love me.*

\*\*\*

*See? I knew you and I were destined for each other.*

\*\*\*

The weight I held in my arms—that alone was precious. This soft creature, its eyes still closed, was a symbol of my love with Auld. Our love had been made tangible; it had danced into my arms from the heavens. How beautiful, how sublime. Auld and I loved each other. My love had reached him. I wasn't mistaken.

Perhaps he'd mistaken my actions for distrust toward him. Perhaps he was a

man who turned toward those who showed him love. Perhaps that was why he'd gotten so angry and snapped at me to stop. *Ah, I see, I see.* He'd thought that I doubted his love. He was wrong. I didn't doubt his love; I simply couldn't bear even the minute possibility of anyone stealing him from me.

It was a misunderstanding that only could have happened to a pair of lovers who adored each other so much. But I hadn't told him everything he needed to hear. I hadn't explained that I'd only done everything I had out of love. I needed to tell him when he got home.

*So please, hurry... Come home to me.*

\*\*\*

Auld hadn't come back. My father named our daughter. He saw the violets my mother let wither away and decided to name her Violette.

Her round eyes and soft hair were a light ash gray. She had the exact face of Auld in the photographs from his youth. Anyone would know her to be Auld's child on sight. What a beautiful baby. A symbol of our love. Proof of his love for me. My treasure, that I wouldn't let anybody else touch. As long as I had his baby, he would *have* to come back to me. He would remember his love for me... My love for him. He loved me. He loved *only* me. He would remember that I was the only one he *could* love.

As the baby giggled in my arms, I felt warmth deep in my chest.

*Ahh... You really do look exactly like him.*

\*\*\*

Auld didn't return home. I heard he had another baby.

That couldn't be. He *loved* me; he loved *only* me. He could never possibly love anyone else. He cared only for me; he *could* care only for me. We were *destined*.

Only for me... My only... He'd been born into this world for my sake alone!

"Deaw Mama?"

Such round eyes, looking at me. Light-ash hair. The same coloring as his. My beautiful, sweet child, who looked just like a young Auld. Looked like? No. Was the *same* as. Had the same face as his, the same hair, the same eyes. Oh—but the hair length wasn't right. I could just cut it. The name wasn't right either—I could just change it. Then this child would be just the same as Auld.

"Oh," I breathed. "Why didn't I see it before?"

*You were here all along, Auld.*

\*\*\*

Auld had come back! Back to me! He was born into this world for my sake!

He was still quite short, but he would grow up in time. I compared him to his photographs over and over, and he looked identical. I could impart the same knowledge, little by little. I could even give him the same scars. It was all right; I knew where they all were, even the ones out of sight.

Ahh. So sublime, so wonderful. He truly was mine and mine alone. He'd been reborn into this world to love only me. To make right the past, when he'd loved someone else. My, how deep his love ran. *I love you so much, my dear, that I'll wait as long as it takes. Even if you call me Mother by mistake, I'll teach you to address me the correct way as many times as I have to.*

*Come, now—call my name.*

\*\*\*

My Auld left me again. It seemed he'd been reborn for me, but it ended in failure. He hadn't come back to me. Without him, I couldn't eat. *So, please, come back to see me. Without you, I can't go on living.*

*It's the same for you, my sweet. Isn't that so?*

\*\*\*

I could feel my heart slowly coming to a stop. My arms, no different from withered branches, were a strain just to lift. I could hear somebody's voice... But

it wasn't Auld's voice, so I didn't care. Where was he? Why wasn't he here?

## Elegant Fable

I'D LOVED HIM EVER SINCE I'd first laid eyes on him. I *knew* that I was put in this world to be with him.

Tall as a pillar of ice, eyes as sharp as stone. Even from a distance, he was beautiful. Not only I but every woman in the venue stared at him with lust. The very attention he commanded was exceptional. It was as if everyone standing near him was there to accent him, and make him and him alone shine.

I'd been put in this world to be with him. I *knew* the same was true of him.

He and I were born to live happily ever after together.

\*\*\*

My parents had died immediately after I began to move on my own. The burden of carrying on the family business fell solely on me. We carried the very grand title of “purveyors to the nobility,” but in reality, we were just the town florists. Aside from when we delivered flowers to grand party halls, our days were quite simple and uneventful. With the money and servants left to me, I wanted for nothing as a single woman. I could live out my life staring mindlessly at the flowers. My days were peaceful, but very boring.

It was a simple life.

Until I met my star-crossed lover.

I spotted him while delivering flowers. His light-gray hair and eyes were so wonderful—he was icier than any fairy-tale prince and, moreover, far more beautiful than any other man. It was love at first sight. It was then that I knew I was born to be with him. That every choice I'd made had brought me to that moment. I had taken over the floral business so that I could find him. I was single so that I could be with him. I was born female so that I could carry his child.



Ah, how blessed I was! The wheels of destiny had brought me to my star-crossed lover. I had never thanked God more than I did that day; heaven had truly blessed me.

“Be patient, my star-crossed lover.”

*Wait for me until I can be by your side.*

\*\*\*

His name was Auld. Even his *name* was beautiful; my star-crossed lover was truly perfect. He was to marry a duke’s daughter soon. To think that a house of such high breeding had spotted him made me proud somehow. What was more, he was to be that family’s successor and become the next duke.

I couldn’t find a single fault in him. My star-crossed lover was simply wonderful in every single way. *Oh, I can’t wait for you to love me in return.*

Ever since the day I’d found him, I’d used every means possible to get closer to him. Fate was on my side, but he wouldn’t consider a humble florist a suitable match. A wonderful man required a wonderful woman. To that end, I needed as much money as possible. And I needed higher social standing to approach him; I needed the right footing to take myself where he might be. He wasn’t yet aware of my existence, so since I’d noticed him first, I needed to give him an opportunity to spot me.

To think, the servants my parents left me would prove useful in such a way. Auld and I truly were blessed by the world. God himself was pulling the strings to bring us together.

“Whatcha looking at, Elfa?”

“Hee hee! It’s a *secret*.”

The wizened face staring at me belonged to a man working at the core of the government.

I couldn’t reach my star-crossed lover as a common florist, so I’d just have someone who *could* reach him assist me. For all its grandeur, the title “purveyor

to the nobility” was no lie. In fact, many respectable figures called on our shop for flowers. We provided careful and loyal service, and the long-established trust in the shop raised my reputation.

