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Hong Heesu



Daddy,
I Don't Want
to Marry!

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Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry 1
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Prologue



WHEN the girl was young, her mother passed away. Her only remaining family member was her father who never stayed home long enough for her to notice. For as long as she could remember, the girl was alone and left to fend for herself. *I want to see Father*, she decided one day. The girl who yearned for the company of her only family member secretly went to meet him. However, what she received was a cold response.

“Why did you come here?”

“I-I...”

With a thundering voice, the man scolded the girl on the verge of tears. “Don’t come here ever again!”

The girl didn't expect him to welcome her for she was used to his cold indifference, but this sharp memory left a deep scar. She grew up knowing she had no place in her father’s heart. With a wounded heart, the girl grew older and made her debut in high society. Her grand debutante ball was held in the absence of her father. She eventually left the banquet hall feeling miserable. He didn’t come because he’s ashamed of me... right? she thought, her heart breaking to pieces.

As she cried to herself, a man appeared before her and consoled her tenderly.

“Why do you shed tears, my lady?”

His words were warm and his gaze attentive. For the man, it may have been an act of kindness he gave to anyone. But for the girl who had been starved of intimacy for so many years, it felt like a savior had descended from above. After that fateful day, she followed him like a shadow, begging for his love and affection until she succeeded in becoming his lover.

“I’ll give you anything you want. All you have to do is love me,” he once said, and she was happy for it. It’s as if her dreams finally came true. But reality strayed from her wishes for he later sang a different tune. “I don’t need your love anymore. Truthfully, I’ve fallen in love with the princess. Let’s break up.”

He said goodbye to the girl whose only dream was to marry him. After their three-year relationship ended, the breakup left her devastated.

“Even you... abandoned me. I’ll never forgive you.”

After some time passed, the princess who stole her lover consumed poison at a banquet and fell into a deep coma. This posed a problem because many witnessed the person who gave the poisoned cup to the princess.

“You! Did you try to hurt her?”

The girl who blossomed into a beautiful woman frantically shook her head. Although she loathed the princess for stealing the man she loved, she never wanted to hurt her. She simply handed the cup to the princess because she had asked for a drink to quench her thirst.

“No, it wasn’t me!” she pleaded. But no one believed her. The circumstances surrounding this incident, as well as her usual conduct, marked her as the only culprit.

When this truth became certain, the emperor ordered in anger, “Take that wicked girl to the underground prison! Now!”

But no one moved to receive his orders. Perhaps this was because standing behind the woman was an even more fearful figure than the emperor himself.

“Father...”

Although he’d always been indifferent towards her, they were still of blood. The woman sobbed while latching onto his hand. Despite his age, he looked like a young man.

“Father, I really didn’t...”

He brushed her off, and her eyes widened in astonishment.

Duke Floyen stared at the emperor. “I’ll personally arrest her.”

The emperor, wary of the transcendent man in front of him, sighed. “How can I trust you? I know you’ll only cause trouble!”

“You’ll have no choice but to trust me if I lock her up in the Room of Shadows,” Duke Floyen said to appease his anger.

The Room of Shadows was a prison cell that confined the most unforgivable sinners. Neither magic nor weapons could break through it, making it notorious for being a prison the worst offenders could never escape from. Only immediate members of the royal family could freely open and close its doors, and in this situation, imprisoning her meant that the duke was giving up on his daughter.

How could you do this to me? Father...

Filled with despair, the woman was led underground by her cold-hearted father. A fishy smell pervaded the cold, musty air. Entering the cold prison walls for the first time in her life was petrifying. But the most frightening of all was the Room of Shadows shrouded in darkness.

The woman decided to try her luck before entering the cell. “Father, I really...”

“Go in.”

Although she called out to him in distress, an icy voice met her. The woman felt an indescribable amount of agony as tears trickled down her cheeks and splattered onto the ground.

I’ve been abandoned... truly...

Her father reached into his coat to hand her something in passing before pushing her into the cell and calmly said, “Endure.”

When the door closed, keeping out his stony voice, a bright light formed a circle and a large geometric pattern appeared. It was a powerful enchantment used to block the entrance.

After confirming what her father had given her, the woman was seized by misery and desperation.

Why did you give me this...? Do you want me to kill myself? Father...

As the cold air inside the cell settled on her skin, so did the reality

of his abandonment. The woman clutched the dagger her father gave her and cried silently. After some time passed, the crown prince approached the woman fatigued by frustration and misery. As a direct descendant of the royal family, he was able to freely enter the cell. The prince, dressed in black armor, was a renowned bloodthirsty war fanatic.

“I came to interrogate the sinner who harmed my sister. Get out of my way,” he commanded the guards.

Though he had a sour relationship with his half-sister, it was unlikely that this man was here to save her. He probably desired to torture her; he’s known to enjoy torturing people.

The appearance of the prince clad head to toe in black armor as the rumors described him to be made the woman afraid. As she trembled in fear, the guards spoke cautiously. “Y-Your Highness. We apologize, but His Majesty hasn’t approved the interrogations yet.”

The prince laughed abruptly, the sound so terrifying even the guards trembled. “Why, do you think I’ll murder her in cold blood?”

There was a brief silence. It was a wordless affirmation.

Eventually, the prince continued. “Shall I chop off your heads first before interrogating her?”

When the guards pressed their lips into a thin line, he laughed maniacally.

“The prisoner will only speak nothing but the truth if she suffers extreme pain on the verge of death.” The prince turned to the woman. “Don’t worry. I won’t kill you.”

His calm voice which uttered cruel words heightened the woman’s fears.

Will he torture me until I die?

It was rumored the prince not only slaughtered numerous enemy soldiers at the border but had also killed many enemy retainers. He was a senseless tyrant in the making. The thought of the maniac tyrant interrogating her frightened her so.

It might be better to die than be tortured by someone like him.

As her rationality became paralyzed by frustration and fear, her last memory with her father came to mind. She wanted his love and comfort, but he handed her a dagger.

It's rather good that this happened. Someone like me...

The woman replayed the countless insults she had received until now: the only disgrace of Duke Floyen, the good-for-nothing that everyone avoided.... she picked up the dagger and laughed hollowly.

It's better for me to just disappear.

The prince noticed something strange and hurriedly reached out, shouting, "Stop!"

But it was too late. She plunged the dagger into her chest. The woman took her own life.

This was the point where the online novel stopped updating.

Ah, it would've been nice if there was an ending to the story... the real culprit hadn't been uncovered.

"Jubelian," a shameless man called out.

I sighed in frustration.

Jubelian Eloy Floyen was the name of the villainess in the novel; the unadaptable villainess who frustrated me to death.

"Why did you call me here?"

It was shameless of the man to speak without a hint of remorse. This was the only words he had to say after making someone wait for three hours. Truly a shameless man.

A voice likewise scolded the man. "I see that you're three hours late."

"Jubelian." His face reddened with embarrassment before cooling down as he called her name again with a lowered voice. This was a natural reaction. It must've been the first time she spoke against him.

"Did I say something wrong, Mikhail?"

From being a reader of the novel... I somehow became Jubelian, the villainess who perished inside the cold prison walls after being discarded by the male lead.

1

Successful Breakup



IN my previous life, I was an ordinary college student suffering from a lack of job prospects. I admit reading far too many books in my spare time, but still, I lived rather diligently: I worked a part-time job, gained relevant experience for my dream career, and obtained several certificates for programming, as well as random things that'd have qualified me to become a tea sommelier or maybe a bakery technician. In spite of this, it was all in vain. Had I known that I'd be hit by a vehicle on my way to my work, I'd have invested a little more time for myself.

I often daydream about being reincarnated into a character of the upper-class. But I never thought of becoming a villainess, especially one destined to live a short life like Jubelian. Usually, reincarnated individuals I read about steered clear from their untimely death. However, my behavior thus far had been faithful to the original work. It would've been nice if I realized I was in this novel earlier. I only remembered the details of Jubelian's life later on. On my second anniversary with Mikhail—three days ago—I suddenly remembered that she used to harass him. I also remember other people's unfounded allegations which led to my death had been corroborated by such behavior. The old me used to persistently harass anyone who approached Mikhail; she threw tantrums and cursed at others who tried striking a conversation with him. There'd also been numerous instances where threats were made under her family name.

I'm now aware that this wasn't normal behavior and that I needed to fix such behavior. Because of these events, Jubelian had many enemies from all sides. I was fortunate enough that I was at the point in the novel where I've yet to collide with other prominent characters such as the princess and the crown prince. I sighed at the face of my grim future, and as if on cue, I heard a deep voice speak with an

annoyed tone.

“Are you livid because I’m late?” Mikhail asked.

