

*I'm Only
a Stepmother
But
My Daughter
is Just
So Cute*



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Original Story by YIR

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Chapter One



The reflection of a beautiful woman was being projected in a mirror. Her silver hair curled up like the ocean tides, and her purple eyes shined as brightly as a pair of amethysts. Although she was beautiful, her despotic eyes looked like they could cut down someone with just a glance. Overall, her appearance was vicious, befitting the title of a villainess.

The woman in the mirror had crimson red lips, almost as if they were dyed with blood. She parted those lips and asked in a low voice,

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”

Upon hearing the question, the surface of the mirror rippled, as though a pebble was thrown into a lake. Soon after, the ripples disappeared along with the reflection of the silver-haired woman. In their place, a young girl’s face appeared.

“The fairest one of them all is Princess Blanche Friedkin, My Queen Abigail.”

I was fixated on the mirror’s dull voice. The girl in the mirror looked afraid—as if she could feel my venomous gaze on her.

“Blanche...” I muttered Blanche’s name as I approached the mirror.

Princess Blanche Friedkin was a young girl who just turned 11 this year. Just as the mirror said, the girl was certainly beautiful. Her elegant black hair resembled the soothing night sky. Her snow-white skin did not have a single blemish. Her round eyes, similar to those of a rabbit’s, were simply lovely. Her soft, plump cheeks enticed people to pinch them at least once. At her current age of 11, it was more accurate to describe her as “cute” than “beautiful.” Nevertheless, she was bound to receive many marriage proposals once she came of age.

“As expected...”—I punched the wall with all my might. My heart

couldn't calm down, no matter how many punches I threw— “As expected, as expected, Blanche!”

“As expected, our Blanche is the cutest girl in the world!” Once again, I couldn't stand how lovely Blanche was. With a doll-like face and yet princess-like dignity, she was the epitome of everything lovely!

In the mirror, Blanche was talking to her nanny with teary eyes. She was as cute as a rabbit, or perhaps a puppy would best describe her. If this world was set in the 21st century, she could have easily debuted as a child actress and received lots of attention from around the world!

'Ah! I can't stand this!' Completely unable to contain myself, I furiously punched the wall again. Only after several punches did I feel myself calming down, just a little. Although there was blood dripping from my fists, it didn't bother me.

'Phew. Blanche was super cute today too. I can't believe such a cute little girl is my daughter' I still couldn't believe it. Strictly speaking, she was not my real daughter. And yet, it was about a month ago that I had received such a lovely daughter. After dying and reincarnating, I found myself in the world of Snow White.

My name is Baekhap Lee.

I was just an ordinary 30-year-old woman. I worked overtime like others, worried about my appearance like many, and stressed over my diet like a normal person. My parents named me after a lily flower, which is why if a stranger only heard my name, they would imagine me as a beautiful woman with white skin and a slim figure.

Unfortunately, the name “Baekhap” did not suit me at all. I was short, chubby, and had rough skin. My only redeeming factor was my unique persona—who am I kidding? Honestly, I was ugly. I was just an ordinary and unattractive woman. I faced many difficulties in life because of my appearance, but I was still happy. This was all thanks to my hard work.

I started working for a children's clothing company after graduating

from design school. It was so much fun designing clothes and seeing them come to fruition in real life. But, I must have worked a bit too hard—you see, for several years I had been working overtime. One day, like any other day, I took a nap in the office, and died. Just like that. I probably died from overwork.

'Ugh. Did I go too far trying to work and lose weight at the same time? I guess I should have eaten better and not skipped meals.'



So, yeah, I died! When I opened my eyes, I found myself in this body. A beautiful and charming, yet cruel, villainess. I became the stepmother of Snow White—a woman who was envious of her adopted daughter’s beauty and ended up plotting all kinds of evil deeds, only for death to befall her—the infamous Abigail Friedkin.

I glanced at Blanche, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. 'Even I get scared of my own face. If I looked more gentle, wouldn't Blanche be less afraid of me?'

We are having an intimate tea party.

“Princess Blanche, please relax and accept this tea” I spoke to Blanche, as kindly as I could.

“Y-yes, Lady Abigail.” Blanche’s face grew pale, and she couldn’t even look at me.

As she held onto the teacup, her hands trembled so much that the contents were about to spill out.

'Sigh, I just wanted to have a nice tea session with Blanche.'

The tea time proceeded in silence, but, just then, Blanche—who had been looking down at her teacup all this time—stole a glance at me. Her big blue eyes were so pure and innocent. She reminded me of a small puppy looking up to ask, 'are you mad at me?'

'Ah, how adorable.'

I couldn't help but smile. Blanche's face changed instantly upon seeing my motherly smile.

“D-did I do something wrong...?” she asked, timidly.

Before, she looked like a sad puppy. Now, she looked like a frightened rabbit. Her eyes were tearing up too.

'Hm. Come to think of it, wasn't Abigail's smiling face super scary?' I was surprised at my own smile, last time I checked the mirror. It was like the perfect definition of a killer smile; literally, a smile meant to kill a person.

“No. It’s nothing” I said as I straightened my face, pretending to drink tea.

Blanche’s expression relaxed, if just a little. She grasped the teacup with both her hands and sipped some tea. She would still steal glances from time to time, trying to read my mood. I could tell that Blanche was frightened and was having a difficult time with me. I felt sorry for her, and it left a bitter aftertaste.

‘Ha, I want to touch her beautiful hair. She would look so cute if I made three braids and formed an updo. Wouldn’t it look even more lovely if I were to match it with cute suspender pants and a frilly blouse? Maybe add a marine-inspired look to compliment her blue eyes. Such as a white one-piece dress with a sailor collar and a blue ribbon!’

Unknowingly, my right hand was itching with the desire to dress her up. It really had been a while since I genuinely wanted to make a design. But every time I saw Blanche, my creativity practically gushed out. Seeing how I died from overwork and yet still craved work, I wondered what kind of freak I was.

‘How happy would I be if Blanche wore the clothes I personally designed? Well, I can force her to wear them, but... wouldn’t she think of it as a new form of harassment?’— Just then, I heard Blanche’s voice.

“Um, Lady Abigail?”

Her soft and meek voice snapped me out of my own thoughts.

“Um... why did you call me here today? Did I perhaps... d-do something wrong?” Blanche was looking at me, fiddling with her fingers.

“No. I simply wanted to have tea with you.”

Blanche still seemed frightened even after hearing my response, and, considering what Abigail had done thus far, it wasn’t a surprise.

Abigail was exactly like the description from the fairy tale, if not even worse. She had to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The woman had chased away any maids or servants considered even remotely beautiful. The remaining women were not spared either—they were subjected to

abuse and punishment without reason.

Blanche was not exempted either. While Abigail could not do serious harm to the princess in public, she terrorized the little girl in secret. For example, Abigail would often summon Blanche to find faults with her. Additionally, she would spread gossip, slandering Blanche's name. Going even further, Abigail would even tear Blanche's dresses to shreds.

'Yeah... No wonder Blanche is trembling in fear.' I sighed internally. Even though I hosted the tea party to get closer with Blanche, I ended up scaring her even more. 'How can I atone for my past and get closer to Blanche?' Troubled by these thoughts, the tea went down the wrong pipe. "!!!" A tear formed in my eye as I choked on the drink.

Blanche's big eyes widened even more then as she watched me cough.

"Lady Abigail!? A-are, are you alright? Are you hurt somewhere?" Not knowing what to do, the child handed me a handkerchief.

I waved my hand to reassure her. I could not help but feel guilty upon seeing Blanche's concerned face. 'To be worried about Abigail, even after all that abuse, you're too kind. As expected of the main protagonist.'

"I-I'm fine. It's nothing to worry about" I assured her. Soon after, I managed to clear my throat.

Blanche looked at me with concern in her eyes, not knowing what to do. "Are you still feeling ill?" she asked meekly.

'Why is she looking at me like that? Oh, is it because of that incident?' Truthfully, Abigail had died once—just like how I had died as well. When I opened my eyes, I was at Abigail's funeral, lying in a coffin. The coffin was filled with hundreds of white lilies—so many that I felt like I was suffocating from their fragrance.

Wondering what was going on, I stood up to look around and saw a bunch of foreigners with horrified looks on their faces. Afterward, I remember causing a ruckus and asking others about where I was and why I looked like that. The imperial doctor had diagnosed that I was in a state of shock after recovering from a near-death experience.

I had wondered at the time, 'Is it due to shock that Abigail's memories are so blurry to me?' Although Abigail's memories had remained with me, they were incomplete. Thankfully, I was slowly able to recall the knowledge needed to live as a queen.

I started adjusting to this world after grasping the situation. But there was a problem. According to how the fairytale concluded, I would eventually hand Blanche a poisoned apple. As a result, I would be forced to wear red-hot iron shoes and dance in madness until death.

'I can't die like that! To avoid such a miserable death, the first thing that I need to do is improve my relationship with Blanche!'

I looked at Blanche quietly. Though, this time I did not smile and did my absolute best to speak softly. "I am alright, thank you for worrying. In any case, Princess Blanche?"

"Y-yes?" she squeaked, jolting slightly in her little chair.

"I'm sorry for what I have done so far" I said, a tinge of regret filling my eyes as I spoke.

Blanche's eyes widened at my words.

"I'm sorry for all the pain that I've caused you so far. I regret it very much. I've come to reflect upon my actions after dying and coming back to life."

Blanche gave me a strange look, seeming very surprised. Unable to say anything, all she could do was blink.

"Even if I were to apologize, my past actions would not wash away. Even so, I want to apologize to you."

For a while, Blanche did not say anything. I looked down, awaiting her response. Abigail's reflection in the tea stared back at me. Even though she looks like a fierce cat, she still looked beautiful.

It was a truly incomparable appearance to my previous life. Ephemeral silver hair, purple eyes, standing at 170cm tall with a model-like body, and smooth skin like a fine piece of porcelain. Distinct and bewitching features

all thanks to the effort that had been put into preserving them as such. When I had first found myself in this body, I had been so enchanted by Abigail's beauty that I found myself staring at the mirror all day long.

'Why did she hate beautiful people so much? You're beautiful enough. How could you bear to torment such a lovely child?'

Just then, I glanced at Blanche. Even her contemplative expression looked cute and lovely, like a puppy. I really wanted to squish those cheeks of hers. 'Even though Abigail is dazzling, I like Blanche more. She's cute, and the most powerful ability in the world is cuteness!

Yes, she is the very definition of cute, and it makes me all tingly. Why? Cuteness is justice! Oh, how I wish I could get along with Blanche.'

Sadly, I had to first atone for all the unforgivable deeds Abigail committed thus far. As if to attest to that, Blanche remained silent. All she did was glance at me occasionally with a confused look. Her bewilderment was understandable. I did not expect everything to be resolved with just one apology. However, now that I'd apologized, I needed to show my honesty with action.

'It'll be best to send her back now. I'm sure she feels uncomfortable staying here.'

"I must have surprised you, Princess Blanche. I'm sorry about that. You may go and rest."

"Eh? Ah, yes, Lady Abigail." Still shaken by what had transpired, Blanche slowly stood up while remaining cautious of me. Just as she was about to leave the room after giving her farewell —"Kya!"— she bumped into someone entering the room and fell over.

"B-Blanche?!" I found myself shouting her name without even realizing it. Right as I went to help her up, I halted in my tracks when I saw the man who had bumped into her. Like Blanche, the young man had jet-black hair. He looked like he was in his mid-twenties.



When I saw him for the first time, I recalled a photo exhibition that I had visited in the past. Among the array of photographs, I was standing before a photo of a black panther. Its dark velvet fur looked elegant and majestic. The black panther inside the picture was silently glaring at me, but even so, its glare was daunting. Even though I was afraid, I couldn't look away. I was mesmerized by its mysterious charm, and I looked at that wild beast's eyes for a very long time.

The man who stood before me greatly resembled that black panther. He was majestic, beautiful, and charming. Even the mole under his right eye only served to make him appear even more charming. Anyone would blush upon seeing his face, yet I could barely hold back a string of curses from escaping my lips.

This man was the king of the country, Blanche's father, and also my husband—Sabelian Friedkin. A sworn enemy of mine.

All the maids and servants bowed in his presence. I, too, needed to greet him. However, there was something more urgent to take care of.

"Princess Blanche, are you hurt?" I asked as I rushed to help Blanche get back up. In doing so, I heard Sabelian's cold voice.

"Pay attention" he said, his indifferent voice cutting off my own. Sabelian looked at his own daughter like she was a stranger to him. His cold-hearted gaze was devoid of compassion or love.

How was it possible for someone to look at their own child like that? Especially a child as lovely as Blanche! But Blanche did not even cry. Instead, she fixed her posture. Then, with her small hands, she grabbed both ends of her dress and greeted us.

"Pardon me, Father. And I'm sorry for showing such disgrace, Lady Abigail." 'Wait, why are you apologizing? It wasn't your fault for bumping' Just then, I noticed something was off.

"Princess Blanche, are you alright?" I asked, carefully grabbing Blanche's right arm. As I did so, the child flinched in pain.

'As expected.' When she greeted us earlier, her right hand was drooping.

She must have sprained her hand when she fell.

“You must have injured your wrist” I muttered, my eyes locked on her tiny hand.

Upon hearing my words, Blanche hurried to hide her right hand behind her. “Oh. T-that’s... It’s fine. It’s really nothing to worry about” she blurted.

Her behavior resembled a child caught stealing something. Afterward, she glanced at Sabelian. It broke my heart seeing Blanche so dejected.

‘She didn’t even cry after falling.’

“I’ll summon a doctor for you. You may take your leave, Blanche. I have something to discuss with Abigail” Sabelian continued, speaking in his cold voice.

“Yes, father...”

Blanche bowed her head and scurried away—she looked like a frightened rabbit making its escape.

“How can you be so heartless?” I glared at Sabelian as I spoke.

“About what?” he asked calmly, as if nothing was wrong in the slightest!

“Your daughter is hurt. Would it pain you to spare a word of comfort?” I practically spat those words, and Sabelian slowly tilted his head to the left. His gaze pierced me like needles.

“How laughable. Abigail, since when did you care for Blanche?”

I was at a loss for words. After all, until recently, no one had harassed Blanche more than me. It must’ve been weird for someone like me to cover for the child.

“I’ve had a change of heart after dying” I answered at last.

“Is that so?” Though he replied, Sabelian did not seem to believe it in the slightest.

‘The words of someone returning from death should have at least shaken him. Yet, he didn’t even flinch.’

He slowly made his way to the table and took up Blanche's vacated seat. The maids quickly brought him a new cup of tea. With a nod, he gestured for me to sit back down.

'Don't treat me like a dog, damn it!' I gritted my teeth as I took the seat opposing him. While looking at him from the front, I thought to myself, 'he's a piece of trash, but he sure is a nice-looking one.'

"Abigail, are you hurt? You don't look so well" he said to me at last.

"The tea is just a little too hot" I replied, using my paltry excuse to look away.

'Ah, what an icky situation. To think drinking tea with a handsome man like this would be so aggravating. How strange.'

In many ways, Sabelian was perfect. He was revered as a wise and strong king who had a charming appearance.

'But so what? His heart is so empty. I know for a fact that the blood running through his veins is cold as ice.'

When I woke up from my deathbed, the first thing I saw was Sabelian's face, just as he was bidding me his final farewell.

"Let us never meet again in the next life, Abigail."

The moment I heard those words, several memories came flooding into me, which caused me to burst out of the coffin.

On their wedding day, the bride and the groom usually kissed after exchanging their vows—but Abigail and Sabelian did not. Not only that, they didn't dance together at the wedding reception, because Sabelian was too tired and had left earlier. Further still, on their first night, Sabelian didn't even lay a finger on Abigail. He simply said, "Abigail, I won't ever lay a hand on you."

Without explaining anything further, Sabelian then fell asleep. As such, Abigail spent their first night together with her eyes wide open in the dark. Even after a year, Sabelian never touched Abigail's body, let alone her hand.

Thanks to all this, Abigail's self-esteem was absolutely crushed. Even though many men wanted Abigail, Sabelian rejected her existence. Devastated, she at first tried to answer his cold treatment with her own. But, as time went on, that very treatment only served to increase her obsession with Sabelian. It finally came to a point where she discarded her pride and dignity, only to cling to him and beg for his love.

"Your Majesty, why do you distance yourself away from me? What must I do to earn your love?"

"Don't even come close to me. Don't do anything, don't say anything. Act as if you are dead. That is your role."

Abigail despaired from his words. She contemplated over and over again on just why Sabelian rejected her so much. After a long period of time, she came up with one conclusion: she wasn't beautiful enough for Sabelian to pay attention to her. Thus, her villainous personality worsened. She became even more spiteful, kicking out anyone that was remotely pretty from the palace, and even harassing Blanche out of jealousy.

Abigail was an awful person, and I could not defend her actions, but I sympathized with her when it came to her tragic marriage. Even if it was a political marriage between two countries, a marriage without love, the treatment she received was too harsh.

'Sabelian, that bastard. Even if you don't love Abigail, how could you humiliate her like that? Why did you even marry her in the first place? Just thinking about it now makes me mad.' I drank some cold water to cool off the anger burning inside me. Being in such a situation, I was not happy to see Sabelian visiting.

It was quite unusual of him. 'And for what reason could he possibly have come? Certainly nothing good.'

"So, what brings you here today, Your Majesty?" I asked, wanting this meeting to end.

"I wished to speak with you regarding your death." He responded immediately, and I flinched on hearing the word 'death.' Setting my teacup down, I looked at him.

“My death?”

“Yes. While you were lucky enough to survive, you certainly died once. So we’re investigating the cause of death and the culprit.”

My ears perked up at this. One thing that bothered me as much as the ending of this fairy tale was Abigail’s death. I heard Abigail died in her sleep. She was only 23, and she was healthy at that. Therefore, her death was unnatural and unexpected. Hence, it was highly likely that she had been murdered.

‘Ugh, I get the chills just thinking about it. I might have died once already, but dying from overworking is completely different from being killed.’

Arms crossed, Sabelian continued with his monotone monologue, as if he was reading a passage from a book. “It was probably poison. Had we the chance to dissect you, we would have known for sure, however”

‘Hey, now. Can you not stare at me like that while talking about dissecting me?’

“I investigated all the servants close to you, but no evidence of attempted murder could be found.”

“What a pity” I replied.

‘In that case, the person who’d killed me could be walking somewhere in the palace right now.’

I felt a chill run down my spine. Unlike me, Sabelian remained indifferent. He took a sip from his tea before continuing.

“Do you remember anything prior to your death? It’ll be easier to catch the culprit if you do” he asked, his eyes probing me. As nice as that would have been, I could only shake my head.

“Unfortunately, I do not.” Abigail’s memories came in bits and pieces, like a burnt map. Some were crystal clear, others completely absent.

Sabelian raised his head at my response. He quietly stared at me for a while before saying. “Do you remember that incident, by any chance?”

“Incident?” I asked, puzzled by the vague question.

“Six months ago, when you collapsed after drinking poison” he clarified, still staring directly at me.

'Six months ago?'

I tried to recall the few memories I had—'Oh, right! I do remember. I did consume poison, but...'

“You mean the time I poisoned myself” I said at last.

That's right, Abigail had previously consumed a weak poison on her own accord in a bid for Sabelian's attention. When she had done that, Sabelian unexpectedly visited her in a hurry. Seeing that, she was so happy to have finally gotten his attention. Although, when the truth was revealed, Sabelian became even colder toward her.

At that moment, however, Sabelian nodded and looked at me again.

“Did you want my attention again, Abigail?” he said coldly. His eyes seemed to be dissecting me with a piercing gaze.

I gaped because I was so unbelievably surprised. 'W-what? Is he seriously suspicious of Abigail trying to kill herself again?'

Of course, Abigail had done it in the past to receive attention, but condemnation like this was too much.

'Yes, she pretended to be sick in the past too! Yes, she tried falling into a lake herself as well! And yes, she drank some poison too, but still! Hm... actually. It's totally understandable to come to that conclusion. Even I'm starting to get suspicious of her. Why am I cleaning up all this mess Abigail caused?'

Despite my wronged feelings, I kept the anger at bay, so that I could live a smooth life from now on.

“I admit, I am guilty of committing a couple creative ploys to obtain, Your Majesty's affection in the past—”

“A couple?”

“A-a few...”

“A few?”

“A-anyway! This time, that was not the case.” I did my best to maintain my composure.

Even so, the man’s eyes betrayed his utter doubt of my sincerity. “No matter what you do, I will not be able to give you the love that you desire.”

I wanted to dump cold water on that stupid face of his. When did I say anything about that just now? I felt a nasty feeling, like I had been preemptively dumped before I could confess. “That’s all well and good. In that case, I do not desire your affections either.”

This wasn’t a joke or a taunt, I was being completely serious. I didn’t want something like his interest. But Sabelian’s aura of suspicion remained.

Once again, I spoke with complete honesty. “After my near-death experience, I finally realized how useless all of it was. No matter how much I sought your attention, all you gave me was pity. Well, I don’t want your pity.” Just like how Sabelian felt no affection for me, I also didn’t feel any affection for him. I admit to being attracted to his face at first, but his personality immediately ruined that. “You may suspect me, but I swear to you upon my family’s name that I have uttered no falsehood.”

“I seem to recall you swore on your family’s name last time.”

‘God damn it, Abigail! Couldn’t you have been more considerate for the person who’d be cleaning up the mess you made? What is it with you and lying about everything?!’

I took a moment to gather my thoughts and chose my next words carefully.

“If I truly used this situation to once again garner your attention, would I not have immediately accused one of the maids of poisoning me?” The real Abigail would have done this for sure, I’m 100% confident. She would have chosen a relatively pretty maid and had the poor girl’s entire family executed for the false offense.

“Given my track record, it’s obvious that suspicion would be directed at me if I told you I didn’t have a suspect in mind. If I had just blamed someone from the start, made up a believable criminal that Your Majesty would accept, then things would be going exactly as you seem to think I want them to.”

Sabelian didn’t say anything, but his suspicion hadn’t fully dissipated either. The distrust we held for each other didn’t diminish easily at all, like hardened snow.

Now was my chance.

“I fully understand your hesitation in placing your trust in my words. But I guarantee you’ll see the truth in them from this point on. In fact, I have a proposition right now to start atoning for my past misdeeds.”

“A proposition?”

“Why don’t we—” I mustered the brightest smile I possibly could. “—sleep in separate rooms?”

I could see Sabelian’s eyes widen just a tiny bit. It was much the same as the moment I came back to life after being assumed dead.

“Separate... rooms?”

Even he was taken aback.

“Yes. Separate rooms.” I spoke slowly, emphasizing each word.

Although I made it sound like the suggestion was for Sabelian’s benefit, it was as much for me as it was for him.

Currently, Sabelian and I were sharing a bed together. That... made me uncomfortable, to say the least. I wanted to sleep soundly, but I couldn’t get three winks lying next to someone I didn’t even know. At the end of the day, he was a stranger to me. We might be a couple on the outside, but on the inside, we were little more than acquaintances.

Sharing a bed with a man I don’t know? Every night I suffered through stress induced sleep paralysis, and I was getting sick of it. So, I came up with my brilliant solution: separate bedrooms. I’d be happy, he’d be happy.

And on the plus side, it might start to improve his opinion of me.

He still looked skeptical. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally nodded his head.

“Very well. I’ll make arrangements for that soon.”

“Wonderful. Oh, and one more thing. That was a suggestion, but now I’d like to make a request.” This was the most important part.

“A request?”

‘Ugh, turn the sharp gaze down a notch, would you?’

I quickly explained before he could get any weird ideas in his head.

“You don’t need to fulfill your duties as a husband. Rather, I would like you to fulfill your duties as a father, at the very least.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’re not the least bit interested in conceiving another child, so shouldn’t you dote on the one you have, even a little bit?”

Sabelian seemed more confused than anything. A small sigh escaped my lips.

“Earlier, when Blanche was hurt, your response was very cold.”

“I called for a doctor, didn’t I?” I knew he would reply this way.

“It would have been better to ask if she was all right first” I urged. But not even a twinge of self-reflection crossed Sabelian’s face.

How difficult a man he was to understand.

My initial assumption behind his odd behavior was because Blanche was a daughter and not a son, but that didn’t appear to be the case. After all, if he really wanted a son, he would have slept with Abigail already. Well, it’s entirely possible he refused to do so purely because he disliked Abigail, but even so, it was still strange that he didn’t get a divorce or a second wife to have a son.

‘Or... could it be that? Spartan education? The Spartan education of a lion making its child fall off a cliff? His way of trying to raise Blanche to

be a strong girl? Nah, that's all nonsense. Ignoring a child and being strict with a child are two totally different things.'

"She's none other than your daughter. You should try to love her" I pressed him.

"Yes, you're right. That is my child—"

'Oh? Was he finally listening to me?'

—But his voice was as cold as the arctic wind. "—It's mine, not yours. I'll be the one to make the decisions regarding Blanche's upbringing."

'What? "It?!" D-did he just refer to his own child as an object?'

If the real Abigail heard this admission, she would have jumped up and danced with joy. Nothing could have made her happier than witnessing the relationship worsen between Sabelian and Blanche.

But not this Abigail. I couldn't turn a blind eye to a child being ignored so heartlessly. I gritted my teeth and quickly stood up from my seat. It made the table shake a bit from the sudden motion, and as a consequence, I spilled a little tea.

"My name is now Abigail Friedkin. Blanche is also a Friedkin. I believe I am well within my rights to intervene." I shot him a glare with all the disgust and hatred I could muster. Sabelian didn't bother saying anything.

"My request remains the same. Please love Princess Blanche as your daughter. I'll sleep by myself from now on. Now, if you'll excuse me." I left the room in a hurry.

Taking my leave before the king did is considered impolite, but I didn't give a damn. Again, Sabelian didn't bother saying anything.

"Clara, are you sure you heard right? The queen's really sleeping separately from the king?"

"I did, I did, Miss Norma!" The maids serving under Abigail whispered to each other.

The woman called Norma was far from what anyone would call beautiful. She was quite tall and lanky, and she had a hawkish nose, to boot. Clara, too, was just an average-looking girl, with brunette hair and a few freckles.

Clara lowered her voice even more and whispered in the most secretive of tones. “And get this, it was the queen who suggested it, of all the crazy things.”

“Just what is she up to now?” Rumors were flying all over the palace the last few days.

The cause of all this was, of course, Queen Abigail. She was the talk of the palace right now. After all, she died and came back to life. And after she revived, she continued doing crazy things one after another.

“What do you mean, what is she up to? Weren’t you the one who said they were on bad terms to begin with?” Clara asked out of confusion. Norma, on the other hand, was biting her lower lip out of nervousness.

“There’s no way it’s that simple, Clara. She’s definitely plotting something, mark my words. This is Queen Abigail we’re talking about, after all.” Norma had been in Abigail’s employ since the queen first came to the palace.

In just the first year of serving the queen, she could have spent an entire week complaining about the things she’d been forced to endure.

Their clothing spoke volumes toward Abigail’s harsh treatment of the serving staff. Only nobility could directly serve royalty, so the palace’s servants were commonly dressed in high-class attire, according to their noble status. But Norma and Clara only wore a normal maid’s uniform. This, again, was thanks to Abigail’s obsession with beauty. You could expect to be scolded immediately for looking even remotely pretty. So the servants wore their drab uniforms to escape Abigail’s ire; makeup and accessories were also taboo.

“Do you really think someone can change that easily? Just watch. She’ll be back here to vent her anger like always, just you wait. And don’t let your guard down.”

“Hmm, alright. I’ll be careful.” Clara nodded, but still didn’t seem fully convinced. Norma just sighed.

After Abigail’s assassination, many servants had been replaced with new ones. Clara, being one of the newer servants, didn’t know Abigail’s true fearsome nature. At this rate, she’d be chased away in a matter of days. But before Norma could give the girl any further warnings, a bell rang from the room outside. Abigail was calling for a servant.

Afraid of getting reprimanded for being even a second late, the two quickly made their way out. But Abigail already looked to be in a foul mood. She glared at the table in front of her with pursed lips. ‘Damn it. We’re screwed,’ Norma swore in her mind, bracing herself for another of Abigail’s hysterical fits.

“I want to ask you two something.”

Norma felt a chill run down her spine at Abigail’s cold tone of voice and tried to respond as politely as she could. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Which of these do you think suits Blanche the best?” Abigail pointed to the table, upon which were two petite pairs of shoes. One was a traditional black Mary Jane-style shoe. The other, a white shoe with a kitten heel, had cute ribbons decorating the back.

‘Were these for Blanche?’ Norma assumed it to be another plot to harass the girl. Abigail was probably planning on putting needles inside or something. The problem laid in how to respond to the Queen’s question. Should she say they were both too gaudy for someone like Blanche, or...?

As Norma mulled over how best to answer, Clara piped up with a warm smile.

“I think both are very pretty.”

Norma stared at Clara with absolute shock. ‘How could she come up with such a foolish answer? The queen would surely explo—!’

“Right? I think both would look absolutely adorable on her.” Abigail brightened immensely, but then her complexion immediately darkened again. “Hmm, but what if she doesn’t like it?”

“Why don’t you let the princess choose which one she likes better, then?”
“That would be for the best, wouldn’t it?” Abigail fell into deep thought.

Norma, in the meantime, was still trying to recover from her shock.

‘Was Abigail seriously deliberating about what present to give to the princess? Especially when her face looked like she was thinking about how to assassinate someone.’

Abigail’s turning over a new leaf started to look more plausible. In the past, if Clara spoke out of turn like that, Abigail would fly off the handle. Something changed after she came back to life, but Norma continued to observe Abigail with a complicated expression.

She noticed that Abigail’s purple eyes shifted toward Clara’s ears. She stared at it intently before saying. “Clara, is it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Your earrings are very nice”

Hidden beneath the maid’s hair, Clara wore blue earrings. Norma felt her heart drop into her stomach. ‘Clara, you idiot! I told you accessories were banned!’

Abigail grinned as she addressed Clara, her face twisting to resemble a demon from hell.

Clara realized her mistake the moment she saw that smile. “I-I’m sorry. I swear, I won’t wear earrings ever again!” Clara visibly paled and tried to remove her earrings quickly. She was in such a hurry that she even made her ears bleed.

Abigail jumped out of her seat and quickly grabbed the girl’s hands. “Clara! Calm down! You’re bleeding.”

Blood droplets dripped from her earlobes. Abigail picked up a handkerchief and wiped Clara’s blood.

Norma stood at a loss. ‘Abigail? Cleaning up a servant’s blood? Not berating the girl for getting blood on the carpet?’

Right now, Abigail’s face showed only worry, and the Queen spoke as if

she were the one who had gotten hurt. “I was only complimenting you on your pretty earrings. No need to be so startled.”

“R-really?” Clara looked more shocked than anything.

Abigail spoke in a soft tone, trying to calm the girl down. “Of course. And, from now on, you may wear whatever you wish. Please relay my order to the other servants as well.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.” Clara barely managed to stammer out a response.

After Abigail confirmed the bleeding had stopped, she took off her handkerchief. “The bleeding stopped, but I recommend you still see a doctor.” Her face was stiff, but not her voice.

Clara went through the moment in a daze. She could not believe that the queen of the country would treat her so nicely.

Abigail didn’t even notice Clara’s reaction and remained rather apologetic. She looked at Clara’s bloodied earrings for a moment, then walked over to her accessory table. “Ah, come to think of it, there was a pair of earrings I’m not using.”

When Abigail opened her jewelry box, precious stones and gems of all colors started shining from inside. Diamonds, garnets, emeralds, corals, pearls, sapphires. The box looked like a small museum display, as if all the jewels in the world could be found in this one chest. Clara had a few pieces of jewelry—she was from a noble family—but this was on an entirely different level. There was just a ridiculous amount of jewelry inside.

Abigail picked out a pair of sapphire earrings from the hoard, ones that were the same shade of blue as Clara’s earrings. Though, they were likely much more expensive.

“Here, I’ll give you these.” The queen carefully held out her hand with the earrings.

“N-no. I can’t accept something like this.” Clara waved her hands in refusal, completely shocked.

“I’m not using them. And you’d be doing me a favor, since I was planning to get rid of most of these, anyway.” Clara’s vision swam as she listened to Abigail’s sweet words.

Abigail seized the opportunity and put the earrings into the girl’s hands. She then turned to look at Norma, who flinched instinctively. Abigail gave her long-time servant a once-over before nodding to herself.

“Peridot would suit you, Norma.”

“I-I don’t need anything, Your Majesty. Your jewels would be wasted on me.”

“No, they won’t. I know you’ve suffered working for me all this time, so I actually want to give you a gift. Norma, I’m very sorry for everything.”

The apology was as awkward as the gift itself. Unable to say anything, Norma watched in a daze as Abigail picked out a green necklace and placed it into her hands.

No words of gratitude came from either of the maids, but Abigail didn’t mind. She simply put the jewelry box back where it came from, and said. “I’ll be giving the other maids gifts as well, so please don’t dwell on it too much, all right? Now then, I’ll be going outside for a bit.”

Abigail briskly left the room, after which it fell completely silent. No one dared to speak. Norma’s mouth was left agape, unable to tell if it was a dream or reality. She unconsciously muttered to herself. “Did she really change?

She’s like a completely different person now.”

Chapter Two



A week had passed since I told the maids they were free to wear whatever they wanted. Most of the maids seemed rather wary of the decree, but thankfully, after only a few days, things started changing bit by bit. Some maids even wore the accessories I gifted them. Clara, in particular, was so excited that she wore something different every day along with her sapphire earrings.

But not everyone was like Clara. Some maids, including Norma, still refrained from wearing anything fancy. If it was of their own volition, I had no problems with it, but unfortunately, it seemed to stem from their distrust of me.

'Sigh. I suppose with all the things that Abigail did in the past, it's no surprise they still don't trust me. Abigail was seriously a piece of work. I wouldn't be surprised if a maid had killed her. Speaking of which, who killed her, anyway?'

More than just a few people saw Abigail as a nuisance. First, the supporters of the previous queen, Miriam. She was a child of the esteemed Stork family, and after her death, the family offered up Miriam's sister to be the next queen. But Abigail, the princess of Cronenberg, ended up being chosen instead. Obviously, the Stork family wouldn't look too kindly upon Abigail for that.

Another one to be wary of was Sabelian's half-brother. His name was Raven.

Like his name, his hair was as black as a raven's feathers. Despite having a different mother, he was the spitting image of Sabelian, with a few notable exceptions. While Sabelian's eyes carried hues of blue and gray, Raven's were golden. Raven's personality was also totally unlike Sabelian's, so it was easy to tell the two apart. Not to mention that Raven's

hair was long enough to reach his shoulders.

Supposedly, they didn't have a great relationship, due in part to succession problems. Although Raven didn't have a terrible relationship with Abigail, per se, they were akin to political enemies. After all, if Abigail had a child, Raven's claim to the throne would plummet.

Apart from those people, the laundry list of those with animosity toward Abigail was a byproduct of her horrid treatment of people. She had tortured too many individuals, including her servants in the castle.

'Ah, Abigail. What am I going to do with you?' There were just too many potential suspects.

'The first thing to do is to reduce the number of my enemies! I can't die like in the original fairy tale. I must improve my relationship with Blanche!'

"Clara, Blanche is supposed to get measured for her new dress today, correct?" "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Do you think, if I were to attend... would she find my presence unwelcomed?"

'Today's the day Blanche finally tries on new clothes! I really, really want to go. But I'm hesitant, considering Blanche is still terrified of me.'

"It'll be fine, I think!"

Clara's reassurance gave me courage. At the very least, I could say that I was bringing a gift as an excuse to stop by.

"Okay then. In that case, can you help me get dressed?"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Clara and Norma each picked up a shoebox to carry. They held the same shoes I had been trying to decide between last week. With the two maids by my side, I walked to the guest room; as I drew closer, I started hearing the voices of multiple people. Before entering, I took a small peek inside.

I could see Blanche sitting down on a chair. As she sat still, with her tiny hands laid carefully on her lap, she resembled a little porcelain doll. Even from this distance, she looked just the cutest. From her tiny little nose, to her mouth and ears, and even to her pink cheeks. If I were to poke her cheeks, they looked like they'd be soft enough to bounce back with a little jiggle.

The room was filled high with large boxes, and several mannequins draped with new dresses. The season was just changing from winter to spring, so the dresses all had a warm and colorful appeal. There was one problem, however, the dresses were all sized for adults.

"Miss Jeremie, what do you think about this dress?" A man wearing a rather sharp suit piped up from the room. He seemed to be a designer of sorts. The lady—Miss Jeremie—was carefully looking at the selection of dresses.

I heard Miss Jeremie was Blanche's nanny and teacher. She had been serving Blanche since the princess was younger, and if I recalled correctly, she was the niece of Duke Stork. With the backing of her family, she wasn't someone to be trifled with. Other than that, I knew next to nothing about her. To begin with, Abigail had never really spoken to her. The first and the last time the two met was when Abigail first entered the palace. Miss Jeremie tried to speak with Abigail about Blanche's education and personality, but Abigail cut the woman off and said: "It's too annoying, so I'll leave the princess to you, and in the future, don't come to me about the princess's affairs."

'Sigh. Abigail. Why did you go and do that? I should give Miss Jeremie a gift as an apology at some point, too.' As I stood there lamenting, Miss Jeremie went through one dress after the other, her eyes roving over them like a hawk. "Do you have other dresses apart from these?"

She was currently looking at a reddish-brown dress. It looked elegant, but it didn't catch my fancy. In fact, none of those dresses were to my taste. Children's clothing was a world far removed from that of adults. The clothing up there right now were adult dresses with corsets. They were probably planning on just tailoring the outfits down to fit Blanche. There's

no way clothing like that would be comfortable for a child.

My desire to design clothes for Blanche surged even more. I wanted to run in and stop them, but I needed to be patient. Instead, I decided to take the chance to see what clothes Blanche liked, so I could make some for her later. In the meantime, the designer took out a new dress from a box.

“What do you think about this one, then?” It was a light-blue dress with white ribbons all over it.

‘Would Blanche like that style?’

I turned to see her reaction, and I saw her eyes sparkle like the stars. The girl gave the dress multiple excited glances. Her feet swung back and forth on the chair in anticipation.

‘Oh my, oh my, her legs can’t even reach the ground because they’re so small. That’s so adorable. Thank goodness she found a dress she likes.’

As I was busy staring at Blanche, Miss Jeremie responded. “Show me something else.”

“Is that so? Then, how about these? They’re also quite popular nowadays” the designer said, taking out another dress.

The moment I saw it, I put a hand over my mouth from shock. That was a dress too far ahead of its time. Even by modern standards, the design looked quite bold.

‘To think I’d see something like that in this era...’

The dress used several colored silks: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. The design looked like it resembled a rainbow. Aside from the garish color combination, the shape of the dress itself was a sight to behold. The puffs on the shoulders were big enough to hide watermelons inside them, and the neckline had a massive amount of fur on the trim, enough to look like the mane of a lion. The designer said this style of dress was all the rage right now, but I knew he had just come here to get rid of his unsellable trash.

Miss Jeremie responded. “This one seems good.”

'What?!' I almost burst into the room in a fit of rage.

'You're actually thinking of making Blanche wear something that atrocious? If Blanche wears something as horrendous as that...'

'She would still be lovely!' Yes. Blanche was adorable, no matter what she wore.

Perhaps Miss Jeremie was aware of that, and that's the reason she purchased it? Or maybe Blanche was into rainbows? Tastes can differ from person to person.

Pondering, I looked at Blanche's reaction.

'Ah, her feet completely stopped moving.'

Her once-radiant face distorted into one of dread. She reminded me of a puppy I raised in the past. It used to make that face whenever I took it to the vet after saying we were going for a walk. Blanche drooped her shoulders just like my puppy being forcefully dragged to the vet.

'That face, oh, it makes my heart throb! Oh, Blanche, you really don't like that dress, do you?!'

Blanche stared blankly at the dress for a bit before saying. "U-um, Miss Jeremie."

"What's wrong, Princess?" Miss Jeremie smiled, but her smile seemed rather strict.

Blanche flinched after looking at Miss Jeremie's face. "I-it's nothing."

Miss Jeremie gave Blanche another smile before talking to the designer again.

'Hmm... That was strange. Has Miss Jeremie really been that clueless this whole time?'

The woman started picking more and more dresses without a moment's hesitation.

'Ugh... I want to pick dresses for Blanche, too! I wonder what dresses would look good on Blanche? And what style of dress she would like?

Hm? Style?’

I felt something was off for a second.

Blanche said nothing as Miss Jeremie continued selecting dresses. All she did was stare agape after looking at the rainbow dress.

‘Was she leaving everything to Miss Jeremie because she didn’t feel like picking them out herself? No, that doesn’t seem to be the case.’

Blanche looked mortified when she had seen the rainbow dress, but periodically, when the designer pulled out a new dress, her eyes would light up. The designer then took out his last dress. I didn’t miss how much Blanche’s eyes sparkled at that moment. It was a bright-pink dress, more cute than beautiful and seeing the patterns of flowers embroidered all over it, it really fit the season.

The designer smiled brightly. “This dress, too, is very popular right now. What do you think, Miss Jeremie?”

Miss Jeremie took a brief look at the dress, then waved it away in dismissal.

“Such a dress would not suit the princess. We’ll go on with the dresses I selected earlier.”

“Understood. I’ll get to work on those dresses today, then.”

After that, the designer started organizing the dresses back into their boxes. Blanche stared down at the floor, looking depressed.

‘N-no! My poor little Blanche! Her precious dresses are going to be...!’

I couldn’t just stand there and watch. If the designer got sent off now, Blanche would look like a clown all spring! I knocked lightly a few times, then immediately stepped into the room. The people inside the room bowed down, with surprise evident on their faces.

“Welcome, Your Majesty.”

“W-welcome, Lady Abigail” Blanche said, jumping off her seat to greet me.

Her head was so small and round, so much like a cat, that I almost pet her instinctively.

'Ugh, patience.'

I tore my eyes off the girl to look at Miss Jeremie. "I heard a designer was visiting. How is the spring clothing selection for Blanche going?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Miss Jeremie gestured to the mannequins. "We've just finished ordering everything."

I snuck a glance at the designer. He looked quite pale. I turned to look at myself in the window's reflection. 'Whoa, this is a face worthy of an R rating. I look so scary with these eyes, seriously.'

"I would like to see the dresses you've selected."

"Y-yes, of course, Your Majesty." The designer brought someone in to take all the dresses he just packed back out. There were dozens of dresses in the box, but there weren't any that Blanche seemed to like.

I looked at the dresses for a bit before turning my head to Blanche. The girl stood still, with her hands folded. "Blanche, do you have any dresses you're fond of out of these?" I tried to look as kind as possible.

"Ah, um... I like all of them." Blanche clumsily responded.

"I see."

'Hmm.' Blanche didn't seem like she wanted to answer honestly in front of everyone. I walked over to a different box and opened it.

I definitely saw the designer put the pink dress in here just a moment ago. I could feel Miss Jeremie's dissatisfaction, but I had no choice. She might be Blanche's nanny, but I'm her stepmother. I have the right to interfere.