All that remained was to slowly worm my way into patrons’ hearts. Smile when they talked to me and give the answers they wanted to hear—simple tasks, really. At times, I offered support. At times, I offered affection. And at times, I offered blunt opinions. With each customer, I changed not my *behavior* but my *reactions*. Once I gained their trust, I meekly confessed a tiny worry of mine.

A woman like me, still so young and so beautiful, was working hard at the family business her parents had left behind. That kind young woman, who always offered affection, support, and at times frankness, would confess a worry simply too big to keep to herself. I showed my patrons dark shadows in my heart that they could easily clear away for me. Since I’d always supported them, they returned the favor. After that, the men who fell under my spell just trusted me even more, deepening their relationships with me. And thus, the cycle repeated.

I didn’t exactly target men, but men were more susceptible to my looks than women. Some even courted me, but to them, I was a sort of sacred sanctuary. It wasn’t my body they wanted; rather, they wanted someone to talk to and arm candy. As long as they made no physical overtures, I felt no need to feed the fire either.

My path began with servants of nobility, but I felt confident that I was taking the shortest route possible to reach my intended. The dolls I played house with then were merely lesser copies of him.

*I’ll come see you soon, my sweet.*

\*\*\*

“Nice to meet you. I’m Elfa.”

He stood tall, slender, beautiful, and noble. He was gentle, soft, and peaceful.

He wished for an accepting woman, like the holy mother, who would never, ever hurt him. Who would never get angry, whatever he said. Who would never resist, whatever he did. He desired someone who would affirm his words and agree with him. He didn't wish to be denied or scolded; he wished to be treated gently and cared for.

The moment Auld first set eyes on me, he was like a timid little animal. He appeared weary with torment; his muscles were constantly tense. Behind his guarded facade, though, his desire for me to dote on him was visible.

I wanted to hold him in my arms. I wanted to dote on him as he hoped. But I couldn't yet. If I gave him exactly what he wanted, just as he wanted it, he'd get his fill. All the men before him, I'd *wanted* to get their fill of me and depart—but this time, I couldn't have him leave. I had to make him keep wanting me and feel loath to ever let me go.

I tore down his wary facade and touched his heart gently and sweetly. But something was missing. Just a bit more...only a bit more...until he burned helplessly with the fire of desire for me.

*Here I am, my love. Come, reach out your hand.*

*There... Now, catch me.*

*There... Now I've caught you.*

\*\*\*

I became his lover. That was only natural, since he had a wife. Ideally, I would've paid her my respects, but apparently wives don't want to meet their husband's mistresses. Auld didn't wish for me to meet her either, so he set up a separate residence for us. He lived with me most of his time; his wife must've been lonely. Sometimes Auld's father-in-law summoned him home, but he'd stay only one night, no longer. And he'd return to me in the middle of the night, smelling strongly of soap.

He always seemed unhappy after he saw his wife. Sometimes he held me

tight and apologized over and over. He seemed bitter that he couldn't make *me* his wife, but I didn't mind at all. *I love everything about you, my darling, so it's only natural that I love your wife too.* He seemed to dislike her, though, so I had to snuggle close and grieve with him.

A little while later, his wife got pregnant. The feeling of liberation I felt Auld exude surely wasn't my imagination. His father-in-law had wanted an heir, and Auld had granted that wish. After that, he rarely returned to the duchy. He only visited for a few minutes each month to manage the house, then came back to live with me in his villa.

His wife must've been anxious during her pregnancy. She encouraged him to come home out of worry over their child's upcoming birth, but he let a midwife handle it. I thought it was a shame he missed the birth of *his* child, but with a professional pitching in, there wasn't anything to worry about. The baby was a girl who resembled him very much.

*How nice... I want one too.*

\*\*\*

I had Auld's child one year later. He stopped returning to the main house altogether and stayed by my side the whole time, supporting me. He was with me during the morning sickness, with me when my bulging stomach made it difficult to move. The moments picking out baby clothes with him were some of the happiest of my life.

Our baby girl was born with white hair and bright blue eyes. She looked just like me and not very much like Auld. It was a bit disappointing. At first, I thought we might trade babies with his wife. Auld seemed very happy, though, so I thought ours would probably suffice. Both infants were his anyway, so both were precious. The fact that ours looked like me, yet held Auld's genes, was itself deeply moving to me.

We named our daughter Maryjune. Since I was only Auld's mistress, Maryjune was illegitimate and couldn't join high society. Therefore, we raised her as a

commoner.

She would never set foot in high society, but that was the only disadvantage. His wife and eldest daughter would take on that burden. Auld wanted to bring Maryjune and me into high society with him, but there was no room for his mistress and bastard when he had a proper wife and legitimate eldest daughter. That upset him, but so long as I had him and Maryjune, I felt you could call my life ideal. My beloved man and our beautiful daughter lived happily and wanted for nothing. I thought such bliss would last forever.

Then Auld's wife died.

\*\*\*

I heard the news several days after she passed. There had already been a funeral, and Auld's eldest daughter now lived alone in that big mansion.

"Oh my... Oh dear. What a tragedy."

"Elfa..."

It was the saddest thing I'd ever experienced. The pain weighed far more heavily on my chest than when I'd suddenly lost both my own parents. My tears flowed unceasingly. Auld held me close in his arms as I wailed my head off like a little child.

*Oh, how sad... Oh, how painful... Oh, how tragic. A piece of Auld is gone. The one who spent so much time with him, bore his child, helped form him—she has died. I've lost her. Oh, how I longed to know what my darling was like when he was with you. If only I'd asked before you died.*

As I drowned in my own tears, Auld whispered in my ear.

"Elfa...I want to make you my legitimate wife."

To him, that was proof of his love for me. I knew that he wanted Mary and I to be his legitimate family. I also knew how it frustrated him that that wish was ungranted.

Of course I still grieved the part of him that was lost. But no amount of

grieving would bring her back, so it would be healthiest to get over it and turn over a new leaf. After all, she'd left behind such a fantastic treasure for me.

"Auld... Of course I'll marry you. I'll support you as your wife and as your children's mother."

*Now, at long last...I'll be the mother to Violette.*

\*\*\*

When I first met Violette face-to-face, she indeed looked just like Auld. She had light-gray hair and eyes, a sharp gaze, and a beauty and allure that captivated you without warning. She was the spitting image of the daughter of Auld's that I'd envisioned.