I was puzzled by his question, my head tilted slightly. Have I ever been incensed with him? I don’t think so. Mikhail was the love of Jubelian’s life and the novel’s male lead. Now that I’m seeing him up close, my heart was terribly still, and a despondent feeling arose inside of me. To think I was infatuated with him, but I feel nothing now. Jubelian treated Mikhail like her savior. She yearned for his love and hung onto his every word. At the slightest change of his expression, she became anxious and was constantly afraid that he’d one day throw her away. However, my experiences in the modern world changed Jubelian’s personality from top to bottom. I had to take care of tuition costs, keep my grades up, look for jobs, and pay living expenses all by myself. I don’t need someone to be my savior. I can save myself; I can change the future myself.

After coming to this conclusion, my lips rose to a curl, and said, “I’m not angry.”

I didn’t want to waste any more of my time and feelings on a man who wanted nothing to do with me.

“Jubelian.” Mikhail stared at me with a slightly irritated expression. Although our relationship had been a bit forceful, it had endured two years nonetheless. I could understand the weight of his words just by listening to the tone of his voice. “Isn’t this unhealthy to our relationship if you pursue small matters this way?”

It was not a request but a thinly veiled warning. He was telling me to stop pestering him. I smiled innocently like I always did. Except this time, I was sincere.

“I’m not angry. I was joking when I scolded you for being late,” I said cheerily to lighten the mood, but it seemed like he was displeased by my response.

He stared at me with a deadpan look. “A joke? That doesn’t sound like something you’d do.” He huffed and observed me with weary eyes. “So, why’d you call me here?”

I sighed upon seeing the blatant displeasure on his face. I guess he

can't help but be upset. The past Jubelian often interfered with his training. I decided to let him off the hook this time due to my previous self's past mistakes.

"Mikhail, could you please..."

"You said you only needed me briefly." He cut me off before I could finish. I burst out laughing, but he wasn't amused. "If it isn't anything important, I'll be taking my leave."

Mikhail was about to leave first at first notice like always. He'd grown weary dealing with me. Despite his ill-befitting manners which brought me nothing but displeasure, I knew nothing good would come from making an enemy with the novel's male lead.

"It'll only take a minute," I said flatly.

"I've to go now." Mikhail sighed. "There's an important training session that I can't pass up. I don't want to be late, Jubelian. You understand that, don't you?"

When I met his cold gaze, I became vexed. Ah, this is pathetic, truly. I'm not even worth five minutes of his time? *Heh*. Three days ago, I asked him when he had time for me because I was afraid of interfering with his training. But today, on our promised appointment, I ended up waiting three hours in the Imperial Knights' waiting-room. No matter what I did, this ill-mannered man continued to ignore my efforts. He only valued his own time, not mine. Well, there's no reason for me to endure this any longer; there's no need for me to beg for his love, nor would I beg for him to stay. He wasn't worth my time, effort, and affection. I'd only be degrading myself.

I set the mood by lowering my voice. "Sit down, please. It'll only take a second."

"I'll have to decline." His voice was threateningly low as if he thought he was the superior one in this relationship.

I had a sudden urge to break his illusion.

"Father knows that we're meeting today. Wouldn't it be odd if you returned early?"

Mikhail's expression stiffened when I mentioned Father, a superior

he both feared and respected. “Five minutes,” he conceded, sitting down in obedience with crossed arms.

It seemed that even the strongest knight was afraid of the empire’s Sword Master. Maybe I should’ve mentioned Father’s name from the start. I laughed, thinking back to the time I struggled to please the man in front of me. It was all in vain. There was an easy way out all this time.

“What’s so funny?” Mikhail asked sternly. His expression was filled with annoyance, but it didn’t matter; I didn’t need his goodwill.

I started with a sentimental opening. “For the past two years, we’ve spent quite a bit of time together.”

“Did you call me here just to say that?”

He probably thought I was trying to seek attention from him because he interrupted me with a low voice. He didn’t let me finish and he’d already lost patience. He must loathe being with me. It’s a tragedy for a man to be so impatient. Would it kill him to wait? I was about to give him a pleasant gift, too.

Although I was disgruntled by his words, I gave an insincere smile I learned from the modern world. “I won’t be bothering you anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

I frowned at his arrogance. He’s being too much. I honestly wanted to tell him, “I’m going to tell Father about this, and he’ll fire you.” He knew Jubelian’s powerful background; this would teach him a lesson about what power could do. However, Father would never fire a subordinate he cared about. If Mikhail and I came to despise each other, it would only end badly for me.

Let’s not make enemies anymore. My goal is to live a long life, I thought.

“I’m saying that I’ll let you go,” I said slowly, reaffirming this decision in mind.

Mikhail’s eyes widened before slowly turning back to normal. Even the corner of his lips tilted. He doesn’t believe me. “You’re bluffing. Do you think I’ll believe that?”

I sighed at his wary composure. It'd be a waste of time to say anything more than this. Sighing, I said, "It's up to you whether you believe it or not. I already said what I needed to say."

I turned around, but a cold voice stopped me in my tracks. "Fine, I'll trust you. Just don't appear in my eyes ever again. Got it?" Mikhail said indifferently.

The corners of my mouth quirked up at his unexpected words. I guess the breakup was successful? But whatever his reason was, he accepted it, and I was all the more relieved. My goal now was to enjoy life to the fullest extent. Although Father was indifferent towards me, he didn't mind supporting the luxurious life I gained from being his daughter. It wouldn't be bad to live life with pleasure while spending his fortune. My spirits increased as I imagined a bright future ahead.

I glanced back at Mikhail and smiled lightly. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened until now. I wish you all the happiness in the world, Mikhail."

After bidding him a sincere farewell, I turned around.

When I used to meet Mikhail, I usually wore pretty-looking but uncomfortable shoes. The ones I wore today were austere and low-heeled. Was it thanks to these comfortable shoes that I was able to leave without regrets?



Jubelian was apologetic? Mikhail scoffed while staring at the woman's retreating figure. *Bullcrap*. It's all but a plot to get his attention. He was certain that woman would turn around and come running back to him. But contrary to his expectations, she continued walking towards the horizon without sparing him another glance. When her figure disappeared from view, he clenched his fists.

She left. She really left.

Was she being serious?

Jubelian Eloy Floyen.

She was, without doubt, a beautiful woman despite suffering from an illness of the mind. For the past two years, he endured her behavior which she excused in the name of love. Like a dog, the woman followed him wherever he went. She exhibited hostility to the people he spoke to and was over the moon if he gave her even the slightest bit of attention. Yes, she was a dog; a stupid dog who wagged her tail even when pushed away and showed affection even when her master did not. Although it was maddening, he tolerated her because of the attention he received from her father and his idol, Duke Regis Floyen. Also, he was relieved that those other pesky women didn't bother him when she was with him.

Why did she suddenly change her mind? Plagued with uncertainty, Mikhail clenched his fists unconsciously. Now that the woman was completely out of sight, he unexpectedly felt strange instead of relieved. It's a relief I won't have to see that troublesome woman anymore, he thought, trying to focus on this mindset to shake off conflicting thoughts, but...

"Damn... what's happening to me?"

He couldn't stop thinking about her. Her words continued to play in his mind: "I'm sorry for everything that's happened until now. I wish you all the happiness in the world, Mikhail." He couldn't forget her smile either. She even looked a little relieved.



It feels like the knot in the pit of my stomach has been unraveled. I should take a rest. With a gleeful smile, I went back home right after parting with Mikhail. It was then I ran into a gorgeous man by the front door. It was Father. I inherited his silver hair and blue eyes, but not his striking appearance. He was a transcendent being who aged slowly; it looked like we could be siblings. There'll be a day when I'll look older than him.

"Father, how was your day?" I greeted him with an upbeat voice, the complete opposite of how I felt inside.

He stared at me with indifference. Although we're family, it'd been years since I greeted him like this. After he turned me away, I only spoke to him when it came to business matters. But now I had a reason to feign friendliness with him—I want to live happily.

After retrieving the memories of my previous life, I realized an important fact: no matter how much I begged for his love, Father would eventually forsake me. To him, I was lacking in many ways, nothing more than a shameful existence. He never cared to speak warmly to others when it came to his daughter. Since I won't be loved by him, I'll give up and find my happiness elsewhere. And yes, it'll be the happiness of money. But of course, I've my own sense of right and wrong. I don't intend to be greedy: a small estate in the outskirts of the city, some funds from Father, and a job handling one of his countless responsibilities were enough. I'd still be living a luxurious life even with only those things. I had no intention of begging for Father's love anymore. But as long as I needed his riches, it was important to maintain an amicable relationship. If I didn't get along with him like in the original novel, I might end up with not a penny in my pocket.