"I must say, this one looks much prettier to me. What do you think, Princess Blanche?" I picked up the pink dress and held it in front of Blanche.

The girl seemed a little shocked, but after a moment, she managed to nod a few times.

“Yes! It’s pretty, Your Majesty!”

“Then let’s go with this one.” I also remembered she looked happy when she had seen that sky-blue dress earlier. I dug through a few boxes to find it. “And this one, Princess Blanche?”

“Yes, it’s pretty, Your Majesty!” Life returned to Blanche’s blue eyes, and they sparkled like a pond in the morning light.

‘Good, good. Let’s find a few more like these that Blanche likes. I’m pretty sure there were more than just these. The problem is, I don’t remember the others at all. But that’s no problem at all for—you see—I’m the queen of this country! ’

“Very good. I should reward a good princess who answers honestly.” Just like the story of the honest woodcutter, people who answer truthfully get rewarded.

I turned to the designer. “Bring me all the dresses here and fit them for Blanche. Make sure to remove the corsets. As for the cost, I will pay for it.”

The moment I said this, the entire room completely froze. All that was left was an eerie silence. No one could believe what I just said. Even the maids were bewildered. Only the designer looked extremely happy, like he had just struck it rich.

The one who broke the silence was Miss Jeremie. She spoke to me with a smile on her face. “Your Majesty, I may be overstepping my bounds here, but the princess’s budget doesn’t allow us to buy all the dresses here. The king has forbidden luxuries....”

‘Damn it... Sabelian! Blanche isn’t even the type to flaunt money. How can he be so petty? Even so, I can’t back off now.’

“And that would be why I said I would pay for it. I’ll use my own money, so there shouldn’t be any issue whatsoever. If the king asks, simply tell him it was done under my order.”

If I bought Blanche clothes with the money meant to be spent on my own dresses, there’ll be nothing left to refute. Eventually, Miss Jeremie nodded.

“I shall do as you order, Your Majesty.”

'I guess that solves that for now. Although, I might end up fighting with Sabelian later on... hm?'

I felt someone tugging on my clothes. When I looked down, I saw Blanche right next to me. The girl was looking at me with a desperate look on her face.

“U-um... Lady Abigail, I’m fine. I don’t want you to miss out on buying clothes just because of me....”

'Is she saying this out of fear of Abigail?'

Looking into her eyes, that didn’t seem to be the case; I felt it in her gaze. The girl genuinely felt sorry for me. My nose stung a little.

'Is she an angel?'

I crouched down, trying my best not to grin, and got to Blanche’s eye level. “It’s fine, Princess Blanche. I didn’t plan on buying anything, since I already have so much to wear.”

“B-but.” Blanche became rather sad. She didn’t have to feel so sorry for me. To soothe her, I tried to speak as kindly as I could.

“Then, could you grant me one request?”

“Eh? Yes!” This kid looked ready to do anything. She even had her hands all bunched up into fists and everything.

“When the dresses arrive, pick out one you really like and show it to me. I want you to show off your favorite dress for me.”

'Then I can see which dresses Blanche would prefer.'

She seemed pretty confused by my request, though.

“Is that, all?”

“Yes. That’s certainly enough.” It was more than enough. Thinking of her wearing pretty clothes already got my blood pumping. “I’ll be going, then. Oh, Blanche, it almost slipped my mind—I came here to give you this gift.” I brought forward the two shoeboxes.

When I saw Blanche hesitating to accept the gift, I whispered to her in her ear, “Show me your dress while wearing these shoes. I can take that as repayment.”

I put the shoes on the table and looked around at the people in the room. Miss Jeremie looked like she had just seen a ghost. “I will excuse myself, then.

I will see you all next time.”

I left the room, leaving behind the confused Blanche. The moment I left, I let out a long sigh.

‘Ah, I thought, my heart was going to explode. I’ve done nothing like this before... My hands are shaking. But I helped Blanche, so all’s well that ends well!’

I calmed my heart for a moment in the hallway, but then I heard an urgent voice from behind.

“W-wait, Lady Abigail!” The moment I turned back, I saw Blanche.

Had she been running? Her shoulders were heaving, and she looked slightly out of breath.

“Yes, Princess Blanche? Is there something wrong?”

“U-um” Blanche paused for a moment before poking her foot out from under her skirt. She was already wearing the shoes I gave her, and they were shining in the sunlight. The laced socks and Mary Jane shoes complemented each other perfectly. Her feet were so tiny, making the shoes look like they were actually made for a doll. I had initially thought they would suit her, but seeing her wear them in person, saying that they only “suit her” was a criminal understatement!

“You said, you wanted to see me wearing these, so.” The girl fumbled over her words a bit, and her face was completely red from being so nervous, but she still smiled as she looked at me. “I really love them. Thank you very, very much, Lady Abigail!”

Blanche’s bright, smiling face was extremely beautiful. I’d never seen her

smile like that before. If smiles were to have a corresponding temperature associated with them, then hers would probably be the warmth of spring. A smile that made flowers bloom from within the hearts of onlookers.

'Oh, oh my, good job, me! You go, girl!'

To think this would make Blanche so happy. Even Norma had a motherly smile on her face! Then, at that moment, someone called out from the end of the hallway.

"Princess Blanche! You still need to have your measurements taken!" It was Miss Jeremie.

Startled, Blanche immediately lost her composure and began fumbling about.

"U-um, I need to go."

"Of course, you may leave."

"I-I'll see you again next time with the clothes...!" Blanche made a neat, albeit slightly flustered, bow and made her way back to the guest room. The way her feet skipped across the floor, one could almost see flowers blooming from beneath them.

'Aww, how cute. Seeing Blanche so joyful makes me happy. How nice, how nice.'

Even after I returned to my room, I couldn't stop my lips from twitching upward.

Curiously, Clara watched me as I attempted to control myself. "Lady Abigail, should I call for a doctor? You don't look very well."

'I don't look very well? Whatever could you mean? I simply couldn't be happier! As I thought, this face really invites a lot of misunderstandings.'

"I'm fine. I want to rest for a bit, so you two may be excused. Don't come back until I call for you."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The maids promptly exited the room.

As soon as I heard the door click behind them, I leaped straight onto my

bed. This was immediately followed by my beating the living daylights out of my pillows.

'Ahh, Aaaaah! Blanche is so cute! How is she so lovely? I want to make her clothes. I want her to wear clothes I made...!'

I wanted to summon the designer and put him to work making a few dresses for me immediately, but there were a few problems.

First off, it was still a bit too early to gift her with anything of that sort. I had no idea what kinds of clothes she would like. I didn't just want to make pretty clothes; I wanted to make pretty clothes that Blanche would actually like. Seeing as how she couldn't refuse Miss Jeremie's suggestions, if I were to give her a dress now, she'd wear it regardless of her feelings, and she'd definitely wear that rainbow dress if I gifted it to her. That's why I needed to first improve my relationship with her, to where she could honestly tell me no.

I curled my hands into fists and steeled myself.

'I'll be able to hold a fashion show for Blanche someday. Until then, I need to become better friends with her!'

The late spring sun was quite warm. Sabelian currently stood next to a sunny windowsill and looked at the building across the way: it was the west pavilion where Abigail currently resided. Abigail was out alone in the hallway and didn't seem to realize she was being watched. No, from the beginning, she was far too busy watching someone herself. When he turned his head to follow the woman's gaze, he discovered Blanche was taking a walk in the garden.

The young princess was walking along the garden path, clad in a pink dress. The girl was just taking a normal walk, but Abigail had already been watching her for nearly 30 minutes straight. This wasn't even the first time he'd witnessed such behavior: Abigail would do this whenever Blanche appeared around her.

'Was that woman trying to spy on Blanche? Just what is she planning?'

Sabelian bit his lips subconsciously. The last time they spoke to each other, Abigail demanded that he spend a little more time looking after Blanche. She almost sounded like a different person altogether. Some believed that Abigail had changed, but Sabelian didn't believe it for even a moment.

Abigail truly seemed to hate Blanche. The woman would stare at Blanche for extended periods of time, then spend several minutes punching the wall or circling the floor while lost in thought. Sabelian wondered if this was how that woman released her murderous feelings.

Right then, Abigail turned her face just enough for Sabelian to catch a glimpse of her expression. It was impossible to miss the woman's evil, venomous smile. Perhaps that was how a devil from hell would look if it smiled. Sabelian's blue-gray eyes turned cold when he saw that face.

'So that woman does hate Blanche after all.'

He couldn't understand what was going through Abigail's mind. Abigail was jealous of Sabelian's previous wife. Hating the dead didn't seem to be enough, however, as the woman directed her hatred towards the living. She even screamed at Sabelian once, asking if he would want to have a child with her if Blanche was no longer around.

'There's no way a woman like that would change so easily.'

As he contemplated all that, Blanche had already finished her walk. That was when Abigail started moving. Sabelian fixed his gaze on what she was carrying; that woman seemed to be carrying a box.

'It's a box big enough to fit a human head.'

Sabelian's eyebrows twitched the moment he saw the box. He instinctively felt danger.

'That woman is about to do something. Just what is she plotting to have such a malevolent smile?'

Abigail moved quietly, without a maid by her side. Looking at the direction the woman was moving toward, Sabelian stood up.

'Mm, I guess now's about the time Blanche usually comes back?' I was hiding behind a wall with a box in my hand. I could see Blanche's room from here.

For this entire week, I listened to rumors about Blanche and observed the girl for myself. I also ran simulations in my mind of what she might like the entire time. Her new dresses had just come in recently, so that was a pass. I already gave her a pair of shoes, so that was another pass. Accessories were a no-go at her age. She didn't appear to enjoy them either. After much thought, I came up with a perfect gift. 'Blanche should like this as well.'

The problem now, however, was the timing. I was thinking about giving it to her while she was taking a walk, but I didn't want to bother her then.

'If I acted like I met her by coincidence in this hallway, and gave her this box, then Blanche would be... Hm? Wouldn't that just make me look like a creep?'

I started thinking from Blanche's perspective. To Blanche, I was something like an annoying boss at work. How would I feel if my boss showed up out of nowhere during my day off? I felt a chill run down my spine.

'No, I should just leave before Blanche comes back. Maybe I should just leave the present in front of her door....'

I wanted to see her face when she opened the gift, but at that point, I thought retreating was the better option. I felt a sense of disappointment as I put the box down.

Right then, I felt someone walk up behind me.

'Oh no, is Blanche back already?'

I whirled around to see Sabelian standing there.

'Phew, it wasn't Blanche. But what is that guy doing here?'

I hadn't seen him since the day we used separate rooms. We ate our

meals separately as well, so there was really no reason for us to meet. 'Even so, I should at least greet him.'

I stood up from where I was and gave him a quick bow. "I hope you've been doing well, Your Majesty."

"What are you doing here, Abigail?" I only received a cold question in response. Sabelian sounded even more on edge today than before.

I flinched for a split second, but I tried to be a little more upfront about it. 'What? Whatchu want? I'm just here to give Blanche a present box.'

"I was going to give Princess Blanche a gift, and I was just about to leave it here."

"A gift?" He still looked mighty suspicious of me. He looked at me almost as if I were a terrorist with a bomb.

"Yes, a gift."

"Give it to me." Sabelian extended his hand out to me.

'Give it to him? When I had wrapped it up all nice with a pink ribbon for Blanche? But he didn't seem like he'd back down if I refused... Well, whatever. I could always redo the ribbon again.'

I hid my annoyance and handed him the box. Sabelian quickly took the ribbon apart with his hands.

'Ahhh, my precious gift for Blanche is...! Why are you the one unwrapping it?!' Soon, the man finished unwrapping, and the gift revealed itself.

"This is?"

"As you can see, it's a doll."

What lay inside was a lovely rabbit doll that resembled Blanche.

While on the subject, its clothes were designed by yours truly! It had the same design as the pink dress Blanche had been eyeing from before. I wanted the two to wear matching outfits of sorts.

Blanche would look really cute, hugging a doll wearing the same clothes

as herself.

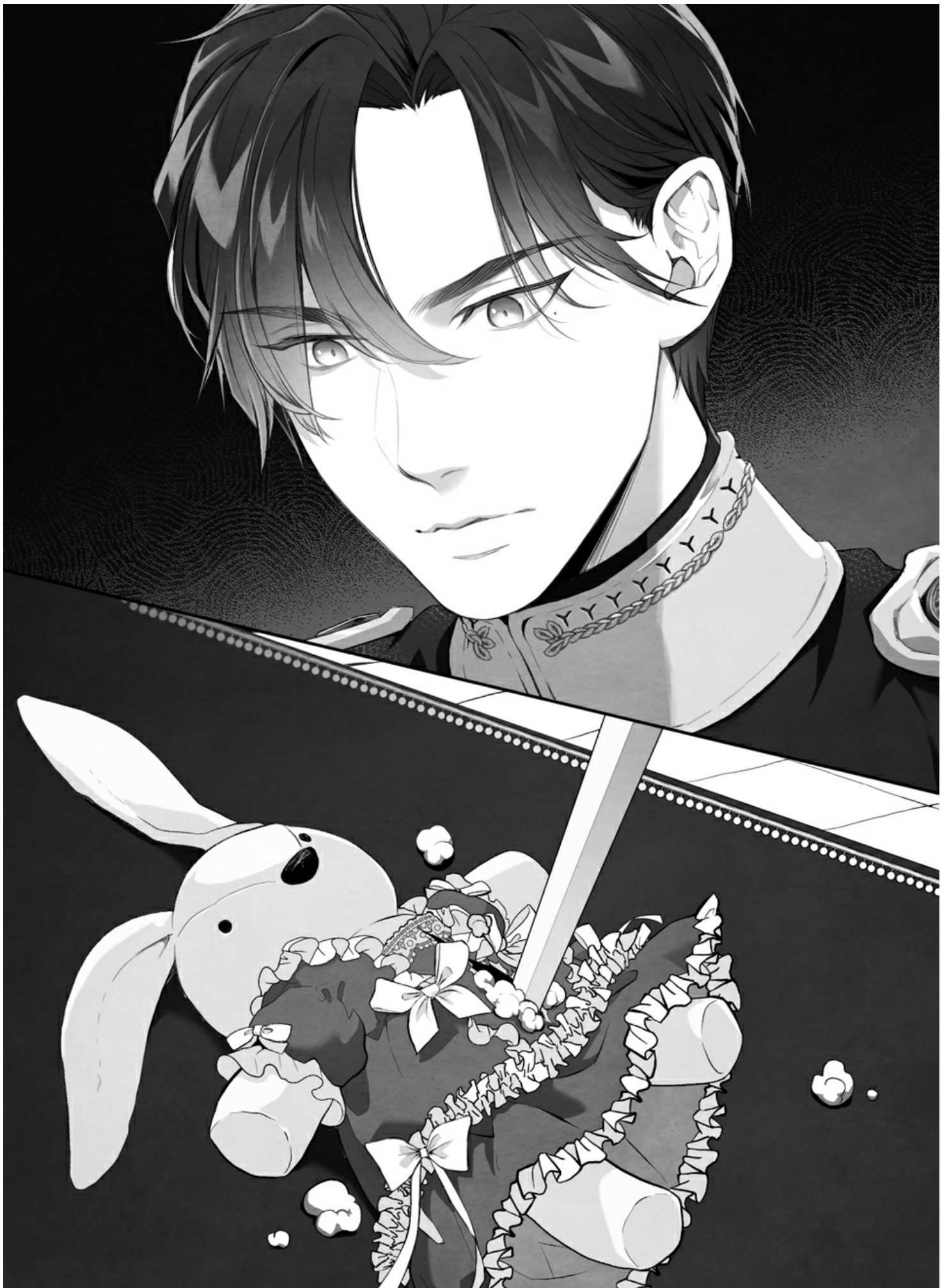
Sabelian wouldn't stop staring at the doll. 'What, do you think I actually hid a bomb in it?' "Please give it ba—" As soon as I said this, he unsheathed his sword.

The long sword revealed itself with a spine-chilling metallic ring. 'Hol—what the hell?!'

I took an involuntary step backward. 'Hey, hey, what the hell are you doing?'

What's up with the sword? Were you the one that actually killed me before—?!'

The doll landed on the floor while I was trying to regain my composure. And Sabelian's sword plunged straight down into it. You know, like, he stabbed it. Right in the stomach.



I looked at Sabelian, utterly dumbfounded. 'What... Just what... What just happened?' His sword split the rabbit's belly in two. The dress I made was cut in half, just like that. White cotton spilled out of its stomach.

He grabbed the doll off the floor and started pulling everything inside of it out. The doll became a mess in an instant. The floor was covered with cotton, and pink scraps of cloth started flying everywhere, like dying flower petals. He ripped apart the doll as best he could to check its contents, and after what seemed like an eternity, he threw what was left of it onto the floor.

"So it actually was just a doll" Sabelian muttered quietly.

Only when I heard him speak did I snap back to reality. "What..." Sabelian turned his head my way when he heard my voice. He seemed surprised.

I couldn't stop my anger from bubbling up. "What did you just do, Your Majesty?"

It felt way more intense than anything I could've imagined. That doll was something I spent hours working on as a gift. He just ripped it apart in mere seconds. I had to watch as Blanche's present become little more than a heap of trash. However, more than anything else, Sabelian's face infuriated me. He simply looked a little surprised. There was not even a hint of guilt on his face.

Sure, he suspected me because Abigail had abused Blanche in the past. I couldn't do anything about his suspicion that I might have tampered with the doll. But did he have to resort to this? Really? I tried to hold back the impending waves of tears, but I couldn't stop myself.

It was then I noticed a change in Sabelian's face. He didn't look sorry at all, of course. Rather, he looked like he had just seen a strange creature. I didn't want to even look at him. I wanted nothing more than to run away, but there was something I had to do first.

I crouched down and started picking up all the scraps. I felt humiliated. It was trash that should have been thrown away at that point, but I couldn't

watch it remain strewn all over the floor like this. 'I made this for Blanche... I made it so I could see her smiling face, and yet...'

Right then, as my fingers trembled from a mixture of shame and rage, I heard a voice come from behind me. "Lady Abigail...? Father?"

It was Blanche. A peek over my shoulder revealed her standing in the hallway with a maid by her side. Tears welled up in my eyes again at the sight of her, as she was wearing the same pink dress the doll had on.

I didn't want to cry in front of Blanche, so I surreptitiously wiped away my tears. "Have you been well, Blanche?"

"Yes, Lady Abigail. But um, that is...?" Blanche was looking at what was left of the doll in my hands. At first glance, one could barely tell that it had, at one point, been a rabbit. Now it was a mere shadow of its former glory.

"That is..." What should I say? I hesitated for a moment before trying to pass it off as casually as I could. "I wanted to give you a small doll, but I messed up a little and the cotton appears to have gone everywhere."

It was an obvious lie. Some sort of sharp object had clearly destroyed the doll. Not only that, Sabelian was right behind me, sword in hand. It would've been the easiest thing in the world to say. "your total son-of-a-bitch dad here was the one who destroyed your present!" But I held the words back. No matter how I felt, I didn't want her to see her parents fighting, even if she knew there was no love between them.

Blanche's gaze drifted over to Sabelian for a second before focusing back on my hands. She then wrapped her tiny hands around mine.

"I have a maid who's very good at sewing. She'll put it back together in no time" she smiled, trying to console me before carefully taking the scraps away from my hands. Her small hands could only hold so many, so I placed the rest into the box beside me.

"Thank you, Lady Abigail. I'll treasure it."

Ah, I felt like crying again. I had to look up at the ceiling to keep anything from leaking out. How was such an angel born from human trash

like him? The man's previous wife must've been the female incarnation of Buddha himself.

Despite wanting to spend a little more time with Blanche, it was more imperative to get away from Sabelian at the moment. Standing up, I lowered my head in an approximation of a nod in his general direction and quickly made my escape, all but running back across the hall.

The moment I set my foot down on the staircase, the tears I had been holding back simply overflowed. Damn it, I hadn't planned on crying. But, Blanche accepted my present today, right? She held my hand, too. She said "thank you" as well.

A good many wonderful things had happened today, but despite knowing that, my tears wouldn't stop flowing. I could only hide behind a nearby pillar and cover my face with my hands.

He looked at the scrap of pink cloth from the doll's dress that was in his hand, then placed it down on the table. It was just a piece of cloth, no bigger than a fingernail, but Sabelian couldn't take his eyes off of it.

"Is there something worrying you, Your Majesty?" He glanced up at the owner of the voice. It was none other than his aide, Millard. The man had appeared out of thin air next to him before he even realized it.

"It's nothing." A strange look crossed Millard's face when Sabelian said that.

If there was truly nothing going on, for what other reason had the king been making a face resembling that of a philosopher deep in thought—with a scrap of cloth in his hand, no less?

His expression as remote as ever, Sabelian suddenly spoke. "How's Queen Abigail nowadays? What rumors are there about her?"

Millard found himself unexpectedly surprised by this. Sabelian, showing interest in that Abigail? The aide responded in a low voice. "according to my sources, she seems to have stopped harassing all the maids. She also appears to be visiting Princess Blanche often."

“For what reason?”

“It doesn’t seem to be anything too special. I heard it’s mostly to give the princess gifts.”

Gifts. Sabelian thought of the doll he ripped apart earlier today. By all rights, there should have been a needle hidden within, at the very least. Contrary to his expectations, however, there had been nothing inside.

‘So it really was just a gift?’

No, there was no way that was possible.

Yet, come to think of it, the dress the doll wore looked exactly like the one Blanche had on. Sabelian fiddled with the scrap in his hand. He didn’t regret his decision, as he considered his actions necessary, given the circumstances. However, seeing Abigail cry was disconcerting.

In the year since their wedding, many things had occurred between the two of them. He had witnessed Abigail rage in front of him like a madwoman; he’d seen her beg in front of him like a beggar. But he had never seen the woman cry. He had never seen her look so truly hurt before.

“I have heard similar accounts. I’ve been told that she seems like a different person.” Sabelian turned to look at Millard, his face still devoid of emotion. “She appears to have turned over a new leaf. What do you think?”

“I believe it’s all an act, based on the queen’s personality.” Millard’s reply contained an unmistakable note of hostility. “She’s probably trying to make you lower your guard. That must be the reason she’s approaching Princess Blanche as well.”

While Sabelian had initially been of a similar opinion, he was no longer so sure. The look on Abigail’s face when she had skirted around him in the hallway was still all too fresh in his memory. That expression of hers, was it just an act?

Sabelian fell into deep thought. Right then, a servant stepped into the room.

“Your Majesty, there are two people requesting an audience with you.”

Sabelian nodded his head in affirmation. Shortly after that, two middle-aged men walked into the room. One of them was Duke Stork, who was smiling brightly at Sabelian.

“Have you been well, Your Majesty? I hope I’m not imposing on your work too much.”

“What do you want?” It was an extremely cold voice, not one anyone expected to hear from a man talking to his father-in-law.

Duke Stork didn’t seem fazed at all, however. The man simply maintained his smiling face as he responded. “I deeply apologize for bothering you. I am merely eager to hear Your Majesty’s response to my inquiry regarding your remarriage.”

Sabelian’s face turned even colder. Duke Stork continued speaking, not noticing the change in Sabelian’s expression. “Your Majesty has yet to produce another child, despite being married to Queen Abigail for over a year. Why don’t you consider getting a second wife for the future’s sake?”

“As I have informed you in the past, I have no interest in remarrying.”

“My other daughter, Karin, is an exquisite and outstanding girl. I believe that Your Majesty would definitely...”

“Enough.” Sabelian cut the man off ruthlessly. His expression was even more chilling than usual, which was saying something. “There will be no second warning.” His words fell like the blade of a guillotine.

Stork felt his neck turn cold at the thought, for he knew very well that the king was not one to make empty threats. The man wouldn’t forgive him just because he was his father-in-law. There was no benefit in annoying the man any further.

Duke Stork closed his mouth and forced a smile. “My deepest apologies for my presumptuous words. I spoke merely out of my concern for Your Majesty. I’ll be taking my leave then.”

Duke Stork left the room with a bitter face. The other man remaining in

the room just stood there silently, not saying a word. With an edge in his voice, Sabelian addressed him. “Do you have something to say as well?”

“Your Majesty, Duke Stork has a point. If not Karin, will you not at least consider other households? You must uphold your duties as the king.”

Sabelian’s expression remained stony, but the man didn’t back down.

“If you don’t get a prince, eventually, Sir Raven’s child might end up becoming the next king.”

Raven was the previous king’s illegitimate child. Because of this, while his claim to the throne was weak, he still couldn’t be ignored. Gender mattered when it came to succession. If Raven produced a son, and Sabelian didn’t, the castle would become divided into two parties, between Raven’s son and Sabelian’s daughter.

“I suggest that you either marry an excellent woman from the kingdom or royalty from another country.”

“Are you suggesting that I don’t know this already?” The man shut his mouth. Duke Stork might have left, but the king was still very sensitive to this very topic. “Abigail’s enough of a handful for me as is. I have no intention of taking in another woman at the moment.”

Sabelian turned his attention to his work after that statement, showing that the conversation was over, as far as he was concerned. The man bowed in response.

“I understand. I apologize for bothering you, Your Majesty.”

“Leave. Millard, I’d appreciate it if you left for a bit as well.” He left quietly in the end.

After the room emptied, Sabelian massaged his forehead in annoyance. When he did this, he realized the pink scrap from before was still in his hand. Seeing it reminded Sabelian of something Abigail once said in passing. ‘You don’t have to worry, it’s not about fulfilling your duties as a husband. Rather, I would like you to fulfill your duties as a father, at the very least.’

“Duty. Duty.” The very word his subjects carelessly flung at him earlier; the senseless bleating to fulfill his duties as king. Those duties and the duties of a husband that Abigail mentioned were the same. They were simply demands for him to make more children. ‘Fulfill your duties as king.’ He’d heard this refrain countless times over his entire life. Never once had anyone told him it was alright to ignore his duties.

Acting as a father. He had never considered himself lacking in that department, but after what happened today, he wasn’t so sure anymore. He could remember Blanche’s face when she looked at the destroyed doll—a doll worth only a copper coin. She wouldn’t have minded such a thing being destroyed before, so what was so different this time?

Sabelian’s head hurt. Not wanting to ponder any further on the subject, he picked up his papers. Burying himself in work would surely make this strange feeling go away. Skipping meals, he worked without rest until the sunset and until night fell. He worked out the cricks in his neck as he exited his office, his body sore from having sat down for so long.

It was quite nice that he and the queen now occupied separate rooms. He wouldn’t know what to say if he met Abigail now. When he entered his quarters, the servants helped him change. They all wore rather stiff expressions. “W-we’ll take our leave now, Your Majesty. Please rest well.”

A little perplexed by their behavior, Sabelian entered his bedroom. Upon doing so, he felt his entire body freeze in place. Today’s strange happenings were far from over.

“Welcome, Your Majesty.”

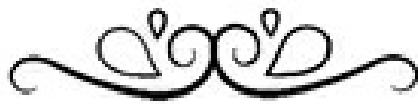
The scent of roses permeated the air while faint candlelight illuminated his bedroom.

Taking center stage amid this rose-scented semi-darkness was none other than Abigail herself. Dressed in a nearly transparent nightgown, the woman lounged seductively on his bed.

Her lips curved in a sneaky smile, as if she had just been waiting for him to appear.



Chapter Three



Most men would have grinned excitedly, but I knew Sabelian was different. The more romantic it was, the more he hated it. I tried to make myself look as beautiful as I could, going so far as to enlist the help of my maids with my makeup. I even surprised myself with how my appearance really tied the room's mood together. And as I'd expected, Sabelian looked furious with me, if that deep frown of his was any indication.

I smirked. 'Hmph, you have the gall to be mad at me? I should be the one mad at you!'

"So, you haven't changed."

"Whatever do you mean, I haven't changed, Your Majesty?"

"I trusted you when you promised we'd use separate rooms. What a fool I must look like now." He spoke as if he'd just been stabbed in the back by his best friend. I don't think I'd ever actually seen him so disappointed—not even when he'd found out Abigail had faked her death. Honestly, I felt a little sorry for him.

'No, no! You can't pity him! You have a job to do here, now do it!' I steeled myself and prepared my rebuttal. "I do plan on keeping that promise."

His frown deepened. "Like this?"

"I asked to use separate rooms so that you would stop being so suspicious of me. But since you ended up being even more suspicious of me than before, I don't really see the point." I deliberately slid one thigh over the other. I could see Sabelian flinch.

"You said you were planning on keeping that promise" Sabelian spoke through gritted teeth.

Frankly, I was surprised, since I had half expected him to have taken off

already, but he endured it. “Yes, I’m planning on keeping it.”

“How?”

“If you apologize for becoming suspicious of me, I’ll go back to my room immediately.”

“And if I don’t?”

I gave him my best pout. “I’m going to move back in.” Sabelian turned completely pale. I decided this was the perfect time to deliver the final blow. “I’m going to sleep with this gown off, as well.”

“...”

“I’m wearing super sexy underwear beneath, you know?” I lifted my chin defiantly. ‘Hmph, how is it? Just imagining it must be pure torture, no?’

I came on a little strong, but I was actually feeling quite nervous inside. After all, I really had sexy lingerie right under the gown. I initially tried to wear something simpler, but Clara stopped me. She got mad at me for trying to get away with simple underwear on “date night” and she dragged out an incredibly raunchy set of lingerie out of nowhere. The thing was practically just a string, I kid you not.

I did threaten the man with removing my gown, but I seriously didn’t want to. ‘Hey, Sabelian, hurry and apologize! I don’t want to show you what I look like under this, either!’

After a moment of silence, Sabelian opened his mouth. His face seemed to have regained a bit of its usual calm. “You’ve, uh, changed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you’d take the chance to sleep with me.”

“Why would I do something like that?” I shrugged. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m not interested in you anymore.”

This was revenge; revenge for the rabbit doll who had to die for her nonexistent sins. When I returned to my room after the incident, I replayed the scene over and over in my mind. But, no matter how many mental hoops I jumped through, Sabelian had definitely been in the wrong. Sure,

it's fair that he was suspicious of me, and he had a good excuse to rip the doll apart in his suspicion.

But shouldn't he have apologized after realizing he was in the wrong? I would have more than easily forgiven him if he had just asked for it. But apologizing never seemed to cross his mind. At that point, I just wanted to hear the word "sorry" come out of his mouth, at least once. If I didn't hear it then, I'd probably have to endure his abuse without ever hearing a word of apology from his lips. "Running away won't save you. I'll follow you around till you say sor—"

"I'm sorry."

'Hey, aren't you being a bit too fast here? This bastard... You really hate me a lot, don't you? This doesn't satisfy me at all, even though I received an apology.'

"I won't accept the apology unless you're sincere about it."

"I'm honestly very sorry, Abigail." Again with the immediate response. I wondered if it was just lip service again, but his voice differed from his usual tone.

I turned to look directly at Sabelian. The anger had completely vanished from his face. I couldn't really tell what he was thinking, due to his usual impassive neutral face, but I could tell his eyebrows were a little droopy. 'Was he really sorry?' I felt a little bad for making such a big man sad like that.

I straightened my posture a bit and ended up scratching the back of my head from the sheer awkwardness. "Well, it's not like I don't understand why you did it, so I'll forgive you."

"..." Sabelian still said nothing. He just looked at me, silently. For some reason, I felt like I could detect a hint of genuine regret in his eyes.

'Ugh, I wanted to get an apology. But! I can't take this awkwardness!' I hurriedly brushed the rose petals off the bed, blew out the candles, and opened the windows to air out the room, letting the slightly chilly spring wind drift in. Perhaps because the perfume was pungent, the smell of the

roses didn't really leave.

The room was mostly dark after I blew out all the candles, though the full moon outside still lit up some of the room. 'Ergh, it's gotten even more awkward without us talking.'

I opened my mouth after a bit of thought. "I'm no longer interested in having a child or having power. I don't care about you loving me, either. If you want to have another child, you might as well take in another wife."

That was better for my situation, really. Though, it'd be annoying if another woman like the old Abigail came in. As long as I could live peacefully, there should be no problems. Hiding from plain sight was my previous specialty, after all. "I heard Karin from the Stork family was rather nice. If you just—"

"I will not be remarrying within the Stork family." Sabelian sounded firm. There was no sign of his former apologetic self; the ice king was back.

"You can get someone from a different family, then."

"All of you are just..." He dragged a hand through his hair in sheer annoyance. In that instant, his gray-blue eyes seemed rather fierce. "I will not be marrying any other woman, now or in the future. My wife is, and always will be, you."

My mouth turned dry at his words. Why was he looking so serious? 'What? I thought he hated me? No, don't let your guard down. He has to be saying this for a reason. This man is a beast.' But despite knowing this, I couldn't take my eyes off of him, and I subconsciously bit my lips. I barely managed to look away from him long enough to walk past him. Only then could I say. "Fine... I shall take my leave now."

Staying beside Sabelian any longer would have just increased my agony; my heart was beating to the point of exploding. I gave him a curt nod and walked out. My body was cold as it could be from the spring air, but the smell of roses lingered in my hair.

It felt good getting my hair brushed. I was getting pampered by my maids while I reclined on my sofa. 'Ah, so this is what power tastes like.' It felt awkward at first, but at some point, I started to enjoy it. Clara carefully caressed my hair as she applied oils to it. It smelled like roses.

The smell reminded me of the incident from a few days back, when I had awkwardly walked out of Sabelian's room. We continued to use separate rooms after the incident, so I didn't have to see him anymore. It really was quite nice. My heart threatened to beat out of my chest when I remembered that face of his.

'Ugh.' What a dangerous face. It was already bad enough seeing faces like that on television... "Clara, could you use something other than roses next time?"

"Yes, My Lady." Clara kept brushing my hair as she responded. In the midst of one of her passes, though, her hand came to a stop. "Um... Lady Abigail?"

"Yes?"

"Did something happen that night?"

"That night?"

"When you went to His Majesty's bedroom."

'Eh? Why's she talking about that now?' I stared at Clara with wide eyes. She looked dreadfully nervous.

She mumbled a little before clearing her throat. "It's just, you came back right after you left. I was wondering if my choice of roses was to blame..." Clara and a few other maids decorated the bedroom that night. I could remember Clara doing her best to arrange the rose petals.

"No, it's nothing like that."

"Was the lingerie not to His Majesty's liking, then?"

"Oh no, nothing of that sort. It all went well. Don't worry about it, really." I spoke firmly. "You trust me, right, Clara?"

The girl looked at me quietly for a second before grinning. "Yes! I

understand. I'll try to do better next time. I even found a famous lingerie designer just for this!"

'No, please stop while you're ahead. Sabelian might send both of us to the guillotine if he finds out.'

I avoided her eyes, since I couldn't say that out loud. Just then, Norma walked into the room, still wearing her normal maid outfit.

"There's a present for you, Lady Abigail."

"A present?" She was holding a black box. I took it off her hands; I was a little surprised by its weight. "Who sent this?"

"His Majesty was the one who sent it."

'Huh? Sabelian? A gift from him? But I don't remember doing anything deserving of a present? This worries me for some reason. It's not something like a pair of white-hot metal shoes or anything, is it?' I looked down at the box, with eyes full of worry.

Clara, however, took it completely differently. "Maybe it's lingerie more suitable for you, Lady Abigail!"

'No, it's not. You gotta get your mind out of the gutter, girl.'

"You should open it!"

"... Right." It couldn't possibly be shoes, right? I gingerly opened the box. When I saw the contents inside, I couldn't stop my jaw from hitting the ground. "He was the one that sent this?"

"Yes, Lady Abigail."

It was a doll; the same bunny doll I'd made for Blanche—right down to its attire and texture. But it wasn't just the one doll, for there was another, slightly larger white bunny in a different outfit: the purple dress I had been wearing that day. The two bunnies complemented each other perfectly, just like a lovely mother-daughter pair. The dolls were cute, but the packaging's complete lack of embellishment reminded me once again that the gift was from Sabelian.

'... A gift? From that guy? It doesn't have a bomb in it?' I subjected the

dolls to a thorough pat-down, before concluding that they were indeed just dolls. The doll resembling me even had purple eyes, like mine. 'What's up with the detail? Did he order it to be like that as well? No way. But to think a guy like him would send a gift... Maybe he isn't as bad as I thought?'

My gaze drifted over to the box nearby, where I finally noticed a card inside. 'A letter from Sabelian? Hoho, I suppose he really can repent when he wants to. Fine~ I'll forgive him this time.' I opened the card with excitement.

[If there is a repeat of yesterday's incident, I'll cut your allotted budget
posthaste.]

[Please refrain from taking such actions in the future.]

“...”

I threw the card away. 'Gaaah! Sabelian! I take back everything I said about you! Everything! You mean bastard!' What an annoying guy. Well, it's not like I'd ever get involved with him again, so best not to dwell on it too much. I'd much rather spend this time fawning over Blanche!

The sharp sound of footsteps hitting the floor reverberated throughout the hallway, a ringing note akin to shattering glass whenever the high heels met the marble floor. Abigail hurried toward the meeting room. The guards opened the doors for her as she approached. Inside, a man awaited. Based on his clothing, he seemed to be rather wealthy, but he didn't give off an air of nobility.

“Thank you for granting me a moment of your time, Your Majesty.” The man kissed Abigail's hand lightly, his own hand shaking from nervousness.

Oozing an ice-cold aura that put cold-blooded reptiles to shame, Abigail spoke with a frown on her face. “I came because I heard you had the goods?”

“Yes, of course.” A servant came in with a small box in his hands. When

the box was opened, Abigail's eyes glittered with a dangerous light. "There are no problems with its quality, I presume?"

"Of course. Not even Princess Blanche would be able to resist something like this." She took out an object from the box, a glass container the size of an apple. Contained within were strange, spiky brown objects, like dried pieces of dirt. They looked ominous, not unlike Abigail's current expression. As her gaze remained focused on them, she grinned, her lips twisting to form a devious smile. "Good. With this, even Princess Blanche would..."

"Kukuku." The sound of low laughter rang throughout the room—a rather creepy sound. The dark, overcast sky outside only added to the sinister atmosphere. "This isn't something easily imported. I'm surprised you could get it."

"I managed to procure a few jars during my travels."

When Abigail took the cover off the container, a sweet fragrance wafted through the opening and into her nose. The smell came from none other than the violet sugar cookies of Abigail's home country, Cronenberg. It was something of a rarity, a delicacy that wasn't exported outside Cronenberg's borders. The smell alone was enough to make Abigail's mouth water, but through sheer willpower, she turned her head away. "You'll be greatly rewarded for this."

"I've brought other goods with me as well, if you'd like to take a look?" When Abigail nodded lightly, several servants started carrying a great number of boxes into the room. They were filled with accessories and toys that seemed to be meant for children.

Looking at the boxes filling up the room, the queen thought about Abigail's formerly lavish and reckless spending habits. Back then, there were several merchants who regularly visited Abigail after she entered the palace. After all, she was a customer that all merchants dreamed of having. Not only did she like accessories and clothing, but she also harbored a great interest in magical items and exotic goods, purchasing anything that caught her eye.

Several merchants had streamed into the crowded space, each clamoring to get her attention. One in particular—a man with white hair—caught Abigail’s eye. The man was someone whom Abigail had held in a rather high regard, as he had brought her many exotic trinkets in the past.

“Your Majesty, please take a look at this pearl necklace here. Not even the mermaid queen herself would be able to get a hold of something so precious. It can be yours for just a small sum of 20,000 Deronas.”

In his hand, the man held an extremely ostentatious and shiny necklace, which boasted a massive pearl at its center. To either side of the centerpiece were smaller pearls, all laid out along the necklace line. The individual pearls gave off an enchanting, almost hypnotic feel. The one in the middle, especially, was something that not even Abigail had ever seen before.

The merchant smiled inside, thinking that this was the one thing guaranteed to catch Abigail’s attention. He fully expected her to demand that he bring the necklace over for a closer look—but contrary to his expectations, she simply eyed the necklace with little interest. “Do you have anything else?”

“What? Oh, of course. Of course, I do. How about pottery from the Far East?” The man hurriedly took out a piece of pottery from his bag. It was a white porcelain piece with blue patterns emblazoned all across it. “They say that this piece of pottery is something treasured by even the nobles in the East. I worked very hard to—”

“Anything else?” Abigail’s cold response gave the merchant pause. Did the woman realize that the pottery was a fake...? Pottery wasn’t something reserved for the nobility in the East; rather, it was considered commonplace there.

But Abigail was a woman with no taste. The man had sold more than a few fakes to the woman before, but she had never found him out. Thankfully, Abigail looked more bored than angry. It didn’t seem that his ploy had been discovered... But even then, if the queen had no interest in either the necklace or the pottery, what should he sell?

Right then, a thought sparked in the man's head. Knowing Abigail, she'd probably even buy that. The man grinned and took away the pottery. He then bowed down to Abigail in a very respectful manner. "As I thought, mere goods like these won't suffice for one such as yourself. In that case, I'll show you something I managed to get from the fairy kingdom."

The man glanced at a servant behind him. "Bring me that artifact." The servant seemed a bit shocked, but immediately after, a grin formed on the servant's face. The servant stepped away for a second, and he soon returned with a big box in his arms. The merchant opened the box and slowly took out its contents.

The maids seemed confused by his actions. The man clearly looked like he was holding something, but they couldn't see anything. From his gesture, it looked as if he was displaying a piece of cloth. Looking on, Abigail's bored gaze turned into a small frown.

"Isn't it beautiful, Your Majesty? It's a dress woven from the light of dawn, silvery cobwebs, and morning dew." The merchant spoke in a relaxed tone. Of course, everything coming out of his mouth was a bald-faced lie. He leisurely continued his spiel in front of the queen. "This dress holds mana within it. It is said that the halfwits and the villainous won't be able to see the dress."

He noticed the queen's nearly imperceptible flinch. Right, there's no way you'd be able to say anything, given your pride. "It's light, almost as if you aren't wearing anything. It even keeps the wearer cool during the summer and warm during the winter... More than anything, it's very exquisite."

The merchant turned to his servant. "Isn't this quite beautiful?"

"Yes, it really is."

This time, the merchant turned to the maids. "What do you think? Don't you think this would look good on Her Majesty?"

"Wha—Ah, yes... I-I think it'd look wonderful!"

"I-It looks very refined!" The maids also sang its praises, despite their confusion. They couldn't see the dress, but they didn't want to appear

stupid or evil.

“How is it, Your Majesty? If you wear this dress, your beauty will surely shine throughout all the kingdom! Since it suits you so well, I am willing to part with it at a mere 300,000 Deronas.” He already planned on starting fresh in a different country after this, so why not one last big scam for a sendoff?

Abigail seemed to flinch slightly before gathering her composure. She then opened her mouth to speak. “That’s a dress?”

“Yes, yes. Can you not see it, by any chance?” The merchant goaded the queen shamelessly. It wasn’t like the woman could say no to his question.

“Of course I can see it. It’s very beautiful, indeed.” The merchant swallowed back a smirk. Abigail continued speaking in a very conversational tone. “But you see, rather than a dress, it looks more like men’s clothing.”

“... What?” What did she just say? The unexpected response had the man scrambling for a good answer.