I was elated. I felt caution, surrender, and a little terror.

Violette wore a complicated expression, but that was only natural. She and I had both spent all this time sharing one man, and this was our first time meeting. Auld hadn't wanted us to meet, for one thing, and I wasn't one to object to any decision he made. Still, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of bitterness that I hadn't exchanged Maryjune for her.

There was no need to work myself up, though. We were family now, and I was Violette's mother. At this point, I could love the daughter of my dreams without worry... Oh, I was so excited about the prospect.

But Auld dared stand between us.

It seemed that Auld disliked his daughter just as much as the wife who'd borne her, even though she resembled him so closely. Or perhaps he disliked her *because* of that. What a shame. She was so beautifully made, I would've spent an entire day gazing upon her face if I could.

*Oh... What a waste.*

\*\*\*

Auld's father-in-law had summoned him to visit for the first time in a while. Perhaps I should say *former* father-in-law; Auld has already succeeded him as

head of the Vahan house. As for what Auld's relationship with his ever-authoritative father-in-law was—I couldn't grasp that, as somebody removed from the political sphere. It wasn't my business anyway. The fact that Mary carried Auld's genes notwithstanding, I could never be accepted into high society.

The house was awfully lonesome without Auld, but Violette was there. She didn't hold a candle to the real thing, naturally, yet just the sight of her filled my heart with ceaseless love. The tea party I asked her to under the pretense of Auld's absence was truly a meaningful affair. The more I looked at her, the more ideal her appearance was. The girl—Auld's daughter—resembled him so closely.

*I can't deny it... I want her.*

\*\*\*

When Auld came home ahead of schedule, a huge upheaval took place in our home. Mary avoided Auld now, and he seemed exhausted and had no appetite. The most significant change of all was that Violette left and didn't return.

*Why? How?* I suggested we search for her, but Auld put a stop to that. Exploding with anger I'd never before seen in him, he began destroying the things in Violette's room until our cook stopped him. *Come to think of it, Violette's maid isn't here either.* I asked what happened to her, but nobody would answer me. Mary and Auld both remained in a depressed stupor.

My paradise's colors changed entirely overnight. I'd lived in my house of dreams, surrounded by blooming blossoms under the shining sun—yet now, the house contained the withered debris from a storm. Dried flowers scattered beneath the moon under the midnight sky; my heart was a parched wilderness at just the sight of it.

*What should I do?* I wanted to comfort and support Auld, but I couldn't speak carelessly to him when I didn't know what ailed him so. I wanted to assure him that he'd done nothing wrong. If Mary was the source of his grief, though, that

would backfire. Auld truly loved Mary, and of course, she was my beloved daughter as well.

*But if I could choose...I'd rather have Violette.*

\*\*\*

Mary just couldn't cut it, but Violette got engaged and left the family.

It pained me deeply to let my perfect daughter go, but if I needed to, I needed to. I still had Mary, after all, and my beloved Auld was by my side as well. Auld preferred Mary, so perhaps this was for the best. I hated to lose Violette, but Auld's feelings mattered most.

"Auld, is something the matter?"

"Er, no..."

We were now a family of three, and our life reminded me of our days at the villa. It would soon be twenty years since the day I'd first spotted Auld. My feelings hadn't changed one bit. If anything, my love for him only grew every day. He surely felt the same way.

Mary would soon wed too. Then it would just be Auld and me again. Come to think of it, we'd had Mary quite quickly, so we'd never spent much time alone. The most important thing was that this would be our first time living together just as husband and wife.

However long you lived with a person, you never saw everything there was to see. I realized that when dealing with Auld's first wife, and when Auld snapped into a rage over Violette. I witnessed him fighting with Mary for the first time too. I'd never seen my darling burn with such fiery fury before. I was sure there were still many new sides to Auld that I'd get to see. I'd seen another one already just now.

*My darling, you're still beautiful, even red in the face.*



## Old Junk

**W**HERE HAD I GONE WRONG? Where exactly had my life swerved onto the wrong path...?

It wasn't that everything had gone seamlessly to begin with. I'd never lucked out; I had to claw my way to success, since I wasn't particularly talented. I honed what few strengths I *did* have so that, when the time came that I was chosen for something, I could unleash their full potential.

I achieved my wishes—outdid them, even. As a person worthy of being chosen, I managed to give the one who chose me exactly what she wanted.

I wonder—what exactly was so wrong with me?

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Life was filled with turning points. You could call those “fate” if you wished. After making such subconscious choices, I always noticed something—but, in most cases, that realization came too late.

The first turning point in my life was a prime example. I had no choice in that matter to begin with. Rather, I was caught in the tide; my fate had already been decided.

“Welcome to the family, Auld.”

The woman's bright-red eyes pierced me with a gaze sharp as the reaper's scythe. That, combined with her cloying, lung-crushing voice, made me feel like I'd just been handed my death sentence.

My first impression of Bellerose was that she was a garish, overstated woman. She did have a beautiful face, but that was her only virtue. However, our marriage was settled before the bride and groom had even met, and it proceeded without me like a runaway train. Still, a political marriage was the chance of a lifetime to me. Being chosen by the sole daughter of a duke had

used up all my life's allotted luck—that was what it felt like.

Even if there was no love between Bellerose and I, I thought we could at least grow attached. I'd probably been wrong to brace myself for the long haul, believing that things would improve if we became a couple little by little.

Was it strange that I wasn't able to care about someone I'd married barely after saying "nice to meet you"? Oh—Bellerose, at least, truly did love me intensely. I felt a little guilty that I couldn't return her feelings. Yet sometimes, for a faint, blinking, momentary flash, that guilt turned into hatred.

Bellerose bared her fangs at every woman who came near me. She was like a vicious beast; one bite left her prey torn into a thousand pieces. She ripped into our female servants, my male friends' wives, and even ladies with whom I exchanged polite hellos. The weapon wielded by the duke's only daughter inflicted fatal wounds on most who encountered it. I begged her many times to stop, but that only increased her tyranny. She insisted it was all for me, all because she loved me.

Little by little, cracks started to form. In our familial bond, in the love that should've grown between us. It shattered, falling in fragments as those cracks shot through our marriage. My common sense and morals took such a pounding that I couldn't even remember what the final blow had been.