I showed Father an insincere smile I learned working in retail. "You must be tired from supervising training all day."

Once again, he didn't answer.

My God! Would it kill him to utter a word? His behavior brought me into a foul mood like it would any other human being. Even so, I was used to it.

"You should go and relax, Father. I'll be retiring to my quarters." I hurriedly finished the one-sided conversation and started climbing the stairs to the second floor.

"There was no training today," he said flatly.

Huh? Father responded to me? I doubted having heard anything at all when an unfamiliar voice reached my ears. It'd been a long time since I heard him speak. I was taken aback for a second before coming back to my senses because I realized what he'd just said. I gritted my teeth cursing the bastard that is Mikhail. He said he had training. That lying bastard... I swear if I ever see his face... *Ugh*. Upon realizing this, I became even more irked. I had the urge to curse profanity at Mikhail

for his cold treatment towards me but quickly controlled my emotions.

“Calm down, Jubelian,” I whispered to myself. “He’s no longer in your life. Let’s be cool about this.”

The life I experienced in the modern world taught me to keep my calm in a moment of anger. I recalled the time I was forced to deal with an aggravating customer and controlled my expression.

“You’re home early,” Father said.

Ah, now that I think about it... Jubelian usually came home in the dead of night, too busy following Mikhail around like a lost puppy. But since I broke up with him and came home straight away, I came back earlier than usual.

Should I tell Father the truth?

Similar to the original plot, Father held Mikhail in high regard. He made things convenient for him while treating him with relative kindness. Since Father saw me as nothing but a useless child, he probably toyed with the idea of making Mikhail his successor. I burst out laughing inwardly. If I was anything like Jubelian, I wouldn’t be able to speak the truth, too afraid that Father might detest me for making things difficult for him. However, I learned something from Jubelian’s past: trying to be loved by Father was futile.

I stared at his blue eyes which were similar to mine and said, “We parted ways.”

Although I didn’t mention Mikhail’s name, he knew who I was referring to. The creases in his face proved this.

“Why?”

It was a short question laden with discontent. I understood why he asked me this. If Mikhail became his son-in-law, he’d not need to worry about the succession issue. But since we separated, I had ruined his plans. Even so, it was a two-person relationship I needed to take care of myself. I won’t allow Father to wreck my future.

“I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with someone who doesn’t love and respect me, Father.”

Father’s face immediately crumpled with horror. He looked

astonished that I broke up with a man of talent because of my pride. Father's narrowed eyes seemed to reproach me. My heart tightened, but it didn't ache. I wasn't a child who'd be hurt by his words anymore.

"I want to marry someone who'll love me unconditionally, Father. I want to be happy. That's all."

I considered being single the rest of my life but thought it better to hide my intentions. If I offended him, he might hand me a dagger. I didn't realize this then, but I knew now: constant indifference was better than cruel abandonment.

I'll live quietly without bothering you, so please, Father, leave me alone like you always did. I'd cry at such thoughts in the past, but I feel nothing at this moment. It was as if all the bottled emotions inside had withered.

I stared at Father as he turned around without a response. Does that mean that he doesn't want to talk to his pathetic daughter anymore? He ignored me plenty of times, so I wasn't offended. I stared at his retreating back and sighed in relief.

I was exhausted.

A lot of things happened today.



Jubelian's maid, Merilyn, gulped nervously. She bit her lips. The reins that used to keep Lady Floyen occupied were gone. Merilyn was able to breathe in peace the past few days because her lady was in high spirits. But it was a different story now that she broke up with Mikhail.

The news was both sudden and unexpected.

Jubelian, otherwise known as Lady Floyen, was a beautiful woman. Merilyn found it rewarding to dress her in picturesque clothes and accessories, but her emotional ups and downs made Merilyn's job strenuous. She'd freely scream and curse if ever she felt slighted. When she destroyed an expensive tea set or ripped her clothes in a frenzy, all the maids became extremely apprehensive. They were

terrified that they would one day be treated like that.

“I’ll help you change out of your clothes, Lady Floyen,” Marilyn said carefully to avoid provoking Jubelian.

Jubelian’s bright eyes which shone like sapphires looked at her indifferently.

Did she say something wrong? Marilyn gulped nervously and looked at her. A subtle smile appeared on Jubelian’s face; she looked beautiful with that smile.

Merilyn’s gaze fixated on her smile, almost as if she was possessed. She blankly stared at Jubelian’s face when she heard her say, “Why are you standing still, Marilyn? I thought you said you’d help me change out of my clothes.”

Lady Floyen’s smile was gone. Marilyn came to her senses, and realizing what she’d done, turned pale with fear. Perspiration formed around her neck and her insides turned cold. She couldn’t find the courage to lift her head till she heard a clear voice speak over her bowed head.

“Marilyn, you don’t have to help me. Just prepare a bath for me, please.”

Jubelian’s tone made her doubt herself. She didn’t seem irritated or angry. Marilyn stared at the beautiful lady with suspicion. When their eyes met, a brilliant smile blossomed on Jubelian’s face like a sea of flowers.

“Ah, and please prepare some bath products that’ll help me sleep. I’m tired and I wish to sleep early.”

“Y-yes. I...I’ll prepare lavender scented ones.” Despite stuttering, she was able to compose herself and reply in time.

Why is Lady Floyen suddenly acting like this? I’m not used to it, Marilyn thought. If anyone asked Marilyn what she thought of the lady, she’d say that Lady Floyen was an unflattering person to serve without hesitation. Although she had never physically abused her maids, she’d done plenty of psychological damage to their state of being.

“I’ll be waiting for the bath then. Thank you.”

Jubelian finished their brief conversation with grace and walked past Merilyn and entered her room. She gave Merilyn an encouraging remark rather than a spiteful one. Merilyn glanced at the closed door, then staggered when her legs lost their strength.

“Merilyn! Are you okay?”

Sella, an assistant maid, rushed towards her. Merilyn refused her help.

“I’m fine. I’m to prepare a bath for Lady Floyen. Please prepare some clothes for her.” Merilyn tried calming herself after giving instructions to Sella.

Merilyn thought she’d lash out at her, but it was not so. The lady behaved oddly today as if she was a completely different person. The Jubelian she knew threw tantrums when she wasn’t in a good mood, ruining everyone else’s mood in turn. The moment she thought of this, goosebumps pricked her skin. Merilyn struggled to compose herself. No, she shouldn’t think useless thoughts but focus on her work. Nevertheless, Jubelian’s smiling face continued to plague her.

“Is it because she didn’t seem energetic? I even felt sorry for her.” At this thought, Merilyn let out a sigh and slapped herself in the face. “What am I thinking about? Wake up, Merilyn.”

She reminded herself to stay vigilant.



Taking a bath was always an enjoyable experience. Useless thoughts would scatter the moment I soaked myself in warm, fragrant water. However, I was worn-out from today’s events that even a bath didn’t seem appealing. Should I skip it? I’d been thinking about going to sleep for a while now but quickly decided against it. The maids were doing their best to prepare the bath. I shouldn’t change my mind at the last minute. It’ll only trouble them. I felt wretched after realizing that I’d been so cruel to the maids. I wish I could start over from the beginning, but it was too late. If I showed kindness now, they won’t

find it sincere and think that I've gone mad. But since I decided to play the part of a virtuous lady, I continued waiting for the bath patiently. Despite my determination, I couldn't stop yawning. I was drowsy.

I'm about to pass out. What should I do? Should I leave? Such thoughts plagued my mind, but I held on. After waiting another five minutes, I began thinking about canceling the bath, but just then, I heard a knock.

"The bath is ready, Lady Floyen."

"Alright."

I rose from the chair to go to the washroom. However, I was exhausted from resisting the urge to yawn. When I finally gave in, tears began flowing down my cheeks. I'm too beat up. I don't think I'll be able to take a bath like this. As I raised my hand to wipe the crestfallen tears, I heard a voice.

"Lady Floyen!" Merilyn cried. She looked at me with astonishment which was an unusual look on her.

Did she see me yawn? I probably looked like a hippo with my mouth wide open. How mortifying.

I smiled as gracefully as possible while trying my best to keep my lips shut. "Sorry about that. I'm a bit under the weather..."

Like a professional, Merilyn didn't say anything about my yawning. "Are you okay?" she asked with a careful tone.

I guess I looked spent in her eyes since she asked me if I'd be okay to bathe. I decided to tell the truth. I thought it better to be honest since she asked sincerely.

A few tears leaked from the corner of my eyes as I muttered, "I'm tired, so I'll take a bath tomorrow. Could you change me into my sleepwear?"