“I think this would look much better on you. I suggest you try it first. I’ll send it off to His Majesty if it looks good.” Abigail’s eyes shone with malice. It was then that the merchant had the first inkling that he’d made a horrible mistake.

“N-no need. It looks like I brought the wrong clothes by mistake. Allow me to move o—”

“Did you not hear what I said?” Abigail’s voice was filled with impatience. Her blazing eyes were locked directly onto the merchant. “I told you to. Put. It. On.” The growl in her voice reminded one of a very dangerous beast. The maids, too, seemed to have noticed something at this point. “Take this man away to an empty room. Bring him to me once he’s finished changing.” “Y-your Majesty!” The merchant tried to say something, but the servants were faster. They quickly dragged the merchant out into the hallway. The door closed with a bang, followed by a silence in its wake, compounded by Abigail’s menacing aura.

A few moments later, the merchant returned. He was wearing the invisible clothing from before... he was naked. He stood, trembling in front of the queen, with only a small garment to preserve his modesty.

“The clothes suit you very well. I know a place where they would truly shine.” Abigail continued to speak with a smirk. “Put him in jail.”

“Your Majesty! Please, give me another chance! Argh!” The merchant was dragged off by the guards. The door closed with a bang behind them once again.

The entire room seemed to have frozen over. The queen glared at the rest of the merchants, with a forbidding gaze that promised retribution for any treachery. “Anything else you people want to show me? Don’t tell me you all came into the castle with wares as boring as these? Show me what you’ve got.”

“U-understood, Your Majesty!..”

The merchants hurriedly pulled out everything they had to place in front of Abigail. There were countless dresses, jewels, and imported goods. All things that Abigail was supposed to like. But the queen was frowning more than ever.

“Is this all you have? Nothing cute or unconventional? Something a child would like?”

The merchants all simultaneously froze at Abigail’s words. Something that a child might like? The Abigail they knew had never once made such a request. Nevertheless, one brown-haired merchant in the crowd couldn’t afford to back down from something like this. After all, if he did, there would be no second chance for him to return to the palace. The merchant hesitated for a second, then spoke.

“I-I have an actual magic tool.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be a transparent dress like the other, would it?” Abigail said sharply.

“N-no, of course not, Your Majesty!” the merchant replied hastily. He then turned to his servants and hurriedly barked out an order. “Hey!

Hurry and bring the item from the carriage!”

The merchant ordered his servants to bring the item over. Soon, two people carried in a large, flat object, covered by a cloth. The merchant began explaining the item’s identity to Abigail.

“This here is a magic mirror crafted by fairies. It is said that this mirror reflects the truth.”

The merchant sweat nervously as he glanced at Abigail’s expression. Fortunately for him, her expression seemed to have improved.

“... A mirror, you say?”

She looked at the mirror with interest. Abigail rose from her seat and slowly approached the mirror. Once she was in front of the cloth-covered mirror, she pulled down the cloth. Underneath, a smooth and clear mirror, its surface as pristine as a frozen winter lake, was revealed. Abigail gazed into the mirror, as if entranced. Pressing her palm against her reflected palm, she murmured to the mirror.

“Mirror, mirror.”

The action was so natural that it was as if Abigail had been the owner of the mirror all along. She continued to speak.

“Who is the fairest of them all?”

The surface of the mirror began to waver, and soon enough, Abigail’s reflection disappeared, replaced by darkness. It was then that a voice resounded.

[At the very least, it isn’t someone like you, who’s asking a stupid question like that.]



The mirror responded with a blunt answer, and the group of merchants who heard the response turned deathly pale. In particular, the merchant who had brought in the mirror looked like he was going to faint. Barely managing to speak, the brown-haired merchant spoke with a trembling voice.

“Y-your Majesty, Queen Abigail. My humblest apologies! I believe my servant may have accidentally brought in a defective product...!”

The servant, for his part, hurriedly kneeled down on his knees. He couldn't help but feel that the situation was all the more unfair, because the merchant's statement happened to be the truth and not an excuse.

Originally, this magic tool had been made to be a companion for noblewomen. It would flatter them appropriately and be their conversation partner. However, a single defective product had found its way into the batch. Unlike the other mild and obedient mirrors, this mirror was particularly defiant. The merchant had planned for the mirror to be returned to the fairies, and his servants thus set it aside—but this servant just happened to bring out that defective product.

[Defective product? Did you just call me a defective product? Do you think I'm like those junk mirrors that flap their lips and chatter away meaninglessly?!]

The mirror shouted angrily. The merchant hastily rushed forward and draped a cloth over the mirror, causing the mirror's voice to become slightly muffled.

[Hey, you! What are you doing?! Get this thing off me!]

“Put this mirror back into the carriage and quickly bring over a new item!” The merchant ordered in a panic.

“Y-yes!”

During all that, the mirror continued to hurl all sorts of curses at the merchant. However, just as the servants tried to take away the mirror, Abigail stepped in front of them and blocked their path.

“Q-Queen Abigail...?”

“There’s no need to take it away.”

Abigail then walked over to the mirror and roughly pulled away the cloth cover. Reflected on the mirror’s surface was the expressionless face of Abigail and the frightened expression of the merchant.

“Just now, did you call me stupid?”

[Yeah.]

The mirror replied sulkily. Abigail maintained an unfazed expression and continued with her questions.

“Why do you say I’m stupid?”

[That’s because you asked something nonsensical. ‘Who is the fairest of them all?’ you ask? How is anyone supposed to answer such a subjective and abstract question?]

The mirror spoke with a sharp tone to its voice, like that of a shard of glass. Abigail’s eyebrows twitched at the mirror’s sharp response, but the mirror, unconcerned, continued to speak.

[Whether someone is regarded as beautiful or ugly depends on the person you speak to, and everyone has respective standards on what they consider to be ‘the most beautiful face in the world.’ That is why, what you asked was a stupid question.]

The words that came from the mirror would have made anyone, not just Abigail, angry. This act was not something that would just get one banned from entering the palace—it was a crime that would get one thrown into the dungeons. The merchant knelt before Abigail on his knees.

“I-I beg for your forgiveness, Queen Abigail. P-please, forgive me. I will bring forth a new mirror immediately, so—”

“No, it’s okay” said Abigail, cutting off the merchant.

Rather than sounding angry, Abigail sounded rather satisfied. The merchant took on a bewildered expression.

“I will purchase this mirror” declared Abigail.

“I-I beg your pardon?!” stuttered the merchant.

“I’ve taken a liking to it.”

Everyone was shocked at Abigail’s decision. Not only the merchants but even the maids couldn’t believe their ears. As expected, the mirror went silent as well. Not minding the surrounding atmosphere, Abigail made a sinister smile and spoke.

“So, mirror, what should I call you?”

[... You can just call me mirror, can’t you.]

“Don’t you have a name?”

[What would be the point of that?]

Mirrors were just mirrors. The mirror had never been called anything else but “mirror” whether it was from the merchants or from the one who created it. Abigail gazed at the mirror and fell into thought. Not long after, she opened her lips once more and spoke.

“In that case, let’s call you Vérité. How is it? Do you like the name?”

The mirror fell silent, astonished. Not a single word came from its mouth. It had heard that Abigail was a conceited, hot-tempered, and haughty woman—a shrew that bought each and every kind of luxury item for herself. To think that it would be sold to such a woman. If it had to live with and constantly flatter a woman like Abigail every day, it was better for it to screw off right now.

So it provoked Abigail. The mirror believed that she wouldn’t be able to hold her temper and thus shatter her tormentor into pieces. However, she didn’t lose herself to anger; instead, she smiled. She said that she had taken a liking to it and that she would keep it by her side. She even gave it a name. The mirror gazed at Abigail. Abigail, who was smiling with her teeth bared, looked a bit—no, very—villainous, but she didn’t seem too bad.

[Uh... well, it’s not a bad name.]

To think that she gave the French name meaning “truth” to it. Abigail crossed her arms and continued to speak with an indifferent tone.

“Alright, Vérité. What else are you able to do besides spit fire?”

[I’m probably smarter than the civil officials in this palace.]

“I quite like that, as well.”

Abigail smiled. Upon seeing that smile, Vérité felt some sort of emotion welling up within it. It was an emotion close to wonder. Initially, Vérité had thought that it was going to be broken to pieces by Abigail and disappear; however, it instead gained an owner and was given a name.

“From today forward, you will work in my palace. When you are with me, there are three things you should keep in mind” Abigail said.

[What are they?]

“Do not speak to me casually.”

Vicious purple eyes gazed at the mirror. To the others around, it appeared as if Abigail was staring herself down.

[... Got it—I mean, I understand... Your Majesty.]

Although Vérité still spoke a bit bluntly, compared to how it initially spoke, its words had become more docile.

“Second, just like your name, always speak the truth. Do not lie to me or try to flatter me with false words.”

To think that she’d tell an existence that was born to flatter others, to not flatter. Vérité held back a laugh.

[I will do that. And the last thing?]

Abigail approached the mirror. She stood close enough to have her breath fog the surface and whispered.

“Princess Blanche is the fairest of them all. If I ask you the same question as before, answer me with that response.”

[What? Don’t be ridiculous! I told you before, didn’t I? That question has no answer!]

“I don’t care. Just say that it’s Princess Blanche.”

At that moment, Vérité thought that Abigail was joking around or was trying to test it. However, the predatorial glint in her eyes said otherwise. The ferocious aura surrounding her, making the air around her crackle, told Vérité that she definitely wasn’t lying. Nevertheless, it couldn’t back down. After all, it had told her that there was no answer to her question, not too long ago.

However, what would happen to it if it didn’t accept Abigail’s words? No, it didn’t matter what kind of punishment she gave. Either way, it was a life that Vérité had once thought to throw away. There would be nothing more unsightly than quietly submitting to Abigail’s every word in fear for its life. After all, Vérité had a lack of body, not a lack of pride. It definitely couldn’t back down on its words, and in no way would it change what it had already said.

Meanwhile, Abigail’s gaze was so murderous that the mirror seemed to tremble to the point that it looked like it would break. Vérité spoke, ready to die.

[The fairest of them all is—!]

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”

[It is Princess Blanche.]

“Then, who is the loveliest of them all?”

[... It is Princess Blanche.]

“Then, who is the cutest of them all—”

[Blanche! Princess Blanche! Satisfied now? How many times has it been?! Please, just stop already!] Vérité suddenly exclaimed with a shout.

I covered my ears. For an object without a mouth, it sure did yell pretty loudly.

“Hey! I told you not to speak to me so casually!”

[Gah, whatever, I don't know! At this point, I'd rather have to flatter you constantly! How many times do you plan to ask the same thing?!]

"But I didn't ask you that many times."

[Just counting today, you asked me the same thing 11 times!]

Had I really asked that many times? Feeling embarrassed, I shifted slightly from my seat. The figure of Blanche that had been floating on the surface of the mirror until now disappeared. In its place stood a boy with sky-blue hair and silver eyes, who looked to be in his mid to late teens. The boy in the mirror stared pointedly at me. It was Vérité. He had taken the form of a person after I had complained that whenever I talked with him while looking at the mirror; I felt like I was talking to myself.

[Isn't it a bit excessive? How can you talk about Blanche all day long?] Vérité nagged.

"Isn't this your job, to listen to whatever I have to say, Mr. Mirror-Who-Neglects-His-Duties? Either way, the answer is fixed, and all you have to say is that Blanche is pretty."

Vérité's shoulders shrank pitifully at my bright and cheerful response. I think I even heard him quietly mutter [Gah, it's a hard-knock life...] under his breath.

I tapped the frame of the mirror as if to comfort Vérité. Social life is always hard. Then, looking at Vérité, I let out a refreshing laugh. "Anyway, it's all good. Shall we now move on to the next topic, then?"

[What topic?]

"The topic of choosing which gift to give to Blanche. I think I have about 20 different kinds of shoes, bags, accessories, dresses, and other things to choose from. Hey, don't make that face. Isn't this just wonderful!"

I could practically hear the imaginary sound of the mirror cracking as Vérité exclaimed [oh my god] miserably.

"Alright then. What should we choose from first? Shoes? Dresses? Go ahead, pick."

[I won't pick! Didn't you already say that you bought those violet sugar cookies? Why don't you hurry up and go to Blanche with those cookies!]
Vérité exclaimed in exasperation.

Although Vérité was clearly pouting, it was still quite cute how he didn't disappear into the mirror but just grumbled quietly to himself.

It had been several months since Vérité had been with me. I was reminded why magic mirrors were so popular among the noblewomen. While Clara followed my orders obediently and the other maids aided me well, I could not fully confide in them about what was on my mind. No matter how close they were to me, at the end of the day, I was their master. I had to be kind yet dignified and keep them close to my side without exposing my inner self.

In that respect, Vérité was a great conversation partner. He was the only companion I could comfortably speak with at any time. Of course, at first, I wasn't happy with how casually he spoke to me, addressing me so informally, but... 'Well, since it feels like I've gained a friend, I'll let it go graciously!' Looking back at Vérité, I saw that he was still grumbling with a pout.

'Oh goodness, looks like he's sulky again.'

Changing the tone of my voice, I spoke to Vérité once more.

"Vérité~" I hummed. "You know I rely on you the most within this palace, so can't you talk with me about Blanche? In exchange, I'll listen to you talk about your favorite topic of magic theory."

Usually, there's an unspoken rule that if you were going to fangirl or fanboy over a topic with another person or a group of people, you had to give everyone a chance to talk about what they were obsessing over. Since Vérité listened to me fangirling over Blanche, it was my turn to listen to what he liked to talk about. The magic otaku Vérité went silent for a moment. Then he spoke once more.

[Well, in that case, then I guess it can't be helped] Vérité answered coyly.

"Thanks! Then can you pick out the gift wrapping?"

[Sure. Bring them over closer, Bibi.]

Seeing how he was calling me by the nickname Bibi, it looks like he was no longer grumpy. Although Vérité was a mirror that often sulked, he also quickly bounced out of his moods, which was a relief. I approached Vérité with a piece of cloth and a ribbon held up. Vérité lowered his eyelids as he observed the objects I held up in front of him, his silver eyes glistening like glass.

[Hm, I believe the purple ribbon will go well with the cloth wrapping.]

“You think so too? As expected, you have quite the eye. In that case, I’ll have to make sure to wrap the gift up nicely. Hah, I hope Blanche likes it as well.”

After wrapping up the glass jar with the soft cloth, I decorated it with the ribbon and artificial flowers. Without realizing it, I started humming happily to myself.

Dumbfounded, Vérité put on a lopsided grin. [I’ve never seen someone giving the gift look more excited than the one receiving it.]

“This is what you would call the joy of giving. I hope Blanche will be happy to receive this!”

[She’ll be happy. There’s no child who wouldn’t be happy after receiving violet sugar cookies.]

“Then that’s great. I’ll believe in the words of the smartest mirror in this palace.”

After securing the ribbon tightly to ensure that it didn’t fall off, I stood up from my seat. Vérité waved his hand, as if to tell me to hurry up and go.

[Have a nice trip, Bibi.]

“Thanks! I’ll let you know how it went with Blanche after I come back.”

Chapter Four



After packing my present, I headed toward Blanche's room. Norma remained silent as she followed me, while Clara chatted away.

"What kind of gift is that, Queen Abigail?" Clara asked.

"Violet sugar cookies. It's a specialty from my hometown" I answered.

Clara gasped.

"I once heard that those cookies are so delicious that they don't export it to other countries." Clara's eyes shone brightly as she spoke. No matter how you looked at it, they were the eyes of someone who really wanted to try the cookies.

I grinned at Clara's expression. "Don't worry. I have two more jars of them, so the two of you can share a jar yourselves" I said.

"Really, Queen Abigail?" Asked Clara, not believing her ears.

"Yes. In exchange, don't eat all the cookies by yourself. Share them with the other maids and servant girls too."

"As expected, Our Queen is the best!" Clara cupped her cheeks with her hands, her eyes glittering ecstatically. Norma remained silent.

Time passed quickly as we conversed, and we could soon see the door to Blanche's room. At that moment, someone came out of the door.

'That person is... wasn't that Duke Stork? What business did he have with Blanche?'

Now, Duke Stork's presence was nothing out of the ordinary, him being Blanche's grandfather and all, but the thought of coming face-to-face with one of Abigail's likely murder suspects was rather uncomfortable. Unnoticed, I watched from a safe distance as Duke Stork conversed briefly with Miss Jeremie, whose hands were overlapped politely in front of her as

she listened. A few pats on her shoulder signaled the end of the conversation, and he took his leave.

'Hm... I wonder what they were talking about? The two looked pretty friendly with each other.'

Miss Jeremie had gone back inside, so I waited a few seconds more before making my way over naturally. Blanche's maid, who was standing by the door, spotted my approach and greeted me nervously. "W-welcome, Lady Abigail. The princess is currently having her etiquette lessons. You will find her if you head straight inside."

"Is it fine for me to enter during her lesson?"

"Of course, ma'am."

After a moment of consideration, I nodded. Leaving Clara and Norma behind, I headed in to find Blanche and Miss Jeremie in the study. The day's lesson focus seemed to be on posture. I peeked in to see Blanche taking careful steps, with a book balanced upon her head. 'Rather than looking noble, she's... she's so cute! Why do they not have cameras in this era?! I need to take photos!' I let a sigh escape my lips, 'well, it can't be helped, I can only attempt to burn the images into my eye!'

As I silently cheered the girl on in my head, I heard something drop onto the ground. 'Mm? What's this? Ah, the book on Blanche's head fell, huh?' It was just a book, but Blanche turned pale. Something was a little off here....

Miss Jeremie walked over and picked up the fallen book, dusting it off with sharp, precise movements. Her unsmiling face was quite the case study in chilly disapproval, as was her voice: "Let's try that again. Since you are Lady Miriam's child, I believe that you can do much better than that if you try. Proceed."

"Y-yes!" Blanche took the book and moved back to her original position.

Just like before, she began making her way across the room, with the book perched atop her head. Unfortunately, she wasn't even able to make

it halfway there this time.

Miss Jeremie's sigh sounded deafening in the ensuing silence. She opened her mouth again, heralding another stern reprimand at the ready.

"Walking to the end is important, but you need to put more effort into your posture. Beauty and posture are inextricably linked. It doesn't matter how lovely you look in your dress, if you do not carry yourself well, you have no beauty to speak of."

'Woah, scary! Miss Jeremie is a total Spartan, huh? Frankly, it wouldn't hurt her to be a little more caring, since the girl is still young and all.'

In any case, Miss Jeremie's lecture ended with this resounding declaration: "Beauty is what's most important in a woman. Title and intelligence be damned, without beauty to support her first and foremost, all else is meaningless."

As soon as I heard it, my mood took an immediate nosedive. There was an unpleasant feeling in my throat, like I had swallowed something foul. Several scenes from my previous life flashed across my mind—memories of the times I'd been told the exact same thing. I unwillingly recalled the laughter and snickering that accompanied all those many instances of so-called well-meaning advice on what a woman's worth came down to: her beauty. The unwanted memories relentlessly battered my heart—terrible memories that I much rather would have done without. 'Miss Jeremie's not right. She's not, but...'

As I stood, quietly lost in thought, Miss Jeremie walked over to adjust Blanche's posture. "Straighten your back, tilt your chin down a little more. And your hips... Mm?" A strange look crossed Miss Jeremie's face as she felt around Blanche's hips for a bit. "... Princess Blanche, did you eat anything other than the foods I approved of?"

"N-no."

"You didn't eat anything during dinner, did you?"

"I-I didn't...."

"Your waist got bigger..." Miss Jeremie muttered to herself before

raising her head. She now wore a kind smile, at odds with her previously stony expression. “In that case, we should adjust your meals some more.”

I reared back in surprise. ‘What? Adjusting meals? For an 11-year-old?’ For a moment, I thought I’d heard wrong. ‘Maybe if the girl had been overly obese, there would be less room for objection, but Blanche was thin. Surely, you can’t be serious!?’

“You may take a brief break. We’ll resume the lesson in ten minutes.”

As soon as I heard this, I remembered my purpose for being there. ‘I need to give Blanche her present! I should also ask about this meal-adjustment thing.’ I coughed lightly as I entered. Miss Jeremie gave me a curt bow.

“Welcome, Lady Abigail. What brings you here today?” Miss Jeremie was smiling, but the smile didn’t reach her eyes, which expressed subtle disapproval.

“I came to give something to Princess Blanche.” I held out the beautifully wrapped glass jar in my hand. “Here you go, Blanche.”

The girl hesitantly took the proffered item from me. “Um, this is...?”

“Open it.”

Instead of doing so, Blanche first glanced at Miss Jeremie. Only when the woman nodded in tacit permission did Blanche put her small hands to work, undoing the purple ribbon. The silk cloth fell away to reveal the jar beneath.

A faintly sweet scent spread throughout the room, detectable even from a distance. “These are cookies from my hometown. They’re quite tasty.” Thankfully, Blanche seemed quite interested in the cookies, if the glow in her eyes was any indication. She looked at the cookies with a fervent excitement that others reserved for precious gems.

“Try some.”

“T-thank you” Blanche stuck her hand into the jar as soon as I gave my permission. But just as she was about to grab a cookie...

“You aren’t actually planning on eating that, are you?” Miss Jeremie’s

voice was like the crack of a whip. Blanche flinched at the sound before jerking her hand away. Her aim achieved, Miss Jeremie bowed toward me again. “Unfortunately, Lady Abigail, Princess Blanche needs to control her diet at this time. I would therefore like to request that you take back your gift.”

So, she really had been talking about dieting a moment ago. An odd feeling of suffocation rose within me.

“Princess Blanche is at the age where her growth is at its peak. I would think restricting her diet would be very unhealthy for her right now.”

“This is all for the princess’s sake, Your Majesty. Didn’t you give me leave to handle all matters related to Princess Blanche’s care at my discretion?”

Blanche seemed rather confused; she was sensitive to, but not entirely grasping, the undercurrents of our conversation. She looked back and forth between Miss Jeremie and me a few times before carefully opening her mouth.

“Lady Abigail, I’m all right. I don’t have to eat the cookies, so... I’m sorry. I was being greedy.” Blanche said this with a smile that sat awkwardly on her face.

Only when I felt a sting did I realize I’d bitten down on my lip. I didn’t want to see her smile like that; I liked her previous smile better. She was just an 11-year-old child. An 11-year-old child that had been genuinely excited over the sight of cookies.

“You can eat them if you want.”

“Your Majesty.” Miss Jeremie intervened with a smile. “I too would love nothing more than to give the Princess sweet things. I understand your sentiment completely but doing so would only be poison for the princess.” This woman didn’t seem to know when to back down.

Does she really think that way? Or is she simply determined to thwart me, confident in the Stork family’s backing behind her?

“Princess Blanche needs to control her weight. If she wants to look good

in a dress, she can't afford to gain any weight."

"'Look good in a dress'? Is that really more important than Princess Blanche's health?" Ice dripped from each word, my voice having taken on a menacingly low tone. She must have picked up on it, for I saw a glint of fear in Miss Jeremie's eyes.

"A-all other noble children do the same. They begin a strictly controlled diet once they reach the age when one begins wearing corsets."

'Corsets?!' I barely refrained from shouting at her; I simply could not believe my ears. 'Was wearing a corset so important that you're able to justify torturing a child in this way?'

"No matter what you say, you can't deny the fact that you're hurting Blanche's health, can you?"

Miss Jeremie fell silent. Despite that, I could tell she was clearly not ready to admit defeat. I wasn't about to give her a chance to rally. I could not, in all good conscience, leave Blanche's education to someone like this. "I had left Blanche's care in your hands, but this is getting ridiculous. In the future, someone else will take over Princess Blanche's care."

"Lady Abigail!"—Her voice grew sharp, forgetting her place.

"I wish to speak with Princess Blanche alone. Please see yourself out." I cut her off before she could even continue her petty defiance. Miss Jeremie seemed like she had a lot more left to say, but I had no intention of listening. In the end, she could only leave with her tail between her legs.

'So, women are just as fanatical about their weight even in this world, huh?'

I ended up chasing her off, but truth be told, I didn't feel very good about it. It's not like I couldn't relate to Miss Jeremie. After all, I had been a diet fanatic during my past life. But, doing it to a child was just inexcusable. And if that weren't reason enough, the thought of seeing Blanche making yet another face like the one before was more than I could bear.

Blanche herself was currently trying to calm me down by any means possible, believing herself to be the reason for the dispute between Miss

Jeremie and myself.

“I’m sorry, Lady Abigail. I won’t eat the cookies. So please don’t be angry.” The child seemed on the verge of tears.

‘You did nothing wrong, so why...?’ I spoke kindly, trying to reassure her. “No, I’m not mad. You can eat the cookies. Would you like to have them with me?” I offered the cookies to her again, but unlike before, she didn’t immediately take it this time. “Try them. They are tasty.”

“But... If I gain weight, I won’t fit in my dress....”

“So what?” I picked up a particularly sugary cookie, a bit of it stuck to my finger. “It’s alright if you gain a bit of weight. It’s alright if you can’t fit in your dress. A child has all the right in the world to enjoy wonderful food and live life to the fullest.”

Blanche stared at me wide-eyed, clearly shocked by the words I was almost certain she’d never heard before. Having said my piece, I offered her the cookie once again and waited patiently. After much hesitation, she slowly took the cookie from my hand and took a bite. Her eyes lit up the moment she tasted the sweetness of that first bite. I listened to the crunching sounds of her tiny jaws working to demolish the rest of the cookie. “Is it tasty?”

Blanche nodded eagerly in response. It must’ve tasted really good, huh? A few seconds elapsed before the girl nervously opened her mouth again. “Can I have more?”

“Of course.” When I gave her another cookie, Blanche took it delicately, like a little baby bird. As the sugar melted in her mouth, I could only describe her expression as pure bliss. Despite not having eaten anything, I felt so full—full with joy, just quietly watching Blanche.

That was until I noticed tears suddenly welling up in her eyes, much to my dismay.

“I-is something wrong? Was there something bad in it? Do you want to spit it out?” I reached out and wiped the tears off her cheeks, filled with surprise and worry.

“N-no. U-um... It’s just so sweet.” Stumbling over her words, Blanche tried her best to smile, even with tears in her eyes. “I’ve... I’ve never had such a thing.”



I felt my heart break at her simple confession. 'It's just a cookie, something so ordinary, yet you're crying because of it... Just how much have you had to endure to cry because of a single cookie?'

I'd pulled her into my arms at some point, without realizing it. The tiny little child sniffled in my embrace and clung to me, like a little girl clinging to her mother. "Eat as many as you want. I can bring you all the sweets in the world if you desire."

Blanche continued crying wordlessly in my arms. I stroked her head gently, comforting her. Now knowing why Blanche was so much smaller than other children her age, feeling just how small her tiny frame was in my arms broke my heart all the more. I hugged her even tighter. 'Blanche, I'll bring more cookies tomorrow. Then the day after, I'll bring you even better sweets. I'll give you all the sweets in the world, so don't you cry. Smile in the sun, as you always do.'

Only the sound of cutlery moving busily about could be heard in the otherwise-silent dining room. The Friedkin family, minus Blanche, sat on either end of a long table, eating without looking at each other. Abigail wasn't particularly fond of this place. They always dined separately, but out of nowhere, she received an invitation—a summons, really—to dine together with Sabelian.

Why in the world did he call her? She didn't want to see his accursed face even in her dreams, let alone in reality. As Abigail swallowed back the urge to curse, Sabelian finally broke the silence.

"I heard you got into a fight with Blanche's nanny. Is it true?"

There was a clack as Abigail slowly put down her knife. Calmly, she raised her head to find herself on the receiving end of Sabelian's indifferent gaze. She didn't look away. Instead, she lifted her chin and answered in a confident voice. "Yes, that happened."

"Was there a reason for doing so?"

"She wasn't feeding Blanche properly." Sabelian stared at her. But

Abigail didn't bat a single eyelid. Up to this point, there had been no complications or issues arising from Miss Jeremie's methods of education. None of the maids had ever brought it up, nor had Blanche herself ever spoken a word of complaint.

"I heard it was all being done for Blanche's sake, though?"

"What, starving her?" Abigail snickered. She was unbelievably good at it—snickering, that is. "That kind of treatment is too cruel for a child. Miss Jeremie isn't respecting Blanche's rights, not just in terms of meals, but in many other ways as well."

"For example?"

"She never once asked Blanche's opinion on the dresses they selected for her." Before, he had heard that Abigail had used up all her spring dress funds on buying clothes for Blanche. The Abigail he knew was a woman who was terrible with money. She used to ask for more money on an almost daily basis, not to mention assaulting his ears with her constant complaints on how small her budget was.

For a woman like that... to spend money on Blanche, willingly? Sabelian began tapping on the table with his finger as he spoke. "Miss Jeremie told me that Blanche lacked the maturity to make such decisions for herself just yet."

"Even dogs and cats have their own wills and desires. What's more, Blanche is a human."

How intriguing. Sabelian stopped tapping the table. "Then what would you like to see happen? We'll need someone new to replace Miss Jeremie."

"It doesn't matter who, so long as said person treats Blanche with respect." Her answer was completely outside of Sabelian's expectations. It was not surprising, given that he'd been operating under the assumption that Abigail was only doing this to make Miss Jeremie look bad.

When taking into consideration that Miss Jeremie was not only part of the previous queen's inner circle, but that she was also Duke Stork's cousin and had ten years of experience as a nanny under her belt, there was little

doubt that such a person could only have been an eyesore to Abigail. Sabelian had assumed that Abigail orchestrated all this in an attempt to take over Miss Jeremie's position, out of sheer jealousy.

Of course, none of this showed on his face. "And if I were to bring in someone from the Stork family?"

"It doesn't matter to me" Abigail answered before adding, not bothering to hide her annoyance at what was clearly an issue she took to heart. "As long as they don't try to control Blanche's meals."

Meals. What an interesting condition. Unexpected, even. Sabelian couldn't even begin to imagine what was going on in Abigail's head.

"It seems that meals are quite important to you, Abigail."

Abigail flinched. 'What a fascinating expression,' Sabelian thought as he continued, acting like he hadn't noticed. "I understand. I'll relieve Miss Jeremie of her current position as a nanny. Her replacement, however..."

He let his words trail off into a momentary silence. As usual, it was impossible to figure out what the man himself was thinking, as his cool, gray-blue eyes surveyed Abigail unblinkingly before continuing. "... should be you, was what I was thinking."

"... Me?"

"Yes. Since you are Blanche's mother and all, there should be no problems."

Abigail seemed a bit surprised. Actually, she seemed very surprised. "That... Blanche wouldn't like that."

"Do you dislike Princess Blanche?"

"No!"

"Then please take on that role from now on." After much hesitation, Abigail finally nodded her assent. Having achieved the purpose of the night's dinner, Sabelian dabbed his lips with a napkin and placed it to his left before standing up. "Our business is done here. I'll be excusing myself then."

Sabelian walked out of the dining hall without missing a beat. Millard, his ever-faithful shadow, turned to speak as soon as the door closed behind them. “Are you fine with this, Your Majesty?”

“What?”

“Putting the Queen so close to the Princess. Wouldn’t it be dangerous?”

Sabelian threw an indifferent glance that was the equivalent of a raised eyebrow at Millard. He then looked away, seeming to consider his words. There wasn’t a trace of emotion in his voice when he finally replied. “I trust she won’t be that stupid. As I shall assign more guards to Blanche, there shouldn’t be any cause for major concern.”

“Even so, I don’t think it’s advisable to put Princess Blanche in her care. Why did you make such a decision?”

“I wanted to see for myself.” They were words of curiosity, though spoken with a distinct lack of emotion. Likewise, Sabelian’s expression reflected the same dispassionate disinterest. “I want to see if she has really changed, or if it is merely an elaborate ruse. With this, I should be able to see for myself, soon enough.”

If it really was an act, it was unlikely that Abigail could maintain her facade successfully in front of Blanche daily. Inevitably, her mask would slip at some point. Plus, there were a lot of Sabelian’s people around Blanche at all times. If Abigail tried anything at all or showed any inconsistencies in her behavior, Sabelian would be notified immediately. Sabelian turned his gaze to his aide after speaking matter-of-factly.

Millard had a strange expression on his face. “Your Majesty, could it be...” Millard hesitated, not sure how to give voice to the question brewing in his mind. He hesitated a little more before asking carefully. “Have you fallen in love with the Queen?”

“Love?” Sabelian repeated flatly. The surrounding air seemed to drop several degrees in that instant. Sabelian’s voice carried the chill of frostbite, his eyes so terrifyingly cold that they could numb just by looking at them. His expression was the same. At that moment, that which flowed through his veins was ice, and he was not of flesh and blood; he was

completely devoid of warmth or emotion. “Is such a thing necessary between a couple?”

To Sabelian, a couple was merely another form of an exchange. Love? Even without love, two people could marry, sleep together, and have a child. Such a thing was no more than meaningless frivolity. Foolishness. Sabelian’s eyes darkened, shadows lurking in the depths of the frozen abyss. He seemed to be warning Millard not to pursue the subject any further.

Millard seemed to have more to say, but found he couldn’t get the words out. He could only swallow them back bitterly. Sabelian started walking again, as if the conversation had never taken place. Millard, with his fist balled tightly at his side, quietly followed his master. Only the sound of their footsteps echoed throughout the hallway.

The chair on the other side of the table was empty. I sat in my seat quietly, resisting the urge to fiddle nervously with the neatly arranged silverware before me. There were still 10 minutes until the promised time. 'Argh, I’m way too nervous!!!' I couldn’t stop looking at the time, any more than I could stop drinking water from nervous anticipation. 'I think this is my fifth cup already?’

But could you blame me? Today marks the first day I get to dine with Blanche! I wasn’t even able to sleep the night before from sheer excitement!! “Clara, how’s my face looking?”

“You’re beautiful, as always.”

“Thanks. I don’t look scary or anything?”

“You do, but it’s all right!”

'No, it’s not alright!' I picked up my spoon, peering frantically at my reflection on the silver. 'Ugh, this isn’t good at all...!' I looked even scarier than usual in my nervousness! Anxiety did nothing for that naturally menacing visage of mine. 'Come on, think happy thoughts... look happy, look happy...!'

I tried forcing my mouth into a smile with my finger, only to end up looking even more ghastly. 'Sigh, maybe I should've just worn a mask. Or a veil to hide my face?' I couldn't stop myself from heaving an enormous sigh. I'd been practicing my smile every day, but I still had still gotten nowhere, as demonstrated by my current state of affairs. 'Come on Abigail, you can do this.' As I disconsolately poked and prodded my cheeks some more, I heard light footsteps approaching the entrance.

I put my spoon down and gazed at the door, my heart beat so loud I could hear it. I heard sounds coming from there, but no one actually came in. A little while later, Blanche poked her head in. The girl flinched in surprise when her eyes met mine.

"H-hello, Lady Abigail."

"Welcome, Princess Blanche."

Blanche nervously moved toward the table, my gaze on her the whole time. She stammered out a few words under flushed cheeks. "T-thank you for inviting me to the meal. Am I late by any c-chance?" Blanche's nervous, stiff self was really cute and just a tiny bit pitiful.

I almost put my hands over my mouth; she just looked all kinds of adorable.

'Oh boy, just what am I going to do with this child? She's just so~ cute~!!'

"You're not late, so don't worry. Here, have a seat." I gestured to the seat near me. 'Calm down, calm down, you idiot. You're going to look like a demon if you smile here.'

Blanche made her way into her seat.

'To think there'd be a day where I could eat together with Blanche... I'll feed you as much food as you want!'

"I'm not sure what you like to eat, so I prepared a normal meal for now. The food should be here soon."

"Y-yes. Thank you." Blanche seemed a little nervous, but thankfully not

enough to flinch whenever she looked at me or met my gaze. Was she getting a little more comfortable around me? It must have been the cookies. 'My, excellent food really is the best way to a person's heart.' As I indulged in such happy thoughts while observing Blanche's every endearing action, the maids brought in the first course. The first thing on today's menu was pea soup.

"Here, let's eat." I took a sip of the soup. 'Hmm, the flavor is really nice. It was slightly sweet and quite warming.' As I slowly savored the flavor, I noticed Blanche staring at the soup, her eyes wide. 'Hm? Why's she doing that?'

"Blanche, aren't you going to eat?"

"Ah, um, w-well..." The child hesitated again before speaking. "... Can I eat all of this?"

"What?" What was she talking about? Blanche, too, seemed just as confused by my confusion.

"Well... I was told to eat just half normally..." Comprehension hit. 'Gaaaah, Miss Jeremie, you birdbrain! Half a bowl for a growing child?! What in the world were you thinking?!'

"Lady Abigail, your face—your face...!" Clara hurriedly hissed from behind me.

'Oops, control yourself, Abigail. Control yourself!'

I covered my mouth with my hand quickly. Thankfully, Blanche didn't notice. Seeing her continued hesitation, I hastened to reassure her. "Eat as much as you want. You don't have to eat too little, nor do you have to eat too much." So saying, I resumed drinking my soup. Blanche, too, grabbed her spoon lightly.

She scooped up some soup and blew on it for a bit to cool it down. Then she opened her tiny mouth, put the spoon in it, and went "nom" in a single, adorable movement. Her eyes immediately lit up. It seemed reasonable to say that she liked the taste of the soup. With every sip she took, the smile on her face brightened, until it was simply dazzling. Ahh, I

felt so satisfied, just watching her eat. I understood exactly why my grandma always stuffed me with food whenever I visited her... I just wanted to watch the little girl eat all day.

To think Miss Jeremie refused to feed such a cute girl like this. That woman must've had a heart of stone! Speaking of stony hearts... 'Now that I think about it, did Sabelian really say nothing after seeing her eat so little?'

"That reminds me, did His Majesty not say anything when you ate with him?"

Blanche raised her head to look at me. She seemed a little confused. "Ah, um...? I never actually ate with Father, so...."

"What? Not even once?"

"Yes. Father is busy with work, so he eats by himself."

'Figures.' I shrugged. 'He doesn't even care if his daughter falls down—with him being the perpetrator, no less—so why would he even think about eating with her? The thought probably never even crossed his mind. I wonder why Sabelian hates her so much?' I recalled a few rumors floating around the palace that I'd heard.

The previous queen, Miriam, died not long after giving birth to Blanche. For the next 10 years, Sabelian didn't take in a new queen. They said it was because of grief. Something about loving his old wife so much that he refused to remarry, or so the rumor went. Apparently, that was why he refused to see Blanche, because his wife wouldn't have died if Blanche hadn't been born and all that.

If that were true, it wasn't like I couldn't empathize with Sabelian. But this just made Blanche even more pitiable, as she had done nothing wrong at all. It wasn't like she got her mother killed because she wanted to. Poor Blanche.... Her mother died early, and her father wasn't the least bit interested in her.... At the very least, I should try to treat her better.

By now, Blanche had finished her soup and was looking down at her empty plate sadly. 'Hoho, my dear Blanche, did you really think the meal

would end after just some soup?' Blanche's face lit up more and more as she tasted each successive course. I tried my hardest to refrain from smiling too much. "Is it tasty?"

"Yes! Very much so! It's so tasty!"

'Oh boy, here I go, wanting to cry again.' The familiar joy and contentment filled me as I gazed at Blanche, who herself seemed about ready to burst with joy. She seemed happier than a dog that had just heard the word "walk." We talked little, but with the ever-bubbly Clara's help, our brief conversations flowed naturally without becoming awkward, making for a convivial and fun atmosphere.

In what seemed like no time at all, the meal neared its end, and Norma placed the final course—dessert—in front of us. Today's dessert was an éclair. A mouthwatering masterpiece consisted of an oblong choux pastry, filled with just the right amount of crème patisserie and topped with seasonal berries and even more cream. I cut a piece and put it in my mouth. The soft texture and sweet flavor of the custard-filled pastry spread across my tongue. 'Mm~ it's just melting in my mouth.' Surely Blanche would absolutely adore this!

Expecting a blissful reaction, I looked to Blanche eagerly. But, to my surprise, Blanche only took a single bite before putting her fork down. She pushed her plate my way.

"L-Lady Abigail, would you like some...?"

'Gasp, what's this? Does she not like it?' "Do you not like the éclair? I can have the chef bring over something else immediately." I shared a quick glance with Norma.

Seeing the maid about to make her way back to the kitchen, Blanche quickly responded. "N-no! It's not that it's not tasty...."

Is it because there's too much? Did she not like the cream? I began mentally checking off a list of possibilities. Blanche paused for a bit before continuing in a rush.

"It was so tasty that I-I wanted to give you some more!"

Blanche smiled sweetly, her cheeks a cheery red. 'Ah, Lord, please grant me one wish. Just one. Please let me touch those cheeks of hers! It is all I ask!'

Blanche's smiling face was as adorable as ever, but what really hit me right in the feels was her heart of gold, how natural her first thought was to share her éclair with me. I can't imagine just how badly she must have wanted to eat all of it herself, yet she didn't even hesitate to offer.

I choked back a sob, feeling the tears well up in my eyes. My teeth caught on my bottom lip as I attempted to hold my rampaging emotions in check and maintain a serene front. "Go ahead and eat to your heart's content. I can always have the chef bring more. Now, go on, eat."

"Y-yes! Thank you for the food!" I watched as Blanche happily resumed eating where she left off—and man, was she doing a good job of it too. Her cheeks stuffed with food were as round as a little chipmunk's, and, together with her content expression, her body language reflected pure bliss.

'Sigh... what a lovely little thing.' Maybe Sabelian didn't like Blanche because he'd never seen her this way? What if I planted a seed in his head? What if he were to see her smiling face and witness for himself how lovely she was? He might very well end up changing his mind about her! And then he would probably hate himself bitterly for ignoring the girl for all of 11 years.

I imagined a scene where a remorseful Sabelian was giving a heartfelt apology to Blanche... 'Hohoho,' just the mere thought of it makes me so excited.

The beginnings of an idea slowly began to take form. Just then, the maid brought over the extra éclair I'd requested. While thinking of all the thrilling possibilities, I took a hearty bite and began hatching a plan inside my head.

Sabelian was reading in his study, the natural light filtering through the windows, dancing over the pages of the book he held. It'd been a while

since he'd last had the luxury of indulging in this particular pleasure, due to the sheer amount of work on his plate. Being able to do so now was a pleasant change of pace for him. Only here could he feel that he was truly alone, closed off from the outside world and its never-ending roar.

For him, solitude wasn't something to be dreaded—rather, it was an old friend who had long accompanied him, and he welcomed its loyal presence like nothing else. Now, immersing himself in absolute silence, taking in the warm sunlight that cast a peaceful glow over him and his surroundings, doing what he enjoyed most, Sabelian was truly in his element. There was nothing he treasured more in the world than moments like that.

Right in the midst of his thoughts, a knock shattered the tranquil silence, like a hammer to glass, intruding upon his hard-earned solitude. 'Millard, huh?' Sabelian clicked his tongue in annoyance. Millard was the only one bold enough to intrude on him like this.

“Come in.”

The door opened in response to his terse summons. Sabelian kept his attention on his book, refusing to even look at the offender.

“What is it?”

“Ah, well...”

Unexpectedly, it was a woman's voice. He looked toward the voice to see Abigail standing at the doorway, shifting awkwardly and looking quite out of place.

“... I seem to have interrupted something, huh?”