*I can't bear this anymore... No matter what I do, I can't ever love her.*

Given how Bellerose had left me parched and exhausted, meeting Elfa was like finding an oasis. She was always kind, always peaceful. She was all-accepting, like the holy mother. She had the smile of an angel and the heart of a goddess.

Meeting her was fate. I'd been put in this world to love her—I truly believed that. To me, Elfa was like paradise on earth. The more I loved her, the more my resentment of Bellerose mutated into bitter hatred.

I couldn't stand the sight of her. I couldn't stand her voice. I didn't want to lay a finger on her. Elfa was the one I loved; she ought to have been the only one.

The only warmth I ever wanted to embrace was Elfa's.

If my father-in-law hadn't said anything, I wouldn't have even touched Bellerose.

"Make an heir," he commanded. Have a baby with Bellerose. He didn't care what the child's sex was—it would prove useful regardless. Since he allowed me a mistress, he demanded that I do the bare minimum in return—that was how he presented it. That man, who'd devoted his entire being to his kingdom, had no regard whatsoever for an individual's rights. And since he had direct influence on the king himself, who was I—the mere son of a duke by marriage—to complain? He was already very gracious to let me have Elfa on the side.

It was heartbreaking. I would calculate the days, meet Bellerose only to produce a child, then return without sleeping to the house where my true love resided. Unable to accept my grim reality, all I could do was beg forgiveness of Elfa and wallow in self-pity.

When I learned that Bellerose was pregnant, I felt nothing but relief that I was finally free. I pitied our unborn child, but I had no desire to hold a baby containing *her* blood in my arms. The infant only needed be healthy; then my duty would be over. That was all I wished for.

The baby girl resembled me so strongly, it made my stomach churn.

Her hair and eyes, the color of her skin and the shape of her lips—everything about her resembled a younger me. The thought that, inside the child, Bellerose's genes were mixed with mine crushed any love I might've had for the baby into intense hatred.

I couldn't stand the sight of Bellerose, nor her voice. I didn't want to touch her. The force of that sentiment doubled the day my baby was born. When I heard that Bellerose was obsessed with the child, my hatred only grew harder and more powerful. Unyielding malice flowed through my veins. The word "hatred" couldn't express the feeling.

I hoped she suffered. I hoped she ached. I hoped she lived her life crying and

begging for forgiveness. My first daughter, Violette, was no longer even a *child* to me.

Then an angel descended into my arms. A sweet, pure-white angel resembling Elfa.

I named my beloved daughter Maryjune. But, come to think of it, I didn't even know when or how Violette received her name.

My darling angel; my beloved goddess. With those two, my life was blissful. And with Violette beside her, even Bellerose was satisfied. The caveats were that I lived in a hovel of a villa and that I forced Elfa to live in shame as my mistress, but otherwise, I was very happy.

When I heard that Bellerose had died, I thought that I would become even happier.

With her out of the picture, I could make Elfa my wife. I wasn't sure how my father-in-law would respond, but I knew there were no more children in the Vahan family, so his duchy was as good as mine. Bellerose's father still wielded massive influence and power, but he wasn't entitled to force me to stay a widower.

My father-in-law took care of Bellerose's funeral swiftly. I was a little upset to find out about it after the fact, but since I received permission to remarry, all was well that ended well.

Now Elfa, Maryjune, and I could be a real family. I could be Mary's father. I could give them the finest lifestyles.

When I told Elfa of Bellerose's passing, she wept. She sobbed like a child, wailing and cursing the death of the woman who'd kept us apart. What a purehearted woman, beautiful both in body and soul. My eyes hadn't deceived me—*she* was my intended. The one I was meant to devote my life to making happy.

I had my beautiful, gentle wife; my darling, intelligent daughter; and no

problems in my work or family. I had the ideal life; a perfect family anyone would admire. I didn't possess a shred of doubt that that happiness would last forever.

Where exactly had my life swerved onto the wrong path...?

Like snowballs rolling down a slope, little problems turned into calamities out of my control and bore down upon me. The biggest calamity tumbled toward me from who-knew-where before I could dodge it. When had that turning point in my life taken place?

Then the giant avalanche cleared, leaving a crushed oasis in its place. My beloved holy mother, my sweet angel—there were no traces left of the bright future I'd envisioned for us. The witch with the holy mother's face cackled, and the angel lay on the ground, her wings torn off.

Ever since the day I'd seen Bellerose in Elfa's smile, I'd lost every bit of the bliss I once had. The daughter Elfa desired was gone, and Mary would marry someone to pass on the Vahan bloodline. I could pray that love would grow between her and her chosen husband, but she no longer had the right to make the choice for herself.

My happy marriage with Elfa, Mary's smooth school life, the day she would eventually fall in love and walk down the aisle—the future I'd painted in my mind had been locked tight, and I could no longer open it.

The key—Violette—was gone.

## Mary Journal

**M**Y LIFE WAS NOTHING BUT BLISS. Whenever I faced a problem, somebody kind always came to my aid. I was just as eager to help others, so I knew the world overflowed with such kindness.

I was right to believe that, but the belief stemmed from my ignorance of pain.

I'd been unaware that wiping someone's tears out of kindness could sting like a knife. My foolish, infantile ignorance—my belief that love contained only kindness—stabbed someone I cared about where they were most vulnerable.

My world was beautiful, everything in place. My little family was constructed entirely of love, and I drowned in that love, unaware of any of the goings-on behind my back.

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I didn't remember when I'd found out that I had an older sister. I'd probably known of her ever since I was a child, but we'd never once been introduced. So, to me, it was as if she suddenly came to life the day I met her.

She was such a beautiful young lady. To look at her was to feel every sensation possible—that was the sort of aura she gave off. She was cold rather than warm, rigid rather than flexible. Her beauty was like that of an ice sculpture. She resembled my father greatly—especially her sharp gaze, the exact opposite of mine. She didn't bear a hint of resemblance to round, girlish little me. We shared the same blood, but if you put us side by side, nobody would've guessed that we were half sisters.

Since we were just so different, I idolized her immediately. I reached for her as if she were far off in the distance. Each time I saw her, she was more beautiful, too striking for words. I started to understand what people meant when they said a treasure *caught* their gaze.