Merilyn nodded silently and began helping me into my clothes. For some reason, she bore a sullen expression. Was it because I made her prepare the bath for no reason? I heard somewhere before that it was easier to see things from someone's point of view once walking in their shoes. Maybe because of what I went through in the modern world

that I pitied Marilyn who suffered all this time under Jubelian's scrutiny.

"It's because... I'm very tired right now."

Marilyn's eyes widened at my excuse. She hurriedly lowered her head. "It's not a problem. Please rest, Lady Floyen."

I'm sure she's upset despite pretending that everything was okay.

"Thank you, Marilyn."

Her legs seemed to wobble for a second, but I was worn out that it must've been an illusion. As soon as Marilyn left the room, I collapsed on the bed. I looked up at the ceiling, wondering if I ended things with Mikhail today. Yes, I did. What a relief! I was elated that my body shook with laughter. Though I felt sorry for Marilyn who was upset from the troubles I caused her tonight, I at least parted ways with Mikhail.

Because of that, I slept soundly.



Late into the night, long after the moon had risen in the sky, the maids were covertly shooting the breeze in a garden full of white roses.

"Ah, I had a trying day."

"Same here... by the way, where's Marilyn?"

"Lady Floyen's most likely scolding her."

At that moment, Marilyn appeared before them.

"Marilyn!"

The maids approached her with anxious expressions and bombarded her with questions.

"How was your day?"

"Are you okay?"

At Sella's pounding, Marilyn recalled what happened recently and

sighed.

Jubelian tried to hide her emotions, but Marilyn could see the tears brimming in her indigo eyes. The lady wore an awkward expression and a forced smile. Jubelian frequently bullied the maids but seeing her gloomy mood made Marilyn feel sympathetic towards her.

“No, there was some crying.”

The maids widened their eyes in astonishment. They began to criticize Jubelian.

“Lady Floyen is too much!”

“That’s right. She should’ve taken it out on Sir Mikhail, not you, Marilyn!”

Marilyn massaged her temples. It seemed like the maids misunderstood her seeing as they tried consoling her. “No, not me. Lady Floyen was shedding tears.”

One of the maids who asked if Jubelian had thrown something at Marilyn grew startled by her words. Her rabbit-like eyes widened with surprise.

“What?” she asked, aghast.

“I went into her room after preparing the bath and saw her crying in hush-hush.”

The maids frowned with suspicion. They knew the kind of person Jubelian was. It was difficult to believe Marilyn’s words.

“Did she really?”

“It seems like the breakup affected her greatly. She looked lethargic tonight as well.”

Silence pervaded the solemn atmosphere before a man’s voice broke the silence.

“She cried?”

At his sudden interruption, the maids jolted with surprise.

“M-master!”

Duke Floyen, the owner of the estate, stared at them with a stony

expression. The maids trembled with fear. They were caught red-handed gossiping and had no excuses for the punishment awaiting them.

“You.” The duke's peacock-blue eyes fell on Merilyn. She held her breath. “Tell me in detail what you saw,” he commanded in a cold voice, “And don't miss a beat.”



When I woke up, my body felt lighter than it had yesterday. It wasn't a bad idea to spend my days as a homebody for a while. I planned to eat a lot of mouthwatering food and live in seclusion. However, this plan was only as good as a wish. For odd reasons I can't fathom, Father asked me to have breakfast with him at the crack of dawn.

“How's the food?”

The food is good, of course. It's *your* presence that makes me sick, Father.

“It's good!” I lied.

I couldn't express the truth; all I could do was eagerly eat after giving a short response. Wanting to finish quickly, I practically inhaled the food despite finding it burdensome for a light breakfast.

Father was gawking. He looked at me like how one would look at something pathetic. “Eat slowly. You'll get sick.”

But you're the one who's making me queasy... I was already shocked that he suddenly called me for breakfast. The air was tense, worsening by the minute as he stared at me. Why's he doing this? To scold me for ending things with Mikhail? Whatever the case, I wanted to leave the dining room as soon as possible, but doing so would only reveal my discomfort. I continued forcing food down my throat.

Before long, Father looked away from me and sighed. He probably thinks I'm pathetic. It makes sense in his eyes. Father bore the great title of duke. He also led an elite group of Imperial Knights and the

entire Central Army. After leading the war that took place 20 years ago to an illustrious victory, he became the empire's most revered hero and strongest swordsman. He had everything. Besides, Father was a handsome man who receives marriage proposals to this day. I can't help it if he thinks I'm pathetic. Father was a character who had it all. It wasn't a mediocre comparison, but a pathetic one. Not only was I incompetent, but my social reputation plummeted drastically as I chased Mikhail around like a dog. I didn't even have friends because of my poor social skills.

In other novels, villainesses were widely liked and admired among their social circles no matter how they behaved... this character is... somewhat realistic.

I was unconsciously sulking when I made eye contact with Father again.

“Do you want this?”

He must've thought I was looking at the plate of food in front of him. I shook my head, but a large chunk of meat already landed on my plate.

“Eat.”

Despite being full, I couldn't refuse what Father had given me.

Why are you doing this to me, Father?

As I silently suffered from overeating, he suddenly called out my name.

“Jubelian.”

“Yes?”

“What is your ideal type?”

I dropped my fork at the unexpected question. Why on earth is he asking me this? A servant in the dining room replaced my fork with a new one, but I was knocked for six that I felt like I was going to drop it again.

“I'm just curious.”

Although it was a simple question, it didn't make sense coming

from him considering his treatment towards me the past 18 years. He was never interested in me, so why is he asking this now? An uneasy thought suddenly occurred to me. Was he trying to marry me off to someone else? It was a credible hypothesis. As his only child, I don't qualify as a successor to whom he could pass down his title. No, I'd rather have an evil stepmother or a tyrant half-brother than to marry!

"I'm not sure. Maybe a man stronger than you, Father?" After quickly deciphering the meaning of his question, I mentioned something hopelessly impossible.

He murmured something to himself, then stared at me coldly asking, "Are you serious?"

Upon hearing his voice and meeting his icy eyes, I realized that I made a blunder. There was no man stronger than Father in the empire. Not wanting to provoke him any further, I hurriedly changed my answer. "...I mean, that would be nice, but there's no such person in this world, right? Father's the strongest swordsman in the empire!"

His expression softened at my praise.

It truly is difficult to please him...

"So, what's your final answer?"

I hoped to move on to a different topic, but he had no intention of doing so. I should mention someone with near-impossible conditions without driving him mad. After all, no other family possessed higher prestige than the Floyen household. Even if Father introduced a man for me to marry, I could say that he didn't fit our family's standards and easily dismiss him. Sounds simple enough, right?

Having cleared my thoughts, I looked at Father with an austere gaze and said, "I won't marry a man unless he has everything I desire. I want the most affluent, famed, and competent man there is. And a good look is a requirement, too."

I snuck in the possibility that I wasn't going to marry and observed his expression for any changes. His face stayed the same, making it difficult for me to guess his thoughts.

After a long silence, he nodded lightly and said, "I see."

It seemed like I convinced him. I sighed in relief. Conversations with Father left me tired. Just a little while longer and this will all end. I'll head straight to my room thereafter. I was uncomfortable spending time with Father, so I desperately waited for breakfast to end.

“Jubelian.”

“Yes?”

I was a little nervous about what he'd say next. But this time, I was ready to answer. He couldn't possibly surprise me any more than this. No matter the questions he threw at me, I would answer confidently.

His lips slowly parted. “Let's go somewhere together.”

Startled by his out-of-the-blue question, I dropped my fork for the second time.

“Pardon me. Go somewhere?”

I searched through 18 years of Jubelian's memories to see if I ever accompanied Father, but nothing came to mind.

“Why?”

When I responded to his unexpected offer, he said calmly, “Just because.”

Bewildered by his brief answer, a dull ache panged in my head.

What is Father doing?



We ended up going to Arcade Street. There was a high-end shopping mall here, similar to modern shopping malls where several stores gathered under one roof.

Father pointed to a strange-looking owl watch. “That one,” he said.

The clerk guiding us called out to someone. “Neil, add the owl watch!”

I sighed with frustration. My head throbbed, so I briefly closed my eyes.

I don't understand. Why's he doing this?

When I opened my eyes, I tried to not let my gaze linger on any one object for too long. But as I walked past a myriad of stores, a porcelain rabbit caught my eyes.

In my previous life, ceramics were a commonly used commodity. But in this world, it was a high-quality item only few could afford. That's why ceramic figures in the form of animals, flowers, and people were envied by the general public. It's a shame. It didn't look charming. My opinions didn't matter, though. Onlookers raved about its beauty. But the various pigments that colored the porcelain rabbit looked chaotic and bizarre. I didn't understand why people were willing to pay a hefty amount for this.