An unexpected visitor. Sabelian toyed briefly with the idea of chasing her out for a second, but thought better of it and closed his book instead, laying it aside.

“Take a seat.”

He wasn't too happy about his break being interrupted, but come to think of it, Abigail had never ever set foot in here of her own accord until today. The stiff expression she wore was a clear indicator of how

uncomfortable she felt about it. Thanks to their using separate rooms as of late, Sabelian found that he had a lot more patience with her than usual, so he merely regarded her calmly.

“Is there something you want?”

She probably had something important to discuss, or she wouldn’t be here otherwise. After a moment of hesitation, Abigail opened her mouth.

“I wanted to ask you to do something.”

“And what would that be?”

She wasn’t there to request that they sleep together again, was she? The sudden unpleasant thought had Sabelian narrowing his eyes at the woman opposite to him.

Uncomfortable she was, but nervous she was clearly not—for even under his stare, she proceeded to state her purpose with an air of resolved confidence.

“I want you to have a meal with Blanche once a day.”

Blanche again? It was rather novel to find that contrary to his expectations, every new thing Abigail did could still surprise him. As far as making requests was concerned, Abigail had quite the track record, so it came as no surprise to Sabelian that she was still making them. What differed was that her requests had gotten quite peculiar as of late. In the past, her requests fell under two categories: his love, or more money.

But a meal, huh? That’s something new. Sabelian couldn’t fathom what Abigail stood to gain from that request of hers.

“Is it necessary to do so? Blanche isn’t a child anymore. I have no intention of teaching the heir to this country to whine or act cute.”

Abigail scowled at his indifferent response. Her next words came out through gritted teeth. “I’m hoping that you two could build a relationship, not have her learn how to act selfishly.”

“Relationship? Why would there need to be such a thing?”

“Because you and Blanche are family.” She all but growled, with a

particular emphasis on the word, family.

Family. What a strange concept. Sabelian was having a hard time understanding Abigail or where she was coming from. Nor could he seem to wrap his head around a concept so foreign to him. Why did the family have to eat together? He'd certainly done nothing of the sort when he'd been Blanche's age.

"I heard you've been taking meals with Princess Blanche. However, is there really a need for me to be a part of it?"

"You're Blanche's family as well, so I'd appreciate it if you started acting like it by participating too."

It was clear that Abigail was unwilling to give in on this matter. Sabelian, on the other hand, couldn't see why the woman was so fixated over mere food.

When Sabelian said nothing in response to that, Abigail took his silence as rejection and -thinking about a plausible reason why he had tacitly refused-hurriedly spoke up. "Is it because of me? You don't have to dine with me if you don't want to. I don't mind. As I've said, you don't have to fulfill your duties as a husband, but please act like a father at the very least."

'Acting as a husband would be easier than this...' Sabelian thought, as he threw her a sideways glance. "What do you mean by 'duties' of a husband?"

Rather than answer immediately, Abigail shut her mouth, considering her reply. After a moment, she opened it again, seeming to choose her words carefully. "... Your love, affection, or sleeping together, I suppose."

Sabelian found his curiosity kindled, despite himself. It wasn't a stretch to say that the Abigail of the past asked for his love all the time, but clearly, this was no longer the case. What made her change?

"May I ask you something in turn?"

"What is it?"

“Why do you no longer desire my attention?” The abrupt change in subject caught Abigail off guard—even after thinking for a second, she didn’t know what to say, for it wasn’t a question she could easily answer. Sabelian observed her brooding countenance and, perceiving her difficulty, took the initiative to ask. “Did you get a lover?”

“W-what?”

“I’m not trying to interrogate you, or punish you for it” he clarified. “I won’t take issue with you for finding yourself a new husband. I can even take in your child with him as my own if you’d like.”

All things considered, Sabelian thought that shouldn’t be a poor offer; it could even have been called generous. Except, he waited in vain for a response. When there was still no forthcoming reply from the woman opposite, Sabelian looked at her, only to notice that her face had gone completely rigid.

“What did you say? A new husband!?” She seemed to have finally found her voice, which rose at the tail end of that question. She seemed flabbergasted, disbelieving. Mad, even. “Do I really look like that type of person to you? I would never do anything that would make me unable to face myself in the mirror! How could you say something like that?!”

Her eyes blazed with a purple fire, every line of her body expressing her indignation and fury. Combined with her malevolent expression, which would do a harpy proud, her countenance was enough to scare just about any man.

“I have no intention of ever being such a disgraceful mother, especially to Blanche. Please never mention such a thing again.”

She was now glaring daggers at him. Faced with her impassioned outburst, Sabelian said nothing. In fact, he felt somewhat puzzled. Why was the woman so mad in the first place? He didn’t understand one bit. It felt like he had done something wrong, though. Or said something wrong, maybe.

“... I spoke out of line. Forgive me.” The words came out stilted and a little clumsily.

This was, of course, understandable. Sabelian had no memory of apologizing to anyone since reaching adulthood. The rabbit-doll incident had been the first instance he could ever recall. It wasn't an exaggeration to call him a "perfect" king. He wasn't one to make mistakes, nor did he allow his emotions to lead him overmuch when making decisions, if at all. This rational, impersonal aspect to him had led to his being labeled a cold-hearted king by some.

Though any other human might be fallible and thus imperfect as a "king" Sabelian was indeed perfect. As a ruler who made no mistakes, naturally, no apologies were required of him. There had never been a need for him to make any, but within a relatively short time frame he had already done so on two separate occasions. First was the aforementioned rabbit-doll incident, and now, out of nowhere, to Abigail no less.

Last time, Abigail had let go of her anger rather easily in the face of his apology, but he had a sudden sneaking suspicion that that would not be the case today. Sure enough, her next words confirmed exactly that. "I can't just let it go this time. I'll forgive you if you take me up on my earlier request."

"... You mean, the meal?" Recalling the matter of the meal, Sabelian could not help but frown, his brows drawing together. "Once a day is too much. How about once a month?"

"Once every four days is the least I can take."

"Once every 10 days?"

"Four."

"... 10 days should be all right."

"Four!" Abigail's eyes were burning fervently as she stood her ground. The fire in her eyes refused to dim, making her resemble a mighty general on the battlefield, determined to come away with nothing less than victory.

The thought and the subsequent image it invoked brought a small smile to Sabelian's lips. Seeing that, Abigail frowned. Not understanding the source of his amusement, her voice came out a little sharply. "What's so

funny?”

“It’s nothing.” Realizing his gaffe, Sabelian immediately rearranged his face to its usual impassive mask before raising his hands in surrender. “I understand. I will dine with Princess Blanche once every four days.”

Abigail’s face immediately brightened. Without thinking, she’d placed her hands on his desk, leaning forward with shining eyes. She probably hadn’t even realized she’d gotten to her feet. “Really? No take backs?”

“Yes. I promise.”

Abigail seemed delighted to hear that. ‘It’s just a meal,’ Sabelian thought to himself. ‘Just what about that made her so happy?’ Try as he might, Sabelian really couldn’t figure out the workings of her mind. He stared thoughtfully at Abigail for a moment longer. “I have a condition, however.”

The cheerful expression froze on her face as the sentence registered, effectively popping her bubble of elation. “... Condition?” Abigail eyed Sabelian nervously before asking warily. “What condition?”

“A simple one. It should be easy enough to meet.” Sabelian laced his fingers together and rested them on his knee. “I want you to be there with us during the meal.” In today’s conversation alone, the various expressions that had flitted across Abigail’s face were ones Sabelian had never seen before. What other expressions could she make that he still hadn’t seen? The faces she’d made—how many more were there he had yet to know about? If he started dining with her, would he be able to see more of them?

He still harbored doubts about her intentions, so this was as good a method as any without requiring too much of him. This way, he could observe for himself, and it should be able to tell him if Abigail really was putting up a facade or not. “If you take me up on that condition, I’ll dine with Blanche once every four days. How about it?”

“... Dine? With you?” Abigail looked like she had just swallowed a bug.

No—that she had just chewed and then swallowed it. Not that it bothered Sabelian in the least.

“You don’t want to?” he asked, his tone one of light inquiry. “Then I suppose that meal with Blanche is—”

“N-no, nothing of that sort. I’ll do it.” She spoke with a smile that was so forced that her cheeks were aching from the effort.

“The deal is complete then. Please inform me of when I should begin attending.” So saying, he picked up his book, intent on getting back to his reading. He wanted to make the most of what remained of his interrupted solitude. Abigail didn’t seem to take the hint though, for she remained where she was.

“Is there anything else?” Sabelian looked at Abigail quietly, waiting. The woman seemed a little lost in thought, if her faraway gaze was any indication. He had the impression she was debating inside whether to voice out whatever bothered her.

“May I ask a question?” She sounded slightly hesitant when she finally spoke up. Sabelian nodded. At any rate, it was probably about Blanche again. When he gave her the go-ahead, Abigail quickly opened her mouth, and the words tumbled out as she took the plunge. “Is the reason why you’re avoiding Blanche and me... because of the previous queen?”

What in the world was she on about? Sabelian frowned as he tried to make sense of her words.

“I heard you loved the previous queen very much, I can understand that. But I don’t think avoiding Blanche because of it is—” Abigail was just warming up to the subject at hand when Sabelian spoke up.

“Wait, wait, wait—”

Was that surprise she detected in his voice?

Sabelian had raised his hand in the universal gesture to stop. He was more than just surprised by what he’d just heard. No, not even close. Completely taken aback, more like. This attempt to make sense of her words went just as well as all the previous ones... which was to say, not at all. “What in the world are you talking about? Who told you anything like that?”

“Like what?”

“That I loved the previous queen.”

“I heard it from the rumors floating around the palace. Is it not true?”

“Hah...” Sabelian put a hand to his forehead. So, the servants had been spreading these sorts of rumors in the ten years he’d remained unmarried? His eyes glinted coldly at the thought. Putting his hand back down, he spoke firmly. “It seems like you’re laboring under a misapprehension. My failure to remarry all these years had nothing to do with feeling any love for the previous queen.”

Why was he explaining himself to this woman? He didn’t understand, but he continued on anyway. “I’m not avoiding Blanche because of that reason. To think you’d believe such a rumor.”

“So why do you avoid Princess Blanche? Do you not have any fatherly love?”

There was no response. The man just sat there, almost as if time had stopped for him. ‘Did I ask a stupid question?’ Abigail wondered, as regret filled her for asking. As she opened her mouth to tell him he didn’t need to answer, Sabelian spoke. “... I don’t understand what this fatherly love you’re talking about is.”

“What?”

Sabelian fell silent again without response. Seeing that, Abigail didn’t probe any further, because he somehow seemed rather depressed at that moment. An awkward silence settled over the room; Sabelian only broke the silence by rising slowly from his desk. “The child is still the heir to this country. I will try my best in educating Blanche, so there’s no need for you to worry.”

“...”

“There are many excellent books here. Please enjoy a few of them if you have the time.” So saying, Sabelian left the room. He could hear Abigail bidding him goodbye from behind, but he didn’t reply. Slowly, he walked through the hallway. The words that came out of Abigail’s mouth a while

ago kept playing back over and over in his head. For some reason he couldn't fathom, Sabelian felt his stomach turning over.

'Love. What a ridiculous thought. If Miriam heard this, she would jump out of her grave.'

Love didn't exist for Sabelian, be it in the past or the present. Since it didn't exist now, it probably wouldn't exist in the future, either. There was no problem in not having such a thing, as he had lived perfectly fine without it up until now.

It occurred to him that he'd made a foolish decision. He should have refused the invitation. He shouldn't have let Abigail in his study. If he hadn't done all that, he wouldn't have had to feel this strange emotion.

He regretted his decision, but he didn't turn back to call off the meal.

Chapter Five



“I don’t understand what this fatherly love is,’ is what he said.” I tried to do my best impression of Sabelian as I recounted it all to Vérité, who was watching my reenactment through the mirror.

[Hmm, and?]

“It didn’t seem like he actually loved his previous wife, either.” I was a bit shocked when he’d told me he had never loved his previous wife. ‘He seemed almost insulted at the suggestion.’ “I thought Sabelian loved his previous wife quite a bit. If he didn’t, why stay a widower for almost 11 years straight?” [You should have asked,] Vérité said bluntly.

“But the atmosphere there was....” Sabelian’s expression had visibly darkened when he said he had no notion of what fatherly love was. Blanche almost seemed like a sort of wound for him. I couldn’t really ask anything more. “If only I knew why Sabelian dislikes Blanche so much... I’d be able to help the two get closer, then.”

[Hm. I’ve heard a few rumors in the palace.]

“Rumors? You were here all this time. How did you hear anything? Through the maids?”

[Nope, I can see into any room that has a mirror in it. So I end up hearing all sorts of rumors.]

Vérité sounded pretty casual about it, but I was taken aback. Look at any place that has a mirror in it? ‘Isn’t that amazing? That’s basically CCTV!’ I wanted to ask more about this ability of his, but right now I was more curious about Sabelian. “So what were those rumors?”

[Sabelian was born without emotions and whatnot, seeing as he’s so cold to his own daughter, and since he even chased out his own mother.]

‘Ah, right, there was that too, huh?’ My mother-in-law didn’t live in the

palace.

They had banished her all the way out to the distant borderlands. Apparently, Sabelian had chased her out because he was afraid of her taking his power as her own. 'He sounds like a total psychopath, honestly.' But he didn't seem completely devoid of emotion, purely based on what he looked like when he talked about Blanche. 'He is still an asshole, though.' "Anything else?"

[There is, but... they're not very nice rumors.] Vérité frowned a little. He rubbed his cheeks before speaking in a tone of clear annoyance. [There are stories about how Blanche might not be Sabelian's kid.]

"Eh? Is she adopted, then?"

[Nope, apparently, Miriam cheated on Sabelian.]

My jaw dropped at that bombshell. 'Cheating? R-really? Oh my god, that woman...!' I had to know. "Is that true?"

[I don't know. It's just a rumor. But according to it, Sabelian hates Blanche because she's not his baby, or so it goes? He's stayed single for over ten years from the feeling of betrayal.]

I quickly closed my mouth. Cheating. It makes sense that he'd hate Blanche if that were the case.

"But Blanche looks exactly like Sabelian!" I exclaimed, half in protest, half out of bewilderment. The two had completely distinct personalities, but there was no question that Blanche was Sabelian's daughter. Her face even looked like Sabelian's, not to mention her hair and her eyes. A girl like her, from a different father?

Vérité seemed unfazed, though. [There's one more person who looks just like Sabelian.]

"Another one? Could it be...?" I trailed off hesitantly.

Vérité nodded. [Raven.]

'Oh my God, am I in a soap opera or something? Cheating on you with your stepbrother??' I hadn't spoken to Raven much, but he seemed like the

quiet type. If I remember correctly, he was living quietly, away from the public eye.

[Of course, it's difficult to know if this was really true. Miriam's dead, after all. We could try to get something out of Raven, but...] Vérité trailed off.

“—there's no way he'd tell the truth.” I finished for him. I'd have watched this with a bag of popcorn in my hands if this were a drama. But this was real life for me now.

“Ugh. So, what if this really is true? How do we make the two like each other?” I scratched my head in frustration. Treating the child your brother had with your wife as your own daughter.... There's just no way. Unless Sabelian turned out to be the incarnation of Buddha himself, there's no way. But it wasn't like I could let things with Blanche stay that way forever. 'Ugh, my head hurts....'

[Hey, calm down. These are all just rumors. It'd be better for you to see all this for yourself.]

“See it for myself? How?”

“The mirrors in this palace all serve as my eyes.” Saying this, the mirror shimmered, and Vérité disappeared. Soon, Sabelian appeared in his place. The king seemed to be in his office, looking over a document carefully. I raised an eyebrow. “Are you showing me Sabelian in real-time?”

[Yeah. Maybe you'll find something if you keep watching him from here?]

Vérité casually suggested that I do something that was very much a crime in my old world. I glanced at the door, worried about someone coming in unexpectedly. “I don't think this is right, though. He'd be seriously mad if he found out. Hold up, you aren't doing this to me when I'm alone, are you?”

[No! I respect other people's privacy, you know. You know what, I'll stop showing Sabelian as well.] Vérité almost sounded a little guilty. The image soon disappeared, and Vérité appeared again. [So how are you going

to do this now, then?]

“Ugh... Maybe if I ask him myself later....”

[You think he'd tell you?] Vérité shot my idea down, sounding bored.

“He probably won't, but... I think this is the type of thing you should ask the person himself about.” This was too big of a topic to just rely on rumors and predictions. After all, even the rumor about Sabelian loving Miriam turned out to be false. The cheating thing probably was false as well. “I'll get closer with Blanche first, then I'll help the two meet more. I think that's the most important part.”

I'd thought it was all over when Sabelian asked me to join in the meal as well.

'To think I'll have to see that stupid face every four days....' The thought had me shudder at first, but I decided to think positively. It'd be better for Blanche if I was there for emotional support. If the two of them were to eat together on their own, it was clear as day that there wouldn't be a single word between them.

'There's no helping it, then. I'll have to step in. I need to make this perfect. Just to see Sabelian apologize to Blanche in the future!'

The palace's kitchen was extremely busy with the meal preparation. They were usually quite busy during dinnertime, but they seemed especially so today.

“How's the meal between His Majesty and the Princess going? Any problems?”

“None at all, sir!” The chefs looked over their subordinates with especially strict glares.

Judging by the looks on the faces present, they were all on tenterhooks. “You all have to be very careful today. After all, it is Queen Abigail asking for this.”

Everyone swallowed nervously when they heard Abigail's name.

She had turned rather mellow after her death; but before then, she had been a troublesome person to deal with. Not only did she have a trying personality, she was also a gourmand. She had shamed the head chef on account of her particular tastes on more than one occasion.

That Abigail had come all the way to the kitchen today. She entreated them to try their best on this occasion, since Sabelian and Blanche were having a meal together today. The woman had been smiling, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she had been making a veiled threat. The head chef couldn't even imagine how he'd be punished if he failed today.

"Since they're almost done with the fish, we need to bring out the main dish. Bring out the sorbet in the meantime." As the maids brought out the sorbet, the cooks got to work on the steak. The steaks gave off a delicious aroma as they sizzled on the grill. 'Surely she shouldn't be able to find any complaint with this.' The head chef wiped his brow as he checked the finished dishes. Since the woman was the type to complain if the food was slightly cool when she ate it, the head chef quickly called for a maid. "Here, bring it out immediately. Don't forget what I told you earlier—Hey, are you listening?"

The absentminded maid turned in surprise—the head chef seemed rather unhappy with her lapse in attention. "What? Ah, yes! I'll serve it right now."

The head chef eyed her somewhat distrustfully, but he was far too busy to do anything about it himself. He simply waved the maid off, and she left the kitchen with her cart. Since the kitchen was a bit of a way off from the dining hall, she needed to hurry. The maid's face was stiff with anxiety as she made her way down the hall, the cart's wheels clattering loudly across the floor.

"I've been waiting. Welcome." The maid returned to her senses when she heard a voice. There was someone standing in the hallway.

It was Miss Jeremie. She smiled at the maid brightly.

"M-Miss Jeremie, is this really going to be alright...?" the maid said, clearly agitated. Miss Jeremie, however, seemed as calm as a cucumber.

“Of course it is. There’s nothing about this that could harm you.” The woman was smiling, but her eyes burned with jealousy and intense anger. These fiery emotions were directed entirely at Abigail. Miss Jeremie thought of her current position. Even though she had been relieved of her duties as a nanny, she had managed to remain in the palace all the way until now. It was all thanks to the goodwill of her uncle, Duke Stork, who had helped her get another position as a maid.

However, although she had retained a position in the palace, her rage did not dissipate. Not only had she worked as a nanny for ten years, but she was also practically Blanche’s second mother. Then a mere figurehead of a queen dared to confront her and shame her? Miss Jeremie could not, and would not, just take that sitting down. Somehow, she would watch that stupid queen’s face color with shame and despair.

“It’s nothing special.” She continued, smiling brightly. “I’m just trying to put everything back to how it was in the past.” That’s right. She was just trying to return everything to its rightful place. After all, Sabelian still had not completely opened up to Abigail. If Abigail made a blunder here, all the trust the woman had accumulated until then would crumble to dust.

“You have to make it quick, Miss Jeremie. If I don’t bring it over soon....” Miss Jeremie raised her head. The maid was right; Abigail might send the food back if it arrived too late. She took out a small bottle filled with a brown substance inside. She inspected the plates, identifying a dish with a noticeably smaller portion inside.

‘This must be Princess Blanche’s.’ She started pouring a considerable amount of the bottle over the meat.



“Give this to the princess. Since it is a smaller portion, you should be able to distinguish it much more easily.”

“Yes, I understand. But what is that ingredient you just... put on?”

“You’re curious about too many things.” Miss Jeremie grinned, but there was something incredibly menacing about her smile. The maid’s face turned completely pale.

“Don’t worry too much. This is just for the princess’s weight. Would you like to try some?” Miss Jeremie handed the bottle over. The maid, after a slight pause, tried a bit of what was inside.

“Ah, this is....”

The maid’s complexion brightened significantly. Miss Jeremie quickly snatched the bottle out of the woman’s hands. “You should serve it before it cools.”

The maid nodded and quickly pushed the cart away. Miss Jeremie simply smiled as she watched all of this happen. It would be nothing more than a minor accident. Just a small one. But it would be more than sufficient to destroy all the trust Abigail had built up.

Miss Jeremie had also already hidden an identical bottle in Abigail’s room. The queen would surely be accused as the culprit once the accident happened. Satisfied with her plans, Miss Jeremie left with a smile on her face.

Meanwhile, the maid had finally reached the dining hall. Sabelian, Abigail, and Blanche were sitting at the table, waiting for their dishes to arrive. Their sorbet bowls were already empty. The other maids shot her a glare; Abigail was surely going to complain about this. But Abigail said nothing.

Or rather, she was far too busy chattering away with Sabelian and Blanche, without a care in the world. “It’s usually delicious to begin with, but this tastes even better today. I asked the chef to make an apple sorbet, since Princess Blanche said she liked apples. How was it?”

“Ah, yes! It was delicious.” Blanche spoke with shining eyes. The girl’s expression surprised the maid. In her memory, Blanche was always expressionlessly eating her food during her mealtimes. This happy and innocent childlike behavior of hers was quite contrary to Blanche’s usual self. Sabelian was seated quietly amid the chatter going on around him. While he did not really join in, he did not seem very bothered by the two either.

By then, the maid had finished laying out the dishes in front of the three. Her hand trembled a little when she placed the dish before Blanche, but she didn’t worry too much otherwise. After all, she reasoned, Miss Jeremie only put a normal spice into the dish. Plus, nothing happened when she had some of it herself earlier.

The steak shone under the light, perfectly cooked, juicy, and tender. The browned meat was laid out next to several sides. Blanche lifted her fork and knife slowly. The girl’s unsuspecting eyes were glimmering with excitement.

The maid’s heart started to pound. A part of her told her that nothing was going to happen, but another, louder part of her warned that something was about to happen. As the beat of her heart accelerated and started pounding harder against her chest, someone raised her voice. “Wait.”

It was Abigail. Sabelian’s and Blanche’s utensils stopped in their tracks, and one of the other maids-in-waiting responded to the queen’s command. “What’s wrong, Miss Abigail?”

“It looks like my plate got switched with Blanche’s.” Abigail switched the two plates as she spoke. Sabelian watched as she did so. “Did something go wrong?”

“Ah, it’s nothing special. I didn’t ask for asparagus, as I don’t really enjoy its taste.” The sides on Blanche’s and Abigail’s plates were different. The maid broke out in a cold sweat, as she had just then recalled what the chef had told her earlier: Abigail preferred anything to asparagus.

Blanche’s dish was now in front of Abigail. It was too late. The maid

couldn't stop her. The only thing she could do was watch from the sidelines. Abigail picked up her knife, its edge sinking into the meat with no resistance.

As she slowly sliced through the steak, it parted to reveal the lovely pink flesh inside—a perfect medium rare. Abigail cut out a piece of it and put it in her mouth. Slowly, she chewed the meat, savoring the flavor until it passed down her throat. Abigail went for the next piece. In this manner, three, four more pieces of meat were devoured, with no problems.

The maid breathed an internal sigh of relief. It was great that nothing had happened, but the moment her nervousness passed, more suspicions turned up to quash the tiny bud of relief she felt. Why did Miss Jeremie do that in the hallway? The maid left the room, with a strange gut feeling brewing in her stomach.

Abigail, on the other hand, was enjoying her steak a little too much. If she had to be honest, it was a teeny bit heavily spiced. However, it did not taste off in any other way, and it was perfectly cooked. She contemplated eating a bit more, eyeing the last piece of meat on her plate.

However, remembering the diet she'd put herself on, she forced her fork down. Ever since her "rebirth" she'd been practically living off the desserts the chef made for her. As a result, while she was still quite thin and by no means chubby, she had definitely put on some weight, compared to how she'd been before her death.

Abigail swallowed the tiny bit of bitterness in her mouth. She had confidently told Blanche that the girl had all the right in the world to get fat. And yet, when it came to herself, she could not even manage to practice what she preached.

She could not even convince herself of what she had convinced Blanche of. "Personality is more important than looks" was something that beautiful people said often. But Abigail—no, Baekhap—could not say this herself. The only thing Baekhap had received whenever she uttered those words was mockery and laughter. To them, she possessed neither beauty nor personality. Gradually, she came to realize that confidence was

something that belonged only to the good-looking.

Right now, she looked beautiful in Abigail's body, but she was still afraid. Afraid of a repeat of all the stares she had experienced in the past, on the off chance that she ended up getting fat. When would she be able to tell herself that it was ok to be ugly, that it was ok to be fat? Perhaps, someday, she might muster up the courage—but today wasn't that day. She wiped her mouth determinedly with a napkin.

After a few more dishes, they were served cups of tea. Abigail took a little sip of her black tea as she looked over at the two people around her. "Princess Blanche, was the food to your liking?"

"Yes, of course! It was very tasty!" Blanche smiled brightly. Abigail noticed that the girl appeared much more relaxed than before. She had to admit it was a rather enjoyable meal as far as meals went, but she had her regrets, despite that. Normally, people would make small talk as they drank together, but Sabelian was just quietly drinking by himself.

By the looks of it, if things were to go his way, the man would be getting the hell out of there as soon as he finished his tea. Abigail quickly came up with a topic they could converse about. "In any case, Princess Blanche. Your clothes are very pretty today. They suit you wonderfully. What do you think, Your Majesty?"

Sabelian put down his cup of tea to get a good look at Blanche. Blanche squared her shoulders the moment her father's eyes landed on her. Meanwhile, Abigail was glaring surreptitiously at Sabelian. "She's pretty, right?"

It sounded almost like a threat. Fortunately, Sabelian correctly interpreted it as one. "Yes, she's pretty."

Though his words were completely void of any emotion, Blanche still looked to be quite flattered by his compliment.

"Right? She's normally very pretty, but she's even more...." Abigail stopped short mid sentence and rubbed her eyes furiously.

"Is there something else?" Sabelian questioned her, but Abigail couldn't

have cared less what the king said.

Was she imagining things? It felt like she had just witnessed fairy wings sprouting out from behind Blanche. She definitely must've been imagining it. 'To think I'd hallucinate from Blanche's sheer cuteness....' Abigail clicked her tongue and took another sip of tea.

Though the tea was undoubtedly normal, Abigail was suddenly struck with an intense feeling of dizziness after taking that sip. It felt like her body was shaking all over the place. She was dizzy and hot, even a little nauseated. But she felt a little more... happy, for reasons she could not quite say.

The fairy wings appeared on Blanche again. Pink, almost transparent wings.



Abigail smiled warmly. “Ah, so Blanche really was a fairy.”

The words seemed to come out of nowhere. Sabelian and Blanche stared at Abigail with varying degrees of confusion.

“Princess Blanche, you’re really very cute today.” Abigail continued speaking with a beatific smile on her face. Sabelian stared silently at it. He had always thought that her face was that of evil incarnate. Before, no matter how bright or how sweetly she smiled, he could always sense a faint trace of evil beneath. And yet, the smile on her face now was... very pure. Her relaxed smile was simply beautiful. He had never seen a face like this.

Sabelian was very familiar with smiles. After all, every person he had met so far had approached him with a smile. Perhaps the sight of a smile would have eased others, but the king had learned very early on that their smiles always hid some sort of ulterior motive. However, Abigail’s face right then had none of that: her pink cheeks were rather beautiful. That woman, who usually felt like the manifestation of winter itself, suddenly looked more like spring.

“She’s cute, right?” Abigail turned to him again.

“... Yes. Cute.”

“Say that again for me.”

“... Cute. I think.” His words had no direct subject to them.

Even so, Abigail beamed victoriously. “Right, Princess Blanche is the cutest in the world! And do you even know how nice she is? There must be so many hardships she’s going through, and she’s enduring all of it. Poor thing....”

Abigail let out a large sigh. “Your Majesty, why don’t you love your beautiful child? Just look at her, she’s a fairy! She even has wings on her!”

Sabelian’s brow furrowed. Abigail was mumbling to herself, like a drunk person. Her eyes were glazing over, and she was staring off into the distance. Was she pulling something again? He couldn’t help but wonder as he observed her behavior.

“No” Sabelian realized. Something was definitely off about this.

She hadn’t had a single sip of alcohol. None of the food she had consumed contained alcohol, either. ‘So how...?’

Even now, Abigail’s voice was only getting louder by the second.

“If I were you, Your Majesty, I’d have Blanche on my lap and I’d pet her every single day! Princess Blanche! Come over here!”

“Ah, yes!” Blanche nervously shuffled over to the queen. Abigail put the girl on her lap and hugged her tightly. Still holding her, she started lightly rocking the girl back and forth in excitement. “Ahh, Blanche, just how are you so lovely...?”

“... Abigail?” Abigail completely ignored Sabelian calling out to her.

“Blanche... You’re the prettiest in the whole wide world... I wish you’d like me, but I don’t know what I’d have to do for that...” Blanche looked up in surprise at Abigail’s suddenly forlorn voice, but then... “Blanche is cute. Cute means bunnies. Bunnies are cute, cute means Blanche....”

“L-Lady Abigail? Are you all right?”

“Oh dear! How’d a fairy end up in my arms?”

Sabelian stood up and took Blanche out of Abigail’s arms. When he did, Abigail looked like she had lost her entire world in that one second. “Ahh, my fairy!”

“Take Blanche back to her room. Bring a doctor on the way back.” The maid exited the room with Blanche in tow. In the meantime, Sabelian took his time observing Abigail.

“Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m alright. Abigail’s alright. Abigail’s pretty. Pretty means Blanche....”

She didn’t look fine at all, if he had anything to say about it.

Abigail stopped speaking suddenly and stared at Sabelian; the intensity of her scrutiny was very unsettling. Her purple, almost gem-like eyes had a

strange charm to them. Sabelian stared at his reflection in her eyes.

At that moment—Abigail grabbed Sabelian by the cheeks.

Sabelian froze in utter surprise. The woman closed in, looking almost as if she was about to kiss him. Sabelian was in shock. He was stunned in place. He couldn't even think about getting away if his life depended on it. All he could do... was shut his eyes and prepare for the inevitable. But then, instead of closing in, Abigail's lips parted.

"You—You shouldn't live like this!" Sabelian's eyes flew open. He was greeted by a furious Abigail.

"You think you have it all because you're handsome? Do you think you can break someone else's doll if you're handsome? Do you know how much time and hard work I put into making that thing? You think you're hot stuff because you're a king?" Abigail yanked at Sabelian's cheeks.

Where as Sabelian... was just staring at Abigail, still in a state of utter shock at the completely unforeseen turn things had taken. "Abigail?"

"You really shouldn't have... and threatening to lower my budget?! Hello! You were the one at fault! And you don't even eat with your daughter! Are you in the wrong or not, you tell me?!" Abigail started indiscriminately squishing Sabelian's cheeks like they were made of modeling clay. Sabelian's brows furrowed in annoyance at her remarks, but before he could express his annoyance, her next words gave him pause.

"You two are still family...why can't you have a decent relationship with each other...?"

Sabelian swallowed back his words. He couldn't bring himself to say anything mean to her, especially not when she sounded so sad. Right then, Millard entered the room, with the doctor following behind. Sabelian put up a hand to stop Millard when he stepped forward to tear Abigail away. "I'm fine. Let the doctor come first."

He noticed that Abigail's mumbles had completely stopped by this point. Was she finally getting better? Unfortunately for everyone in the room, his analysis couldn't have been further from the truth. Abigail began to

wheeze, her face scrunching up in pain.

“Your Majesty, are you all right? I think we might need you to....” Just as the doctor was about to start his diagnosis, Abigail jumped up abruptly. The entire world spun madly around her.

“I... I’m going to go.”

She wanted nothing more than to lie down in bed. Before anyone could stop her, she ran out of the dining hall. Her vision was getting weirder by the second. The halls were turning completely red, and everything around her was melting away like a dripping candle. She was scared. She wanted to run, but she wasn’t able to go far. Before long, her vision went completely black.

Abigail didn’t even notice that she’d fallen onto the floor. She was dizzy, she hurt, and it was getting hard for her to breathe. 'I’m scared, I’m scared. I’m dying.' Her consciousness began to fade. As she lay down on the floor, just struggling to breathe, a voice from afar called out to her.

“Abigail!”

Who’s this, now? Who was looking for Abigail so urgently? She wanted to open her eyes, but her eyelids were getting far too heavy to lift. She heard her name once more, but the next moment, her consciousness had faded away completely.

“... not that?”

“Yes. The queen only... a sizable amount of... she’ll be fine.”

I could hear several voices through my splitting headache. 'Ugh, where am I? My head feels like it’s getting stabbed by needles....' After a moment of struggle, I managed to crack open my eyes. Sunlight streamed into my vision, I appeared to be in my room. 'Why am I here?' It felt like I was going through a terrible hangover. 'Did I drink? No, no, I didn’t. I was eating with Blanche and Sabelian. And then, and then... oh Lord, I remember now. I remember it too well. Agh! Ah!’

I kicked away my sheets in pure shame. 'Holy heck, I must've been crazy! What the heck were you thinking, me?!'

"Are you awake?" Sabelian quickly approached my bedside. At the sight of him, I remembered how I had played around like crazy with his cheeks.

'Oh god, it feels like the blood inside me turning to ice... I'm in so much trouble...Am I going to be executed for this? Or am I going to get thrown out of the castle?'

"I-I'm so sorry...!"

"Stay in your bed." Sabelian stopped me from getting out of my bed.

'... Is he implying that he's going to make me lie down forever?' I sneaked a tiny glance at Sabelian. He didn't really seem mad or anything. To be precise, he actually looked worried? 'Why isn't he mad? I said all sorts of stuff to him...'

He sighed when he noticed my gaze on him. "I know you weren't in your right mind, so don't worry about me being mad. Even you wouldn't say stuff like that when in possession of all your faculties."

'Are you trying to console me, or are you trying to attack me? Why don't you just stick to one, hmm? But thank god he isn't mad.'

"Even so, I'm very sorry, Your Majesty. I don't know why...."

"There was something wrong with the food." Sabelian interrupted me.

'Food? What was wrong with the food? What?' Sensing my confusion, the doctor stepped up to explain. "There was a lot of nutmeg in your food, Your Highness."

"... Nutmeg? Isn't that just a normal spice?"

"Normally, yes. But consuming too much comes with some side effects. It puts a person in a mild state of euphoria and also has some hallucinogenic properties." Ah. So that's exactly what it was. So the reason I saw Blanche as a fairy was because it was hallucinogenic.

'Well, as weird as this is for me to say, thank god I was high.' Unlike me, though, Sabelian had a very worried look on his face. "It seemed to be a

mistake on the chef's part. I've decided to punish him after a week."

I didn't like the sound of that. "By punishment, you mean?"

"Endangering the life of a royal is punishable by death." Sabelian's voice was as cold as ice. He spoke of execution as if it were a mere triviality. It reminded me of just how pitiless of a person Sabelian was.

I raised my body from the bed. "That's too much! He just made a mistake, can't you do something else?"

Sabelian looked at me quietly, his gaze of someone observing a fascinating creature. "Even though he's harmed you?"

"He didn't do it on purpose, and... I'm fine, aren't I? Please change your decision." A life wasn't something so worthless. I couldn't just let him take one away willy-nilly. Sabelian stared at me for a few more seconds before turning away. "Fine."

'Whoa, really? Thank goodness he agreed just with that. I managed to protect that poor chef's neck.'

"I'll think about the punishment some other time. Aside from that, Blanche wanted to see you. Would you like to see her now?"

'Ah, Blanche. She must've been shocked as well.' When I gave my assent, Sabelian called the maid outside to enter. In no time at all, Blanche was in the same room as me, her face painted with worry. She approached my bed carefully and grabbed my hand with her tiny fingers.

"Miss Abigail, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

'Don't make that face, Blanche. It's just a hangover, so why are you so worried?' I patted her hands lightly with my other hand. "I'm not hurt. But I'm a little ashamed that I showed such unsightly behavior in front of you."

'I know I wasn't in the right state of mind, but dear god, do I still feel ashamed about it? I've done much weird stuff in front of her....'

"I'm sorry. I surprised you, didn't I?" I apologized and reassured her. "I'm fine. I'm really fine." The girl's fingers tightened around my hand.

They were warm and soft. Blanche glanced at me for a split second before looking down at the floor. “U-um, Lady Abigail... I’d like to ask you something....”

“What is it?”

“You said you liked me back there.”

‘Ah, I did. To think I’d be outed as a total otaku for Blanche right then and there...’

“Were you... telling the truth?”

“... Yes, I was.” There was no way to hide at this point. I had to confess. I snuck a nervous look at Blanche. ‘What if she looks scared? What will I do then?’

Contrary to my doom and gloom thoughts, the girl’s face took me by surprise. She had a joyous expression. I don’t think I’d ever seen her this blissful before, not even when she was eating the cookies I’d given her, or the eclair she had for the first time.

She looked like she simply couldn’t contain her sheer elation. I felt like I was being cured of all the diseases in the world in the presence of that smile.

“Um, then... Miss Abigail, I’d like to ask you for something....”

“What is it? I can do anything for you, dear.”

‘I’d even slap the hell out of Sabelian’s cheeks!’

Blanche hesitated a little in embarrassment. “W-when you recover... W-would you go... on a walk with me?”

Her ears were turning completely red. She must’ve mustered all of her courage just to say that... ‘Man, this isn’t a request. This is a reward! Oh man, I feel like I’m going to cry.’ I fervently took Blanche’s hands in mine. Her big eyes were incredibly lovely to me. “Of course, Blanche. I’ll be up and about as soon as possible.”

Blanche’s face shone with happiness from just that simple sentence. Forget diseases, her smile surely had the power to save the entire world.

Good thing I got sick. Was this why Abigail pretended to be sick a lot? As I was wallowing in my own happiness for a bit, I heard the doctor speak from the side. “Since it hasn’t been too long since Miss Abigail recovered, I think it would be best if she was given some time alone for a bit.”

‘Wait, no. Look here, Mr. Doctor. Blanche being beside me like this is medicine to me!’ The Sabelian who could not read the mood just nodded away at whatever the doctor said. He turned to speak to Blanche. “Let’s leave, Blanche.”

“Ah, yes, Father. Miss Abigail, p-please rest well!” Sabelian left with Blanche.

‘Tch... That man’s seriously no help at all!’ I was left with complete silence, as I became the only person left in the room. It was pretty weird. I tried turning around in my bed a little bit.

So nutmeg was more dangerous than I thought, huh? I had no idea. Come to think of it, it felt like I was forgetting something, ‘Damn, I can’t remember. My head is still spinning all over the place. Come on, remember, remember....’ As I kept trying to think of whatever it was I was missing, I heard a voice come from somewhere next to me.

[Hey! You okay?] The sound was coming from inside my drawer. The curt and welcome voice was Vérité’s. I opened it with what little strength remained in my arms to see a small mirror placed inside it.

[Abigail, are you feeling alright?]

“It’s not too bad, but... you could do something like this as well? You’re really talented, aren’t you?” The Vérité from inside the mirror was now the size of a doll.

The boy reflected on the surface spoke rather glumly. [It’s still useless. I couldn’t even stop this from happening.]

I could tell he was quite worried for me, despite his best attempts to feign annoyance. I smiled faintly at him. “Thanks for worrying about me. I’m fine.”

[What do you mean, you're fine? You almost died.] He informed me grimly, [You can die from eating too much nutmeg. You can even become paralyzed or go blind.]

My jaw dropped. 'W-what the... Nutmeg had that kind of side effect...?' I kind of understood why Sabelian wanted to execute the chef now. It was a mistake, but it almost brought about a horrific result. [It was because you were an adult that it was only this bad, and not worse. If Blanche had eaten it, she might've actually died.]

“... What? What do you mean?”

[Blanche is way smaller than you. That amount of poison would work far better on a smaller body than on yours.] The moment I heard Vérité's words, I realized what it was I was trying to remember all this time, what had been nagging at me: the food had originally been served to Blanche. It was something Blanche would have eaten if I hadn't. A cold sweat ran down my spine. My hand trembled uncontrollably. “... The chef will definitely have to be fired.”

[Nothing's going to change, though] Vérité continued calmly. I shot him a confused glance, as I listened to the rest of what he had to say. [The chef did nothing. The nutmeg was added by someone else entirely.]

My brain went completely blank after hearing this, and I turned away in horror. Blanche almost died. And someone did this intentionally. Just who —? Who tried to kill that small child? It was then that what Vérité had just said clicked in my head. I turned back to the mirror immediately. “You said someone else threw on the nutmeg. Do you know who it is?”

[Yes.]

“How?”

[I told you. Don't you remember?] Vérité pointed to his right eye. It was sparkling with a silver light.

[Every mirror in this castle... might as well be my eyes.]

Chapter Six



Miss Jeremie realized that the situation had gotten a lot more annoying than she had first envisioned. Abigail had eaten the dish Blanche was supposed to have had, which Miss Jeremie hadn't seen coming at all. According to the servants, before fainting, Abigail had said some weird things because of the nutmeg.

Thankfully, no one suspected Miss Jeremie of being a criminal. In fact, all the blame had gone to the chef. She had even heard that the man was to be executed for this. Well, that wasn't her problem.

'Princess Blanche should have eaten that.' Miss Jeremie chewed on her fingernails. If Blanche had consumed the nutmeg and shown abnormalities, all the blame would have gone to Abigail. But Abigail was the one who'd ended up eating it instead, thus foiling Miss Jeremie's plan in an instant. As she let out a small sigh, she heard someone knock and enter the room. It was her maid.

"What do you want?"

"Um, well... Miss Abigail's looking for you." Abigail? Miss Jeremie flinched a little, but she calmed down immediately. 'It can't be because of the nutmeg. That stupid woman knew nothing. In fact, that woman's wrath should be completely directed at the chef right about now.'

"Very well, I'll be there soon." Miss Jeremie headed for Abigail's room. Once inside, she was greeted with the sight of Abigail sitting on the sofa. The woman didn't look sickly at all. In fact, she had a very queenly aura about her. She slowly turned her head to look at Miss Jeremie. When their eyes met, Miss Jeremie realized something was off.