I was so happy to call her my sister. I believed I'd attained the right to stand beside her without justification—but I was wrong. I didn't know anything. I'd been left completely in the dark. I convinced myself that there were no secrets between us. I put too much weight on the word "sister."

I was ignorant, so when the truth was thrust upon me, it gouged me like a spear.

A smiling person wasn't necessarily happy. What she said wasn't necessarily what was really on her mind. Loving words could taunt someone, and a smile could cut like a knife. For a kind person, always *being* kind was neither straightforward nor easy.

My beloved, strong, beautiful big sister taught me the danger of the weapon I brandished. She showed me whom I ought to brandish it at. I'd thought that all I needed to do was strive to be like her; I was so naive. Now that she'd made me self-aware, I needed to be introspective. I needed to understand the meaning behind things. There was always an answer in whatever direction I was guided. I could always act in accordance with the answer before my eyes and drown myself in the kind, gentle world.

That kind, gentle world my sweet father had prepared for me—how happy I could've been there. What a wonderful place it might've been. As far as I could tell, my family was beautiful. Of course it had looked beautiful; my father chose only the most beautiful things to include in it. Neither jagged things nor sharp things, neither heavy things nor stiff things, were ever visible to me. In that tiny box, he pampered and cared for me.

I assumed it was the same for my sister. Until that day, I truly had not a single doubt.

With a wild beast's murderous sneer, Yulan had pointed out a thorny path to me that ensnared me more and more deeply with each step I took. Whenever I writhed in pain, I only felt that pain worsen. That was a place that existed for pain. I didn't want to proceed any farther along the path, but not because the

thorns hurt me. Rather, each step brought me closer to an answer—and I was scared to find out what it was. I wished I could turn back and return to the time when I'd known nothing. Then I could still address my father with respect. I could remain his beloved daughter, who loved him in turn.

I loved my family. I'd been born and raised in the arms of bliss, showered with love. That was what a family looked like; that was how a family should be. My family *was* the model of my happiness. Someday, I'd fall in love like my mother had with my father. I'd sleep every night in the arms of my beloved husband with our sweet baby. I believed that without a moment's doubt.

Until my beloved sister's bare hands crushed that belief to pieces, I'd danced in the light of my callous hopes and dreams.

*Dearest Sister, I so wished to love and be loved by you. I wanted to belong to that family.*

*I believed that you, Father, Mother, and I could be the happiest family in the whole world. How silly I was. Why was it we who thought we had to accept you into our fold?*

*How could I have been so foolish as to forget about your mother—to forget that you were abandoned all alone, and to think we'd do you a favor by being a happy family for you? How arrogant I was. What we should've done was wait for you. Just waited until you chose to accept us.*

We'd been wrong. I'd been wrong, Father had been wrong, and Mother had been wrong. We'd been wrong from the very start. But it was far too late to apologize now. We'd reached a point where we could no longer have any kind of relationship with Violette.

"Mary... He's come for you."

"Thank you."

Seeing my father's sullen expression made the back of my nose sting with tears. I picked up my packed trunk and heaved a heavy sigh. I couldn't let myself



cry. I had no reason to cry.

*Sister... I'm going to be married. I hear he's a blood relation of the Vahan family, so I'll be moving in with distant relatives of yours. My fiancé's far older than me, you, or Prince Claudia. He's probably closer to my mother's age. He seemed mild mannered the one time I met him. But I know all too well now that what a person says, or appears to feel, can be the complete opposite of what's in his heart. I'm marrying him for the Vahan family's future. In other words, it's a political marriage. I'm a little nervous, but I've resigned myself to my fate. I have no choice in the matter. The rest will come down to my own resilience.*

*Sister, listen... I've learned so many things.*

*I've learned that even happiness has its dark side. That it isn't easy to make any judgments seeing only one side.*

*That kindness isn't enough to nurture someone, but harshness alone will crush someone.*

*I've learned that love can be a pillow or blanket... But that, at times, it can also be a whip or blade.*

*That hearts are tender, fragile—they're never sturdy. That's why we must cherish them. And hearts are also neither strong nor weak.*

I could no longer remain little Mary in the happy miniature garden. I would have no choice but to walk straight ahead, getting hurt along the way. That was what it meant to grow up—only now did I understand that. I already knew that some paths couldn't be traversed without injury. Yet I could keep walking, embracing the thorns that wouldn't come out.

From the beautiful world that had all been laid out for me, from the miniature garden where I'd been nurtured only on love, I would carry the burden of abundant blood and tears as I walked the path of life.

## Victim

**T**HE PASSAGE OF TIME WAS SO FAST. Violette thought about that with each passing year of her own life, and having a baby made time's quick movement all the more tangible to her.

"Maaama?"

"What's wrong, Vanila?"

"Where's Mawi?"

"Marin's doing laundry. Want to go see her?"

"Mawi says she's gonna bwing da fwuffy-fwuff."

Violette's three-year-old son, Vanila, flapped his tiny hands up and down. The gesture looked like fluttering leaves, but the words "fluffy-fluff" perplexed Violette.

She asked Vanila what he meant. "Fwuffy-fwuff...?"

When he responded by imitating her confused look and squealing with laughter, she realized she'd get no further clues as to what the "fluffy-fluff" might be.

Violette knew Vanila had taken to following Marin around ever since he'd started calling her "Mawi." She never knew what he was up to or what he expected Marin to do for him. Still, she knew he'd at least be safe in Marin's presence. For Violette, one happy memory was Vanila falling on his face, and Marin flying to his aid with tears in her eyes. The tumbler himself had only blinked innocently in Marin's arms as if he had no idea what the fuss was about.

"All right," she told Vanila. "Let's go see Marin."

"Yaaaay!"

"But we mustn't disturb her at work."

“Kay.”

Whether he understood her or not—probably the latter—his reply was at least clear and fairly polite. His hands reached up to the sky; Violette initially thought he was asking her to pick him up and carry him. The boy had recently taken to toddling wherever fancy led him, though. More often than not, Violette shuffled behind him, keeping pace with his short little stride. But they could only do that without trouble indoors. If she set Vanila loose in the garden, he’d make use of his tiny body and bottomless well of stamina, and the adults would need to dispatch a search party before they knew it.