I suddenly sensed a burdensome gaze behind me and quickly directed my attention elsewhere. Although I'd been determined to not look at any one object for too long, I caught myself staring at this bizarre object for a while. As I dwelled on my mistake, I heard Father speak.

"That one as well." He pointed at the porcelain rabbit.

I frowned with frustration. I wonder why he kept buying things I looked at? I thought this would only be a simple outing, but Father was splurging, buying everything I laid my eyes on. It was uncomfortable. I get that shopping was an inevitable part of my new life, but I didn't want to lavishly spend money without careful consideration. Was he testing me to see how I'd behave when I ran out of patience? If he was, what a pain. All I wanted to do was go home, but the reality was that I was the duke's daughter. My dependence on Father meant that I couldn't rebel against his will, otherwise, it would only bring me trouble. This was all my fault for not creating means to be independent from him.

I sighed.

Something suddenly appeared in front of my face. It was the bizarre porcelain rabbit I saw. If I break this and pretend it was a mistake... will I be scolded? No, it's best not to test my luck. I accepted the rabbit without a choice.

Father looked at me. “Let’s go.”

For some reason, his expression was more relaxed than before. If someone he knew sees him, they might have asked if he had good news.

I sighed and glanced at the things he bought. Perhaps he was the type to relieve stress by splurging needlessly. I followed him in silence, careful not to put him in a horrid mood. Then, something caught my eye again. This time, it was a person. She was carrying a sword. It fascinated me. The empire had clear-cut gender roles, so it was difficult to find swordswomen. As such, she couldn’t help but stand out. I remember, though vaguely, a steady stream of swordswomen stopped propping up after Sir Yulia, the first empress’ captain of guards, suddenly went missing. No one’s seen Sir Yulia since then.

People around us began whispering, but I thought it pleasantly nice to see more women wielding swords again. Father also caught sight of the swordswoman and stopped in his tracks.

“Wait here for a minute.”

He approached the woman wielding a sword.

Does he know her?

When they disappeared into the flock of herd, the crowd’s conversation shifted.

“Was that person Duke Floyen?”

They were whispering, but I could still hear them. I felt uncomfortable with all the unwelcome gazes on me. It felt like I was being scrutinized. I cautiously stepped away from the crowd, but my movements were noticed by Geraldine, my escort knight. He was also my older cousin.

“Where do you think you’re going, Jubelian?”

I frowned at Geraldine as he looked at me with suspicion. He must’ve thought I was planning mischief.

“There are many people here. You should speak with respect, Sir Geraldine.”

He sulked at my remark, but quickly composed himself in

embarrassment. “So where are you going, Lady Jubelian?” he asked more respectfully this time.

“I want to buy something from that shop.”

Geraldine’s expression hardened when I carelessly pointed to a lonesome shop at the corner of the street. “Is that really... where you want to go?” he said in a strange tone, so I turned around to look at the shop and flinched. The sign read “Growling Bear Armor Specialty Shop”.

...Why did I point to a place like that? Just as I regretted my actions, Geraldine said sarcastically, “I will respect the lady’s wishes.”

Unable to change my decision, I simply nodded and answered, “Thank you.”

I entered the store with Geraldine and was greeted by an owner who possessed the physique of a bear.

“Welcome to... huh? An angel in our store?”

I was embarrassed at his exaggerated praise.

“Oh, I...”

“What do you need?”

I took a quick glance at Geraldine for help, but he was distracted by something else.

“Oh, I love this gauntlet!” he gushed.

He’s here to protect me, but he’s shopping for his stuff. A bit of a shame. Father would have Geraldine’s head if ever he found out.

“Price?” said the voice of a stranger.

The stranger only spit out a single word, yet his cold and desolate voice made me tremble. I peeked to the side inconspicuously and saw a man wearing a black cloak that covered his entire body. His face likewise was covered with a black hood.

He looked suspicious.

“Ten silver coins, sir!”

In response to the owner’s lively voice, the man searched through

his pocket.

He was tall and handsome from the prominence of his nose. At that moment, crimson eyes that I could barely make out under his hood turned to me. I hurriedly avoided his gaze but not before our eyes briefly met.

This is embarrassing... I should apologize...

“What are you looking at?” he questioned distastefully.

What ill manners. It was true that I took a glance at him first and displayed impolite behavior, but I didn’t want to apologize due to his rudeness.

“Oh, um... I was looking for the thing you’re buying right now.”

When I answered, the owner stiffened. “Miss, you want to...buy this?”

Is that armor polish? I tried maintaining a profound gaze when I realized what I was looking at. Knights were usually associated with armor, but in reality, they didn’t have to wear them unless they were in combat. In other words, armor polish was useless to me.

“Yes, I need it!” I declared loudly. I didn’t want to admit that I’d been secretly stealing glances at the cloaked man. I’m sure to cry in embarrassment later on in closed doors. “It’s a shame that the decorative armors in my house have lost their luster.”

The owner nodded to my answer vigorously. “Of course, but one would not be enough to shine everything in a house. Hold on, miss. I have more!”

“...What? No, I just need one...” I tried refusing him, but it seemed like the owner didn’t hear me.

“Wait here. I’ll go through the warehouse to find more!”

After the owner disappeared, it sunk in that I purchased something out of impulse. I bought useless armor polish... I can’t criticize Father when I’m doing the same thing.

Like father, like daughter.

I sighed, thinking of the grave I dug myself into. Meanwhile, the

man next to me placed a gold coin on the table, picked up his polish, and turned around. I would've ignored him had he placed down a small amount of money. However, a gold coin was an enormous value. It could feed a commoner's family for two weeks.

"Hey, what about change?" I shouted after him at full volume, but he didn't respond.

"Change!" I made chase and shouted louder.

He should be able to hear me. I began wondering if he was deaf. Maybe he heard the wrong amount from the owner. I suddenly felt pity for him.

"Hey, can you hear me?" I asked again.

The man stopped in his tracks. He turned around and glared at me.

So he's not deaf. Despite my embarrassment for causing a commotion, I said, "I think you heard wrong. The amount you paid is ten times the price."

As I explained to the man, I heard Geraldine's call.

"My lady, what's going on?"

"Um... this guy..."

I tried to make clear the situation, but the man took that window of opportunity to leave the shop. I frowned in embarrassment when I heard the owner's voice again.

"Miss! It turns out that we have ten more of these."

"No, I don't need ten..." I voiced my thoughts that I didn't need that much, but the owner wouldn't listen.

"One gold coin for all of these! Oh, you've already done the math!"

One gold coin. It was the same amount the man in the hood paid. I tried clearing the misunderstanding with the owner, but he continued making his assumptions.

"By the way, did that guy take my stuff without paying?"

"No, you're mistaken..."

"That damn bastard!" The owner cursed at the man. Despite my

attempts to interject, I wasn't able to get a word in until he was finished.

Finally, I cried in anger. "That one gold coin was paid for by him!"

The owner grew flustered. A rosy blush adorned his cheeks. "Is that so? You should've told me earlier."

Is this guy pointing the finger at me? I tried to tell him all this time! What a guy! In my exasperation, I decided to never step foot into this shop ever again. He just lost himself a potential customer.



Next to a carriage parked in a vacant lot, a short-haired woman was waiting for someone anxiously. Where is he? she wondered. When the man arrived, she sighed in relief.

"My Lord, I've informed Duke Floyen of your appointment," she said.

"Good."

Although his voice was cold as usual, he sounded somewhat annoyed. The woman realized this and asked, "Did something happen?"

"Hey, can you hear me?"

The man thought back to the woman he met in the shop earlier. She had no fear even around a vicious hound who bared its teeth to caution those near him to stay far away. He was ticked off for a second, but the moment he turned around and met the woman's eyes, all hostility disappeared. Reminiscing what occurred, the young man frowned.

"Nothing happened."



I left the shop in frustration. As I walked away, I tried

brainstorming ways I could recover from today's unexpected event.

"Where have you been, Jubelian?" Father bore a displeased expression.

"Oh, I bought something," I quickly answered.

Father turned to Geraldine who was carrying the purchased goods. "And what is that?"

"It's armor polish."

At Geraldine's answer, Father looked at me with a slight frown. He sighed and said, "Let's go."

I'm aware that I purchased something so... useless, but there's no way he'd dare berate me. If he has a conscience, that is.

I followed after Father for who knows how long. When an obstacle—stairs—appeared before my eyes, my composure threatened to crumble.

I'd been following him for several hours today. My feet were beginning to throb. I only need to endure this a little while longer. I tried ignoring the pain by imagining the bright future ahead of me after inheriting Father's wealth.