The air was stuffy. It was a bright and sunny day, but it felt incredibly dark. Miss Jeremie felt like she was suffocating. Abigail was a woman who already had a terrifying face, but it was on another level today. Pure malice

oozed out of the queen's entire body. Miss Jeremie felt that she might faint from the venomous look in Abigail's eyes. She barely kept her calm as she addressed the queen. "I heard you were looking for me?"

"Do you know why I've called you here?"

Miss Jeremie feigned ignorance with a slight smile. "No, I do not."

"I know that you tried to put nutmeg into Blanche's food."

Miss Jeremie felt like her heart had just been stabbed by those words. Her smiling face crumbled away in an instant. 'How did this woman...?' No, Abigail must have been testing her. If she acted like a criminal here, Abigail would end up winning, so she acted the part of the innocent.

"I don't understand, Your Majesty. I know that you might harbor ill will toward me, but trying to make me a criminal is a bit excessive." Miss Jeremie spoke, her tone and delivery exactly that of a person wronged. Her acting was perfect—good enough to make almost anyone believe that Miss Jeremie really was being framed. But Abigail wasn't fazed at all. In fact, the more Miss Jeremie tried to feign ignorance, the more furious she became. "Clara, bring that child in."

Clara nodded and brought someone in from another room. Miss Jeremie's eyes widened as she saw who it was: it was the maid who had been tasked with bringing the food to the dining hall that day. The poor maid's face had gone completely pale. 'So that girl betrayed me?' Miss Jeremie wanted to tear that woman's hair out right away, but she employed patience and kept her voice level. "Who is this woman?"

"You of all people should know best who she is. The maid who was next to you when you were adding the nutmeg."

"I don't know that woman. Are you really not satisfied after chasing me out of my previous position, to even put such a false charge on me?" Miss Jeremie's eyes pooled with tears. That poor maid was shaking, but what did that matter to her?

She had to feign ignorance till the end. There was no physical evidence, anyway. Seeing that Abigail didn't seem to have reported this to Sabelian,

the stupid queen probably wasn't sure either. Miss Jeremie shed silent tears as Abigail looked on, before the queen ordered the maids in the room to leave.

"Miss Jeremie." Abigail slowly made her way over to Miss Jeremie. Miss Jeremie stepped back in apprehension. Out of nowhere, she recalled the times she'd tried going out hunting with the men. During those hunts, the hunting dogs would often return with ducks or rabbits in their jaws. Why was she remembering this now? And why did Abigail suddenly remind her of those hunting dogs, with their mouths stained blood red?

"I wonder if you'll keep spouting lies even after seeing this." Abigail pulled something out from behind her. It was a little jewelry box. When she opened the box, Miss Jeremie looked at a small mirror. Just as Miss Jeremie was wondering what in the world this woman was trying to do, she heard a familiar voice coming from inside the mirror.

[I'm just trying to put everything back to how it was in the past.]

It was her own voice. When she looked into the mirror, she saw the scene of herself talking to a maid. The mirror was showing a place other than the room she and the queen were currently in: it was the hallway connecting the kitchen to the dining hall. The mirror clearly depicted Miss Jeremie looking over the food, then taking out a glass bottle. Her face in the reflection as she sprinkled the nutmeg over the food wore a vicious smile. Miss Jeremie, watching this, felt all the blood drain from her face.

[Give this to the princess. Since it is a smaller portion, you should be able to distinguish it much more easily.]

It was blatantly obvious that Miss Jeremie's aim was none other than the princess. The box closed with a small click.

"Do tell me if you have anything to say, Miss Jeremie." Abigail purred. Miss Jeremie knew Miss Abigail had a habit of collecting magic tools, but to think she had something like this.... Now was no longer the time to act arrogant or bluff her way through. She kneeled in front of Abigail and begged in a desperate voice. "Please forgive me, Your Majesty. I just... wanted to take back my place as a nanny. I just wanted Princess Blanche to

experience a little trouble....”

“A little trouble?” Abigail crouched down to look Miss Jeremie straight in the eye. She reached out and grabbed Miss Jeremie’s jaw, her grip almost strong enough to crush the woman’s mouth.



“Did you say ‘a little trouble,’ just now?” Abigail’s eyes were filled with hatred, her hand tightening with rage.

Miss Jeremie felt like the woman was about to kill her, and she felt her legs tremble in fear. “I-I just wanted her to feel a little dizzy. Ugh, Your Majesty, it hurts!”

“It hurts? Just from this? Blanche almost died.” Abigail gritted her teeth. She looked like a demon to Miss Jeremie—a demon who was going to rip her apart piece by piece. “It was enough to make me, an adult, faint completely. Did you really think Blanche was only going to faint if she ate that steak?” Miss Jeremie felt her heart skip a beat.

She remembered talking to a medicinal merchant when she had procured the nutmeg. She had asked for a dose strong enough to make a person faint, but she hadn’t told the medicinal merchant whom she was trying to feed the spice to. The medicinal merchant obviously thought she was asking about an adult. He didn’t think even for a moment that she was going to feed it to a child.

“I was actually feeling a little sorry for you. After all, you’ve taken care of Blanche for years, but I just waltzed right in and whisked the little girl away. It’s understandable if you hate me a little.” Her purple eyes glinted with a dangerous light, like that of a beast’s. Her voice was sharp, like shattered glass stabbing into Miss Jeremie’s body. “I would have actually forgiven you if you aimed for me from the start. But how could you even think about harming a child you’ve taken care of for 10 years straight?”

“I-I, just thought Princess Blanche would have a minor stomach ache....”

“A stomachache? So you think a stomachache is fine? You told me you raised her as your own daughter!” Abigail’s fury was like a volcano, leaving Miss Jeremie with nothing to say. She felt her body burning away, just standing near the queen. The pain from the queen’s crushing grip on her jaw had disappeared long ago, overshadowed completely by the overwhelming fear she now felt.

Abigail fixed on Miss Jeremie with an icy stare for a minute, before throwing her away on the floor in disgust. “I’m going to give you three

options.”

'Three?' Miss Jeremie looked up at Abigail with lifeless eyes. Abigail continued on, raising her index finger up.

“First, you confess to Sabelian.”

There was no way she could. Sabelian was famous for being heartless and cold-blooded. Even though she was Duke Stork’s cousin, she was sure to be killed if she confessed. Ignoring this little detail completely, Abigail raised her middle finger. “Second, I tell the king what happened.”

Miss Jeremie wanted to complain. How different was this compared to the first option? She would still have to face the repercussions of her actions.

But no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t complain—not in her current position. Instead, she squeezed out a servile smile. “Th-third?”

Abigail withdrew her raised fingers. She put up her thumb, then drew it across her neck in a quick slashing motion that left nothing to the imagination. “Third. You die by my hands. Right here, right now.” Miss Jeremie couldn’t breathe.

She was now fully able to understand what prey felt like before a predator. Abigail, to her, looked like a judge that had come straight out of the depths of hell. This woman was the devil—there was no other way of explaining it. How else was Abigail capable of releasing an aura of such malevolence? Miss Jeremie couldn’t speak, as her entire body trembled.

Abigail silently looked down at the petrified woman, before delivering the coup de grâce. “Now. What will you do?”

She couldn’t even think, let alone dare, to ask for another option from Abigail. It felt like she was about to die from the sheer pressure itself.

“Miss Abigail, have you heard? Miss Jeremie got put in jail.” Clara spoke almost as if she were imparting something of utmost secrecy. Though, obviously, I knew about all that from the very beginning.

Miss Jeremie chose the first of the three options I gave her. After all, turning herself in would give her a lighter punishment, in theory. However, Sabelian still sentenced her to death. He gave her the choice of death by hanging or death by guillotine.

Well, she didn't end up dying in the end. She just went to prison. All thanks to Blanche.

I tried to hide the truth so that Blanche wouldn't be hit so hard by shock. But despite my best efforts, I couldn't stop the rumors from spreading inside the palace, and the child ended up learning about what happened.

Blanche cried all day when she heard Miss Jeremie was going to die. She asked Millard to send a message to the king, begging him to not kill Miss Jeremie for her crimes. After all, no matter how bad of a person Miss Jeremie was, she did raise Blanche for 10 years.

Sabelian decided to punish the woman using normal means after receiving that message. It was honestly the first time I'd ever heard of him doing anything like this. The fact that the request came from his daughter must've held more weight in his eyes. It looked like Sabelian, too, was changing, little by little.

Since Miss Jeremie was in prison, there should be no way for her to hurt Blanche anymore. I even recorded the scene where she ordered a maid to hide nutmeg in my room. It might come in handy in the future. If she tried to mess with Blanche again, then I really wouldn't stay still. "Speaking of which, did the chef ever get his job back?"

"Yes. He's back in the kitchens now."

"That's good." Phew, even the chef made it. We almost ended up killing someone completely innocent. Thank goodness Vérité had my back, like a champ.

"By the way, today's the day you go on a walk with Princess Blanche, isn't it?"

'Oh, shoot! I can't believe it!' I had been forgetting something so important! I quickly jumped up from my seat at the reminder. "Let's get

ready to go out. We can't have Princess Blanche waiting."

I quickly headed to the meeting spot. Thanks to my haste, we ended up arriving at the gardens 30 minutes earlier than planned. Despite being so early, I was as happy as could be. I could finally understand what people meant by a person being giddy with happiness, the hour before meeting someone they loved.

Just then, I caught sight of something black on one side of the garden. Was it a cat? When I came close enough, I realized that I was staring at a small head. Blanche was crouching down in a corner of the garden, looking at something. Whatever it was she was doing, she seemed really absorbed in it. She hadn't even noticed me. "Princess Blanche?"

The girl leaped up in surprise when I called her name. She quickly hid something behind her back. "M-Miss Abigail! You're early...!"

"Well, yes. I am, somehow. What were you doing over there?"

"U-um...!" Blanche didn't seem to know what to do. The flustered girl ended up squeezing her eyes shut and sticking her hands out to give me something. "Um, this...."

It was a small bouquet. I didn't know what flowers they were, but the white and purple flowers went pretty well together. "Is this for me?"

"Y-yes... I thought it'd look good on you since they're pretty like you...." Blanche had her head down, occasionally peeking up at me. Her fingers holding the flowers were fumbling about from nervousness. Oh good Lord, I totally would've just cried if I were by myself! 'Seriously, her cuteness is just out of this world! And she even got flowers for me!!'

"Thank you, Princess. They're beautiful." I carefully took the flowers from her hands. They were small and cute, just like the girl herself. Blanche smiled faintly in happiness as she watched me.

"Um, Miss Abigail, if you could...." The girl gestured for me to lower my head a little. Hm, what's this now? I leaned down a little toward her.

Blanche put her head next to mine and whispered something, as if she was telling me a great big secret.

“When you said you liked me... I was really happy.” Her voice was light and full of joy, almost tickling my ears like the wind. Blanche lowered her voice even more. “I like you too, Miss Abigail. I want to become friends with you. Thank you for coming out today.”

The girl bowed down to express her thanks. As for me, I put my hands over my mouth. ‘Oh, my word. Oh my, oh my. This is a perfect life I’ve lived right here, isn’t it? I won’t have a single regret even if I died here.’

“M-Miss Abigail? Are you crying...?”

“I-it’s n-nothing... Just sweat in my eyes....” ‘Ahh, so this is happiness. This sweet and bright thing, this wonderfully gentle little child.’ I barely prevented my tears from making their way out. “Now then, shall we walk? I’ve prepared some galettes for us to have as a snack later.”

“Yes, I’d love to...!”

I took a step out with Blanche, who was smiling like the sun itself. The end of spring. The garden’s path was lined with white flowers. As we strolled, I could feel a person’s gaze on me from somewhere. When I turned to see who it was, I could see someone looking at me from indoors. It was Sabelian. He was looking at the two of us curiously, but he turned away as our eyes met.

“Miss Abigail?” Blanche looked back at me when I came to a stop. I came back to my senses and turned my gaze back to the front. “Ah, I’m sorry. Let’s continue, shall we?”

I wonder why he was looking at us? When I looked back again, all I could see was the curtain flapping about in the breeze.

The wind coming through the windows was saturated with heat. Tiny, sparse little clouds dotted the bright summer sky, almost as if a painter had accidentally flicked a few drops of white paint on his canvas. Once the palace entered summer, the colors of just about everything became much more vibrant. The garden, too, became green and lush with life.

‘Phew, it’s unusually hot this summer.’ I was drawing a tree a little

farther in the distance. Clara, who was fanning me from behind, struck up a little conversation.

“Miss Abigail, you’ve been drawing a lot recently!”

“Yeah, I’ve taken a great liking to it.” I added a few more lines to the sketch. It was about time I started laying down the foundation—the foundation of making other people believe that I was starting to like art. Moreover, my relationship with Blanche was only getting better and better by the day; we ate together twice a week, and we sometimes went on walks together!

“That necklace looks beautiful on you.” “Doesn’t it?” I looked at it with pride.

The outside of the locket necklace was decorated with pressed flowers. What flowers, you ask? They’re the flowers Blanche gifted me from our first walk! ‘Hah~ To think I’d even get a gift like this—It feels like a dream. I hope she will wear some clothing made by yours truly in the future....’ I kept drawing, trying not to hum.

Clara, in the meantime, continued our conversation, her excitement clear to hear. “Anyway, it’s almost the imperial festival. What kind of dress are you planning on wearing?”

The coming of the summer heat meant that the day of the festival was near. It was one of the biggest festivals, held to celebrate the day this country, Nergen, was founded. It was technically the second time Abigail had ever attended this festival. On the first occasion, the original Abigail had worked really hard on her appearance.

During this festival, many famous people from all over came to visit the palace, and Abigail had wanted to let them know just how wonderful a life she led.

To that end, she spent a tremendous amount of money on having a dress made just for her. No doubt, Abigail was the prettiest woman in the entire festival last year. Unfortunately, it hadn’t really been a significant event for her. After all, the last day of the festival had left her wallowing in embarrassment.

'I wonder if the same thing will happen this year?' Well, it didn't really matter.

As I was wiping my hands clean after putting my pencil down, Norma approached the two of us. "Lady Abigail, there's a delegation from Cronenberg here to visit you."

"Ah, got it. I'll be there soon." I made my way over to the guest room. There, I saw a familiar middle-aged man sitting on the sofa.

He stood up and bowed to me. "Have you been well, My Queen?"

"It's been a while, Sir Moize. Are mother and father doing well?" Sir Moize was from Abigail's home country, Cronenberg. I should feel more relaxed being close to someone from my hometown, but... "Yes. But they're both worried sick for you, to the point that they're unable to sleep at night."

"I'm doing very well, so they shouldn't have to worry."

"You haven't managed to conceive a child just yet, have you?" Sir Moize went straight on the offensive, without preamble.

'Oh God, I don't feel so good anymore. It's always about a child.' This year, too. This feeling was strongly reminiscent of the times I'd been dragged off to a family gathering, back in my previous life... 'I'm having traumatic flashbacks just thinking about it.'

"When are you going to lose weight..." "Why don't you have a boyfriend..." "What happened to getting a job..." I was always bombarded with questions like those, alongside a cousin of mine back then. That cousin always smiled awkwardly whenever our relatives grilled her about having a baby. I felt like I could relate to her just a little.'

"Nope, nothing yet." I informed him unrepentantly.

"The queen is curious if you just aren't getting a child, or can't get a child."

'Dear God, he's sounding exactly like my aunt now. Aunt, you're doing well right...?'

“The queen has been getting increasingly worried, especially after the events of the previous festival.” Sir Moize looked at me with his wrinkly eyes. “Back then, The King refused to dance with you.”

That’s right. The event had caused Abigail great shame. A normal couple would dance together at a dance ball, no matter how bad their relationship was. It was just the normal thing to do. But Sabelian wasn’t normal. Not at all. No way. He refused to dance to even a single song. No matter how much Abigail begged.

Well... he hadn’t held her hand, even during the wedding, after all. So that was no surprise. The problem was that literally everyone was witness to the scene of Sabelian’s refusal at the festival. Cronenberg had been absolutely enraged over the matter. They sent countless messages demanding an explanation for the king’s refusal to dance, and even Sir Moize became furious.

“They weren’t aware that the king doesn’t like to dance.” Luckily, Sabelian didn’t dance with anyone else at the festival either. Apparently, he’d stopped doing it after the previous queen died.

“Yes. Her Majesty was understanding after learning of it, but she still worries about getting a grandchild.”

‘For the love of god, pay me if you’re going to nag any further.’

“Don’t worry. The king and I have a good relationship.”

“... Really?”

“Yes. You can try asking the others, if you’re doubtful. I’ve been having quite a few meals with him as of late.” I sighed internally as I realized just how ridiculous I sounded.... To think I’d ever boast of my friendship with someone just because they agreed to eat with me.

Sir Moize actually took that surprisingly well, seeming slightly thoughtful, even. “To think you’re now able to have a meal with him... It looks like the relationship between you two really has improved.”

It appeared as though his rant was finally going to end, but... I knew that wouldn’t be the case. Situations like those never ended when you wanted

them to. Sure enough, he continued with renewed vigor. “But this is still a matter of much concern. If you don’t get an heir, your position as queen will be in danger, and this danger might extend to Cronenberg as well.”

It was understandable that Abigail’s parents and Sir Moize would be worried. After all, Cronenberg was an incredibly weak country, compared to Nergen.

'You. Do you actually think I can pop out a child on my own just because I want to?' Sabelian didn’t love me, nor did I, him. Granted, I had never actually wanted one to begin with, so the thought of not conceiving a child was more than welcome in my head. Sir Moize became a little suspicious when I didn’t respond. “You’re not still hated by him, are you?”

“Of course not. We’re on very good terms together.”

“... Really?”

“Really.” I pushed through with the power of sheer bullheadedness. It wasn’t like he’d be able to say otherwise, anyway. What’s important right now is... bluffing! Just like every Thanksgiving or any family gathering!

Sir Moize stared at me for a moment before putting on a smile. “So I’ll finally be able to see you two dance.”

'Eh? Wait a second.' Sir Moize’s eyes instantly turned sharp when I couldn’t answer him immediately. “Could it be... you were lying about the relationship?”

“O-of course you’ll be able to see us dance. Why would I lie?”

“I see. Then I’ll be looking forward to it.” Sir Moize looked thrilled. 'Oh dear, oh dear. I think I just dug myself a very deep grave....'

Sabelian felt a strange chill run down his neck. At the same time, he felt a tiny itch on his right ear, making him scratch it subconsciously.

“Is something wrong, Your Majesty?”

“It’s nothing. I just felt cold for a second.” Sabelian replied as he entered the garden.

Millard followed closely behind him. It was a little warm, but it was perfect weather for a walk, regardless. Come to think of it, Blanche and Abigail had been taking walks together here as well. He saw them once. It was a sight he would never have imagined seeing just half a year ago.

“It seems you’ve been on good terms with the Queen recently.” Millard interrupted Sabelian’s thoughts, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Sabelian paused in his step for a second. “I’m just eating with her every once in a while. Plus, you were happy that I would be eating with Blanche as well, if you recall.”

Millard sighed. “It’s good that you’re getting close with the Princess, but... I still find it difficult to trust the queen.” As a knight of the royal family, his top priority was always the safety of Sabelian and Blanche.

“The nutmeg incident is still very suspicious to me” he continued. “Yes, Miss Jeremie confessed, but... I find it strange that the queen was the one to eat the food.”

“You believe Abigail had a hand in this matter?”

“She did voluntarily consume poison once, after all.” In Millard’s eyes, Abigail was evil and would always remain that way. Every action of hers, even those considered mundane and normal, he considered as potentially malicious and foul. This was a woman who had been so jealous of the little princess that she’d used violence to hurt her. If someone could resort to such terrible actions, there was no way they would suddenly change just like that.

Which was precisely why Millard was not a fan of how Sabelian had been acting lately. To think the king would be on good terms with that woman. It was almost as if a witch had charmed him. Millard’s expression was still hardened. Sabelian spoke after a moment of thinking, looking straight at Millard. “It’s not like I actually trust Abigail. Though I find it foolish to suspect her when Miss Jeremie confessed already.”

“... Yes, you are correct, Your Majesty.” Millard finally said. Sabelian pondered the matter a bit more. He must’ve looked very close to Abigail for Millard to be this worried.

Did he like Abigail? No, not at all. He was more... curious about her.

Abigail's facial expressions seemed to change as fast as the summer weather recently, challenging all he thought he knew of her. It was rather interesting to watch. In fact, the reason why he started eating with her in the first place was exactly that. He remembered the incident when she'd grabbed hold of his face, and his fingers reached up to stroke his cheek at the memory.

As he was thinking to himself, a servant approached him hurriedly. "Your Majesty, the Queen requests a meeting with you."

"Abigail?" He could see Abigail standing at the entrance of the garden. When Sabelian nodded, Abigail immediately made her way toward him.

She greeted him courteously but expressionlessly. "Have you been well, Your Majesty? And thank you for all your hard work, Sir Millard."

Millard nodded instead of replying. The man never spoke with Abigail. Back in the day, Millard used to tell the woman off angrily for her manners. It even got to the point where Abigail would visit Sabelian, just to ask that Millard be fired. But recently, Abigail hadn't seemed to care anymore in the least. "I'd like to speak in private; is that alright with you?"

"Of course. Millard, if you would." Millard clearly wasn't pleased with the situation, but he still complied. He watched the two talk from afar.

It was a sunny day. The bonnet on Abigail's head cast a dark shadow over her face. Sabelian turned to look at the queen, his face devoid of emotion. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Um, well..." Abigail hesitated for a second. "I'd like you to dance with me during the festival this year."

"Dance?" He echoed, incredulously. Abigail nodded. She seemed pretty nervous. "I know that you dislike dancing, but... things have gotten a little troublesome for me this time around."

"What happened?"

"A messenger came from Cronenberg." Sabelian could guess what had

happened. Abigail's family must've been pressuring her. After all, the one who'd be in trouble without a child was Abigail, not Sabelian. Sabelian had Blanche.

Blanche wasn't a boy, but he should still be able to make it work out, one way or the other. But for Abigail, not so much. A queen without a child was bound to have a lot of nasty rumors surrounding her. "My family seems to think we cannot have a child because of our relationship."

Abigail's face seemed particularly dark. Was it because of the shadow? "I denied it, but... they didn't seem to believe me. That's why—"

"—If we don't dance, the rumors about you would just get worse." He finished for her. Abigail nodded once more. Sabelian said nothing for a while. This wasn't the first time she had asked him to dance with her. In fact, Abigail had begged him for a dance at least once last year as well. It was the same request, essentially. But... it also felt different.

Was it because of her eyes? Before her "death" Abigail's eyes had always been full of greed. The eyes that wanted to grasp Sabelian so much. He detested them, for they were similar to that woman's eyes.

But her eyes this time left a distinct impression on him. They were the same purple eyes, but they had somehow changed. The greed from last year was nowhere to be seen. Instead, they were filled with worry. Perhaps that was why he did not feel annoyed at her request, unlike the last time.

"I'm sorry." Sabelian apologized. He thought about explaining why he couldn't dance, but he ended up swallowing the words back. He did not believe she would understand, so he decided to lie. "I dislike dancing because of my lack of skill for it."

"Ah... I see. Would you like to practice together, then?" Abigail's rejoinder was so natural and innocent, catching Sabelian so off guard that he found himself momentarily unable to react.

"We might as well practice if you're bad at it. We still have plenty of time." She seemed dead serious. It would have been much easier for him had she been shocked, or if she had laughed at him instead.

“... Practice, you say.” He finally murmured.

“Yes. I haven’t danced in a while either, so I need it as well.” Sabelian hesitated when he turned to face her properly. He could not detect any hidden motive or malicious intent from her so far, but he did not enjoy dancing. In fact, one could even say he greatly disliked dancing. Thus, he decided he could just say no to her like always.

“Dancing...” he said while trailing off because Abigail was looking up at him. Her concerned face looked so innocent, and her eyes were incredibly bright and clear under the sun. He swallowed. He had to refuse that face? He found it very difficult to answer her directly.

“... I’ll think about it.” He finally managed a proper response. To Abigail, however, it sounded like an indirect refusal. A moment of awkward silence passed.

Her gaze flitted around for a moment before she responded politely. “Yes, I understand. I’m sorry for asking you to do something like this. I’ll take my leave now, Your Majesty.”

Abigail turned away to leave. Sabelian did not understand why, but he could not take his eyes off her back until she had completely disappeared.

“To the left, and then turn straight to the right... Yes, very good, Princess!” Blanche stepped forward with her left foot, in rhythm with the music. She was dancing, her features set with concentration.

It was a very energetic dance with light, cheery music, appropriately meant for a child. Normally, they would have her dancing to an actual band, but this time, they had to settle for a music box. Blanche was skipping around lightly to the music. She seemed like a little doll straight out of a movie.

I had placed several mirrors all around the room so that Vérité could record her practice. 'I should watch this whenever I’m feeling depressed.' As soon as the music box stopped playing, Clara and Blanche stopped as well. Blanche bowed to Clara as an acknowledgment to the song’s ending.

I jumped from my seat to clap without thinking twice.

“Amazing! Absolutely spectacular! Surely you’ll be the one to shine the most during this year’s festival!” I burst out. ‘Of course, that’d be the case! No one is as cute as Blanche in the whole wide world!’

Blanche bowed toward me with reddened cheeks. “T-thank you, Miss Abigail... even though I’m still so bad at it.”

“No, no, you were great. Wasn’t she, Clara?”

“Yes! of course! Princess Blanche is the cutest in the kingdom!”

Did the results of my business come to fruition? To think even Clara had finally fathomed the depths of her cuteness! ‘B-U-T you’ve still got a ways to go, Clara. Blanche isn’t the cutest in the kingdom... She’s the cutest girl in the world!’ I silently beamed at the two with pride. Clara, meanwhile, turned to speak to Norma. “You think so too, right, Norma? That Princess Blanche is just the cutest!”

“... Calling someone who’s your master ‘cute’ is just rude, Clara.” Norma spoke with an icy voice. Well, she wasn’t wrong. In all other situations, calling your boss “cute” would just be plain rude. Having realized that she had potentially overstepped her position, Clara immediately apologized. “Ah! I’m sorry, princess. I just....”

“It’s okay, Clara, you were complimenting me.” Blanche smiled faintly, but her face shone as brightly as the sun itself, clearly still happy over receiving praise.

‘Ah, how could a little girl be this cute and well-mannered at the same time...?’

“... Actually, I’d like to do it better if I can.” She continued hesitantly. “Maybe Father would praise me if I danced well?” Blanche asked shyly.

The sight caused Abigail to cry tears of joy. Even though she was responsible and mature, Blanche was still an 11-year-old child. It was only natural for her to want her parent’s attention.

“Of course, Princess Blanche. I’m sure His Majesty will be happy.”

“Then, will Father dance with me as well?”

Hmm, I couldn't answer her question right away. How was I supposed to explain this? I couldn't tell her that her dad didn't want to dance with her because he was an awful dancer. I was a bit surprised when I heard that Sabelian wasn't a good dancer. Who knew someone had that kind of scar? I didn't expect it because Sabelian was good at everything, but that just showed that nobody was perfect in this world.

After hearing about Sabelian's shortcoming, I gave up on dancing. I didn't want to force someone to dance, if it meant making that person feel uncomfortable. I would have preferred to listen to Sir Moize's nagging.

“Don't you think he'll dance with you once you become a bit older, Princess Blanche?”

“Yes...” she replied dimly.

I was covertly trying to make Blanche feel better, but her expression was still dark. It seemed like she was really looking forward to the ball. I contemplated for a moment. To grab her attention, I changed the subject.

“Then, would you like to dance with me, Princess Blanche?”

“... Yes?”

Blanche looked at me with a surprised expression. Her eyes widened like a rabbit, and after blinking, she spoke with a bright smile on her face.

“Yes! I would like to dance with you, Lady Abigail! I really want to dance with you!”

'Huh? The reaction is way too good though?' Blanche's face became so bright that it surprised me. I was just trying to cheer her up, but I didn't think she would like the idea that much.

Clara butted in, as I was too flustered to speak. “That's a great idea! I think it'll be beautiful if the two of you danced together!”

Norma nodded in agreement.

'No... I was going to decline, but everyone is paving the way, huh?' I became embarrassed and cleared my throat.

“Ahem, great. Shall we practice?”

“... Okay!”

When Blanche smiled widely, her small, pearly teeth showed. I carefully grabbed Blanche’s hand. Because of our difference in height, we couldn’t do the usual ballroom dancing. Instead, we decided to do a sequence that many people danced during the party.

The music box started playing. I moved my feet with Blanche and danced to the music. I’d never danced before in my previous life. That included ballroom dancing and all other dances. Dancing was an embarrassing thing to do. Being watched by many people was the same—I had been constantly imagining people ridiculing me behind my back; a fat and ugly woman was dancing poorly.

‘Well, thankfully, I’m living in a different person’s body now.’

Abigail was beautiful, an avid dancer, and very capable. Her body remembered the dance and the rhythm. Her body moved naturally to the music.

‘One, two, three. One, two, three.’

After moving to the front, I looked at Blanche. When our eyes met, Blanche smiled.

‘Right! So what if she can’t dance with Sabelian! Blanche said she’ll dance with me!’ It was during that moment that I felt like I had the world. ‘At this rate, I wouldn’t mind dancing until my feet got blisters.’ Blanche was also jumping around happily. Even after the music box stopped playing, she showed her excitement. Just then, Clara spoke in a tearful voice in between sniffles.

“You two... are s-so beautiful! Lady Abigail is so cool and Princess Blanche is cute... Oh, oh, you two are so lovable!”

This friend, she was really a good friend. She would fit the role of vice president in Blanche’s fan club.

“Thank you, Clara.”

“You two really look great together. I’m sure everyone will admire you two at the ball!”

'Was it that great? I should ask Vérité later to show it to me again.' Clara said it because she was excited.

“Since we came this far, why not have matching outfits? I think you two will look great!”

'Matching outfits, huh? But that’s... really amazing.' Usually, I would decline at least once, but I couldn’t let this opportunity pass. I spoke to Blanche cautiously. “Outfit... What do you think, Princess Blanche?”

“I like it! But....” Blanche didn’t finish her sentence. Did she not like the idea, as expected? I looked at her anxiously, but Blanche smiled brightly.

“... I don’t know what kind of clothes are pretty. I would like for Lady Abigail to pick out the outfit!”

“The outfit?”

“Yes!”

'So... Blanche will wear the couple’s dress that I pick out and will also dance with me? I can design it myself as well, then? Did I save a country in my previous life or something? I hadn’t, though? Could it be Buddha’s mercy? A gift from Jesus?’

My cheekbones rose up in a wide grin, without me realizing it. When I laughed out loud, Blanche looked surprised. “I-If you don’t like it... I’m sorry....”

“No! Of course, I like the idea!” I quickly put on a serious face. Curses, Abigail’s smile is killing me. “I’ll definitely prepare a dress that looks good on you, so please tell me your preference.”

“Okay!”

It felt like my entire life’s worth of luck had exploded today. There was nothing else that could block me.

'Blanche! Trust me! I’ll make you the idol of the founding country festival!’

Chapter Seven



“Hm, I wonder what kind of design will be good for Blanche... Vérité, what do you think?” handpicking a few designs and showing them to Vérité. “They were designs I drew for Blanche and myself.”

[I think the first one looks good on you.]

“I’m talking about Blanche, not me!”

It was a mother-and-daughter look, but the focus was Blanche. I was just an extra! I had to pick out a dress that made Blanche stand out. Vérité released a sigh and then spoke.

[No matter what I say, you are just going to say that everything looks good on Blanche.]

“Of course!”

Vérité shook his head as if it were hopeless and disappeared into the mirror. 'Hmm, would it better if I asked the maids instead?' I looked at the designs again. First, Blanche liked flowers, frills, and ribbons. Overall, it seemed like she liked flowery dresses. She preferred pink or sky blue, but more of a pastel tone. A variety of outfits appeared in my head. The first one that popped up was a modern-style one-piece dress, but it would complicate things if there was a big difference between my ideas and what was currently trending.

In this period, the overall outfits were close to the Rococo-period robe à la française. Women wore a corset to create a smaller waist and emphasize the fullness of the breasts, and they also wore a pannier to create volume for the dress. They also added a long cloth on the back, which stretched out like a robe. Blanche could have just worn an ordinary robe à la française, but I didn’t want to make her clothes like that. The clothes made during this time weren’t for children. The idea of children’s clothing didn’t exist before the 18th century.

I just made a smaller version of what adults wore. However, I didn't think about the physical characteristics of a child or the ability to move. The idea of putting a corset and a pannier on a child, when they were already uncomfortable for an adult, was definitely weird. I wanted to create an outfit for Blanche, for children. 'But if I make it too modern, then it'll also be weird. Isn't there something that's a bit comfortable and doesn't stand out too much?' I looked into the designs while struggling.

Just then, Vérité appeared again and pointed at one design in particular.

[What's that? The design is unique.]

"Are you talking about this one?" picking up the design and held it out. Vérité looked like he was interested.

[Yeah. That's a dress, right? It's unique.]

I felt a bit nervous by Vérité's reaction. Would this dress stand out a lot during this time period?

"Does it look weird?"

[Not really. It's just I've never seen this design.]

I breathed out a sigh of relief. It seemed like it wasn't extremely repugnant or that it would make someone look suspicious. However, compared to what was being worn now, it was a bit plain, so I wasn't sure if Blanche would like it. 'Well, I drew a lot of different things. I'm sure Blanche will like at least one.' Feeling relieved, I organized the designs.

"Anyway, did you see Blanche dancing last time? How was it? Cute, right?"

[Yeah, yeah. She was cute.]

I didn't feel any sincerity from his voice... 'I will need to have a deep conversation with him all night about Blanche.' When I was about to talk about Blanche's lovely personality, someone knocked on the mirror room. I heard Norma's voice soon after.

"Lady Abigail, it's time for dance practice."

"Oh, it's that time already. I'll be right there."

I didn't know how much time had passed, because I was trying to pick a design. Vérité waved his hand without sincerity.

[Have a great time, My Queen.]

“Yeah, yeah. Be sure to watch my Blanche dance this time, too!”

Leaving Vérité behind, I headed toward the practice room where Blanche was waiting. 'Dance practice with Blanche!' Because of my excitement, I started walking faster unconsciously. And it was also the day where I would show Blanche my design! I excitedly opened the door to the practice room. As soon as I opened it, Blanche ran toward me and hugged me. “Ah, Miss Abigail. Welcome!”

“I'm sorry for being late, Princess Blanche. There was something I wanted to show you.”

“Show me...?” I handed the bundle of paper that had the designs to Blanche. Blanche looked up at me with a confused expression.

“They're designs of the dresses you'll be wearing to the ball.”

“Wow! S-so pretty!” Blanche looked through the designs with admiration.

'Ahhh, I'm glad she likes them. I had been so worried she wouldn't like them.'

“There's a variety, so look later and let me know which one you like.”

“Okay, okay! I'll pick out the one that will look good on you, Lady Abigail!”

'No, you have to pick the one that looks good on you, not me!' But Blanche looked so happy that I couldn't say so. 'Well, Blanche will look pretty no matter what she wears, so it won't matter.' Blanche called over the maid and carefully handed the designs to her.

“Please take good care of them. Make sure they don't fly away or get wet!” Speaking in a serious tone while Blanche made fists and placed them pleadingly on her chest.

To think she could order the maid with sorrowful eyes... no, it was more

like asking for a favor. I covered my smile with my hand and spoke. “Now, shall we begin?”

“Oh, yes!”

Blanche quickly came to my side. Today, we would not be dancing to a music box, but to an actual band. There was even an instructor. Once everything was in place, I took my position and waited for the band to play. Blanche looked at me with an expression full of determination.

But when the dance practice was about to start, the maids that were sitting all stood up, their faces turning pale. ‘What happened?’ The maids lowered their heads toward what was behind me. I also looked back.

“Hello, my wife.”

“... Your Majesty, Sabelian?”

‘Wait, why are you here?’

The person who came into the practice room was Sabelian. His expression was brusque, as always. Bewildered, I questioned the king. “Have you been well, Your Majesty? For what reason did you—?”

“I came because you called me.”

“I did?”

‘No, when did I ever call you?’

Sabelian let out a light sigh, as I was too flustered to say anything.

“Dance practice. Didn’t you say that we should do it together, or did you forget already?”

His response dazed me, and I could only blink..

‘Didn’t you turn me down back then?’

“I thought you were not fond of dancing?”

“I’m not, but I thought that I should at least practice once.”

‘What’s gotten into him? For him to come all the way here personally. Is he actually not Sabelian but someone else?’

“What are you looking at? Shall I leave?”

'No. That rudeness is definitely Sabelian.'

Millard was behind him when I took a glimpse. Looking at how even Millard was glaring at me, I could finally guess Sabelian's purpose. It seems he didn't come to dance, but to keep an eye on me. He was also watching me during the stroll. It was a bit uncomfortable, but I paid it no mind. Either way, it was a good thing that Blanche and Sabelian had come across each other like this, after all.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. Thank you for giving me your time. Princess Blanche wanted to see Your Majesty as well.”

I glanced at Blanche. That child greeted him, full of nervousness. “Welcome, Father....”

Sabelian was mute toward his trembling daughter.

'Is he some sort of robot?'

Millard approached Blanche in that time. He kneeled down on one knee in front of Blanche and spoke kindly, with a bright smile.

“Princess Blanche, have you been well? It's a relief that you look healthy.”

“H-hello, Sir Millard.” Blanche smiled shyly. Millard grinned widely, unlike his usual self.

'Wow, how out of character. And he always went around frowning when talking with me, as if he wanted to kill someone.'

Millard's face was completely relaxed now. Blanche didn't seem to be that scared of Millard as well.

'Hmm. By any chance, this Millard guy...?'

I carefully spoke. “The dress Princess Blanche is wearing today, isn't it quite pretty? Sir Millard.”

“Yes. The blue silk of the dress goes well with the Princess's eyes, and the unexcessive ribbon decoration is highlighting the Princess's loveliness

further. Of course, the Princess is beautiful, even without such things.” Millard said so with a proud tone.

'This guy. He's one of the fans who deeply fell for our Blanche!'

For some reason, I felt a bond forming with Millard. While smiling gently to Blanche, he spoke again.

“His Majesty, the King, has come today to practice dancing with the Queen. May I be Princess Blanche's partner while the two are practicing?”

“I, that—” Blanche seemed like she didn't know what she should do and looked at me. After another moment, she gripped the hem of my clothes and hid behind me. “—I-I wish to dance with the queen so....”

'Ah, I saw an angel for a moment. Did she finally come to take me to heaven? My chest hurts because Blanche, who hid behind me, is too cute. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Buddha. I will live piously from now on.'

“I see. Dance with the Queen....” Millard was smiling, but his atmosphere differed from before. The glint in his eyes looking at me was terrifying.

Cursing with just a glare was a talent. It seemed like he was saying. “You dare to dance with Princess Blanche?” But I didn't get intimidated, so I glared back at him.

'Hmph, you're jealous? You're jealous, right? You're grumpy that you can't make it big? Dance with Sabelian, if you don't have a partner!'

“What are the two of you doing right now?” Sabelian spoke with a voice full of annoyance. We woke up from our wordless staring contest. Blanche seemed to be a bit frightened.

'Ah, it can't be like this. It's a chance that doesn't come easily. Come to think of it, I remembered the words Blanche had said before. That she wanted to dance with Sabelian.'

While I wanted to dance with Blanche like this, I suppressed my desire and asked a question, even though it made me feel like throwing up blood.

“Princess Blanche. How about you try practicing dancing with His

Majesty, Sabelian, and not me?”

“Yes?”

Blanche asked back in surprise. Sabelian silently gazed in my direction.

“I think that all the citizens will be happy if His Majesty and the Princess danced together during the country’s founding festival. Don’t you think so, Sir Millard?”

Millard twitched for a moment and looked at Blanche. He spoke as if hesitating.

“... I see. I also think that it is a good idea, Your Majesty.”

Sabelian said nothing for a moment. Blanche’s face became agitated. My chest was beating wildly as well. It would hurt Blanche if Sabelian turned her down again. I shot a fierce glance at Sabelian.

“Wouldn’t it be alright if it’s just practicing?”

‘Please say that you will do so. Please! Blanche will be satisfied if you just hold hands and spin in circles!’

Sabelian didn’t avoid my gaze. He looked at me and Millard, as if he didn’t know why he had to dance. But Millard was on our side. He was also sending a fierce gaze, like mine. He let out a deep sigh and spoke, as we sent pleading—yet sharp—gazes.

“I understand.”

I barely prevented myself from cheering. Millard also had a face of being deeply moved. Sabelian silently put his hand forward, toward Blanche. He was wearing white gloves, even though the day was hot.

Blanche hesitated, slowly looked at me, then spoke with a sullen voice. “I want to dance with Lady Abigail as well, though....”

‘Hnng, I will become weak if you look at me with such eyes.’

They were eyes that made me want to chase out Sabelian. I stroked Blanche’s head.

“Let’s dance a lot later. Since we can dance tomorrow. How about

that?”

Blanche nodded her head after being consoled. And carefully let go of the hem of my clothes and approached Sabelian. Blanche’s small hand fell into Sabelian’s large hand. The two looked very awkward, despite being father and daughter. Blanche was sweating while looking at the ground. Sabelian just stood still, like a statue.

In the awkward atmosphere, the music started playing. It was lively and light music, as if puppies were running around. A cheerful atmosphere spread and filled the practice room. Even so, the two only stood still. Ah, it seemed Sabelian really didn’t know how to dance.

“I will show a demonstration first. Clara, come here and be my partner.”

“Yes, My Queen!”

I held hands with Clara and slowly started taking steps, matching the music. The movements were simple—this dance was based on the one had Blanche danced with me just now. Also, this dance was on the easier side to memorize, as it was just the same movements over and over.

‘Even Sabelian would be able to do this much, right? And wouldn’t people just gloss over it even if he made a mistake, since he’s dancing with his daughter?’

He observed me with a serious face. After the short demonstration ended, I stopped in place.

“Your Majesty, please try dancing with Princess Blanche now. Should I show a demonstration one more time?”

“It’s enough.” He said, with a composed voice.

‘Didn’t you say that you were clumsy at dancing...?’

The dance started.

One, two, three. One, two, three.

Sabelian moved first, matching the dancing teacher’s clapping, as Blanche followed him. I looked at Sabelian and Blanche with a feeling like that of a mother who sent their child to the waterside.

'Let's cover for them if Sabelian makes a mistake! And let's scold him if he says something to Blanche!'

I was looking at the two while determining so, but thankfully Sabelian didn't make a mistake. On the contrary, he was dancing very well; it was to the point that I couldn't think that it was his first time at it.

There was unfathomable depth and beauty, even though it was a simple dance. The figure of the father and daughter dancing was a beautiful picture. The most handsome man in the palace and the cutest girl in the world were dancing together. It was when the equation "handsome thing + cute thing = wonderful thing" was achieved. The warm feeling was a bonus. The figure of Sabelian—who was far taller than 180cm—dancing with his small daughter was truly lovely.