As Vanila stumbled by Violette’s feet, she gazed down at the little mop of light-gray hair. It was like an angel’s shining halo. His tresses, cut short to stay out of his eyes, swayed side to side with each footfall. The gray ponytail behind Violette’s head was the same color, and it was probably swishing side to side in the same way.

From his round, catlike eyes rimmed with thick lashes, to the curve of his cheeks and thinness of his lips, Violette’s son really did look just like her. The fact that Violette had already been living as a boy at his age only reinforced the resemblance.

Her sweet little boy. When he’d called her “Mama” for the first time, she’d been relieved, knowing that she could indeed love him. As Vanila smiled innocently and reached out to her, tears had spilled relentlessly from Violette’s eyes. All the fears that had plagued her before giving birth had been staved off by the growth of a baby, of all things. You could say that was partly because Violette had been unable to wall herself off from the double impact of her heart’s latent fears being extinguished and peace coming to her.

“Va-*nee*-ya calls it fwuffy-fwuff.”

“Ooh, you sound pleased with yourself. Do tell Mama what it is.”

“Mm-hmm! Va-*nee*-ya will teach you!”

Violette giggled. “Thanks.”

As Vanila smiled big and bright, his eyes looked golden for a moment. When he blinked, though, they looked dark. His irises were grayish-gold, the same color as the sand in the sandbox where he liked to play. Some had hailed his eyes as gold, others condemned them as “impure,” but since Vanila never left home, he’d never heard any of it. Yulan and Claudia had a plan to ensure that Vanila would never have to hear that gossip even after he ventured into the outside world.

“Mawi! Fwuffy-fwuff!”

“Why, Master Vanila, what brings you here?”

“Sorry to disturb you at work, Mari. Vanila says you made him some sort of promise...”

“Fwuffy-fwuff!”

“Fwuffy—oh, you mean *this*. Yes, I just ran out of things to wash, so you may use it now,” Marin told him.

The maid had just been working at a washtub, and the surface of the water inside was bouncy with fluffy white foam. Finally, Violette discovered what the mysterious “fwuffy-fwuff” was; Vanila meant those soap bubbles. His fingertips curiously scooped them up; he watched the soap bubbles drip between them, then scooped up more.

“He saw soap bubbles when Chesuit was washing dishes,” Marin explained. “Since we couldn’t let him touch the dish soap, I used a soap that’s gentle on one’s hands for the laundry.”

“That little scamp—he went to bother Chesuit again?”

“Yes. He figured out that if he bothers Chesuit while he’s testing recipes, he’ll get a snack. Chesuit has a lot of fun testing all sorts of things out on him, from sweetness levels to dinner portion sizes.”

“Well, since we let Chesuit handle all the meals here, that isn’t exactly a problem. But I do hope Vanila isn’t bothering anyone else at work.”

“Chesuit’s used to it, Violette. You apparently used to behave the same way.”

“Come on. I was definitely a bit older than him.”

Back in her childhood home, she hadn’t had proper meals until Chesuit was hired. She’d frequently eaten everything force-fed to her at the table without complaint, then thrown it up after her mother left. That had been a double-edged sword—she’d eaten to the point of discomfort, yet felt hungry.

Whenever that happened, Chesuit made her dessert and let her eat only as much as she wanted. It was no exaggeration to say that had saved little Violette from starvation. And, every day, she’d come to hover around Chesuit’s toes when her mother wasn’t looking.

“I suppose you and Vanila have a special curiosity about Chesuit’s cooking in common,” Marin said.

“I’m not sure... Maybe Chesuit brings that behavior out in anybody.”

“That could definitely be true. His staff meals won over our junior employees.”

“Oh my.”

“Maaama, watch me bwow on it!”

“All right, dear. I’m watching.”

It took everything in the boy’s small lungs to blow the bubbles from his hands to the ground. Still, Violette gave her son a proud round of applause as he shyly slapped his hands to his mouth. The residual bubbles on his hands gave him a fwuffy-fwuff beard.

“Come here and let me wipe your face,” Violette told him.

“Don’t wanna!”

“Are you sure? If you leave your mouth like that, you won’t be able to eat dinner.”

“Nooooo!”

“There, there. I think we’ve had enough fwuffy-fwuff for today. Your father should be home any minute.”

“Daaada’s coming?”

“Yes. And if he sees your new beard, he’ll have an awful fright.”

She wiped his face a bit roughly with a handkerchief. Vanila’s interest had already shifted to his father’s return home. He clung to Violette’s neck, demanding to know when Yulan was returning and whether he was back yet.

“He’ll be back very soon,” Violette assured him. “But, Vanila, have you forgotten what you promised Dada? You told him you’d have cleaned up your toys by the time he got home.”

“But I *did* cween up. Va-*nee*-ya’s aww cween!”

“Wow, I’m impressed. You’re a very good boy. Well, let’s just wash your hands and get you changed.”

“Kay!”

Just when she thought he’d erupt into a tantrum, he cheerfully and politely obeyed. A toddler’s mood swings were no joke. If you reacted to each change in turn, you’d wish you had three days’ energy to cram into one.

Truth be told, it was anyone’s guess whether she’d be able to get Vanila’s hands washed and clothes changed before Yulan returned, but she’d cross those bridges when she came to them. She didn’t know what would pique her son’s curiosity next, so trying to make any sort of schedule would be pointless—the past three years had pounded that lesson into her soul.

“Which one wew we show Daaada?”

“Good question. Which one shall we go with today?”

“I wanna show Daaada the spawkowy one!”

“Didn’t you wear the sparkly one yesterday?”

“I wannaaaa!”

“All right, then. Let’s go with the sparkly one. I can’t wait to see what Dada thinks.”

“Tinks!” Vanila repeated.

“Pardon me, Lady Violette, but I do believe you exhausted yourself while I was washing the laundry earlier...”

“I did,” Violette admitted. “Could you please come with me, Marin?”

In the end, it took three times as long as she expected—*seven* times as long as usual—to get Vanila dressed. The room where they prepared for Operation Sparkle looked like a burglar had ransacked it, and there was no way they could tidy it before Yulan’s return. They managed to sidestep handling that disaster for now by going to greet Yulan at the front door.

“Daaada. I made fwuffy-fwuff.”

“Fwuffy-fwuff...?”

“I can bwow by mysewf!”

“Oooh, wow. That’s great.”

“It aww white. You supwised, Daaada?”