Wait, what's going on?

I felt a tingling sensation in the back of my head and my eyesight became speckled with black dots. My legs lost their strength as I tried to take another step.

"Help!"

Fortunately, I didn't fall because I grabbed onto something in front of me. As soon as my eyesight came back, I looked up to see what I was holding onto and stiffened with fear.

"What are you doing?"

Although I was worn-out, I couldn't believe that I had latched onto Father's arm.

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

To not ruin Father's mood, I hurriedly apologized and backed away from him.

He held onto my wrist. “Stay still.”

My field of vision swayed violently. The next thing I knew, Father carried me bridal style. I choked in embarrassment.

“F-father?” He didn’t answer and continued walking while holding me in his arms. I was not one to stutter. It’s the embarrassment Father displayed I tell you.

“We’re going back to the carriage,” he said flatly.

I looked up at him, surprised by his words. Icy blue eyes and a twisted expression met me. He looked displeased that I had gotten in his way. “I’m fine, Father.” I tried convincing him to put me down, but he ignored all pleas.

“Quiet,” he ordered with a cold voice.

As he continued to hold me in an embarrassing position, I swallowed my shame.

Why’s he like this...? I’m confused.

He was acting strange when we were shopping, too. Maybe it was due to the stress, but my head throbbed and ached. I was in so much agony that when Father sat me down on the carriage seat and took off my shoes, I couldn’t say anything, much less retort.

A stinging sensation ached around the back of my feet. I must’ve chafed my heels. I’ll apply some medicine and rest when I get home. I have no choice but to endure.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Father asked sternly.

It seemed like Father was in a bad mood. I ruined his day. I tried hiding my increasing stress levels. “It’s really not a big deal,” I chuckled softly. If I pretended to be okay, I hoped he wouldn’t treat me like a useless person. “Let’s go back shopping.”

That should do it, right? But contrary to my expectations, his voice was as cold as ice.

“Were going home.”

“What? But...”

“Don’t say anything useless and stay still.”

I clamped my mouth shut before releasing a small sigh. Although I listened to him all day and behaved well, his countenance didn't seem so good. It truly is difficult to please him.

The heat from my forehead rose and my headache worsened by the minute. What's happening? I feel sick. As soon as I became conscious of the bizarreness of it, Father's voice vibrated in my ear. "Jubelian." I turned to him. He sighed and opened his mouth again. "Sooner or later, I'll... a good one... shopping... your thoughts..."

How strange. Father's voice kept cutting off and I couldn't concentrate on his words properly because of the pounding headache. I'll just agree to whatever he says. I nodded along even though I couldn't hear him well. I didn't want to spoil his mood. My head began to feel heavy, so much so that I couldn't sit upright anymore.

"Is something wrong?" Father asked gently.

Fortunately, I could hear him clearly this time. The moment I tried to answer, his eyes widened as if he was shocked about something.

"Jubelian?"

He called my name. That was the last thing I heard before my consciousness blackened.



A carriage bearing a lily and sword crest that symbolized the Floyen House was spotted on the horizon. A butler came outside to greet the approaching carriage and smiled to himself merrily.

I wonder if his date with Lady Floyen went well today. He'd been excited about it, he thought. He recalled his master's determined look as he questioned the servants about what his daughter liked and disliked. The butler tried suppressing his amusement, but laughter couldn't help but spill from his lips.

The carriage soon arrived at the mansion and the door opened, he bowed to greet his lord. "Welcome, Master..." When he looked up, his smile immediately disappeared and his eyes widened with shock. "L-

Lady Floyen!”

Jubelian turned deathly pale in the arms of his master; she looked like a wax doll.

“W-what is...” the butler stuttered, trying to find the right words to say, but was cut short by a fierce voice that snapped him to attention.

“Derrick.” Panic reflected in his master’s eyes, but his expression was as steely as a slab of ice. “Summon Allen. Right now.”



The past Jubelian had fallen sick a few times, but it wasn’t severe enough to the point that her father visited. Her heart broke whenever she regained her strength.

“Wake... up...”

Out of annoyance, I opened my eyes, though barely, to see who was murmuring in my ears. I could barely make out a man with a blurry and distorted face. It didn’t help that my body was floating in the clouds, giving me no sense of reality.

“Jubell!” It was strange. He didn’t have a reason to call me like that or look at me with a face that looked to be on the verge of tears. “No, this can’t be. If you’re gone, I...”

It’s said that dreams were unconscious expressions of what the dreamer desperately desired deep in their hearts.

“Please wake up.”

What a terrible dream. As the fleeting thought passed, I sank into the darkness.



I was on my bed when I awoke.

“How are you feeling, Lady Floyen?”

The first person I saw was Allen, the Floyen House's family doctor. Only then did I realize that I hadn't fallen fast asleep but passed out.

"How long has it been, Allen?"

"Three days, my lady."

I observed my surroundings. Maids looked back at me with anxious expressions.

"How are you feeling, Lady Floyen?" Allen repeated.

Merilyn, Julia, and Sella. I counted the maids in my room. Father was nowhere in sight. It's not like I expected him to be here in the first place. He hadn't shown up to my debutante ball either.

At that moment, the door opened. Allen's countenance brightened and ushered a figure inside. I turned around to check if it was Derrick, our butler. But it wasn't him, it was Father who came through the door. I widened my eyes with surprise. Why was he here? I stared at him, unable to believe *that* he was here. He gently placed his hand on my head.

"You're awake," he said. Unlike his emotionless voice, his large hand emitted warmth.

Was this a dream? I could barely believe what was happening. As I continued to stare at him unintentionally, his hand retracted.

"Rest."

I stared blankly at his retreating figure, then laughed to myself. Don't be fooled. He'd been cold-hearted towards me for as long as I could remember. He even detained me in the original novel. Father only came to check my well-being because he didn't want to look like a heartless father who neglected his sick daughter. I shouldn't fool myself to think there was more to this, so I quickly destroyed any lingering attachments I had to avoid developing expectations.



"You've overexerted yourself recently. Please rest well, my lady." As Allen advised, I decided to rest by reading a book on my bed. But... it

bored me to death. A light novel would've been more entertaining, but this book was about human resources and estate management. It's what I get for choosing to neglect my studies up till now.

Some people might speculate why the duke's only daughter bothered even studying, but reality wasn't that simple. Father would never pass down his title to an incompetent person like me, so it was likely that he would remarry to produce a successor. In that case, I, too, would have to marry a man born with a silver spoon or become independent with only a small share of my inheritance to support myself. But I had no intention of doing the former because marriage was a risky investment. In a conservative and patriarchal setting like this, the activities of married women were limited to fulfilling their responsibilities for their families and playing the part of a filial daughter. They were expected to diligently oversee their family's reputation while maintaining dignity as a hostess. Additionally, they might have to bear restrictions on living lavishly if the husband was their only source of income. All this went against my objective goal of spending money on what I want, whenever I want.

There was only one solution.

If I received an inheritance from Father and became independent from him financially, I might be able to make income. And if I got lucky, I might acquire a big share of the inheritance and even titles Father was responsible for. But the biggest stumbling block came after that. In my new life, I learned only manners and basic literacy skills that were expected of a noble lady. With these meager skills alone, it'd be difficult to survive in this world alone without help from a man. I could try to build a source of income, but I knew better than that. Starting a business was *not* for everyone. While I possessed knowledge of modern civilization, there weren't many things I knew how to make. I didn't have excellent vernacular or entrepreneurial skills, nor did I have many connections. There was a high probability that I'd fail and end up with a fat lump of debt on my back. The only solution I could think of right now was to maximize the wealth I inherited from Father. The only problem was that I don't know how.

I sighed when I came to this unpleasant conclusion. Then I heard a knock on the door.

“Letters that have arrived for you, Lady Floyen.”

I sat up. They came as expected.

My social reputation was in shambles, but it was nothing compared to people’s reverence of Father, a living hero.

“Please bring them here.”

Merilyn carried in a silver tray, stacked with a pile of letters.

“Here they are.”

I skimmed through the letters one by one, unable to resist the urge to giggle each time. There were dozens of letters, but not a single one was sincere. It was as if they’re telling me that I lived a life in vain. This left a bitter taste in my mouth, but I wasn’t upset. I’m the only person to blame. In the past, I never cared about what other people thought of me. I was too preoccupied trying to win Mikhail’s affection. While I frequently lashed out at those who offended me, I showed him favor no matter how he treated me. As a consequence, I became a lone wolf. There was no one else to blame for this but myself.

“Do you want me to put these letters away, Lady Floyen?”

I looked up at Merilyn. Since I was done skimming through the letters, she probably thought I wanted to put them away.