Not only me, but everyone in the practice room looked at the scene with motherly and fatherly smiles. A faint smile appeared on the indifferent Norma's face as well, and Millard wasn't able to keep up his dignity; he also had a broad smile, but poor Blanche's face was frozen the whole time.

She rarely made mistakes, but she missed the beat several times. I started to feel uneasy. The music was nearing the end. At that moment, she stepped forward a beat early, and her foot got caught on Sabelian's foot. Blanche's small body staggered, she let go of Sabelian's hand, and the young princess fell to the ground. While she hadn't fallen hard, Blanche's face was pale white.

I suddenly remembered what had happened at the teahouse.

"F-father. I-I'm sorry. I made... a mistake...."

That child trembled as she looked up at Sabelian. Sabelian was looking down at his daughter with cold eyes, like he had back then. Blanche and Sabelian had the same colored eyes, but they each held something different. Sabelian's eyes were a winter ocean. They were like the lonely sky, pierced by the frigid northern wind.

The musicians' hands had stopped, and they had fallen into silence at some point. They were all glancing at each other. A feeling of unease started to form in my chest. 'I should handle this before that guy says

something to Blanche.'

The moment I was about to go to Blanche in a hurry, Sabelian carefully bent over. Two pairs of blue eyes faced each other. An impersonal voice came out of Sabelian. "Are you alright, Blanche?"

There was no affection in the voice. It was an inorganic voice, like an output through a machine. But I couldn't help being surprised.

'That Sabelian? Caring for Blanche?'

Blanche seemed to be quite flustered as well. "Are you hurt somewhere?"

"N-no! I'm fine...."

"I see." Sabelian slowly raised Blanche up. He inspected her to see if she had been hurt.

"Then let's continue" he said to the musicians. "I will ask for some music."

The musicians restarted the music. Sabelian danced as if nothing had happened. There was no reprimanding or scolding. Blanche was completely dumbstruck as she followed Sabelian's lead.

The music ended while I was still looking at that scene, in a daze. Blanche suddenly bowed her head. "F-father. I'm sorry that my ability is lacking...."

"You were lacking. To make a mistake with this level of a tune... practice more."

"U-understood!"

'Sigh. That mouth of destruction. Is there something wrong with telling her she did well there? Heck, you even mentioned you were bad at dancing too.'

But his response was still much better than before. He asked if she was okay, at the very least. Blanche became completely worn out after dancing a single tune. It seemed she had been quite nervous, dancing with Sabelian. So, I carefully asked Blanche. "Princess Blanche, how about we rest for a moment? I also have to practice dancing with His Majesty, after all."

“O-okay....”

Blanche nodded her head a few times and sat down on a chair to the side. Millard stuck right next to her.

'Now then, the remaining problem is my husband, but....'

He was standing with his arms crossed. His hands were hidden well in there. He looked like a person without the will to dance.

“Should we practice some other time, if you are tired?”

“No. It's fine.”

He said so, but he didn't seem to want to do so. His expression was terrible too. It was uncertain if he didn't want to dance with me, or if he was uncomfortable with dancing. It didn't look like he utterly hated me, seeing how he had come here personally. Perhaps dancing in front of a crowd was burdensome for him. Just imagine if a rumor that Sabelian was a klutz got out. Given his personality, he wouldn't be able to burden the shame.

“I will have the people leave if you are uncomfortable with the large number of onlookers.” I lowered my voice so that others couldn't hear it.

“It's fine. Let's do so as is. There shouldn't be a problem” he muttered. It strangely sounded like he wasn't talking to me, but to himself.

'If he says so, it should be fine.'

I nodded my head and stood a little distance away from him. “Please go with 'Lotte's Banquet'.”

A slightly sluggish tune started, unlike the one from before. While I was wondering if I should request a demonstration from the dance teacher, Sabelian bowed his head and greeted me. It seemed he was just bad at dancing, rather than being completely clueless on how to dance. He had his eyes closed, so his long eyelashes stood out. I greeted him as well, by bending my knees a little.

It felt off to just stand face-to-face with him like this. The music flowed at a slow speed. The air became soft, at some point. I held out my hand

toward him. Sabelian raised his right hand—he had his white banquet gloves on. I carefully grasped his hand. At that moment, Sabelian frowned like a person who got poked by a thorn.

“... Just as I thought, I’ll stop here.” He took his hand back and covered his mouth. His expression was pale, like someone that had gotten saved after drowning in water. Not only his expression, but even his walking was rather strange.

The moment he turned his body away from me, he lost his balance and staggered. I quickly grasped his arm. “Are you alright, Your—”

“Don’t touch me!” Sabelian roughly shoved my hand away the moment I grabbed him.

It didn’t particularly hurt. But I became stiff from his expression. Eyes devoid of warmth. A bitter frown, like the chill of a snowy country. And a repulsion on his face, like frost. His expression was exceedingly cold. It felt like my heart would get frostbite from his expression. Sabelian was looking down at the ground while gritting his teeth. He was trembling.

“... I will excuse myself first.”

He left the practice room, after bidding a brief farewell. Millard followed him with a hard face. “Then I will see you again, My Queen and Princess Blanche.”

The two disappeared like that. The warm air in the surrounding area disappeared instantly. It was a strange air, like it had suddenly become winter from summer. Nobody could say a word, and even the lively Clara had become pale as she nervously looked around. ‘Ah ah, is it my time to take care of the aftermath again?’ I tried to talk while being as calm as possible.

“My partner disappeared. Norma, can I ask you to practice dancing with me?”

“Yes. Understood.”

Norma, who had lived together for a year with me, seemed to be familiar with such things. I gave the signal to the musicians as Norma came to the

center. The musicians started playing a more lively tune than before, as if to melt the frozen atmosphere. Norma put her hand on my waist, and I grasped her shoulder. I hardened my expression to pretend like I wasn't affected. 'Yeah, he hates me. Despises me. How did I forget that, like an idiot?'

Pretending to be okay was one thing I was great at, whether it was fortunate or unfortunate. I couldn't let it show, since Blanche was looking at me with eyes full of worry. I danced to the lively music. Like someone who wasn't hurt, even a little.

The kingdom conference that started in the morning ended when the sun was high in the sky. Sabelian's expression—as the king left the conference room—seemed full of fatigue. It wasn't like the conference was long or that they had dealt with a complicated matter. Stories about other species and the contents of the upcoming festival celebrating the country's founding had been the core topics of the discussion.

The conference had ended without any major problems, but Sabelian's expression wasn't good. He seemed displeased. Perhaps it was due to Duke Stoke's face. Duke Stoke had a smiling face the entire time the conference took place, after hearing that Sabelian had pushed Abigail away. He would have ignored it if it was like usual, however, that face truly had gotten on Sabelian's nerves today.

Millard was watching out for his lord. Sabelian had been in deep contemplation after returning from the dance practice the previous day. Millard glanced at him and discreetly started a conversation. "Your Majesty, I believe you should get going to the dining room soon. Princess Blanche and My Queen should be waiting."

Sabelian stopped short after hearing those words. It was the luncheon of all days. He made a troubled expression. It was a meal he would have to eat either way. He just had to go to that place and leave after finishing his meal.

"... Send an attendant, saying that it will be difficult for me to partake,

as I am busy today.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Sabelian headed to his office like that. He started working immediately after sitting down. He focused on work—even skipping lunch—and finished all the items that had come up. He called a secretary to bring all the documents that had to be taken care of, saying that it didn’t matter if they were urgent or not. Sabelian didn’t want to think about anything but work.

Abigail came up in his mind if he let his guard down even a little. Sabelian didn’t like who he was right now. He hated the emotion that made him agitated like this. He had regretted his actions, all night long. Even during the conference, the hurt on Abigail’s face appeared in his mind and made it difficult to concentrate. His fist clenched tight. He wanted to scrape out that emotion with a knife if he could.

What a king needed wasn’t emotion, but reason. Sabelian had heard countless stories of leaders that brought their country to ruin after getting swept up in their emotions. Kill your heart, think as a king, and act as a king. That was the education he had received his entire life. But he felt like he was being swayed as a king of his integrity and reason. He let out a deep sigh.

He heard a knock at that moment. It was his secretary.

“Your Majesty, I have brought the documents. But someone has come requesting for an audience....”

“Is it the Queen?” he asked carefully, holding documents in his hands.

“No.”

He was half relieved and half regretful that it wasn’t Abigail. It was strange. He could understand the relief, since she was an uncomfortable person to meet—but why did he feel regret? The secretary spoke, as the king was pondering this. “Princess Blanche wishes to see you.”

“... Blanche does?” His emotions shriveled at the unexpected name. He nodded, to have them let her in.

A short while later, the princess's small silhouette could be seen. Blanche came in hesitantly and greeted him. "F-Father. H-have you been well?"

"Come in."

The daughter was full of nervousness, and the father had an indifferent face.

Sabelian gazed at Blanche. It was the first time that Blanche had come to find Sabelian. She was a child who found it difficult to talk to him and to make eye contact. So, for such a child to have come to his office personally...

"What did you come for, Blanche?" Sabelian spoke, while feeling doubt.

"I-I... heard that you weren't able to come to the luncheon because you were busy...." Blanche holding a small basket.

The daughter carefully approached her father, like a child approaching a wild dog. She slowly handed him the basket. He realized that a sweet smell was wafting out of the basket. He took the cloth covering the basket off; he could see some madeleines in it.

"Because... You might not have eaten...."

Sabelian was looking into the basket, as if he was seeing something unfamiliar. He couldn't understand why Blanche had gotten him something like this. Even if he skipped a meal, he just had to call an attendant if he was hungry. He couldn't understand his daughter, who went through the trouble of visiting with something to eat. And...

"I don't like sweet things."

Madeleines, of all things. He had never eaten them, even when he was young. Blanche grew noticeably despondent from that response.

"Ah, I-I'm sorry...."

He remembered Abigail, looking at Blanche's depressed figure. He felt like he could hear the queen's voice, which had scolded him to be nicer to his daughter. Abigail would have definitely gotten angry if she had been there. Sabelian hesitated for a moment and bit into the madeleine once.

The degree of completion was brilliant, due to being created by a skilled cook, but it wasn't welcoming for Sabelian. The sweet taste on his tongue, the sweet smell that seeped into his nasal cavity. All of that was not to his liking. He chewed and swallowed it without thought. Then he took the second madeleine into his mouth. Two, three, four... after some time, he emptied the basket. Blanche was looking at his figure with surprised eyes.

"... Thank you for bringing it to me" he spoke forcefully. He didn't feel good, as the inside of his mouth was still sticky. But he wasn't showing it.

Blanche, who had a dazed face, smiled faintly. "I-I will bring something else next time!"

He closed his mouth as he was about to say that it wasn't necessary to do so. Blanche glanced at Sabelian for a moment and fiddled with her fingers. "Um, Father. I have something to say...."

"Go ahead."

Even with permission, Blanche said nothing. Her face was pale because of her nervousness. Blanche breathed deeply. She was afraid of Sabelian to the point of wanting to leave immediately, but she spoke with courage. "Yesterday... When you danced at our practice... Lady Abigail seemed incredibly sad after you left...."

Sabelian's lips moved a little at Abigail's name. It felt like the pain in his chest that had settled was coming back up. "... So, why are you talking about that?" An icy voice came out, even though he hadn't intended to be harsh.

Blanche trembled lightly at that voice, her shoulders shaking with her head down. She seemed frightened, but she didn't step back. Blanche gripped her small fists tightly, and, after raising her head with difficulty, she looked at her father. There were tears welling up in her eyes from being so frightened. "C-can't you apologize to, Lady A-Abigail?"

Sabelian looked at his terrified daughter. Blanche was trembling, as if she would collapse at any time. He knew his daughter well, that she frightened easily and was weak. It was because of this very fact that he was always concerned about Blanche.

What a king needed was reason and determination. Blanche, the child who would someday become the ruler of the country, lacked that. She would become ill if she were to be swept up by an insignificant, lingering affection.

He sought to raise Blanche strictly because of that, like how he had been brought up. Blanche, however, was unchangingly kind and cowardly. That was his greatest concern. How could he pass on the throne to a child who cried so easily and couldn't even speak her mind properly? Blanche had always been like that.

But, this time, his daughter didn't run away, nor did she turn her head elsewhere. Instead, she spoke to him. Albeit while trembling and sniffing. "W-was it because Lady Abigail did something wrong?"

"No. It's nothing like that."

"Then why were you so upset before?" Blanche asked, on the verge of tears. Sabelian hesitated to speak.

Blanche continued, sniffing every other word. "Lady Abigail is pitiful... She didn't even do anything wrong... She pretended like she was okay today, but she was probably sad...."

Sabelian couldn't understand his daughter. Abigail was a woman who had made Blanche suffer so much. She had changed into a completely different person after coming back from the dead, but it was still difficult to accept.

"Why do you care for Abigail so much?"

More than anything, Sabelian was curious as to why a child with so much fear would personally come find him and ask him to apologize.

Blanche hesitated at the question and barely spoke up. "Because Lady Abigail is... my mother...." She had stopped spilling tears at some point. Blanche faintly smiled, with her eyes slightly red. "That's why... It would be nice if Father and Mother could get along...."

Sabelian's mouth opened wide hearing that word. "mother." Only the sound of Blanche sniffing broke the silence.

Sabelian barely managed to regain his cool-headedness before he spoke. "I understand. I will apologize to Abigail. So, don't cry."

"R-really?"

"Yes."

"Will you come to the next luncheon as well...?"

"I got it. I promise."

Blanche stopped crying and smiled shyly only after getting his promise. Sabelian couldn't understand what made her so happy, to smile so brightly.

"If you don't have any other requests, go." It was a much softer voice.

Blanche bowed down deeply as a farewell and left the office.

Sabelian sighed deeply and covered his face with one hand as he heard the door close. What should he say in apology after going to Abigail? His chest hurt once more, thinking about her face.

A crescent moon was hanging in the sky. It would have been dark even if it had been a full moon, as there were many clouds. I sat on the windowsill for a moment and looked up at the moon. My feelings were complicated today, continuing from yesterday.

Sabelian hadn't come to the luncheon today. They said that he didn't take part because he was busy with work, but it was actually a relief that he hadn't come, to be honest. I tried raising my left hand and looking at it. The wedding ring on my ring finger looked shabby. I suddenly remembered the words Vérité had said yesterday.

[Hey, get divorced!] Vérité shouted in anger instead of greeting me, when I returned after finishing dance practice. He yelled as he threw a fit.

[He had come himself to practice dancing, so why did he suddenly throw a tantrum? Why hit someone?]

A laugh came out of my mouth after hearing those words. Vérité's face filled with annoyance.

[Why are you laughing?]

“It’s just nice knowing you’re getting angry for my sake.” For there to be an existence that cared about me like this, I was suddenly thankful. Vérité grumbled, turning his head away.

[You were treated unfairly, so it’s obvious to get angry. Don’t you think so?]

My chest felt like it was suddenly opened up. I also raised my voice, riding on that vigor.

“Right!? It’s really not even funny. I should have cursed at him, getting all angry!”

[He’s a terrible guy, that bastard. Divorcing him is the only solution here. Think about it seriously Bibi.]

“But would a divorce be that easy? It’s a marriage between two countries.”

[I will try to look for a method, if you want me to.] Vérité’s voice was firm. Thick books materialized within the mirror. Once then he stretched out his hand into midair opening a book among them.

[I’ve looked through human affairs, and it wasn’t like there weren’t any cancellations of marriages or any divorces between a king and queen in the past. Not being able to conceive a child, an inappropriate past existing for the other side, and not sharing a bed after marriage can all be reasons for divorcing.] Vérité puffed out his chest, as if telling me to trust him. [So tell me if you want to get a divorce. I will help you divorce him!]

I ended up laughing again, remembering his firm gaze. Vérité had asked continuously today, as well, if I had any thoughts on divorcing.

‘Divorce... divorce is it? That might be the best, if it were possible.’

The culprit that killed Abigail hadn’t been discovered yet, and the end of the fairy tale weighed on my mind as well.

‘Should I just divorce, like Vérité said? But Blanche’s situation will

bother me. I just thought that she was simply an excellent model, a cute child, but that child feels like my family now. Would she do well with Sabelian with just the two of them if I left? Wouldn't that child become lonely again if I leave? Should I just take Blanche and run away since it became like this?! Phew, I'm losing my strength at these unrealistic thoughts. Should I just live pretending like Sabelian doesn't exist?

It would be possible to live without even coming across each other like before, but... It will be a problem when we need to eat together.'

Only a sigh escaped my lips as my head drooped with all these messed-up thoughts. 'Let's go to sleep and think about it tomorrow.'

While stretching, I walked over to my bed, and stopped in place.

'... I can hear something?'

It was a silent night, where even the sound of a leaf falling could be heard. I thought that it was just the sound of the wind, but it was closer to footsteps.

'I heard a sound from the entrance... Did I imagine it? Or is it a maid? Or... Could it be the person who originally killed Abigail?'

A chill ran up my spine. I couldn't tell if I had misheard footsteps or if they were real. While I was listening carefully, I could hear someone's voice through the door.

"... Abigail. Are you sleeping?"

It was Sabelian's voice. That relieved my tension instantly, but emptiness and perplexity came at once as the tension disappeared.

'Why did that guy come all the way to my bedroom? And what was that line, like he's an ex-boyfriend or something? What kind of fight is he trying to pick this time? Should I pretend to be asleep?... No, let's decide now. I should say that we shouldn't eat together and live as separate beings.'

"I'm still awake."

"I want to have a conversation." His voice was downcast, like a wet leaf, unlike usual.

I opened the room's door. Sabelian was actually standing there. Sabelian's eyes were as clear as usual, but a faint smell of alcohol wafted. He didn't seem to be drunk, and I wouldn't have known he had drank, if it wasn't for the smell. I somehow remembered the day I went to his bedroom. Sabelian had a shocked expression at the time, but he seemed exhausted today.

"For what reason did you come, Your Majesty?" A stiff voice had involuntarily come out of my mouth. Sabelian glanced toward the inside of the room.

"May I come in?"

"..." I stayed mute.

I didn't really feel like letting him in. But it wasn't like we could talk while standing at the door, so I nodded my head. We sat down on chairs, with some distance. Midnight, bedroom, and a man and woman in sleepwear. But there was no amorous atmosphere. The room was still dark. I wondered if I should turn on more lights, but I let it be. It wasn't a face I wanted to see, anyway. Only the outline of his lips shut tightly could be seen. His lips soon parted as a voice came out.

"Yesterday...." He bit his lips once, as if hesitating for a moment. "I am really sorry" A light sigh leaves his mouth. I could see him wipe his face. "I feel like I'm saying sorry to you often."

He kept silent, as if waiting for my forgiveness. I didn't reply. He apologized often, as he had said, and I... didn't know. I didn't know if I should forgive him once again.

"Your Majesty. There is no need to apologize. You do not need to dance if you do not want to dance." My voice was stiff. Like Sabelian's.

"I understand that you properly despise me, so I will not annoy you any further. I will live in a way to not be visible to you just as Your Majesty wants. That is why, please return now and rest."

The inside of the room started becoming brighter, as if the clouds covering the moon were slowly drifting away. It was still dark. The

moonlight reached the tip of my feet and eventually illuminated Sabelian's figure. I could finally see his expression.

"Despise?" There was faint agitation mixed into Sabelian's face. "I do not despise you."

"Oh, a person who can't even handle my hand touching you?" snapping back.

"That's...." He seemed troubled. Sabelian bit down strongly on his lips and kept silent. The night wind silently came into the room. Sabelian was sitting at the window side, so his scent wafted towards me. The smell of scented oil and wine. Sabelian's scent wandered around me, like the tune of the dance music I heard in the afternoon.

"Why I pushed your hand away...." He was hesitant and confused—a rare sight for Sabelian.

The clouds covered the moon again, and a veil of darkness wrapped around us. Only after both faces were fully covered in the shroud of night did he continue. "It's not that I despise you, it's just... It's biologically impossible for me to make contact with a woman."

He spoke as if giving up. He looked like a warrior showing his vitals after taking off his armor. "Also, it seems there are many things you are misunderstanding about me, outside of that."

"What do you mean?"

"Like how I loved the previous queen, Miriam." He said Miriam's name as if it were some kind of great insult. "It would have been possible for me to dance with you today, if it wasn't for that woman."

I could feel regret and resentment in his voice. 'Did he get a phobia toward women because of his previous wife?' I finally felt some feelings of compassion. "... Are the rumors true by any chance? That Princess Blanche isn't Your Majesty's child...."

He didn't reply to the careful question. I could see him smiling, it was filled with ridicule.

'Who was that ridiculing smile for?'

“No. Blanche is my child. Since that woman wouldn't sleep with other men, going by her personality.”

“Then why do you loathe the previous queen so much?”

The conversation suddenly stopped short. Sometime later, Sabelian spoke. “Do you remember how old I am?”

“That's....”

'I heard when I first entered the palace. It was three years older than Abigail, wasn't it? Then... 26 years old. It was 26 years old. And Blanche was 11.'

I suddenly lost my words. It felt like something disgusting was crawling up my throat.

At that moment, Sabelian's voice could be heard again. “When I was 15, my midwife brought Blanche to my arms and told me that Blanche was my child.”

Chapter Eight



In this society, a child became an adult at 16 years old. On rare occasions, there were cases where people married before then—but 15 years was still too early to have a child. I imagined a 15-year-old Sabelian, the figure of a young man, embracing a newborn baby. It would look more like a big brother and a little sister than a father and daughter.

“When the previous king passed away, I was 14. I had the highest right to the throne, but I was too young. Though I may be okay now, I almost died a few times when I was young because I was frail.”

I imagined a 14-year-old Sabelian... The crown seemed too large and too heavy for a child to put on.

“My mother feared me dying. Rather to be exact, she was afraid of the bloodline of the rightful heir getting cut off.” He was calm. Like a person talking about a story unrelated to him. “My mother told me to make a child. That it was the duty of royalty.”

The unpleasant feeling in my chest grew. Sabelian didn’t stop his story. “That woman, Miriam, had the same thoughts in mind. Since her status would only become more stable if she gave birth to a prince, she considered conceiving a child to be more important, even while I was sick with a high fever....” Not a single emotion could be felt from his bleached voice.

Since he had recounted his tale, Sabelian felt nothing, as if the ashen remains of his former self had since burned away.

“... It was from then on that I shunned women. So, understand that it is entirely my fault when I say I can’t dance with you.” He lowered his head to me. His voice was careful, mixed with an apologetic tone. “I’m truly sorry for being unable to tell you ahead of time, Abigail.”

I wasn’t able to reply. No, I just couldn’t. Noticing my silence, Sabelian

continued with a small voice. “I understand. Even if you are disappointed in me, I know well enough how laughable I am. It is something that I should obviously do as the king, but to fear it? One can only describe such a thing as shameful.”

He seemed like he was mocking himself; unable to stand the sight any longer, I forcefully opened my mouth. “... No.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s definitely not something to laugh at.”

The room suddenly became awfully stuffy. My eyes burned, and something rose from my throat. “It’s not a laughable thing, and it’s certainly not Your Majesty’s fault that you became like this.”

‘That is not your fault. It was only the fault of the ones that imposed the continuation of the lineage on a sickly child. It was the crime of the one that pushed their own child into the bridal chamber like a breeding horse, and of all the ones that didn’t dissuade them.’

Everything angered me. The ones that messed up his heart, the ones that made him blame himself for saying that it was his own fault—and I was angry at myself for just assuming things. The emotions boiling up inside of me leaked out.

“... Are you crying?” Sabelian asked incredulously, as if he was doubting what he saw.

I lowered my head. Tears ran down my cheek to my chin, falling like rain.

“Why are you crying, Abigail?”

Sabelian got up from his seat and approached me. I struggled to endure it all and stop crying but failed.

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand why both you and Blanche show tears so easily at something that isn’t truly significant,” he muttered calmly.

Perhaps I wasn’t able to stop crying because he wouldn’t cry himself, but

not a single word would come out. None at all.

After a while, he came over to me.

“Please, don’t cry, Abigail. It isn’t a story I brought up to hurt you,” he said as if to comfort me, unlike his usual self.

As I was trying to stifle my tears, something cold touched my cheek. It was Sabelian’s hand. His hand was cold, like that of a person stranded on a snowy mountain. I could feel that he was trembling as his hand touched my cheek. Even so, he wiped my tears.

Realizing Sabelian was kneeling on one knee in front of me, his face looking up at mine. Blood rushed to my face, I hurriedly turned my head away and spoke. “... I’m sorry, Your Majesty.”

“About what?”

“I unnecessarily urged you to dance... I will not pressure Your Majesty into doing so any further. I will not enter your bedroom in such a manner again either.”

I remembered now how he had been gravely agitated when I had ambushed him in his bedroom. At the time, I felt he had deserved it, but now? Now I wanted to return to the past and grab myself by the collar.

I lost track of how much time passed between the two of us. The room became dark once more, as clouds gathered. Even though it was dark, I could still clearly feel Sabelian’s presence.

After what felt like an eternity in the silence, I heard his voice ring out. “There wasn’t a case where I had a chance to talk about my circumstances earlier. A wife requesting her husband to dance is also not something to apologize for. And the bedroom is....” hesitating for a moment and continued. “Making a child would be difficult but dancing... I believe it would be possible to hold hands if we practice.”

Sabelian spoke softly and carefully, as he slowly held his hand out toward me. It was in that moment that his eyes held a vague similarity to Blanche’s.

“Could you hold my hand?”

For some reason, while the hand he held out to me was large and firm, it looked as if a young Sabelian was holding his small hand out to me instead. 'Has anyone reached out to him before?'

I carefully grasped his hand as gently as I could, lightly enough that he could push my hand away if needed. Once my hand touched him, I could feel Sabelian twitch. Dozens of seconds passed by like that. He looked agonized, like a person holding a metallic doorknob heated by flames. I could feel his trembling and cold sweat, and I could see his eyes closed firmly shut as if he was enduring genuine pain. Even so, he didn't let go of my hand.

“Your Majesty, please don't overdo it.” I slowly let go of his hand.

Sabelian had become very pale in that short time. I could see his front hair sticking to his sweat-covered forehead. My instinct told me to brush it to the side, but I couldn't do so, since my hand would have to touch his face. His head drooped.

“... We probably can't live like other couples,” he muttered.

“Is that so?” I replied softly.

“Do you not resent me?”

I shook my head. It would be nice if I could hug him, and I was truly sad knowing I could not.

“Then we just have to live differently than others. We can become a family, even if we can't become a couple.”

“...”

He didn't agree out loud, but he also did not reject the idea. Sabelian sat in front of me for a long time and raised his head.

“... Tomorrow as well, may I come to hold your hand?” I could see the trembling in his eyes as he spoke, his gaze filled with fear and unease.

“Yes. It's fine.” I nodded.

“Will you allow me to come the day after as well?”

“Yes. I will allow it.”

“Every night, would it be all right for me to come to hold your hand?”

I closed my hand into a fist. The sensation of his quivering hand remained, even though his hand was gone. “Yes. It’s fine to come every night.”

I could hear the sound of bugs crying from outside the window. Sabelian, who kept silent for a long time, spoke. “I have bothered you at such a late time. Please rest well.”

He said so and got up. I didn’t escort him out. But before leaving the room, he muttered something—almost in a whisper.

“... Thank you, Abigail.” As he quietly leaves the bedroom.

The sound of bugs could still be heard clearly, as if to prove that it wasn’t a dream. The trembling sensation was left in my hand.

“My Queen, My Queen! How is this? It’s a new product of a famous dressmaker in the capital!”

“As I said, I don’t need lingerie!”

“Hng....” Clara made an expression like that of a puppy in the rain while tightening her grasp on the lingerie.

‘The lingerie she brought today was... red, is it?’

About a week had passed since Sabelian had come to my room. Since then, he had come to my room every night, as promised.

‘Well, none of the perverted things Clara imagines happened, even though he comes at night. He just grasps my hand in my room, then returns.’ Placing a hand on my waist proved a problem as well, but we agreed I would wear sturdy reinforcement under my clothes. There will not be a time where I needed to touch his waist, either. Thereafter, we practiced holding hands again. That was it. It was strangely nerve-

wracking, even though we were just holding hands.

'Did Sabelian infect me with his nervousness or something?'

He held my hand while moaning in pain every night, but the fruits of his hard work started to appear after a week. At first, it was difficult to even hold hands for a minute, but we had since been able to hold hands for over five minutes! The time we spent together was dry, but there was no way the maids would know the circumstances. If a husband visited his wife's room every night, everyone would think the same thing.

"But His Majesty never stays until morning, does he? It definitely has to be that he didn't like the lingerie!"

'This maid friend of mine, is she actually an employee of a certain lingerie store?' I released a light sigh.

"His Majesty puts more importance on the inside than on the outside. Something like lingerie wouldn't entice him."

"Hah, I see. As expected of His Majesty!"

Thankfully, it seemed like Clara believed those words. Well, if they misunderstood and thought that I had a good relationship with Sabelian, that would be fine in its own way. It seemed like our relationship was becoming better over time. He diligently participated at each meal, and he had even started talking more.

I looked out the window. A summer shower was pouring down. The day was becoming hotter. I recalled there were only about three weeks left until the country's founding festival. 'It might be possible to dance with Sabelian if we kept practicing holding hands like this.' Norma entered the room while I was enjoying the scenery that was outside the window.

"Princess Blanche has arrived, My Queen."

Blanche was peeking her head in as I looked at the door. The child laughed shyly as our eyes met. "Have you been well? Miss Abigail."

Before, she had been a child who would be on the verge of crying every time she saw me; now, she was laughing normally. She had come to meet

me, even though it wasn't one of our agreed-upon days. I happily got up from my seat. Blanche approached me as I nodded my head to allow her to come in.

"I am okay now, thanks to you. Thank you for coming, Princess Blanche. What did you come for today?"

"I, um... I chose a dress from the pictures you drew last time." Blanche carefully handing me a paper.

Ah, she selected a draft. I wonder what kind of dress our Blanche had chosen. I received the paper and opened it. '... Huh? This is?'

"Princess Blanche, is this one okay?"

It was the dress that Vérité had seen last time and commented on, saying that it was peculiar. I thought she would choose a mainstream one... It was a bit unexpected.

"It's incredibly pretty, so I wanted to try wearing it." Blanche said so with a pure smile. I was always happy for my creation to be recognized, but today was especially electrifying.

"I understand, Princess Blanche. Then I will have it completed as soon as possible."

"T-thank you. I have a lesson soon so... I will go now. I will come again next time!" Blanche nodded her head and left.

I saw that child out while waving my hand lightly. A laugh leaked out of my mouth unconsciously. "K-kukuku... Kukuku...." My heart started getting pumped up.

'Blanche will soon wear the clothes I make! It's easy as pie to create a new trend if it's based on Blanche's cuteness!'

"Norma, Clara."

"Yes, My Queen."

The two replied as a single voice. I stretched one arm forward like a general commanding an army.

“Call the best weavers and clothiers in this country! As quickly as possible!”

The clear blue sky, pierced by the rays of sunshine, heralded the coming of summer—and with it, the country’s founding festival.

To accommodate the festival, they decorated the palace. They hung a wreath made of green wheat straws in various places in the palace. The rain showers that poured down from time to time during the beginning of summer had completely disappeared. The atmosphere of the festival was gradually lifting with the clear weather. The garden was well kept, but everyone avoided the sunlight in favor of staying inside. The nobles that filled the hall were sharing amiable conversations. They were all embellished fully, wearing a dress or banquet outfits.

“It’s a bit hot this year.”

“Indeed. According to my father’s words, it seems to be the hottest summer in the past dozen years.”

The esteemed ladies conversed while fanning themselves slowly. Even though they were drinking cooled lemon water with ice, beads of sweat were still rolling down their napes under the intense heat.

While having a conversation among them, a noble’s daughter, with golden hair twisted up high, entered the hall. The ladies all approached her. “Lady Karin, you are truly beautiful today as well.”

“Lady Karin! Welcome. Would you like some canapes? Or tart, perhaps?”

A girl handed her a small plate with finger food. She was also a noble, but the girl seemed like Karin’s maid.

“Very well. I will try it.” Out of generosity, Karin took a canape the girl handed to her and ate it. Other girls spoke with shining eyes.

“Either way, Lady Karin. You have worn an amazing dress. It’s a truly beautiful dress. It looks great on you.”

“Thank you.” It was a rather shameless tone, as if it was only obvious that she was pretty. But no one minded. She was beautiful to the point that she no longer needed to be humble about it.

Her liveliness—that sort of liveliness that’s particular to teens becoming adults—was like a bunch of flowers blooming in summer. If there was a noble with the most slender waist, then it would undoubtedly be Karin. Her ample chest made her look even more captivating. On top of that, the dress that she put on today piqued the admiration of people. It was a high-class and fancy dress, even at a glance. The dress was obviously expensive, made by the designer widely said to be the most famous in the kingdom.

The clothes were definitely worth the money. The most beautiful woman in this hall would definitely be here. She shined all the more because of her pride. Duke Stoke approached from the other side while Karin was chattering with other girls. She flashed a smile.

“Ah, please excuse me. Have a good time.” She left with a brief farewell and approached her father. Duke Stoke laughed out loud.

“My lovely daughter, Karin! Are you having a good time?”

“Yes, Father. Of course.”

Duke Stoke looked at her with a proud face. But for a moment, his eyes carried a sharp glint. “It’s great that you seem cheerful. But you didn’t forget your role while chattering with those empty-headed girls, did you?”

“There’s no way that’s possible, father.” Karin was smiling brightly, even at the pointed words.

Duke Stoke spoke while holding up Karin’s chin with a finger. “Yes. You are beautiful today as well. His Majesty, the King, would favor you as well.” Duke Stoke spoke again, his anger rising. “Abigail, that woman, should have died. It’s a shame.”

Duke Stoke opened a banquet the day he heard the news that Abigail had died, and he screamed and beat up his maids when he heard Abigail revived a few days later.

“I have to make the marriage with His Majesty succeed this time for

sure....” Duke Stoke chewed on his lips.

It had been 12 years since the eldest daughter of the Stoke family, Miriam, had been wed to the former Prince—now King—Sabelian. After the previous king died of an illness, the palace fell into chaos.

Everybody was scrambling, wondering where they should pledge their displaced loyalties. Duke Stoke was also contemplating whom he should follow. At that moment, his eldest daughter Miriam visited him with a plan to get married to Sabelian.

Miriam was a woman with a greater desire for power and greed than even her father had. She considered this a chance. Duke Stoke introduced his daughter to the queen dowager. Miriam caught the queen’s fancy, and it didn’t take long for Miriam and Sabelian to get married.

The Stoke family’s power only increased as Miriam gave birth to a child. The duke was drunk in the honor his daughter had brought him, but that didn’t last long—Miriam died, only giving birth to a daughter. Rumors started flying about Sabelian potentially taking a second wife who would obviously give birth to a son. Blanche—and therefore the Stoke family—would then be pushed out of power. So Duke Stoke desperately pressed Sabelian for remarriage.

Naturally, the head of the Stoke family had offered his daughters, but Sabelian turned down all requests. He had been weak and easily swept up by other people before, but now, after Miriam’s death, the king was cold-blooded. As Duke Stoke spent years and years trying to convince Sabelian, his daughters aged in and out of their prime. He made his daughters marry into other families, like he was reselling a returned product. All he had left was Karin. The youngest and prettiest daughter. He had to marry her to Sabelian before she got older.

Karin glanced at Duke Stoke. She carefully spoke to him, as his expression didn’t look good. “Don’t worry, Father. It will go well.” Karin didn’t know what to do, as her father might get angry.

Duke Stoke loosened his expression only after looking at his daughter glancing at him. “Yes, It will. Who could love that wretched witch? You

would be far better, no matter who looks at it.”

Red gums appeared as Duke Stoke smiled. It was a smile full of heinous desire, like a beast showing its fangs. “Then I will go to greet some other family heads. Keep your purpose in mind.”

“Yes, Father.” Karin politely seeing her father off.

Duke Stoke joined up with the other nobles, and a hearty laugh could soon be heard at a distance. Karin departs to the hall as Duke Stoke leaves. Upon her return, the girls who had been conversing with Karin approached her once again.

“Right, Lady Karin. Do you have your first dance set up? My brother wishes to have a dance with Lady Karin—”

“I’m sorry, but that would be a bit difficult.” Thinking the only person who could dance with her was King Sabelian. She wasn’t able to gain his interest last year, but it would be different this year. Karin smiled brightly as she spoke words of refusal.

The girls that saw her smile seemed surprised. Some of them started exchanging glances. One girl carefully started speaking. “Ah yes, we will be going to the dressing room in a moment; would you like to come along? It seems like we have to fix our makeup a bit, you see.”

“I will follow a little later. Please go ahead first.” There was a will of refusal in Karin’s smile. The hesitating girls left first in the end.

As the girls disappeared, Karin’s face hardened. Those girls were daughters of counts at the most. There was nothing to gain, even if she hung out with them. She was a woman who would become part of royalty, as her father had said. She couldn’t waste her time with people without influence. Yet, she wanted to go to the dressing room as well. It felt like her makeup was melting off her face because of the sweat. ‘It’s unusually hot this year.’

Her clothes, layered one upon another, were keeping in the heat. Her feet and legs ached as well because of the high heels. The temperature already made it difficult to breathe, but it was even more difficult because of the

corset. She wanted to rest. But the King might come out if she left. She had to endure until then. She didn't know when he would arrive. He would obviously say that she was the most beautiful if he saw her. Finally, as she looked around expectantly, the musicians stopped playing.

“The Moon of the Kingdom, Her Majesty Abigail Friedkin, and the Star of the Kingdom, Princess Blanche Friedkin, are entering.”

Abigail and Blanche entered the hall with the sound of trumpets. The crowd started raising a commotion the moment the two appeared. “Oh my, what in the world is that outfit?”

I could feel the people looking at me. Their small, whispering voices could be heard clearly as well.

I inspected the outfits of the people, and just as I expected, there was no dress similar to the ones Blanche and I were wearing. The pink dress I wore didn't have a corset or a pannier. The white inner cloth naturally dropped down to give off a soft yet comfortable look. The name of this dress was the *Chemise a la Reine*. It was a dress that was brought into being and popularized by Queen Marie Antoinette. It didn't constrict the body, unlike a corset and pannier, but it still had an elegant feel.

Also, the dress's material was lightweight. It was made with silk or thin muslin, so there wasn't much of a burden, even if worn in summer. It was beautiful, but it seemed a bit normal to be worn in a public location. Frills and decorations were added en masse to make it look fancy.

Meanwhile, a white *Chemise* dress had been made for Blanche, taking the body of a child into consideration. It put a focus more on comfort than on beauty, but it was still lovely. Several layers of ruffle collars were attached to the neck part. It was like a white flower with thin petals. It was even more adorable, as a pink ribbon was used to highlight the outfit's trim.

Clara and Norma had complimented it, saying that it was a pretty and original outfit. But unease suddenly overcame me, as I received the gazes of so many people.

'Did the maids only give good reviews? Did I do something unnecessary? Should I just have worn an ordinary dress? Thinking about it, the reason this dress was popular was because Marie Antoinette wore it! Would people accept it just because I wore it?'

While I was wondering if I should return and change into another one, someone grabbed my arm. Blanche was holding me when I looked down. That child whispered something in a small voice.

"Lady Abigail, this dress is so wonderful. Thank you for giving me such a pretty dress." Blanche's cheeks were flushing red. Wearing a swaying white dress, she was literally an angel.

'Yeah! Even if the one I am wearing isn't good, the one Blanche is wearing is super cute! They wouldn't be able to curse Blanche, even if they cursed me!'

I moved forward, believing Blanche. I straightened my back and looked at the people. I addressed the crowd with a composed tone. "I truly thank everyone who is participating in our Country's founding festival like this. I hope that everyone will be blessed, like how the sun is brightening the future of the kingdom."

I received a glass of champagne and slightly raised it up.

"For the prosperity of Nergen, cheers."

"C-cheers!"

"For Her Majesty Abigail and Princess Blanche's glory!"

The people that belatedly got themselves together raised their glasses. I was able to take a breather since the toast speech was completed.

'Whew, what I had to do is finally over.' I looked around at my surroundings.

It wouldn't matter even if I went to my seat immediately, but I wanted to have a conversation with the female nobles. It felt like Abigail's reputation among the nobles was still bad. I could tell just by looking at the gazes on me.

'Hmm, I still want to get along with the noble daughters though. Should I try talking to one of them?'

I looked around and approached a young girl. Her name was—

"Miss Weitley. Thank you for coming like this."

"Y-yes? How does My Queen know my name?" With a look of shock on her face, Weitley responded. Looking at the trembling girl, I felt like a delinquent who came to pocket some money.

'Why do I feel like I'm the one being wronged here?' I spoke gently while trying to maintain my expressionless face as much as possible.

"I remember since you came last year as well."

"Ah, I-I see. Th-thank you...." She was still nervous. Glancing around, the other girls didn't even dare to come near us.

Weitley was smiling, but it was an expression that was asking me to spare her, no matter how one looked at it.

'Urk, as expected, an amiable conversation is impossible.'

Sadly, an innocent girl would be brought to tears at this rate, so I decided to fall back in the end.

"It's great that you're doing well. I hope you have a good time during the country's founding festival. Well, then." I walked away while pretending to be cool as much as possible. But, internally, I wanted to cling to her.

'Uuhuk, I also wanted to talk with people! I wanted to share trending clothes or makeup methods! I'm sad, so sad. When will I get a friend?'

Another quick glance around the hall I see several girls gathering far away, as I went to my seat slowly. These were young girls in their mid-teens. I could hear the girls giggling as they approached Blanche.

"Princess Blanche! Have you been well?"

"The princess is beautiful today as well."

"Th-thank you...." Blanche was surrounded by girls, grinning widely at her shy figure.

'Hu, our Blanche's cuteness, is world-class as expected. I want to join in there... But peeking in from a distance is all I can do.'

I swallowed my tears, listening to the cheerful voices of the girls. 'Should I just play with the veterans, then?' At that moment, I heard a girl's voice.

"Either way, Princess Blanche. There's something I would like to ask...."

"Ah, yes? Please." With a bit of hesitation in her voice, the girl spoke up.

"That dress is a design I haven't seen before. Which designer created it? It's so original and pretty!" The girl's eyes shined.

'Hm? What? Is she trying to flatter Blanche?' But the other girls had similarly shining eyes as they spoke.

"Yes. Who in the world was the designer that made this? It would be a skilled artisan, no?"

"The princess's insight is truly amazing since she chose such a designer!"

'Hm, ahem. That designer is me though.'

I became happy and embarrassed at the same time, overhearing the compliments. I barely suppressed myself before I let a grin slip out. Blanche seemed as happy as I was. That child spoke with a proud voice. "Right? Isn't it pretty? Lady Abigail designed it!"

The eyes of the girls went wide at those words, like people who heard something they simply couldn't believe.

"The Queen designed a dress?"

"Yes! L-Lady Abigail!"

At that moment, Blanche found me and ran toward me. The child fell into my skirt with a pure smile. "Lady Abigail. Everyone complimented the dress that Lady Abigail designed!"