“Oh, yes. I’m very surprised.”

“Wia! You’w not supwised at all!”

“Huh...?”

“Hee hee! Hang in there, trooper,” Violette chuckled.

Their son was doing his best to tell Yulan about his day, but his speech was already quite difficult to decipher, and his verb tenses were all over the map. In actuality, even Violette—who was most often with him—didn’t quite understand what Vanila was talking about. She felt badly for Yulan, who was doing his best, nodding in understanding. Vanila was probably just stringing together random vocabulary words he’d heard, not wanting to communicate anything specific. If he did have a message to convey, it would be “Listen to all

the new words I learned!” The end.

“Come on, Vanila. If you’ve finished eating, you have to brush your teeth.”

“Nah done yet.”

“Chesuit doesn’t have any treats for you.”

“Nooo!”

“Hm? He told me you already had your treat for the day. You only get one treat per day. Remember how Chesuit said that?”

“No faiw!”

“Fair or not, he doesn’t have any,” Violette snapped.

A moment of silence followed her rebuke. Vanila’s eyes quickly welled with tears, and as the first ones spilled over, he released the air in his lungs in a wail.

“No *faiaaaaaw*!”

His wails resounded through the room like an alarm. It was no trick of the ears that his screaming seemed to get louder every day. What had been simple cries when he was a baby were now motivated by a variety of complaints.

Unfortunately, these cries were the angry sort.

“Oh dear,” Yulan sighed. “After I finish eating, I’ll give him a bath.”

“Thanks. I’ll bring him a change of clothes after.”

“All right. Think it’ll be a long one today?”

“Not sure... But I predict he’ll fall asleep before he stops crying.”

“Oh, yeah. Could be. He’s already starting to sound tired.”

“Thank goodness he has trouble pacing himself.”

“I predict he’ll last two minutes tops.”

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In the bath after a good hard cry, Vanila began nodding off as predicted. By



the time he was out, he was as good as asleep. He'd nod when spoken to, but when asked to raise his arms to get into his nightclothes, he just wobbled listlessly. By the time he was in his room, he was well off into dreamland.

"He's sure a quick sleeper," Yulan remarked.

"His nighttime crying was a nightmare, but he certainly transitioned smoothly to sleeping alone."

"He's quick to perk up after waking too. The complete opposite of me."

"I think he took after me in that regard."

Given that their child was asleep in the adjoining room, it was a mystery why they felt the need to speak in whispers. The door to Vanila's room was half-open, but still, there was no way they'd talk loudly enough to wake him.

"Vanila resembles you so strongly, Vio. I feel like there're fewer things you *don't* have in common."

"Chesuit said the same. He said Vanila acts just like I did at his age."

"That's right—Chesuit was with your family all that time. I wish I could've seen you at that age."

Violette giggled. "Well, I can't say much about my personality, but I *looked* exactly like Vanila. Our hairstyles were a little different, but otherwise..."

How was it that, in that regard, she remembered her younger self so vividly? She'd hardly been self-aware at Vanila's age. Even her memories of clinging to Chesuit's feet were from when she was a bit older. Anything before then was pitch-black, as if the lights were out.

*What's my oldest memory...?*

"Vio?"

Violette gasped under her breath. "Sorry... My mind wandered there."

"It's all right. Something on your mind?"

"Not exactly... Just trying to remember my oldest memory."

“Oldest memory?”

“Right. Do you have an oldest memory, Yulan?”

“Hmm... Probably moving in with the Cugurs. I think that was the age when I had my audience with the king too, but I’m not sure which was first.”

“Were you the youngest person to have an audience with him?”

“I don’t remember. Anyway, it was top secret.”

“Too bad,” Violette replied. “My oldest memory is from when I was about Vanila’s age.”

It was a memory of a little three-year-old girl who still wanted to be coddled by her mother...and the day she was turned into a boy.

“My earliest memory is my mother...cutting my hair.”

The smile on her mother’s face as she held the scissors was still vivid in Violette’s memory. She’d sat in a puddle—she’d probably wet herself out of sheer terror—and sobbed as her mother happily hummed a tune and cut her hair. Once it was all over, she was forced to look at herself in the mirror.

Her mother had relied on her memory of Violette’s father to create the haircut, and there was no way an amateur hairstylist like her would be capable of such a feat. Violette’s pristine part was now messy and rough; the “hair” of a scarecrow bowing its head in a field looked better than hers. She could still see her own face in the mirror, wet with snot and tears.

*It’s the same face as my own son’s. That was me—the spitting image of my father.*

“Just thinking out loud,” she added. “I’ll forget about it by tomorrow.”

Yulan just sat quietly with her.

“When I look at Vanila...I sometimes get chills,” she added.

*My beloved son looks so much like me. A boy who looks like me... Like my father...*

“When I imagine what might’ve happened if my mother were still alive...”

She would’ve snatched Vanila away from Violette by literally any means necessary.

A chill went down Violette’s spine, her fingertips quickly losing warmth. She’d only been set free because she was a girl. Her mother had cast her aside because she’d matured into a woman. As a girl, Violette could never make her mother’s wish come true.

But if she were a boy...if she were Vanila...it was clear what that cruel woman would have done.

“I know exactly what would happen,” Violette answered herself. “She’d turn him into my father...into a version of Auld who’d shower her with all the love she wanted.”

It was more than merely bone-chilling. If you’d tried to make your daughter your surrogate husband, you certainly couldn’t justify taking your grandson by blood. But if luck favored *her*, they would’ve lived “happily” ever after as a family of three...end of story. That was such such a realistic fantasy, a sort of sick thought experiment, that Violette’s fingertips trembled—and were clasped by a pair of big hands.

“But...at the same time, I feel relieved,” she continued.

The inexpressible hatred that enchained her entire being sickened her. The unpleasantness assailing her was a hundred times worse than when she’d directed her hatred at *herself*. The horrifying what-if that swirled at the back of her mind was unbearable, although it would never come to fruition.

“I’m so happy...” She spat the words out on a heavy breath, colored with just as much resentment as relief. “I’m so happy that my mother died...!”

She’d thought that many times but knew she mustn’t ever say it. She believed doing so would be taboo. It was the moral, logical thing not to utter it. All life should be respected, so death should never be celebrated. She knew that. It

was because she knew it that she felt guilt toward both her father and grandfather.