“No, I’ll reply to all of them myself.”

She widened her eyes. “Are you sure... you want to reply to these letters?”

I chuckled at her question. “Yes, I’m sure. They sent them to me out of concern, so it’s my duty to personally reply to them.”

I knew very well these people didn’t send me letters because they were worried. It was because of Father and his prestige. However, there were several reasons why I couldn’t ignore them like usual. Many nobles resented me for disregarding them as if they were mere trash. I’ll have to show them that I’m not that kind of person. No matter how poorly I was perceived before, I’m sure they’ll change their opinion of me if I showed them my subtle but clear transformation to becoming a better person. Writing replies to these letters was a part of the plan, but I ran into an obstacle before I could begin.

What should I write?

Since I was indifferent to the lives of others, I didn't know their preferences, much less how to strike a correspondence. I don't know the nobility well enough to compliment them. I pondered hard on the matter when an idea sprung in my head as I looked at Merilyn. Now that I think about it, Merilyn must've written replies to these letters all this time.

When one thinks of a maid, they usually think of a person who does the laundry or cleans the house. But unlike ordinary maids, maids-in-waiting were expected to possess excellent speaking skills and knowledge of social affairs. Because they were tasked with assisting aristocrats, they usually hailed from fallen noble families or middle-class families that could afford an education. In other words, Merilyn was like my secretary.

"I have a request, Merilyn."

"Please do tell."

"Can you help me reply to these letters?"

Merilyn widened her eyes and gaped at me with a bewildered expression. This was natural, given I had never asked for her help in the past. It's a given, but I'm no longer the stupid and prideful girl she once knew.

I looked at Merilyn and said, "I just need to know a little bit about the families we usually interact with."

"Yes, I'll do my best, Lady Floyen."

I smiled at her compliance and replied, "Thank you. It's reassuring to have your help."

Merilyn briefly looked at me strangely before quickly fixing her composure. "Then, I will bring a pen and some paper."



Merilyn stood outside the door of the duke's office with a stiff expression. Madam Perez, the head of housekeeping, glanced at her

and announced, "This is the girl who serves Lady Jubelian, Master."

There was no answer as the door opened.

Merilyn gulped nervously and stepped inside the room. However, the sight before her turned her fear into admiration. The duke stood in front of a large window, his silver hair dyed with scarlet from the amber sunset. He looked like a picturesque painting.

"What did Jubelian do today?"

His voice promptly brought Merilyn back to reality. "S-she wrote replies to letters after reading a book."

Merilyn's stuttered answer subtly changed the man's stony expression.

"She read a book?"

His surprised expression left as quickly as it came. Merilyn glanced at the duke's blue eyes, which reminded her of the vast sea, and did her best to keep herself together.

"What kind of book?"

"Its main topic was about estate management."

The duke frowned slightly. "Why?"

It was natural for him to ask. Jubelian never read books before, much less anything about estate management. Merilyn recalled what Jubelian said when she asked for the book.

"I'll be a nuisance to Father if I don't know the basics."

"Lady Floyen said she doesn't want to be a nuisance to you..."

"I still don't understand why she'd want to read something like that."

He had an annoyed tone, but Merilyn could feel that it was markedly different from before.

"Perhaps... she wants to talk to you," Merilyn voiced her thoughts without thinking.

The duke stiffened at her words.

Merilyn gulped nervously.

“She doesn’t have to know something like that to talk to me,” the duke said lowly.

Contrary to his indifferent tone, he was smiling. It was a dazzling sight that Merilyn couldn’t help but blankly stare at his face again.

“Take good care of my daughter,” he commanded with a soft voice. His indifferent expression took over his face again as if he didn’t smile in the first place.



Four days passed since secluding myself in my room. During that time, I finished reading all the books I borrowed from the library. I needed a new book, but Merilyn had gone out for some errands. Sella was in my room as her replacement.

I looked at her.

“Is there something you need, Lady Floyen?”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t ask Sella to bring me books. Unlike Merilyn who received proper education, Sella could only read basic words. I thought it better if I went to the library myself. I didn’t want Sella feeling awful if she knew the reason why I didn’t send her to the library, so I decided to send her elsewhere.

“Could you bring me some chocolate cookies and tea, Sella?”

“Yes, of course!” Stella beamed. “I’ll be right back.”

When she left, I informed another maid that I’d be getting books from the library and ventured outside my room. It was quite a hassle finding the right book to read every time. I opened the door to the library while lost in thought and gasped when I saw Father inside.

“Oh, F-father! G-good morning!” I stuttered with astonishment.

I greeted him; I didn’t expect him to answer.

“It’s not morning but the afternoon,” he replied to my surprise.

Although he found fault with something I said, as expected, it wouldn’t do me any good to be hurt by his response.

“Yes, it is indeed. That was my mistake,” I agreed calmly, hoping that was the end of our conversation.

I walked towards the bookshelf.

“That’s... estate management theory,” he said.

Father was burning a hole at the book I was holding. His stony expression gave away his thoughts. It seemed like he’s asking me why I’m reading something like this. I hurriedly placed the book back on the shelf and said, “Yes, I was simply curious about what kind of duties Father performs as a lord.”

His expression hardened at my excuses. “Why are you curious about that?”

Oh, what if he thinks I’m being greedy?

“I don’t have any other intentions. I was merely curious.” I didn’t want him to misunderstand, so I replied with a dry tone to avoid sounding materialistic or ambitious. Though I made an effort to avoid offending him, he frowned slightly. I gulped nervously and added, “I’m sorry for bothering you. I’ll be going now.”

I sneakily ended the conversation and tried to leave the library.

“Jubelian.” A cold voice called my name, so I turned back around. Father was staring at me with a stony face. “Sit down.”

Does he have something he wants to say? My head began pounding as I tried figuring out Father's intentions. Allen did advise me to relax my mind and body and I *was* afraid of falling ill again, but I couldn’t ignore Father's burdensome gaze. I suppose this wasn’t something I could avoid so I immediately settled myself on the couch across from him. The soft, fluffy cushion relaxed my body, but I was tense and on the edge.

“Jubelian.” I forced myself to listen attentively. “Do you know the three elements that make up an estate?”

“The land is the foundation of an estate, the lord establishes and protects order, and the people are responsible for the production of resources.”

I didn’t expect him to quiz me, but I responded promptly without

missing a beat.

“You learned well.”

“Yes, since I’ve read the entire book.”

Thinking that this was all he had to say, I planned to return to my room but was interrupted by his sudden outburst.

“Then, do you know this as well?”

However, Father's pop quiz wasn't over. He continued asking questions one after another to check that I had read the book thoroughly. When will this end? I glanced at the time and saw it was already three o'clock, two hours after I had left my room. I usually had teatime around this hour. And those chocolate cookies I told Sella to bring... I sighed at my current predicament, wondering when it will end. Then, as if my prayers were answered, there was a knock on the door.

“The guest has arrived, Master.”

Father stood up at the words of Derrick, our butler.

Is it finally over?

I observed him with tentative relief.

Please, please leave me alone.

However, Father continued defying my expectations and walked in front of the bookshelf while I suppressed the urge to sigh.

“Master,” Derrick called again.

Father didn't answer.

Why's he looking for a book?

Before curiosity continued to swallow me up, he walked towards me with two books that he picked out.

“Read these,” he said. He handed them to me and left the library.

I looked at the back of his tall profile with trembling eyes, then checked the titles of the books he gave me. I could barely believe my eyes. Why did he want an ordinary lady to read about military strategy and tactics? It would've been helpful if Father gave me books on

agriculture or commerce, but these books contained information that I would never use in my lifetime, but since he told me to read it, I should at least try, right? I had already planned to read books that would aid my goal of becoming independent. It was rather troublesome that he added more to my growing list.

I sighed as I thought about all the things I had to do when something caught my eye.

A pendant?

It was inlaid with a large blue gemstone that looked familiar. Where have I seen this before? I recalled that it was similar to the necklace Father always wore around his neck. He must've forgotten about it and left it here. After deciding that I'd give it back to him later, I tucked the necklace into my pocket.



When I came back to my room, Merilyn had just returned from her errand.

“Did it go well?”

She nodded politely. “Yes, Lady Floyen. As requested, the letters were delivered to the noble families.”

“Thank you for going through the trouble.”

When I commended Merilyn for her work, an out-of-the-ordinary expression crossed her face again. Come to think of it, I used to hate having to do extra work than what was needed of me. She's probably frustrated having to toil more than usual. Poor Merilyn. I'll give her a bonus later. For now, some sweets will do.

I handed Merilyn the plate of chocolate cookies. “Take this.”

“I'm sorry?”