"Is-is that so?" 'I actually heard it all just now, but I feigned ignorance.'

The girls looked at me with surprised eyes and cautiously approached me. Miss Weitley was mixed in between them as well.

"M-My Queen. That's amazing! To personally design clothes for the

princess....”

“They are truly beautiful clothes. The set that the two of you are wearing suits each other so well.”

Their faces were a bit stiffer than when they were speaking with Blanche, but there was curiosity mixed in with their wariness.

Blanche smiled brightly. “On top of that, this dress doesn’t need a corset or pannier, so it’s incredibly cool and light.”

“It doesn’t need a corset or pannier?” The girls were surprised, so they asked again.

An odd sense of desperation could be felt from the gazes that were inspecting Blanche’s clothes. I think I could figure out what that feeling was. Honestly, it felt as if their waists could be grasped with a single hand, with how tightly their corsets had been tightened.

“I’m jealous. How cool and comfortable it must be....” Envy was practically dripping down from their voices.

It was difficult to even wear a brassiere in midsummer, but they had on underwear, corsets, panniers, and dresses on top of all that. I inspected the girls for a moment. There were about five girls gathered. If it was that many...

I spoke without hesitation. “I can give you each a Chemise dress as a present if you would like.”

The designs already existed, and the creation could be left to the makers. Five wouldn’t be so difficult.

“Yes? My Queen will?” It seemed like the girls were getting flustered.

I remembered when I said to my maids when I told them they could wear whatever they wanted. They seemed to be confused as to whether they should trust me or not.

One girl carefully spoke. “... May we truly receive such grace?”

I could see streams of sweat forming on her neck. She reminded me of a person looking for water in a desert. It seemed like the exhaustion from the

heat produced by their garments was greater than their fear toward me.

“Yes. Of course.” Nodding my head.

“Thank you. My Queen is truly kind....”

“My Queen, may I receive the present as well?”

“... I as well!”

The other girls all started requesting a dress from me one after another, after the one started it off. It seemed their wariness was lowered because they were still young.

Blanche was looking at me with a satisfied face. It was an expression that expressed so much pride that she didn't know what to do. 'How could she have such a deep heart?'

At that moment, the music in the hall suddenly started changing. It was a group tune, and Blanche's eyes shined. “Lady Abigail! It's group music...!”

It was good to get friendly with the girls, but dancing with Blanche was important as well! I bid farewell to my new friends. “Then I will send the presents to your residences. Well, then. Princess Blanche, let us go dance.”

“Yes!”

I held Blanche's hand tightly as we headed to the hall floor. There were quite a few people gathered in the hall, but space sharply appeared as Blanche and I entered. We took a spot while the music stopped. Blanche lightly held her dress and spread it wide to both sides giving a small curtsy.

“Lady Abigail, please take care of me.”

The widely spread white dress looked like the wings of an angel. She was also wearing the white shoes I had given her as a present a while ago.

'Huhuk, it was worth designing and choosing the cloth all night! Everyone look at my child! Look at her! this child is this cute!'

Following Blanche, I also gave a light greeting. Just then, the music started. The instrument's sounds filled the air with a cheerful and lighthearted atmosphere.

As we had practiced, we held hands and started stepping the steps. Blanche danced lightly. Her movements were graceful, but her happy, smiling face was far too pretty. Blanche's white dress fanned open each time she spun. Resembling the shape of a flower flying in the wind.

Everyone was looking at Blanche as if in a trance. Judging from their reactions, it seems they are fully possessed. I was fine because I had seen her dance ahead of time, but I would have screamed and freaked out if today was the first time.

Blanche, after spinning around me one last time, held my hand again. We looked at each other's faces and took the final stance in a friendly manner. Clapping erupted from the onlookers as the dance ended.

“Amazing!”

“The both of you are so pretty!”

'Heh, they all have cuteness-overload expressions. Behold! I let all under heaven know of Blanche's cuteness like this!'

Since the next tune was a piece of social dance music for gentlemen and ladies, Blanche and I moved to the side to let other people have their time. Stepping off the floor, I couldn't help eavesdropping on the people conversing around us.

“It was an extremely lovely dance! How could one be so beautiful....”

“The matching clothes are so pretty too!”

Thankfully, there was nothing said about me being scary. It felt like Blanche was too cute and pure that it was rubbing off on me. I was receiving Blanche's grace. 'I'm satisfied, so very satisfied.'

One woman approached behind me while I was concentrating on the conversations. “Have you been well, My Queen?”

A golden-haired, pretty lady greeted me. If Blanche were a puppy or a rabbit, should I say this child looked like a cat? It was a face I recalled seeing somewhere. 'If I remembered correctly, this person was... Ah, right... She was Karin of the Stoke family?!'

“Karin. Are you enjoying the party?” Abigail spoke with an attitude full of dignity, befitting a queen. She was calm, even with her opponent in front of her.

“Yes. Thanks to you. Your dancing truly left a deep impression.” Karin said while smiling brightly. She was hiding her emotions well, with a wiliness far beyond her age, but a fire was burning up inside of her.

Karin had been monopolizing the gazes in the hall before Abigail and Blanche’s mother-daughter dance came into the picture. All the men had been looking at Karin with entranced expressions, trying their best to start a conversation with her.

But the people fell into a daze as soon as Abigail and Blanche appeared. The duo’s dresses were matching, as well.

Karin had put a great deal of effort into preparing her dress for the day, but she had been easily undone because Abigail was wearing clothes that Karin was seeing for the first time in her life.

The entourage of girls that had stuck to Karin before were now all around the queen. Karin was disgusted. Before, they all shared a fellowship of speaking ill of Abigail together, but for their attitude to change so much after receiving the promise of a single dress? It was simply too much for Karin’s simple ego. Her anger began to swell, but Karin remained composed outwardly, displaying a beautiful fake smile.

“Either way, where is His Majesty? It seems he didn’t come together with you?” Speaking with a naïve-sounding and nonchalant tone.

A mere noble family’s daughter had thrown a question shamelessly to the queen—even the question’s subject matter was audacious. The girls around the queen, even some of which were part of Karin’s inner-circle, were shocked at the sudden rude question. Yet Karin stood there still all smiles cheek-to-cheek.

She had heard that Abigail had changed her ways and that the said change had made Blanche and King Sabelian open up their hearts. But for

a woman such as that witch, that was clearly impossible. It was far more likely that the king was being tricked by that wicked woman. King Sabelian would come back to his senses if she made that woman's true nature appear again; only then would he finally look at Karin.

"His Majesty should have seen the dance just now as well, such a shame." The voice may have been pure in tone, but the heart of it was a pure mockery. The meaning was closer to, 'Why did you come alone without Sabelian, the king?'

The veiled insult should not have passed easily, especially with Abigail's fiery personality—but Abigail replied in a composed tone as if she didn't care. "Is that so? It seems he's late facing the delegations."

This woman would have let out a shrill voice if it had been the personality of Abigail in the past whom most are familiar with, but it seemed she would not show her true self that easily. Karin decided to press into the wound a bit more.

"I see. Then His Majesty would obviously dance wonderfully, like the one you have just shown, I presume?" There was a sharp thorn in her words. Karin made a provocative smile. 'Now, get angry, Abigail.'

It would be her victory if Abigail dared to retaliate, but Abigail's hand did not even twitch. Instead, the queen just sent a condescending gaze.

"Hmmm? I wonder. I'm not sure. He would dance if His Majesty wishes, I suppose."

"Oh my, I see. I had hoped that you two would dance. I was disappointed when I wasn't able to see it last year."

Abigail didn't respond to those words. She just stared at Karin with a blank expression.

It was true that Karin was waiting for the queen to get angry, but she couldn't help the feeling of immense pressure baring down on her amid the ominous silence. Karin swallowed at the queen's dominating gaze. At that moment, Abigail sharply replied. "Karin."

"Y-yes?" Suddenly, a chill bolted down her spine.

“I have something I wish to talk about. It would be nice if we could change locations.” It was a voice that seemed like it would freeze Karin’s heart and soul.

“H-how about we talk about it here?” Cold sweat flowed down the girl’s back.

“You would be troubled if I say it here, though.” The threat reached only Karin’s ears. She didn’t know whether she should be happy or despairing that she had awakened the beast.

“I-I understand.” Was she trying to reprimand her in a place without people? The other girls only exchanged glances without words.

Abigail took Karin and left the hall, leaving those girls behind. The path leading out to the back was a desolate hallway. Only the hot summer sunlight came in through the windows.

What in the world was Abigail trying to do to her? Karin became increasingly scared. It was dangerous to go too further. She stopped short and spoke towards Abigail’s back.

“My Queen. What were you going to say...?” Karin tried to maintain her calm, but her voice sounded stuffy and stilted. Karin’s breathing stopped once Abigail looked back.

Abigail’s expression was colder more fiercely than usual. It seemed she was greatly angered by what Karin had said before.

“Karin. I was wondering whether I should say this or not, but....”

Would this be the death sentence from the grim reaper? Karin waited for Abigail’s words while trembling. Abigail looked around and approached Karin.

A chilling voice seeped into Karin’s ear.

“Please listen without misunderstanding. Your...”—Karin waited for the words while trembling.—“... front teeth...”—The queen would pull out her front teeth?!—“... has caviar stuck in it.”

“... Yes?”

'Caviar?' Karin thought that she had heard wrong, but Abigail spoke with a firm tone. "There's caviar stuck in it. A lot of it."

Karin had eaten a canape with caviar on it, but did the queen call her out just to say such a thing?

"I was not going to say it since you might be ashamed, but it felt like you would be more troubled if it was left alone."

Abigail raised her locket necklace. She opened the necklace with a click, revealing a mirror within the locket.

"Have a look." Handing the mirror necklace to Karin. Karin peered gingerly into the mirror.

"..."

"..."

An awkward silence ensued. Karin returned the mirror and covered her mouth with a fan. Her face blushed furiously.

"I-I will excuse myself first!" Karin left the hallway almost at running speed. The heels on the marble almost sounded like a rain of bullets.

Abigail looked on at that fleeing figure disappearing into the distance with a serious face.

Chapter Nine



“As expected, should I have not said that?” I looked at Karin desperately running away. She disappeared at the speed of light, despite wearing high heels.

I let out a long sigh. “I should have just said that we should have a glass of water or something.”

[There was a bit too much to take care of with water.] Vérité’s voice could be heard from the necklace.

Shaking my head, I sighed again. “That’s true.”

I felt complicated thinking about Karin’s face again; her face had been bright red, all the way to her earlobes. She seemed to have been just that ashamed.

[Either way, why did you tell her?] Vérité asked, with a lukewarm tone.

“What?”

[That there was caviar stuck in her teeth. She is the daughter of Duke Stoke. Practically, you should have let her be embarrassed.]

His question was too reasonable, so I wasn’t able to answer easily.

The Stoke family and I were in a hostile relationship. Karin was also blatantly keeping me in check as well, so I had no reason to help her. I could have left her to be shamed like Vérité said, or I could have said it in front of everyone.

“She’s still young.”

How old was she again, 16? Karin had just become an adult, but she looked young to me. Maybe, because of that, I was finding it a bit difficult to treat her harshly.

[Oh boy, how are you going to live through this harsh world with such a

soft heart?]

“Whew. Tell me about it. A certain useful mirror will take care of it, I guess.”

[How much are you going to leave... Hold on....] Vérité suddenly cut his words off. After a moment, he carefully whispered to me.

[... There is someone hidden there,] he gestured. [behind the pillar.]

'Behind the pillar?' I looked around after hearing that. Indeed, someone's shadow could be seen beyond the pillar, just as Vérité said.

'Who in the world is it?' I thought. Looking closer, I could faintly see black hair in the shadow. Pondering for a moment, I spoke toward the pillar.

“Hello, who is by the pillar over there? Please come out.” Silence followed. But after a moment, the shadow moved. A familiar, black-haired man came out from behind the pillar.

“... Hello, Your Majesty. I didn't think I would see you like this.”

I almost mistook him as Sabelian for a moment. It was a face that looked like his. Either way, his black hair was long enough to reach his waist, and his eyes were glowing in a warm golden color.

“I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking about listening secretly.”

“... It has been a while, Sir Raven.”

Raven Friedkin. An illegitimate child of the former king and Sabelian's elder brother.

'Wow, I really can't get used to it. His face is too much like Sabelian's.'

“I didn't know there would be someone here” I added carefully. Noticing he had an awkward smile on.

'Did he hear the conversation with Karin just now? No, more than that... Did he hear the conversation between me and Vérité?' I inspected his face, but he was only smiling.

Raven spoke in an amiable tone. “I also didn't think that someone would

come here... For it to be My Queen at that....” Raven dragged on the end of his words and looked at me. His eyes curved in a friendly manner.

“You are wearing a wonderful dress. It looks good on you.”

It was a fresh and honest tone. They were born from different mothers and had appearances similar to twins, but Sabelian’s and Raven’s personalities were different, as if they were strangers.

‘Was it possible for Sabelian to laugh like that?’

I stopped imagining it. It felt weird trying to imagine his smile.

“Thank you, Sir Raven. Either way, what were you doing here?”

“I was hiding away from the crowd for a moment. I dislike their attention, you see.” He said so, as if it embarrassed him.

As I thought about it, I remembered that Raven didn’t appear in public all that much. It seemed to be because of his status as an illegitimate child. His claim to the throne was rather weak, but he would become the next king if a problem occurred with Sabelian and Blanche.

It was because of this that he really couldn’t have a good relationship with Sabelian. Although, the relationship between the two was peaceful enough because Raven did nothing to stand out.

“On another note, do you need a dance partner this year as well? My Queen.”

“This year as well...?”

Ah, come to think of it, Abigail danced with Raven during last year’s country founding festival.

There were several rules to dancing in this country, one of which was that a noble’s first dance had to be with a member of the same family or with a lover. If that wasn’t it, then they had to dance with someone they favored.

Abigail obviously had to dance with Sabelian first. But Sabelian turned down her request. Abigail selected Raven as her first dance partner because of that. She didn’t have the personality to just look on the entire time, after

all.

Raven had been sitting quietly in a corner back then as well. Abigail half forcefully dragged Raven out, despite the fact that he had been peacefully drinking champagne.

He had obediently danced with Abigail, even though it was a rather rude request. It was quite embarrassing though.

“It’s fine, Sir Raven. I don’t think I want to dance this year.”

“Ah... is that so?” He smiled, half in relief, and half emptily. His slightly lowered gaze seemed sorrowful somehow.

“It’s a bit of a shame. I expected that I could dance with My Queen again this year....”

‘Eh? What’s this all about now?’

“Didn’t you not like mingling with people?”

“Yes. But I felt like My Queen might need a dance partner. And—” Raven then raised his head to look at me. He had warm, golden eyes, unlike Sabelian’s cold, blue eyes. “—It was fun dancing with My Queen.” He said sounding a bit embarrassed.

‘Come to think of it, the expression Raven has when he smiles is a lot like Blanche’s. So it’s not because of nothing that the rumor that Raven is Blanche’s actual father is going around, especially since their appearance and personalities are so similar.’

I started feeling guilty thinking about Blanche. ‘Would Raven be alone in the hallway if I left him?’

I momentarily contemplated whether I should dance with him or not.

‘Would it be alright this year, since I did so last year? Sabelian might not mind that....’

“Sir Raven.” I could hear a familiar voice from behind. It was a familiar voice with an even more familiar chill. As I looked back, Sabelian was standing there. A turbulent atmosphere was surrounding him for some reason. “What are you saying to the Queen right now?”

It felt like daggers of ice had filled the air. Sabelian was showing clear hostility. The target of his animosity wasn't me though, but his own brother.

Yet, surprisingly enough, Raven didn't avoid Sabelian's stare. Their gazes practically clashed visibly in the air. Even though it was midsummer, I could feel the air temperature drop rapidly.

'No, what is this atmosphere? I know the two don't have a good relationship, but... It feels like something will happen at this rate.'

While I was glancing at them, Raven opened his mouth. "Have you been well, Your Majesty, the King? My Queen didn't seem to have a dance partner, so I only requested to be her partner." It was a polite and gentle tone, like when he had faced me.

Raven had a good person's smile, but Sabelian didn't smile. A fight might really have occurred, so I carefully spoke. "Yes. It's true. Sir Raven did ask me for a dance."

"... I see." Only then did Sabelian let out a deep sigh. It seemed like his expression became softer. He got in between me and Raven, as if to protect me.

"Thank you, Sir Raven. But it's fine since she will dance with me this year." It was a clear-cut tone.

'He minded little when it was said that we had danced together last year, but why is he like this, this year?'

Raven's gaze fell on me for a moment. He made a virtuous smile and lowered his head. "I see. That's a relief. Then I will return now. Please have a good time." He left the hallway without regret.

I stood there as the tension in air finally dissipated, but I was still a little confused. Breaking the awkward silence left from Raven's departure, Sabelian spoke after letting out a small sigh. "Did nothing happen?"

"Ah, yes. We just had a conversation. Either way, how did you know to come here?"

“I asked the servants, since I couldn’t see you.”

'He purposely came to look for me? Why?' He avoided my gaze, as I looked up at him with eyes full of suspicion.

“It would be troubling if the Queen leaves for a long time during the country’s founding festival. Let’s return now.”

Certainly, I left for a long time. Even so, it was unexpected for him to come personally, instead of sending servants.

I remembered Raven, who had left obediently, while I silently followed behind Sabelian. Honestly, I hadn’t seen Sabelian be wary of someone so much before. Of course, he put me at a distance as well, but... should I say the feeling was different?

If there were wariness and fear in the gaze towards Abigail, then it was only unpleasantness for Raven.

I would wonder why he hated him so much if there weren’t so many reasons to have a poor relationship. There was the problem with succession, and the rumor that Raven was the true father of Blanche was going around, after all.

After losing myself in thought for a while, we eventually came upon the hall entrance.

“It would be best to not be that close to Count Raven.” He tossed a comment out right before entering.

'I should keep a distance from Count Raven? Why?'

I wanted to ask, but we couldn’t have a conversation, as we already arrived at the hall. The people lowered their heads in greeting as we entered. As we passed, they split to either side making a path. They placed a decorated throne full of dignity at the very front of the hall, and there placed on both sides were glamorous chairs. Those were Blanche’s and my own, and Blanche was already sitting in her seat.

“Lady Abigail! I was worried because you took so long.”

“Princess Blanche, have you been having a good time? Weren’t you

tired?”

“Yes, and no! These clothes are incredibly light so it’s not hot, and it’s comfortable.”

Blanche grabbed the skirt and waved it around. Sabelian stared at the outfit and spoke. “It’s the first time I’ve seen this dress style. Which designer made it?”

‘Hm, it wouldn’t matter if I’m honest here, right?.’

“It’s a dress I came up with” I spoke after hesitating for a moment.

“It’s you, Abigail?” He seemed to be a bit surprised. I could feel him looking at mine and Blanche’s clothes with more care. “I didn’t know you had such talent.”

“... Are you mocking me?”

“There’s no way.”

He seemed like he was mocking me... I glared at him for a moment and turned my gaze.

A light tune was flowing in the hall. I could see young girls around their mid-teens dancing around while giggling.

Sabelian was looking straight ahead while drinking wine. Millard, who had been standing behind him, whispered something into his ear. I couldn’t tell what they were talking about, but Sabelian’s expression stiffened.

He turned his gaze and looked at me and then turned his head to look at Blanche before speaking.

“Blanche.”

“Y-yes?”

“Follow me.”

‘Why was he looking at me...?’

It was a sudden call. Sabelian walked down, while Blanche forgot to reply in her fluster.

The people then started to divide to either side, as if avoiding a wild beast. Sabelian spoke with an indifferent tone, as Blanche still looked at him with confused eyes.

“Did we not promise to dance tonight?”

A silence befell instantly. Sabelian was waiting for Blanche with a calm face. “It’s fine if you don’t want to dance.”

“N-no!” Blanche finally hurriedly went down to the hall. The two looked at each other without words.

Sabelian put his hand forward.

A father gave his hand to his daughter. It was a normal and obvious action, but it greatly moved me for some reason. Blanche, who had been hesitating, carefully grasped his hand.

The music soon started once more. The father and daughter danced to uplifting music. Blanche was using too much strength and became stiff like a wooden doll, but even that looked adorable.

Blanche wanted to dance with Sabelian, so it was a wonderful thing. While I was feeling proud looking at the pair, someone approached me from the side.

“I am truly thankful.”

The one who said so without context was Millard. Glancing to the side, he was looking out at the dance floor, his hands behind his back.

“Why so, Sir Millard?”

“His Majesty and Princess Blanche became closer thanks to My Queen, no?”

I carefully looked at Millard. ‘Is he the Millard I knew? It was worth living long, seeing Millard thank me and all.’

“That’s unexpected. I thought that Sir Millard didn’t like me much, though.”

“...” He didn’t deny it.

I let a soft laugh leak out. It was more comfortable to see this side of Sir Millard, where I could see right through him. “Well, it’s not like I dislike Sir Millard in particular, though.”

He didn’t reply this time either. I thought about looking at his expression, but I didn’t in the end. He must have had a bitter expression.

As the music ended, and applause filled the hall. Blanche’s face was full of joy. That lovely child bowed to the ever-cold Sabelian and hurriedly dashed toward me.

“Lady Abigail, Lady Abigail! Did you see it? I-I didn’t make a mistake and danced to the end!”

‘Well done, well done, my child!’ I wanted to pinch her squishy cheek, looking at her excited face.

“Very well done, Princess Blanche. His Majesty is probably happy as well.”

I would have been more indiscreet if there weren’t any people. I was patting Blanche with a proud look, when Sabelian approached as well.

“Your Majesty, it was a truly excellent performance.”

“It wasn’t much.” His expression was indifferent, even though he just received a compliment. He stood in front of me like a statue for a moment.

‘Why is he acting like this, without talking?’

The moment I was going to ask, Sabelian put his hand forward. It was his bare hand without wearing gloves.

“I would like to dance with you this time.”

“Yes...? Wait. What? With My Queen?!”

I could hear Millard’s shocked voice. He seemed like he couldn’t understand this situation. Certainly, this man wouldn’t know about my and Sabelian’s special lessons.

Sabelian only glared at Millard for a moment, but he didn’t answer. He still had his hand stretched out toward me, though. It was a firm and

straight hand. Well-shaped, beautiful fingers extending out. The fingers that had desperately held on to me every night.

I could see his fingers shaking from nervousness.

“It’s fine to not overdo it, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not overdoing it.”

I met his eyes, serious eyes full of determination. Sabelian slightly bent his back and whispered in my ear.

“I would like to dance with you tonight, no matter what.”

If he had solidified his determination, then I had no choice but to respond to that determination in kind. I reached out, held his hand, and I could feel that Sabelian’s hand was cold. He was trembling, but he didn’t push my hand away.

We silently came down to the hall floor. Millard was still looking at us with a blank face. The other people however were different, they were looking at us with surprised faces.

“His Majesty is dancing...?”

“With My Queen at that?”

“He had never danced before though...!”

I became even more nervous after hearing that. Among the crowd, I could feel a piercing gaze while I was breathing deeply. I looked around to find the owner of the gaze, finding three people staring at me with a fiery expression.

One was Lord Moize. He seemed pretty surprised.

‘Whew, it seems the scolding will reduce a bit, looking at that expression.’ The other two stares were from Duke Stoke and Karin.

‘Hmm, it seems she has thankfully gotten the caviar out.’

I tried to help her in my own way, but Karin didn’t seem to be well. Karin’s eyes were burning with envy. To think that I would receive such a gaze. It was a gaze that had nothing to do with my past life.

I felt like I would feel proud if I received a gaze of jealousy, but it wasn't as refreshing as I thought.

Being under someone's hostile gaze practically hurt my skin. It felt like my body was stiffening, as if their glares would petrify me under their jealousy and anger.

By the time I snapped out of my thoughts, there was only Sabelian and me in the entire hall. Everyone was looking at me. A gaze of doubt, a gaze of moderate shock, and more gazes...

Now that I think about it, it's my first time dancing with a man in a place with this many people...

I... will I be able to do well?

Someone grabbed my hand while I was hesitating.

"Abigail."

Sabelian held my hand. It was a firm yet tough hand. I remembered how he'd blocked Raven in front of me before. Then, and now, I felt like I was being protected. I could hear Sabelian's low voice.

"It's alright. Please don't get nervous."

I could only pull myself together after hearing his voice, and I suddenly realized his hand was still trembling. He was nervous, but he still comforted me, saying that it was alright to not be nervous. That fact made me feel thankful, and it even felt cute. To think of another when he was also nervous.

"Thank you. I'm fine now."

The gazes of the Stoke daughter-and-father pair were still painful, but I could ignore it. Sabelian gazed at the musicians and soon after nodded his head.

Then the music started. A calm and gentle tune. I counted the beats internally and moved my feet, matching the rhythm... 'Huh?'

I stopped in place before moving my foot.

Sabelian wasn't moving.

The music continued without stopping. Only Sabelian and I were paused, like a frozen moment in time.

I could feel the gazes full of doubt from the people. I could see Sabelian chewing his lower lips. His shoulder trembled faintly.

"I'm sorry, Abigail. A moment, just a moment...."

'Ah, was it overdoing it, as expected?'

He was still holding my hand in the meantime. I glanced at him and signaled for the musicians to stop playing.

"We missed the beat. Please start over." I looked back at the people after saying so.

"Wouldn't you all dance together? The hall is far too wide for just us."

Sabelian seemed to be more nervous since everybody was focusing on us, and it would be better if there were others beside us. People exchanged glances amongst themselves, but nobody stepped up easily. At that moment, I could hear a familiar voice among the crowd.

"Father, dance with me!"

"C-Clara?"

It was Clara's voice. Clara's father, visibly flustered, got pulled out by his daughter. "Norma, you should dance together as well! Let's go!"

"... Yeah." Norma came out to the hall, following Clara. Her dance partner seemed to be one of her brothers.

'Norma, Clara....' To be the first pair to come out would have been terribly embarrassing. It felt like my heart was ringing with a zing. I could feel the stiff atmosphere loosening as two pairs came out.

Others started coming to the hall one by one. I calmly whispered to Sabelian. "What will you do? It's alright to stop. It should be alright to slip out, since people have gathered."

"... No. I would like to try dancing. You would be in trouble if we don't

dance here.”

Lord Moize and Karin’s daughter and father were still looking at us, so I nodded my head and pulled him toward me gently.

“I understand. Then please believe in me, Your Majesty. I will take care of everything.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t think that we’re dancing and just follow my lead. It’s fine to make mistakes. That’s why, please just think about enjoying it while relaxing.”

Abigail’s dancing ability was worth boasting about, after all! If one side was a veteran, the other side could be covered even if they were a novice.

‘It should work out if I do well to take the lead. Just trust big sis, Sabelian. Big sis will take care of it!’

As the music started once more, people started moving at the same time. I focused all my attention on pulling rather strongly at Sabelian’s hand.

He slowly started following my lead. He moved his foot to one side, matching the music. First, to the left, move two steps! Sabelian followed my steps with a serious face. There were times when he paused for a moment, but he soon seemed like he was calming down. ‘Yeah, yeah. You’re doing well.’ I carefully looked at Sabelian. His face was very focused. The trembling that I felt from his hand unnecessarily made my heart pound.

‘A day when I danced with Sabelian like this had come, huh?’

While I had been deep in thought, my body staggered as it swayed unconsciously. My dress seemed to have been stepped on by something, and, turning, I could see the face of the smiling Karin.

When did she come to the hall? Did she step on it on purpose? No, that wasn’t important. I was about to fall...!

‘Ah, whatever. I’m the only one that would be shamed if I fall!’

I closed my eyes tightly. But, at that moment, someone pulled on my

waist. I hugged a sturdy embrace instead of crashing into the floor.

It was Sabelian's embrace.

I felt an unexpected sense of relief. But I only felt relief for a moment, and perplexity soon came to me instead. He was a person who trembled just holding hands, but a hug?! Wouldn't he faint or something?!

"I-I'm sorry. I made a mistake." My heart beat wildly. I belatedly pushed him away. As expected, his face was pale. 'Should we stop at this point? What should I do?'

Sabelian spoke while I was looking at his expression. "Your skills seem to be lacking, to say that you would take care of it."

'What, you bastard? It's because Karin stepped on me!' I glared at him with a wronged feeling. He let a small laugh escape his lips.

"Your expression is better than before."

I realized a little later that he had picked a fight with me on purpose. My tension was released ironically, looking at that hateful figure.

Sabelian seemed to be the same. His expression wasn't good, but his face seemed more relaxed. He just held my hand.

"Dancing... Are you going to stop dancing?"

"... No way." I responded to the provocative question with a smile. Sabelian was enduring, so it wasn't like I could stop. I started matching his breathing once more.

The tempo of the music gradually became faster. Sabelian's dancing was becoming better while people dizzily went around the hall. No, it wasn't just better—it was great, to where I couldn't believe that it was the same person who was just hesitating a moment ago.

Sabelian moved his feet more skillfully and elegantly as the music approached the climax.

The people dancing together had stopped in place at some point and were looking at us.



I wish I could know just how beautifully Sabelian and I danced.

Abigail was a woman who practiced her dancing skills for years. Even if I entered that body, the body's memory didn't disappear.

My feet started moving like I put wings on them, as Sabelian focused on dancing. I could feel my body slowly heating up.

Abigail had danced with many people before, but no partner matched her pace so well.

It felt like only me, the music, and Sabelian were left in the world.

'It's fun! Was dancing such a fun thing? It was fun dancing with Blanche as well, but this is a different type of enjoyment! Oh, oh my gosh!'

He led me, and I was leading him. Being able to go in the same direction with a partner befitting my ability. The happiness that sense of unity gave was immense.

Sabelian lightly pushed my hand to send me further away. I used that flow to spin lightly around once. The light of the chandelier above my head sparkled brightly as well. I returned and held his hand, and I soon faced Sabelian's face.

It felt like he was smiling. He appeared expressionless, but I could tell that he seemed joyful. It was the first time I had seen such an expression. As I stood there, dazed, applause like a peal of thunder rose from the crowd.

"A wonderful performance!"

"You are beautiful, Your Majesty!"

I regained myself at that sound. The people were clapping with faces full of admiration. The one that was giving the most fervent applause to me was Blanche.

It was a scene I couldn't believe, even as it was before my eyes, and the intense thumping of my heart didn't stop.

I looked at Sabelian. 'Did he have the same feeling I did?'

Sabelian looked bewildered, but it wasn't a bad expression. It was a strange feeling, and to think that he and I would dance so joyfully. 'Ah' I suddenly realized that we were still holding hands. "Your Majesty, your hand is...."

"Ah." He slowly let go of my hand, as he also realized the situation belatedly. Sabelian looked like a person who just woken up from a dream.

Sabelian and I looked at each other without words. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what I should say. Something small and light hugged me from behind when I was looking at him blankly.

"Lady Abigail, it was a really... Really beautiful dance!"

Blanche was looking at me with a lively face when I looked back. That child spoke excitedly, as if she had seen a fairy.

"It was really, really amazing. For Father and Lady Abigail to dance so well...." Blanche seemed to be very moved. I felt like I returned to reality, looking at that face.

"Thank you, Princess Blanche. It's a relief that my ability hasn't rusted with time."

Sabelian had returned to his usual face as well. He spoke while keeping a slight distance from me. "You were good at dancing, Abigail."

"Yes. This much is just the basics." I tried pretending to be great. He smiled while only raising one corner of his mouth.

There was no awkwardness, even though I made a joke like that. It felt like our relationship had gotten a lot more comfortable than before we had danced.

"Um, I want to dance with Lady Abigail one more time..." Blanche spoke while clinging to my dress tightly. I nodded my head. Yeah, of course, our Blanche should dance as well!

"I will have a conversation with the delegations for a moment. I will excuse myself first then." Sabelian lightly bowed and left. As he moved away, the gazes of the people followed him.

Several girls looked at Sabelian with desperate eyes, as if they wanted him to dance with them as well, but Sabelian didn't even glance at them as he left.

Either way, Karin and Duke Stoke weren't anywhere to be seen now. It would appear they ran away, given what had happened. Well, Karin caused a disturbance, but it ended well enough.

For now, I wanted to enjoy this feeling.

I held Blanche's hand and came to the hall. We danced, matching the uplifting tune like that of a rabbit prancing about. I also smiled lightly while looking at Blanche, who was smiling brightly. My chest was full and warm to a strange degree.

The passion from when I danced with Sabelian just now was now a deep warmth in my heart. 'Would I be able to dance with him once more, sometime?' I danced on with that slightly empty thought full of expectations. The chandelier's light sparkled like stars.

"Hah... I'm tired. I'm completely exhausted today."

[You seemed excited. You said that you weren't interested in dancing though.] "I will cancel that. I'm really interested."

I chattered with Vérité while lying down on my bed; he was reflected in a mirror placed on a table.

My feet still hurt a bit, even though the maids massaged them. 'Is it like this because I wore flat shoes instead of high heels?'

It was said that a late dancing craze was scary, but it was really scary. To think that dancing was so fun. 'Was it because Abigail was good at dancing? All I did was dance class during middle school in my previous life.' I danced with Blanche, with Clara, with Norma, and with Lord Moize.

'Ah, come to think of it, I wasn't able to dance with Raven. I became just a bit sorry.

He said that he had gone through the trouble of preparing ahead of time too....’

But he couldn’t be seen after that, so I couldn’t dance with him even if I wanted to. Since he said himself that he disliked mingling with people, I decided it would be better not to do so.

“Either way, you recorded the dancing today, right? I want to see me dancing with Blanche!”

[Isn’t it better to sleep?]

“I think I will sleep better if I sleep after watching it!”

[Whew. There’s no stopping you, is there? Wait just a bit.]

It was great that Vérité had a recording function as well. A moment after Vérité disappeared, the surface of the mirror started wavering. And soon, familiar music started flowing out. I could see the scene of the hall in the mirror.

The shining chandeliers reflected the handsome men and beautiful women wearing formal wear. There was a greater lack of a sense of reality looking at it through a mirror like this. It was like a scene in a movie, and I could see Blanche and myself in the middle. That child was dancing while jumping around like a small squirrel.

‘Kuuuk, cute! There was a special taste to seeing a record like this.’

I became happy, as the Chemise dress looked good on Blanche. On top of that, there was no need to mind others, so I could laugh as much as I wanted! I laid down face forward on the bed, with my hands supporting my head, smiling while looking at Blanche. ‘Hah, to think that I’m monopolizing this cuteness.’ I was proud and guilty at the same time.

‘What kind of clothes should I make next time? I feel like it would be alright to make more modern clothes... huh?’

“Vérité. Pause for a bit.”

[Yes, yes. Master.]

The figures in the mirror stopped short, as if time had stopped. The

smiling Blanche and the surrounding dancing stiffened like a stuffed animal, and a single man caught my eye among the paused people.

It was a child of a noble with light brown hair. The age seemed to be in the mid-20s. He was looking at Blanche. That fact itself wasn't something strange, especially since many people were looking at Blanche. But... I felt a sense of disharmony in that gaze. And I feel like I had seen him before?

"Show me another scene as well. It's fine if it's not dancing with Blanche."

"Yeah, got it."

The figure of Blanche sharing a conversation with some girls appeared. The brown-haired man was there as well.

"Show me another scene."

I blinked briefly, and a scene of Blanche sitting on a chair appeared. The brown-haired man was there as well.

The scene of Blanche dancing with Sabelian. The scene where Blanche was eating a cookie. The scene of Blanche and Clara having a conversation. The man was continuously in the mirror, no matter how many times the scene changed.

He never directly talked to Blanche or contacted her. He only put a certain distance between them and wandered around her.

"This person... is somehow strange."

It wasn't just that. The sense of disharmony I felt when I saw him at first was because of his gaze.

His gaze that looked at Blanche was certainly different. A gaze that was different from that of looking at a cute child.

'It seemed like he was observing Blanche. Why? And who in the world was this person?'

"Do you know who that brown-haired person standing near the wall is?"

[I'm not sure. It would be better to ask the maids rather than me, since

what I know is mostly from books.] Vérité seemed to be a bit down. He was probably upset that he wasn't able to help. [I will try looking into it though.]

“Yeah. I'll leave it to you.”

'Who in the world was this person? Looking at how he wasn't in Abigail's memory, he didn't seem to have a high status.'

I ended the day well today, but my feelings suddenly became murky. While I was looking at the mirror with a complicated feeling, I heard a short knocking sound. 'Hm? At this time?'

“Who is it?”

“It's me, Sabelian. May I come in?”

'What? Why did this guy come?'

I hurriedly exchanged eye contact with Vérité. Vérité disappeared after nodding his head, as if he understood.

“Yes. Please come in.” The door opened quietly as soon as permission was given, and Sabelian came into the room.

He had already taken the suit from the banquet off. The smell of scented oil wafted faintly as he approached, as if he had come after washing off.

My chest thumped strangely. 'Why is it like this?'

It was just the familiar scent of a familiar person... I spoke while clearing my throat. “Great work today. Either way, for what reason did you come so late in the night, Your Majesty?”

Sabelian tilted his head slightly as I asked like that and replied indifferently.

“I came because you said that it was alright to come every night.”

'I did? Ah, I certainly said so. But I thought that only applied until the banquet, though...'

“Shall I return?”

“N-no. Please have a seat.” He probably had something to say.

He sat down in his usual seat. The face I usually saw was unfamiliar, as I sat facing Sabelian. It felt like the sound of the hall's music was ringing in my ear too. My heart beat quickly, matching the music that hummed on.

“It's a relief that it was taken care of better than I thought.” I said so while unnecessarily raising my voice. The matter from several hours ago felt like a memory from long ago. The faces of the people who couldn't prevent their surprise were funny as well. Duke Stoke was on the verge of collapsing due to the shock. “It was an enjoyable Country founding festival too.”

“Enjoyable...?”

He stayed still while muttering that word. 'Ah, was it not enjoyable for him by any chance? It felt like Sabelian was enjoying it as well, though... Certainly, there was no way Sabelian would enjoy such a thing.'

“Hm, um... I'm sorry. It was fun for me to dance with Your Majesty....”

He was still looking at me, as if he was still in doubt.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Since I said that it was enjoyable even though it wouldn't have been for Your Majesty.”

Sabelian seemed perplexed at that answer. He moved his lips for a moment, and he couldn't be seen, as he covered his mouth with his hand.

He avoided my gaze and kept silent for a long while. He then spoke in a small voice so quiet I almost didn't hear it. “It was fun.”

“Yes?”

“I also found dancing with you enjoyable.”

His honest answer dumbfounded me. 'It was enjoyable? Really?' My chest became warm, as if I had taken a sip of warm tea, hearing that he had enjoyed himself. 'Thank god. I wasn't the only one that had fun.' It felt like I would grin unintentionally, for some reason. “It worried me that it would have been unpleasant, but it's a relief that it was a pleasant experience.”

It was so much of a relief—we had made substantial progress. My worries were like a mountain looking at Sabelian tremble every day, holding my hand. 'Kuk. He's all grown up, all grown up.' I kept my heartfelt emotions inside.

Sabelian looked at me and spoke. "I hope that we can dance again next time." It was an indifferent but somehow generous tone.

Sabelian held out his hand after saying so. 'Hm? Why is he giving me his hand? Is he saying that we should dance right now?'

"Your Majesty, are you asking for a dance right now, by any chance?"

"That would be alright but... I would like to hold hands for now." He raised his head and looked at me. His face, illuminated by the moonlight, was shining.

"Is it because of practice? Isn't there no need to practice now that the banquet is over?"

"There is no need to practice but..."

He slowly lowered his voice then. He spoke in a still, silent voice, as if it were such a secret that even the darkness itself had to pay attention. "Didn't you say so back then? That I can come every day."

A voice that tickled my ears. I was greatly surprised at what he had just said.

'There's no need to practice, but he wants to hold my hand?!' My head didn't function for an instant. 'He should definitely hate holding my hand though...'

He kept his hand up, even while I was hesitating.

"Are you not going to keep your promise?" He spoke in a tone as if disappointed. "I trusted you, but as expected, this time as well—"

"No, no! I will hold it! I just have to hold it right?!"

'Oh, come on. Just when I had refused for your sake too...' I held his hand while grumbling.

It was a hand that I had held both last night, and this afternoon, but... somehow... it felt different. The warmth... Yeah, the warmth was different.

There was a warmth in his hand, unlike during the afternoon. The icy hand that had once stiffened due to tension now had a soft warmth.

It was a smooth yet tough hand. We held hands like that. Was it five minutes, or 10 minutes that passed? Honestly, it felt like far more had passed than that.

'Isn't this a record?! But... when will he let go, I wonder? I'm getting sleepy, only holding hands like this without talking... I was going to sleep early since I was tired though...'

The sensation in my hand was still clear while my consciousness was becoming hazy. Unlike before, I could feel him knitting our fingers together. I could feel his heartbeat faintly as well, a slightly fast humming beat. That beat felt like a lullaby.

My eyes started closing. They kept closing even if I tried to open them. 'Yawn, I did overdo it a bit today.'

'I always thought this, but... Sabelian's hand sure is large... Hmm... It's warm...

The sound of the heart beating feels nice. This... is it... Sabelian's sound? Or... If it wasn't Sabelian's...'

Chapter Ten



“Abigail.” Sabelian carefully called out to Abigail, but there was no reply.

“Abigail.” Again, no response, even when he called her name once more.

Looking at her face up close in the dark, Sabelian realized she had fallen asleep.

'To fall asleep while holding hands....' It was absurd, but a laugh slipped out of him all the same.

She had probably overdone it at the festival, just as he had.

No, perhaps that could not be considered “overdoing” it. A cold sweat may have drenched his back when they started dancing, but he had enjoyed the whole thing as well by the end.

He looked down at his hand. Abigail’s own hand was still in his grasp.

It seemed like they didn’t need to practice anymore, as Abigail had said. Even so, he had held her hand to confirm. That afternoon, without even realizing it, he had been holding Abigail’s hand, even after the dance had ended. He could only ponder why he did so. Perhaps, at that moment, he was so focused on dancing that his fear had subsided momentarily? Or was it a coincidence?

That was why he wanted to confirm the possibility, at least once. So, he came to hold Abigail’s hand again tonight, and he was still holding it now. He felt nothing. It was a strange thing. Just one year ago, when his arm had been grabbed by Abigail, he felt like the place she grabbed had been poisoned.

By no means did it seem he was completely healed, as a slight trembling remained, but his heart was still incomparably calm.

'Strange, truly strange.' He muttered to himself.

Abigail's hand was soft. Like Miriam's hand.

He didn't like that hand. He had spent about a year with Miriam, but his only memory about her was pretty much only her hand. The sensation of the hand touching him all over was like that of a soft bug crawling on him.

The only time he spent with Miriam was on the bed. Miriam didn't seem to have much interest in him, aside from creating a child. They had never shared the deep conversations one might expect from a married couple, either. Logically, a 15-year-old boy wouldn't exactly be an enjoyable conversation partner for a 26-year-old woman. The family expected that boy to die soon because of his frailties, anyway.

Miriam had often said that she didn't need feelings for him to create a child—and her words were quite right, for Blanche had been born even without love.