But whenever she looked at Vanila, the thought returned against her will. She was glad she'd never had to let her mother see her son. She was glad she'd never had to take her son to meet her mother. She was glad that evil woman was no longer on this earth.

Those were her true feelings, unmistakably, undeniably. Naturally, part of her condemned herself for being so immoral. But the reality that Vanila was safe was much more important to her. Since her baby had been saved from evil's clutches, Violette would proudly, contentedly walk the unrighteous path.

"I'll forget by tomorrow," Violette repeated. "I'm just thinking out loud."

After a long beat, Yulan said, "Me too."

"You're going to think out loud too?"

"That's right. I've thought the same thing as you...every day of my life."

The feeling Violette had on Vanila's behalf, Yulan had on Violette's. How many times had he burned with rage, wanting her never to be hurt again? How frequently had vivid, murderous thoughts consumed him?

"I guess that's something you and I have in common," Violette said.

"Guess so. But, you know...isn't that a good thing?"

Through their clasped hands, through her hand on his arm, through her head on his shoulder, their warmth flowed into each other. To share with each other. To complete each other. One heartbeat from two pounding hearts. The two quiet pulses slowly throbbed to each other's rhythm.

"Don't they say that the passing years make a married couple an awful lot alike?"

## Afterword

**I**T'S SO NICE TO SEE YOU ALL AGAIN. Reina Soratani here.

Thank you for purchasing Volume 5. Due to all my loyal readers, we brought this story to the finish line. I'm truly blessed.

I had many different ideas for the final scene, but it wound up exactly as you read it. I was worried some people might find it a bit sudden, but the moment Violette's attitude switched from a tentative "I don't want anyone to hurt us" to a bold "I won't let anyone hurt us," I thought that was where the ending had to be. It was a bit risky to make that a symbol of happiness, but it worked out very well for them.

I'd been wanting to write little stories from Auld's, Bellerose's, Elfa's, and Maryjune's perspectives, so I had a lot of fun doing that, and they were the easiest things to write. Their inner thoughts, their futures, and anything else I didn't touch on that I had in mind during the course of the main story—I finally got to bring it all up. I especially enjoyed writing Bellerose's descent into madness, since she'd only appeared in flashbacks.

Bellerose and Elfa were very similar characters. Had they not fallen for the same man, they might've been best friends. Auld perceived them as polar opposites, but that only proves he never saw Elfa for who she truly was. Violette and Marin figured her out after only a brief conversation, and Chesuit had an inkling as well.

I guess Auld just wasn't careful enough around a woman who was too good to be true. I can sympathize with him wanting to let Elfa soothe his weary soul after Bellerose, but the fact that he attracted a similar woman... He's terrible with women, that's all I can say. Still, Elfa inarguably did accept everything about Auld, so you could say she was his ideal wife. Since she'll be with him until death does them part, how their marriage goes from this point onward is

really up to Auld.

As for Maryjune's future—personally, I think it'll be bright. It's also up to Maryjune, in a way, but she was always a beautiful, purehearted girl. If this most recent ordeal made her stronger, she'll probably make it through any struggle on her own now. The connection between her and her big sister was severed, but I think she'll make a happy life for herself somewhere far away.

Elfa will likely be happy until the end. She'll probably cry at the loss of some aspect of Auld, but that's all. All she needs to be happy is Auld, so chances are she'll live out the rest of her days neither helping nor harming anyone.

As for Yulan's birth mother...I might write about her at some point, but I also might not write about her, so I think I'll reveal a little about her right now. She looked exactly like Yulan. Since Yulan already has an androgynous look, if you just looked at their features devoid of male or female attributes, they'd be identical. As for where she disappeared to and why she left Yulan behind, her life was full of mysteries, but one thing is clear—she couldn't live the life of a caged bird. She preferred to venture out into the unknown rather than stay in a little treasure box wanting for nothing. (That said, from Yulan's perspective, she was nothing but a nuisance.)

Vio and Yulan's baby, and Rosette and Claudia's baby, also made their appearances. I did a lot of research and asked around to learn about early childhood development. Since each baby talks and walks on their own timeline, I had to consider how old their babies would appear. The more I learned, the more amazed I was by the wonders of life.

I made Vanila a mini Violette with sand-colored eyes, and Radia a golden-haired Rosette, just because. Since they're the same age, I simply decided that they'd probably be friends. I haven't made my mind up about whether they'll have any younger siblings or not, but I'm really excited to see how those boys grow. I'd love to write a side story about the boys someday.

Speaking of side stories, I'd have a lot of fun going into detail about how

Rosette's and Claudia's hearts evolved, penning a story that featured Marin, or writing more about Gia.

At the end of the day, Gia sort of wound up being the most powerful character in the main story. That worked out well for Yulan, since they were allies. Had they been enemies, though, the strong-willed, tough-minded, and hardy Gia would've ignored all of Yulan's carefully crafted schemes and just gone his own way. Free spirits are powerful.

On that note, Chesuit and Gia embody the same archetype. They're both excessively free-spirited. Having been raised in Duralia, Chesuit has more common sense than Gia, but they both keep their eyes focused solely on what they want to do. In Chesuit's case, that's cooking—which is both his hobby and his career, so it's not an issue. Meanwhile, Gia has a dauntlessness that enables him to cast everything else aside to serve himself. A man who has the confidence to survive with only the clothes on his back essentially has no weaknesses—I could imagine no bigger thorn in Yulan's side.

I considered romances for Gia and Chesuit too, but for the moment, absolutely nothing has come to mind... Chesuit, maybe, but would Gia ever choose love over amusement? If he ever did come to love someone, what would they be like? He might find somebody who ignited his curious spirit, but things would get tricky when it came to romance. Although Gia was the easiest character to write in the story, he'd be the toughest if he had a romantic arc.

The thought of Yulan and Violette going from schoolmates to parents...it's just really emotional. I never thought the main story would make it past two hundred chapters, for starters, so writing about their future in a novel is like a dream come true. I can't thank you all enough for watching over Violette and Yulan all these years.

The manga version is also available, so I'd love it if you supported that run as well. It has a charm different from that of the novels, and I look forward to every new volume. They include bonus short stories by me, so I'd love it if you gave them a read.

Thank you all so much, truly.

I look forward to the day we meet again, whenever that may be.

Reina Soratani

February 2024





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