Marriage without love was a common thing, and he knew full well that it was so, but he had been pained by it nonetheless.

Once, he had tried requesting help from his mother, but he was met with only chiding, loathing, and declarations that he wasn't manly enough. There was not a single soul that comforted him.

Except for Abigail.

At some point, she no longer looked at him as only a King, but as a person. Abigail had said that his pain was no laughing matter. She cried for him and got angry for him.

She had the bravery to tell him that, even if they couldn't become a married couple, they could still become a family.

Remembering this, he tried holding Abigail's hand tightly once more.

'Yes,' he thought. 'We might be able to become a family.'

To Sabelian, family was just a blood relationship. He thought that there was no value beyond that, but the family that Abigail spoke of seemed to be a slightly different relationship, and he was curious about just what that difference was.

Sabelian also wanted to know why one side of his heart felt ticklish whenever he looked at Abigail. He wasn't sure what to call that new feeling. He didn't know where the urge to keep holding her hand was coming from, either.

He didn't want to let go of the hand, but he had to. After all, he could not let her continue sleeping in a chair the whole night.

He carefully released the knitted fingers in his grasp. He had to wake her up and send her to the bed, but he closed his mouth right before he called Abigail's name.

Abigail was in deep sleep. Her sleeping face was peaceful and calm. He did not want to wake her.

He hesitated, and after a moment, carefully embraced Abigail. Carefully leaning her weight against himself, Abigail's sleeping body softly fell deep into his embrace. As expected, he could feel the heat rising to the surface again.

His heart began to pound, and his breathing became strained. As he had expected, he was not entirely cured, seeing how severe his reaction was.

As he carried Abigail to the bed and carefully laid her peaceful body down, his chest was still beating violently.

Truly, with such a reaction, he could not understand how he could hold her hand calmly. Then a thought came to him: 'Would embracing you become easier with practice...?'

'... And then... maybe even....'

Sabelian carefully held Abigail's hand while having such thoughts, then brought her hand to his lips after some hesitation.

A light kiss touched the back of her hand, soft enough that Abigail did not even twitch. It was a light kiss, like a feather peacefully brushing against her hand before falling off.

Despite that, Sabelian's face had become bright red.

'As expected, it was impossible. This illness wouldn't be cured so easily,

there would be no other reason for my heart to beat so wildly as if it were going to burst.'

He let go of Abigail's hand. She was just fast asleep, like a child.

Sabelian pulled the blankets up to her neck and covered her. He gazed at her sleeping face and silently whispered. "Have a good night, My Queen."

He whispered a goodnight greeting that she couldn't hear and left the room. Of course, the man himself was unaware that he had become completely red to the tips of his ears.

Sunlight was shining on the heads of the noblewomen. The tree leaves were as abundant as the frills on the dresses glimmering in the sun. Several noblewomen were sitting together on a mat beneath the shade of a tree.

Scholars and the old were saying they were experiencing a never-before-seen heat wave that summer, but the expressions of the women were bright. Their Chemise dress skirts fluttered as the wind blew.

A fresh laugh rang out.

"You bought a new Chemise dress!"

"Yes. This is already the third, but I can't wear anything else now."

The other noble girls nodded in agreement. Every lady sitting under the tree was wearing Chemise dresses, after all.

A new trend had swept through nearly every social circle after the founding festival's banquet: The Chemise dress.

Queen Abigail had given each of the noble ladies one of her Chemise dresses, as she had promised. Those women who wore them for the first time found themselves completely entranced by the dress. They were light, comfortable, and, as Blanche had explained, cool. The pure design stimulated the hearts of the noblewomen.

Other women had gone to dressmakers to procure their own Chemise dresses, as the positive evaluations of the design spread like wildfire. A dress personally designed by the queen herself for beauty and comfort, the

Chemise dresses soon became known in social circles by the nickname. “the Queen’s Gown.”

“Even so, I think the Chemise dress designed by My Queen is still the most beautiful. I’m jealous, Lady Weitley.”

The noble girls looked at Weitley. She was wearing a Chemise dress given as a present by the queen. Weitley showed a proud smile.

“I also think so. I went and requested other dressmakers, but My Queen’s dress is truly the superior. How should I say it... somehow, it is more elegant?”

It was difficult to express, but the minor details and small decorations differed from the normal dresses created elsewhere.

One noble girl’s eyes shined.

“It surprised me in various ways. To think that My Queen would give a gift. Contrary to the rumors, perhaps she actually is a truly amiable person.” Weitley nodded her head and spoke in a slightly excited tone.

“That’s right. To be honest, she was very, very scary at first, but she proved to be truly kind. Even more so, her relationship with Princess Blanche was excellent.”

“I heard the two wore matching dresses? And even danced together....”

“Yes! The two were lovely, dancing with one another. On top of that, she even danced with His Majesty, the King.”

“There had been a rumor that there was discord between the two.... Was it just a rumor? Then Lady Karin would be—” She wasn’t able to finish her words.

It was because the noble girl next to her had poked her with an elbow.

At that gesture, all the noblewomen at the gathering turned to look in one direction. Several women were approaching, wearing the drooping robe à la française.

The one leading the group at the very front was Lady Karin, with an aloof expression on her face.

Seeing her draw near, the gathered ladies rose from their seats to greet her.

“Welcome, Lady Karin. Have you been well?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” Karin carefully sat where a cloth was laid out and covered her mouth with a fan. The width of her large dress filled the cloth seating. It was a struggle to allow the woman following behind her to sit as well.

The noble girls who arrived first were glancing at her.

“Lady Karin, would you like something to eat? There is caviar as a snack—”

“I-I hate caviar the most in the world!” Karin shouted while jumping up in surprise—though her followers were even more surprised. “I feel like I will get rashes even seeing caviar, so get rid of it. Immediately!”

Had Karin always hated caviar so much? The noble girl didn’t ask further and silently closed the picnic basket.

Karin’s face was red, perhaps because of the weather. She lightly cleared her throat and looked at the noble girls fiercely.

“To have a picnic in such hot weather. Wouldn’t it be better to go inside?”

“Ah, it is a bit hot, isn’t it? Lady Karin must be even hotter. It would be much cooler if you wore a Chemise dress, though.” The youngest noble girl said so, intending nothing by it.

However, Karin’s eyes became sharp. Her twitching mouth couldn’t be seen as it was hidden by the fan. “Like how one can’t go around naked no matter how hot it is, wearing a dress that is not much different from nightwear...” Karin smiled brightly. “It looks a bit vulgar.”

The noble girls wearing Chemise dresses shut their mouths. Some were quite worked up over such a comment, but none of them could speak so easily. Lady Karin was the daughter of a ducal family. There was no mistake, they would be socially shunned and ostracized if they spoke

carelessly with her.

Karin continued talking while the noble girls were keeping silent. “A noble has a right to maintain their dignity. If a noble were to seek comfort over their dignity, then how are they different from commoners? Do you not think so as well?”

“Yes, you are right. Lady Karin is truly the role model of a lady.”

The noble girls that came with Karin spoke as if they had been waiting, but they were fanning themselves, unable to win against the heat.

Karin was also suffocating due to the heat, but she tried her best to not let it show. She spoke in high spirits. “Please don’t chase after comfort and keep your dignity. Such an inelegant attitude is uneducated—”

“I’m sorry I’m late!” A bright voice could be heard from far away. Karin frowned, looking back.

It was Clara. She was also wearing a Chemise dress, as expected. Not reading the mood, she quickly walked over and sat down brazenly.

“What was everybody talking about? Ah, hello to Lady Karin as well!”

“... Hello.”

The other noble girls were only glancing at each other, but Clara had no hesitation. It seemed she was being arrogant, trusting in her position as the Queen’s maid.

Karin gave a terse smile. “What is the occasion, Lady Clara? I thought for sure that you would be at the palace.”

“My Queen has given me a vacation! Ah, right, everyone... look at this!”

Clara grinned as she took something out. It looked like a small satchel, but the silk seemed high class, and there was pretty embroidery on it. There was a long line of lace attached on either side to it, so it seemed comfortable to bring around. The noble girls spoke, with eyes full of curiosity.

“What is this?”

“It’s a purse that Lady Abigail made me. It’s called a reticule!” If the Chemise dress had a disadvantage, it was that it didn’t have a pocket. A servant could hold the wearer’s items, but there are still times when it was inconvenient. But for there to be such a hand purse. It felt like an accessory on its own, with delicate embroidery and flowers made with fabric on it.

“It’s so cute! For My Queen to create something like this for a maid like Lady Clara....”

“It seems My Queen is truly kind.”

“Right? Right? On top of that, she even requested the royal chef to prepare dessert when I told her I was going to meet everyone!”

Clara looked back, and right on cue, the servant who followed behind her handed her a small basket. There were tasty-looking tarts in it. There were plentiful amounts of summer peaches on the tarts, and they looked like jewels because of the sugar scattered on them.

The noble girls that saw it let out a small exclamation. A sweet scent tenderly wafted from the pinkish peach tarts.

“My word, for a royal chef to make a tart!”

“It looks so delicious!”

There was one person with a stiff expression: while the noble girls were screaming in delight, Karin didn’t even think to feign interest. Even the noble girls she had brought along were eyeing the reticule and enticing peach tarts, despite Karin’s subtle warnings.

The ladies started chattering again while complimenting Abigail. Nobody cared about her, Karin. It was an unfamiliar and unpleasant situation for her, as she was usually the center of attention. After all, she deserved to be in the spotlight!

She resisted the urge to gain attention through a crude method, such as shouting—despite her growing indignation. Yes, she knew she would simply reduce her own social standing, becoming laughable if she suddenly shouted for no reason. Karin, however, had no intention of simply sitting there. She rose from her seat abruptly.

The noble girls only then regained themselves and looked at Karin. Karin spoke, looking at the noble girls on her side.

“I will be excusing myself for now, then. Hmm? What are you ladies doing? Will you not be coming?”

“Y-yes!”

“O-of course!”

Karin’s group hurriedly got up. Karin glared at Clara and started walking away. Although Clara herself didn’t seem as if she noticed a thing.

'Damned Abigail.' Karin internally cursed.

Her already extreme annoyance was growing because of the heat that was suffocating her in her heavy dress.

The mask that Abigail had adopted was far more stable than Karin had initially thought. But just how unseemly would it appear to those that Abigail had tricked, once the hypocrite’s mask was taken off?

She would definitely unmask that woman, and then everything would fall back into Karin’s hands, where everything belonged.

Karin glanced back while thinking so. The noble girls were eating tarts with bright faces.

The cool wind blew. The white Chemise dresses rode the wind, fluttering with an exceedingly free feel. Karin withdrew her gaze at that point. No matter what, she couldn’t afford to lose her dignity. That was her father’s greatest teaching.

I scooped up a spoonful of lemon sorbet. A sour and cold sensation coated my taste buds, as I put the spoon in my mouth and the dessert silently melted away.

'Hmm, our chef’s ability is truly first class!' It tasted even better, perhaps because we were eating it on a hot day.

“Princess Blanche, does the sorbet suit your palate?”

“Yes! It’s very delicious.” Blanche said so, smiling brightly.

'Whew, our Blanche’s smile is more refreshing than lemons.' It felt like I was receiving vitamins through my entire body. However, a moment later, Blanche had a sullen face.

“It would have been nice if Father could have eaten it with us....”

She then glanced at the seat next to her. The seat Blanche was looking at was empty.

Sabelian participated in meals without missing out after the country’s founding festival ended, and he visited my room every day.

There was nothing he and I did in particular. He just held my hand for about half an hour and left. That was all there was to it, but he didn’t come yesterday.

“It seems the government is very busy these days.”

'A day could be skipped if he was busy, but... No, it’s good if I don’t see him! I can have my own time.'

I ate the sorbet. It was sweet, but it was a bit bitter as well, perhaps due to the lemon peel mixed in.

“He will come to the next meal after all. Either way, there’s nothing wrong, is there, Princess Blanche?”

“Yes? Yes! Nothing wrong.”

“That’s a relief then.”

There was something bothering me ever since the country’s founding festival ended. It was the brown-haired man who had been observing Blanche.

I couldn’t figure out who that man was. The maids asked around after I told them about his appearance, but there was nothing gained.

They said that they didn’t even know if it was a low-ranking noble or if he was from a family with many brothers. Seeing how he came to the festival, however, he should have had a pretty high rank.

It might have been possible to know if I took more measures, but I didn't want to cause a great disturbance just because I didn't like how he looked at Blanche.

'It should just be unfounded fears, right?'

I was lost in thought when I heard Blanche's voice. "Lady Abigail? Does the sorbet not suit your palate? Should I ask for something else?"

'Ah. I unconsciously made my dejection noticeable.' Blanche had an expression like that of a dejected puppy.

"No. The sorbet is quite delicious."

"Then is it perhaps because Father didn't come? You seemed a bit sad...."

'Did I have such a dejected expression? I was trying not to make Blanche worry, though... To be comforted by none other than Blanche. Let's keep my spirit up!' I tried to talk as if I wasn't affected.

"Thank you, Princess Blanche. I was just slightly worried, as they said His Majesty was going to be busy."

Blanche let out a small sigh of relief. I can't mess up the mood when I'm eating something tasty with a good person.

Tea came out as the finisher after we ate the sorbet.

'Should I go for a walk with Blanche!' I was about to get up when the outside started to get a bit noisy.

The door burst open so quickly that I jolted in my seat. The one who came in with agitated steps was Sabelian.

"Your Majesty?"

"I'm sorry I'm late, Abigail. The meeting ended late."

It seemed he had been running quite a bit. There was an expression of urgency on his face and beads of sweat on his forehead.

Sabelian sat down in his seat. He spoke while glancing at the dish.

"It seems I came too late."

“We heard that you were very busy. There was no need to overdo it by rushing over....”

It had been a while since I had seen him behave so frantically. He was a man who didn't spill a single drop of sweat in the heat of summer.

Sabelian moistened his throat with cold water and spoke, after turning to look at me.

“I promised you I would take part in meals, did I not?” His tone was dry. Like someone saying something obvious. He probably answered without thinking much of it.

But, to me, the achromatic reply felt especially warm coming from him. It would have made sense if he had taken credit for making the effort to come even though he was busy, but he didn't show a single hint of doing so.

No one would have said anything, even if he hadn't shown up—it would have been too late. Even so, it seems he ran desperately despite being busy, just to keep his promise with me.

I was very satisfied with that fact. 'Does warm blood flow in him now? The very man who was once called cold-blooded?'

Sabelian was looking at me as if he felt my gaze.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because it was unexpected... You said that you didn't feel the need to have a meal together in the past.”

“I still don't feel the need though.”

It was an answer that conjured up the old biting winds. I woke up from my warm-and-fuzzy stupor. 'Hmm, yeah. He was originally this kind of person, wasn't he?'

A maid approached to set up another spoon and fork. Sabelian waved his hand to tell her to stop.

“It's fine. I can just have a meal separately later.”

“Then at least dessert....”

“I don’t need it, since I don’t like sweet things.”

The maid fell back with her head bowed down.

'So he didn't come for the meal, but really to just keep the promise. Yeah, at least he came!' I tried to think about the happy parts first, before the sad parts.

Sabelian spoke at that time. “Also, I’m sorry I wasn’t able to keep the promise. I will send a servant at least to contact you next time.”

“That’s alright. You came although you were late, and it can’t be helped, since you’re busy.”

“Not that.”

'Not that? What other promise was there?' I tried to remember while sipping tea.

Sabelian’s serious voice could be heard.

“The promise that I would go to you every night.”

“!!!” I almost spat out the tea in my mouth as I coughed.

I hurriedly wiped my mouth with a napkin. 'Ah, no. Wait. To say such things so openly. Of course, we are spending a non-indecent time night after night, but still...!'

The servants seemed to all be surprised when I looked around. There was a serious misunderstanding being created. Even Blanche!

Blanche, who had been nervous until just now, was looking at us with eyes full of curiosity.

'It’s not that kind of thing... It’s not the kind of thing that a child shouldn’t know about.'

“L-let’s speak about such things later. There is no need to visit every night.”

Sabelian’s expression hardened at that reply. He asked with a saddened voice.

“Do you... Dislike me going?”

His eyes seemed a bit pitiful. No, I might really jump up in a craze. The saddened face looked so pitiful, as if someone said that they weren't father and daughter.

“No, it's not like I don't like it, but... Anyway! There is no need to visit every day!”

“I will go every day. Since I promised.”

He said it so firmly. 'No, why is he being so stubborn?' I could feel my face and neck getting hotter.

At that time, I made eye contact with Clara, who had been standing opposite to me. She was looking at me with a mother's smile. I knew what she was thinking just by looking at her expression.

'You did it, really did it!'... It seemed like it was saying something like that.

'I didn't do it; I didn't! Oh my god, I'm going to explode. There was nothing bad about a misunderstanding that Sabelian and I had a good relationship spreading... but! It's embarrassing!'

“It will be a little difficult today, so I will go to your bedroom tomor—”

I stomped on his foot to tell him he should keep his mouth shut. Sabelian only then closed his mouth. He looked at me, as if to ask why I was being like that.

This man can say everything in front of a child! Thankfully, it seemed like Blanche didn't understand what we were talking about.

“Either way, you should keep the other promise you made with me. Do you not remember?”

I smiled, doing my best to look as threatening as possible. He thought for a moment and nodded his head.

“That promise. Of course I remember.”

Sabelian only then turned his gaze from me and looked at Blanche. It was

still an unfeeling gaze.

“Blanche. What is your schedule today?”

Every time we gathered, it was only Blanche and me chatting, and Sabelian rarely did, so I added a condition. He had to talk to Blanche for at least five minutes during each meal.

'That such obvious things must be put in a negotiation clause, I'm crying. Even so... it should get better, right? We're holding hands after practicing, after all.'

Blanche seemed to be taken aback at the sudden question. I could hear her voice trembling lightly.

“Ah, yes! T-that's... I had etiquette lessons in the morning.”

“Tomorrow's schedule?”

“Tomorrow is the day Lady Karin comes.”

“... I see.” The conversation ended in less than a minute. There was a long way to go. Sabelian looked at me with a rather proud expression.

'Was he saying that I should compliment him? This shameless guy. You only talked for a minute!'

I only let out a sigh inside without being able to say anything. At that moment, Blanche carefully opened her mouth.

“Um... Father.”

“What is it?”

'So the daughter is stepping forward since the guy called a father can't have a proper conversation. Sniff, I'm so proud of you, Blanche.'

“Are you not using a separate room from Lady Abigail... anymore?”

'No, wait. I barely managed to change the subject. So why?!'

Blanche's expression was sparkling with expectation in the meantime.

“No. We are still using separate rooms.”

“B-but it's not like your relationship is still bad, right?”

Unease appeared in her eyes that had been full of expectation. It seemed she was concerned about how we used separate rooms.

Sabelian wasn't able to reply easily to the question of whether our relationship was good or not. Instead, he spoke while glancing at me.

"Ask Abigail."

'Hey, you! Why are you passing over the question to me?'

"Lady Abigail, is your relationship with Father... okay?" Blanche looked at me with eyes filled with half expectation and half worry.

'Kuuk, how can I say no without receiving such a gaze!'

"Of course. His Majesty and I have a good relationship."

"Is that so?"

"Our relationship is very, very good. No?"

"... Yes, you're right." A lukewarm answer came out of his mouth.

'Hey, are you cooperating with me or not?'

But I could see Sabelian's mouth curl into a grin, like he was relieved.

I wanted to tell him that he should say so properly if he was discontent, but I couldn't do anything, as Blanche looked far too happy. She wore a radiant smile, and the servants were looking at us with warm gazes.

'Kuuk... this amiable atmosphere. I can't take it.'

I changed the subject once more.

"Either way, Your Majesty. For what reason were you busy today?"

"It's not something you would have an interest in...." He started off like that and swallowed his words, starting a bit differently than his first attempt.

"No. It would be good if you knew as well. A troubling problem occurred, concerning other species."

Come to think of it, he had never talked about governmental matters to Abigail before. Although, in the first place, Abigail hadn't liked hearing

about it.

I felt proud since it felt like the king had acknowledged me as a queen. I paid attention to his words.

“What kind of problem with other species is it, exactly?”

“It’s a problem with the fairies. It’s said that they have greatly increased the price of magical tools.”

‘They raised the price? Magical tools were already pretty expensive, though. A considerable price was paid for Vérité, too. To raise the price further even with that... How much could it possibly be?’

Sabelian continued.

“It’s a bit troubling, as there are several magical tools needed in the royal family. There was the opinion that we should be self-sufficient, using this chance to start relying on ourselves instead of relying on the fairies, but....” Sabelian asked Blanche, after saying that much.

“Blanche, what do you think?”

“Yes? Ah, that is....”

Blanche closed her mouth. She seemed flustered at the sudden question. Blanche glanced around for a moment before opening her mouth.

“Wouldn’t it be difficult to make all the magical tools...? There should be a low number of people who can create magical tools....”

“Yes. You’re right.”

As Blanche had said, there was a minuscule number of humans who could create magical tools. Most other species have mana from the moment they are born. The blessing of mana wasn’t given to humans. There are people born with mana from time to time, but this number was exceedingly low.

On top of that, most of the tools made by humans were useless, as the amount of magic power the tools possessed was too small. They often hired a small number of human magicians as royal magicians to dedicate themselves to the kingdom.

“Besides that, they said that we should limit it so that only royalty and high-ranking nobles could use the magical tools. Since it would then be possible to handle that volume only with the magical tools bought until now and the ones human magicians created.”

“Then... Wouldn't trade with the fairies be cut off?” Sabelian nodded his head at Blanche's question.

“It's impossible to cut off the relationship immediately. Since fairies are the only species that are relatively friendly with humans, there's no reason to block them off. But we can't just be swept up by them.”

He turned his gaze to the door after saying so. The secretary had come in at some point. The secretary's expression seemed urgent.

“It seems the five minutes are up.”

He said so and got up from his seat. To keep the five-minute rule in that time. Quite like Sabelian.

“Then I will excuse myself first. Since my work isn't over yet.”

“... Yes, thank you for coming.”

'He ate nothing in the end, but he's going back to work.' I gazed at Sabelian's back as he walked out of the dining hall—but before he left, he looked over his shoulder and spoke.

“It seems today might be impossible. Tomorrow, I will go to your bedroom.”

I could see Clara cheering with her face. Sabelian unhurriedly left the dining room.

'Ah, aak! This cowardly bastard! You escape alone while turning the mood into this mess?'

The eyes of the people around were sparkling so much that it seemed like the room wouldn't need lighting, even in the middle of the night.

Blanche smiled brightly, with a cheerful face. I swallowed my tears. 'The sorbet is salty today....'

“The tea is quite nice, Princess Blanche. It seems they’ve changed the tea leaves.”

“Ah, yes. It seems so...!”

Karin smiled while holding her teacup elegantly. The teacup with a blue tinge was full of orange-colored tea.

Karin was sitting opposite Blanche. There were only two girls in the wide palace teahouse.

Today was Karin’s visiting day, an event that occurred from time to time. To be exact, it was the visiting day for Duke Stoke and Karin. He didn’t participate today, saying that he was busy; ‘I was a bit surprised, because Duke Stoke often came with the excuse that he was coming to see his granddaughter.’

It would have been nice for Blanche and Karin to speak comfortably, as there were no adults around. But the young aunt and the younger niece were quiet.

Blanche, feeling nervous, was gingerly sipping the tea. Karin spoke while glancing at Blanche.

“Princess Blanche is wearing those clothes every time I see you.”

Karin’s voice was considerably cold. Blanche was wearing a Chemise dress, but with a different design from the one she wore during the country’s founding festival.

Blanche put on a bright smile as Karin mentioned the Chemise dress.

“Yes, yes! Lady Abigail made it for me. Isn’t it pretty?”

The princess was boasting with such an excited face, but her gaze suddenly went to the clothes Karin was wearing. She was still wearing a robe à la française.

“Does Lady Karin wish to have one as well? Then... I will request Lady Abigail!”

“... to My Queen?”

Karin’s voice was mixed with doubt and slight yearning. The feeling she wasn’t quite able to hide had leaked out subconsciously.

She had admonished the noble girls wearing Chemise dresses she came across, saying that they had forgotten their pride as a noble, but she was jealous on the inside.

It felt like she was several steps behind on what was trending, and though the heat had subsided a bit, it was still summer.

The corset pressed down on her lungs each time she breathed in the hot air. The clothes weighed her down heavily, like she had fallen into water while wearing the clothes.

The Chemise dress was Karin’s preference. A cute, pure, and lovely design. Her heart got tugged no matter how much she turned away.

“... It’s fine. I would be scolded by my father if I wore such clothes.”

How deplorable had Duke Stoke found it when he heard that Chemise dresses were in fashion? He raised his voice, criticizing the women that were walking around in their pajamas without knowing shame. If she wore a Chemise dress during that? There was no way it would just end with a scolding. All Karin could do at the moment was to deny her feelings as best she could.

“I do not have an interest in such clothes, anyway.”

“Is that so... Lady Karin would look good in it if you wore it though?”

“But Princess Blanche will be in trouble if you only wear such clothes, you know?”

“Yes? Be in trouble?”

Blanche tilted her head. Karin continued with a sullen expression.

“Wouldn’t your waist size gradually expand if you only wore such comfortable clothes? What will you do if the corset doesn’t fit?”

“Ah....”

A small sigh of despondency leaked out. She had just said it to disturb her, but Blanche unexpectedly became glum.

Karin inadvertently became excited at Blanche's reaction. She spoke, becoming more high spirited. "I've heard that you don't control your meal intake? What will you do if you become fat? I'm worried."

Her coy voice was full of deceit and lies. Blanche's expression became darker by the second. While looking at the princess's face, Karin thought of an excellent idea.

She had tried to separate Sabelian and Abigail from one another. But the queen wasn't as easy an opponent as Karin had presumed. The solution to the problem of how she should face Abigail, as it turned out, was close by.

She just had to conquer Blanche, not Abigail.

The question was. "What if Blanche came to hate Abigail?"

Then the follow-up question. "And if Blanche came to like me?"

The plan was set up, so she just had to set it into motion. Karin carefully took Blanche's hand and spoke tearfully, as if she was full of worry.

"Did My Queen truly change? She had always been jealous of Princess Blanche in the past."

Acting was Karin's specialty. The kind, warm voice, intent on separating mother and daughter, didn't feel like a lie.

"Didn't she make comfortable clothes on purpose? There's no mistake that she's letting Princess Blanche eat as much as you want, to turn you into a pig."

Blanche said nothing. Karin couldn't see Blanche's expression, as the princess had her head down. Karin continued, as if comforting her.

"Please don't trust My Queen too much. She definitely has some sort of intentio—"

"No."

Blanche abruptly cut Karin's words off. And she raised her drooped head

to look at Karin.

“Lady Abigail is not such a person.”

They made eye contact. For a moment, Karin felt that something was pressing down on her shoulders.

Blanche’s eyes were clear, unlike the eyes of a young princess. There was no fear, nor were there any tears.

There wasn’t even anger. Only a void-like emptiness. It was only an instant, but her gaze was like that of Sabelian’s. To face that cold gaze she had only seen from a distance, right in front of her nose. Karin was flustered.

Blanche soon returned to her glum expression.

“Lady Abigail certainly... was a greatly strict person in the past. That’s why I think it can’t be helped that Lady Karin would misunderstand.”

Blanche smiled shyly after saying so. It was a kind smile. The stern gaze from just now had gone like the wind.

“But she is trying her best to be kind to me and other people. That is definitely not false.”

It was a warm voice and gaze. That voice seeped into Karin’s chest, like how the air breathed in after holding one’s breath in the water was sweet.

“That is why I would like it if you could trust Lady Abigail a bit more. Lady Karin would surely come to like Lady Abigail as well.”

‘I would come to like Abigail?’

Karin suddenly remembered the festival, hearing those words. Abigail had called Karin out separately and told her that there was caviar in her teeth.

At that time, she was ashamed and embarrassed, but she also felt slightly suspicious.

‘Why did she go through the trouble of talking about it where there weren’t any people?’

Was that Abigail's goodwill? No, that wasn't possible. Abigail was definitely mocking her. That person was a witch and an evil woman. Her enemy. Her father had certainly said so.

And her father couldn't be wrong. Karin didn't speak for a long time. Blanche had a perplexed look on her face.

"Uh, um... Lady Karin? Have I upset you by any chance...?"

"No. That isn't possible."

Karin gradually raised her head. Her expression had gotten considerably gentler, unexpectedly. There was a hint of reflection as well.

"For the Princess to say so much... It seems I have misunderstood My Queen."

"Lady Karin...!" Blanche seemed to be deeply moved. The gentle voice of a young girl could be heard.

"I would like to speak to My Queen as well. If it's all right, I would like to have tea time with My Queen, but would it be possible?"

"Yes, yes! I will try asking Lady Abigail!"

'Idiot Blanche.' Karin swallowed her ridicule, looking at Blanche's pure smile. There was no way hostility toward the queen would disappear with a word or two. The reason Karin requested a tea party was to destroy Abigail.

She didn't like how everyone in the social circle praised the queen. She was preparing a new dress to crush Abigail's fame. Karin's new dress was planned to be far more graceful and beautiful than the one Abigail had made.

She would have tea with Abigail at the palace, and Karin would showcase her new dress. She would see Abigail's face crumple up in front of her.

A smile formed naturally, imagining the queen not knowing what to do in jealousy and envy.

"I'm looking forward to the tea party."

Karin said so and smiled. Her red mouth curled up like a snake.

“Vérité, Vérité! Big news, big news!”

I entered the mirror room while bursting through the door. I could see Vérité sitting on a chair, reading a book.

“Guess it, guess it! What do you think it is?!”

[The thing about how Blanche said that they should have a tea party with other noble girls?] Vérité spoke as if it wasn't much. His gaze was on the book, and his legs were crossed.

“What... So you already knew?”

[Yeah. I heard while you and Blanche were having tea in the parlor.] He closed the book with a thud. Vérité finally looked at me, but he still seemed to think it was a drag.

'Uuu... I forgot this guy was a person in the know. I was going to boast about it, but to guess it correctly on the first try....'

I collapsed on a chair. It was a bit of a shame, but I couldn't miss out on boasting!

“Right. It's decided that we will have a tea party with the noble girls. This is all thanks to our Blanche doing her best!”

The day after Blanche met Karin, she had come to me, asking if it was alright to host a tea party. Basically, she wanted to invite a bunch of other noble girls around her age.

'I had been thinking that it was a shame that I couldn't converse with the noble girls properly during the festival. But if I had one worry....'

Vérité sighed. [I heard Karin was invited to the tea party as well?]

“Mhmm. She said that she really wanted to host a tea party with Blanche at some point.”

It was Karin. 'She should definitely not like me at all, but to openly say she wanted to host a tea party with Blanche is....'

Vérité frowned, as if there was an actual foul smell. [It's suspicious, so suspicious. The suspicion reeks everywhere.]

I also felt like Karin had some kind of plot in mind, but it was difficult to refuse. There was a chance that interfering would make the tea party disappear, and then Blanche would be sad.

“What is Karin trying to do now? It would have been okay if it was just on the level of stepping on my dress, but....”

[She will attempt something, but invite her anyway.]

I tilted my head. “Why?”

[If she is going to attempt something regardless, it would be better for her to do it in a place where I can see it.] Vérité grinned.

'H-how reliable...!' As Vérité said, it would be better for her to do it in my palace, if she were to have a plot. Since Vérité can't see outside.

“All right. Then I will prepare for the tea party with ease of mind. Haah, I can finally have friends as well.”

'Friends, huh? Was “friend” such a sweet word?'

'The other noble girls seemed to go on picnics all together, go shopping together, and go boating together. I should be able to get along like that if we become close, right? Would it be difficult since I'm a queen? But... I'm still looking forward to it!'

The corner of my mouth twitched unconsciously as I became excited, but when I turned back, I made eye contact with Vérité. Vérité was looking at me with a sullen expression.

'What's with him? Was my smiling expression terrifying again?'

[Is it not enough?]

“Hm? What is?”

'What is he saying all of a sudden?'

Vérité spoke in a still sullen tone.

[Friend. Is it not enough with just me.]

Vérité pouted. His forehead was wrinkled. 'This is, don't tell me... Is he sulking? Oh my God! I'm sure of it! He's sulking! Look at his lips! He's sulking a lot!'

I was rather flustered at the sudden change. Sure, I knew this mirror sulked easily, but... 'To sulk because of something like this....'

[When she said that I was her first and best friend, the one she relied on the most....] There was sadness and sorrow in Vérité's voice. I had often seen him get angry or pout, but it was the first time I had seen him this dejected.

"Ah, of course, you're the one I'm closest to! Even so, it's important to have exchanges with other noble girls. Don't you think so?"

I hurriedly comforted Vérité. But Vérité's shoulder only drooped down further.

[I only have you as a friend though....]

I felt an impact, like someone had hit my head with a hammer, hearing those words. Only, it wasn't a hammer; it was guilt.

Vérité was my magical tool, my personal magical tool. Only the maid who cleans the room came in from time to time; nobody beside me came into Vérité's room. I was the only one whom he talked to. We conversed almost every day, but it wouldn't ever be more than a few hours at the longest.

Vérité spent time on his own for the rest of that time. He would be lonely even if the mirrors in the palace became his eyes. I only then felt sorry. I was busy being happy that I had time to be friends with noble girls... I wanted to pat Vérité's drooping shoulders, but my hand couldn't reach the inside of the mirror.

I put my hand on the mirror glass. It felt like a transparent wall was blocking us. "Vérité."

[...]

"Vérité, I'm sorry. You've been lonelier than me."

Vérité was lowering his gaze. I used my call to comfort him.

“Should I not go to the tea party?”

[No. You should go to the tea party. It would be a loss in various ways if you were to fall behind in the social circle.] The voice was sagging, like he was standing alone in the rain. It felt more pitiful because they didn't seem like empty words.

“Vérité. A friend like you is more important than such things to me.” It wasn't like I could throw away an old friend to make new ones. Vérité slowly raised his head.

[... Am I really more important?]

“Yep. Of course.”

Vérité only then smiled shyly. 'Oh boy, oh boy. He's a hopeless child at such times.'

[You can't forget me even if you make more friends, okay?]

“Yep. I promise.”

I wanted to lock fingers, but he didn't have a body. Thankfully, it seemed like Vérité was getting better.

[Well, there shouldn't be a friend as able as I am, even if you get another friend.]

“Right, right? Vérité is the best!”

I tried my best to flatter him. I couldn't tell who the master was now.

'Either way. “friend” is it....' I couldn't ignore Vérité's loneliness, now that I knew about it.

He would be bored in the mirror, alone, all day long. Wouldn't it be better if he had another conversation partner?

I tacitly asked Vérité.

“Either way, you're bored on your own, aren't you? Should I introduce you to a maid? Clara or Norma. Or how about having a conversation with a civil official?”

[I said this before, but it would be best to hide me as much as possible. Since it can become dangerous in various ways.]

This was something agreed upon between Vérité and I. To not spread the ability Vérité had to the surroundings, that is.

Vérité's ability was useful and powerful. The first thing any of my enemies would want to harm or dispose of would be Vérité, if they knew of his existence. Other magical mirror tools are said to only have a single function. Because of that, the other people only knew Vérité as a simple conversational partner.

I did feel that it would be alright to tell a trustworthy person, but... Who would there be that I could trust? The person who I could think of immediately was just Blanche. I still don't know for sure about Sabelian.

If it was Sabelian, the utilitarian, he might get greedy for Vérité's usefulness and take him away.

'Hmph, not a chance.'

"Can I talk about you to Blanche later?"

[Blanche...?] He tilted his head. He pondered for a moment and shook his head. [No. I don't particularly want to see her anymore, because you show her off so much.]

'What, this bastard is saying something all high and mighty? He's saying no, even when I gave him the chance to meet her personally. Hmph, you will regret it later.'

I was glaring at the mirror with blazing eyes, when Vérité looked toward the door, as if he heard something.

[Either way, it seems someone has come? Looks like Sabelian.]

'What... this late at night? So it was true that he would come today...' I wanted to send him back, but I didn't have a choice.

[Abigail, get closer to Sabelian, do your best!] Vérité cheered me on, as if making fun of me.

'Aah! Can't I do something about that guy or something!'

I returned to the bedroom while grinding my teeth. Sabelian had entered at some point. He looked at me from the door.

“I’m not sure if I bothered your rest.”

“... No. It’s fine. Please take a seat, Your Majesty.”

I said so and approached the sofa I usually sat on. Sabelian sat beside me naturally, as if it were his own seat.

‘Now, hurry up and hold my hand for 30 minutes and go sleep.’

I waited for him to give me his hand. But he didn’t hold his hand out like usual. ‘What? Is he trying to graduate from holding hands?’

Sabelian only stared at me blankly and didn’t even move. His lips soon parted slowly. “Are the clothes you are wearing right now designed by you as well?”

He suddenly asked a question that wasn’t like him. Wasn’t Sabelian uninterested in clothes? “Yes. I designed it.”

“I heard the outfits Blanche wears these days were all designed by you as well. The Chemise dress, was it?”

Oh, it seemed he was slowly gaining an interest in Blanche. I unconsciously raised my voice, feeling a bit better.

“Yes. I designed that as well. It’s quite pretty since Princess Blanche wears it, right?”

“Yes. It’s pretty.”

‘Huhu... this guy. He now acknowledges that Blanche is pretty.’ My shoulders shrugged with pride.

“Blanche, and you, are quite interesting. Since you’re more affectionate than those tied by blood, even though not even a single drop is mixed in.” He looked at me with interest.

The words “tied by blood” that came out of his mouth sounded pitiful for some reason.

“I heard you will hold a tea party together as well.”

“Yes. We will be hosting a tea party since Princess Blanche made a request to me recently.”

“Will it be alright? There shouldn’t have been a time where a tea party has been hosted here before...”

My eyes went wide at the sudden consideration. 'How did he know? I thought he didn’t have an interest in Abigail, though?’

“How did you know?”

“I somehow thought it would be so. You don’t have any close friends, no?”

His blunt remark pierced my solar plexus. 'This, this cowardly bastard! You don’t have friends either. Are you going to be like this between people with no friends?’

“I have a friend as well.”

I said so in anger. Sabelian looked at me with eyes full of curiosity.

“Really? I’ve never heard of that though... Who is it?”

“It’s a secret. Anyway, I have one, a friend! A really close friend!”

'Hmph, you don’t have a best friend, right? I have one! It’s a mirror, though.' He bit his lips after hearing that I had a friend.

It seems it hurt his pride. I was a bit proud. Sabelian fiddled with his own hands silently.

“I would definitely like to be introduced, whoever it is.”

“Yes, well. If there’s a chance.”

“Anyway, please tell me if there are any difficulties in preparing the party. Also, nothing should happen, but....” He frowned a little.

“I am a little worried, hearing that Karin is coming as well. I’m concerned about what the Stoke family will do.” Contempt, wariness, and concern could be heard over the calm voice. He continued dryly. “I will increase the security during the tea party. Is there anything you need outside of that?”

“Not yet.”

“Please tell me if there is. Then, I will excuse myself now.”

He said so and got up from his seat. 'Huh? Huh? You're just going to leave?'

“Y-Your Majesty. Wait, wait a minute!” I desperately called out to him. He stood still and looked back at me, hearing my voice.

“What is it?”

“T-that is....”

It flustered me, as he stayed for a shorter time than usual. We didn't hold hands either... 'Why was he leaving without holding hands today? What's going on? No, it is about time he graduates from it but....' It felt sad and empty somehow to just send him off without holding hands. It felt embarrassing to stop him like this. 'Was I too indecent...? It's fine! I'm originally an indecent person!'

“Are we not going to hold hands today?”

I asked in a direct manner. In the end, I would end up curious for the rest of the night if I sent him off like this.

Sabelian became stiff at the question, and he turned to look at me—or, rather, at my face. But, instead of the cold and indifferent Sabelian, his figure somehow looked like a young boy.

“... May I hold it?” It was a careful question, as if something might break if he were too loud. He lowered his voice even further.

“I was wondering if you disliked holding my hand, since you stepped on my foot in the dining room.”

'Ah, you were worrying about that the entire time? You looked fine at the time, though. I really thought I knew him, but I guess I don't. And... I don't know myself either. That answer, why was I so relieved?'

“It's not that I dislike holding hands but....”

I fiddled with my hair because of my embarrassment.

“I just didn’t like that you said that you would come at night in front of other people.”

“... I see.”

His stiff voice relaxed. Sabelian sat down.

“I did say it on purpose, but I will not do it anymore if you don’t like it.”

“... Were you making fun of me?”

“I said it because I thought it would be good to silence the rumors that there was discord between us, if we pretended to be friendly.”

‘Ah, was it like that? I thought you were trying to anger me.’

As I nodded my head in understanding, Sabelian spoke while gazing at me. “It was fun looking at your expression, too.”

‘Do one or the other! You’re either making fun of me, or comforting me, don’t mess with my emotions by doing both! Aah!’ I glared at Sabelian fiercely, but he slyly held out his hand.

“Will you hold my hand?”

“... Yes.”

I reached out my hand and grasped his. Sabelian had a satisfied face. On one hand, I was deeply moved, but on the other, I was doubtful. He, who had once trembled greatly while holding my hand, was now doing so like it was nothing special. It was already an encouraging thing, and something worth congratulating him for, but...

“Your Majesty. I have something I wish to ask.”

“Please ask away.”

“Do you need to practice every day? It’s already fine holding hands with a woman, no?”

Sabelian slowly raised his head at that question. His eyes seemed clearer and more beautiful at night than in the day.

“It’s not fine.”

“Yes?”

“It became all right to hold hands with you, but it’s still impossible with other women. I feel repulsed just imagining it.”

He said so and tightly gripped my hand. I would have never expected what he was about to say in a million years, as he looked me in the eye.

“Abigail, you... are precious to me.”

Special Thanks to A:Tempo Media

From the Author

Hello, this is Yir. It is nice to meet all foreign readers of 『 I'm Only a Stepmother, but My Daughter is Just So Cute! 』 like this. And thank you for reading this novel. I never imagined that this novel would be translated to a foreign language when I had written it. That I would even write an Author's Words like this as well. I am curious and nervous what kind of feelings our foreign readers will read with!

I remember when I first planned this novel. I thought it would be fun to write a story where the villainess of a fairytale is the main character. After giving the setting that the main character possessed Snow White's stepmother, I suddenly had a question. 'Why did the stepmother hate Snow White so much?'

The overall concept was complete in the process of answering that question. The queen who had no choice but to become a villain and the main character who had a wound similar to such a queen. The queen died a villain in the fairytale but I felt it would be nice if the queen could also come to a happy ending in her own way in this novel.

I came to write a story where the stepmother meets the suffering king and lonely princess, love each other and have a happy ending like that. I was truly happy to be able to write a story where everyone loves each other and becomes happy.

Perhaps due to gaining the motif from a fairytale, some told me that this novel was like a long fairytale. Like how we dreamed happy dreams reading fairytales when we were young, I hope that this novel will remain as a happy memory to everyone. I wish everybody to be healthy and happy at all times!

With love,

End of Volume 1

*I'm Only
a Stepmother
But
My Daughter
is Just
So Cute*

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