“I haven't touched it yet,” I said, in case she thought I was giving her leftovers. “They're new.”

Merilyn continued to look at me with a strange expression, then

took the cookies and bowed. “Thank you.”

“Of course. You can leave now.”

I sipped my tea when she left the room.

The responses to my letters will come soon. Until now, I never bothered replying. The noble families who sent them certainly won't be expecting handwritten letters, but when they did, they were obligated to write back. All I had to do now was wait patiently. It was cumbersome but a necessary process for the sake of my future. I could only live peacefully after I subdued their hostility towards me.



As always, the royal family was a topic of concern among the nobles.

“The borders are stable, so why doesn't His Majesty the Emperor bring His Highness the Prince back to the palace?”

“Her Highness the Princess is also coming of age soon. Will they ever grace us with their presence?”

The royal prince and princess had never shown their faces in the social scene, so all the nobles were curious about them.

“Didn't you say your cousin was serving at the northern border, Lord Luigi?”

“I heard from him that His Highness the Prince is always wearing a helmet, so he's never seen his face.”

“Is there a reason why he's always wearing a helmet?”

“I don't know. Maybe he has a scar on his face or...”

Everyone tensed, so the person who previously led the conversation prevented the noble from concocting this bold claim. “That may be the case, but we don't know unless we see him in person, right?”

Someone quickly brought up a new topic to gossip about and said, “By the way, did you receive the letters from Lady Floyen?”

The next topic of interest after the royal family was the ducal

family. People gladly joined in to speak their thoughts with pleasure.

“Yes, it seems like she’s finally matured,” a noble answered pridefully. He was one of the few families who received a reply.

However, a grating voice wasn’t afraid to voice criticism. “There’s no way a person like her could change so easily.”

“He’s right! You can’t just forget about all the things she’s done in the past! The letters must’ve been written by someone else.”

The many nobles who didn’t receive a reply from Jubelian and those who resented her didn’t hold back their condemnation.

“It’s odd that someone who used to do whatever she wanted would suddenly do something like this.”

Those who neither received a reply nor resented her expressed their misgivings.

Lady Floyen’s change of behavior was inevitably a concern in the social world due to her powerful position and beauty. Although they gossiped about her, they were subtly envious of the people she had replied to.

This is sickening, a man attending the banquet thought. He was disappointed by all the things he heard.

“What do you think about this incident, Sir?” someone asked him.

In response to the aristocratic man’s question, the man glared at him with cold eyes. His lips twisted into a frown. “I find you boorish to ask something like that.”

After speaking his mind, he turned around.

“S-sir Mikhail!” The aristocratic man desperately called after him, but he was already gone.

After leaving the banquet hall, Mikhail clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

“What do I think about this?” A certain woman’s pale face came to mind. In an instant, a cold smile graced his lips. “It’s obvious what she’s thinking. This is just another scheme to get my attention.”

2

What You Do to Me



I spent the majority of my time idle in my room enjoying the lifestyle of a homebody. But boredom filled my core. I eyed the clock; two hours left till dinner. I'll have to busy myself to pass time. Wondering what to occupy myself with, something caught my eye. It was the books Father recommended to me. Should I read them? I wasn't sure when he'd quiz me again, so I thought to make myself useful and prepare ahead of time. I began with the tactical books, thinking it'd be an unpleasant read, but surprisingly, the anecdotes and clever strategies used in times of war were vividly described in the book to the point of hooking me in. I was sure I was reading a heroic fantasy novel because it entertained and compelled me further into the reading that I soon forgot the uncomfortable posture I was in. I couldn't feel my arms either; they were numb. Slowly, I changed my posture and felt something poking me in my pocket. It was Father's pendant.

Bookmarking the page I was on, I took out the pendant. The blue gemstone reminded me of the cerulean ocean. The light that reflected from its surface scattered silver shards in all directions. At the time, I wondered whether to keep the pendant to myself. I could sell it for a high price, but I know it won't do me any good. The temptation was alluring, but I was afraid Father would look at me with disappointment. I should give it back to him. It's better that way. Since he's always in the office, the chances of finding him there were high. I quickly left the room and walked through a long corridor line with varieties of decorative paintings and statues. The white marble floor was pristine because of the maids' frequent cleaning. They're swamped with work as always, I thought. When I saw the gleaming armors lining the walls, I was guilt-ridden about the varnish I bought. I quickly passed the drawing-room with a rosy flush adorning my

cheeks and continued towards my destination. As I turned the corner that led into his office, I heard a voice.

“Don’t think of convincing me.”

I stopped in my tracks. There was someone else with Father whose voice seemed familiar. I’ve heard it somewhere before, I’m sure.

“It’s a warning, not a suggestion.”

The cold, apathetic voice belonged to Father. I could spot it from miles away. But who’d speak to him for this long? Derrick was usually out of his office in less than an hour, however, this stranger had been here for over five hours. I thought it unusual he was able to speak to Father this long. Must be someone important.

The door to the drawing-room adjacent to the office opened with a creak, and I quickly hid behind the corner. There was a pillar in front of me that obscured their view. I prayed to the heavens that no one, Father especially, would notice my presence. Glancing at the corridor in front of the drawing-room, I saw Father and a young man in black cloak. He was of towering height—taller than Father, I supposed. But he didn’t look like a brute. I sensed an oddly familiar aura too.

“It’s useless to tamper with it,” Father said, breaking me from my chain of thoughts.

I leaned further out to take a better look at the young man, my breath lodge in my throat. With the handsome duke as my father, I had my fair share of experiences meeting attractive men. The young man, though, I couldn’t help but admire him. He had midnight black hair and crimson eyes that were slightly aloof and lidded as if he was drowsy. His masculine yet beautiful face was ethereal; he wasn’t just a pretty face, but comparable to a craftsman’s masterpiece creation. Though both Father and the young man possessed icy demeanors, I sensed subtle differences: Father composed himself with sharp and intelligent poise, while the man had a liking towards darkness and danger. He could use a bit of taming. Then an overdue question arose in my head. *Who is he?* It was the first I’ve seen of him, yet I sensed an overbearing familiarity. I slowly observed the young man again, this time with scrutiny. He was neither a knight nor a soldier. His giant sword gave it away, which could accidentally wound a close ally within

proximity. I thought it thoughtless and unreasonable to label him a thief or assassin, too. Those were jobs requiring one to blend in, which was next to impossible with that cumbersome sword. With the following options crossed out, I conjectured that he was a mercenary or a wandering swordsman.

Father placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "Max."

Was that his name? My curiosity heightened to its peak. Father didn't have many close companions. He was somewhat a lone wolf (like me) bolstered by his heroic reputation. But who was this stranger named Max and why was Father on friendly terms with him? I racked my brain guessing their relationship but all was futile. Meanwhile, Father raised his head and looked straight at the pillar I was hiding in. I stood still with pressed lips, my heart thumping voraciously, and praying that I'd not be caught. But why am I hiding? There was no reason for me to do so.

"Swordsmanship exists to protect those you love, not slaughter. You seem to forget this basic principle, Max," Father said sternly, causing me to flinch.

However, Max was adamant. "I haven't forgotten. I just... don't want weakness."

The man's words reminded me of myself. I smiled bitterly. Father had kept a distance from me for as long as I could remember; Mikhail was no different. I wasn't upset, but sympathetic towards the old me.

"Sometimes, a man grows stronger to protect their weakness," Father said bluntly.

I wondered what Father wanted to protect. Perhaps his lofty status? Maybe his sense of honor, or more graciously, his precious subordinates? After all, he placed great importance on his work.

Max's grim voice broke my dismal thoughts. "Master."

Immediately, my eyes widened. Master? Father took in disciples? Surprised by his words, I peeked past the corner.

"I don't want to hear any more of your lectures, Master. I'll be going."

His tone was grim and indifferent that even Father paled in comparison.

“Someday, you’ll find someone; a precious existence that you’ll want to protect,” Father said, smiling. His stern voice was filled with affection that I had never witnessed.

I bit my lower lip unconsciously before straightening my composure. There was nothing to mull over. I’ve long given up attempting to win his love and affection. I have a long life ahead of me, and I shouldn’t let myself be dragged down by wanton thoughts. I can’t allow myself to be shaken. Nothing he said could cut me to pieces once I gave up.

Father’s disciple lowered his voice to a cold whisper. “I haven’t found that precious existence yet, but it looks like I’ve found a rat in hiding.”

I came to my senses upon hearing the very thing that aroused my worst fear. *Rats*. I shuddered with disgust as goosebumps rose on my skin. My melancholic thoughts disappeared without a trace, wondering where the rat hid. I couldn’t move around without making my presence known; I anxiously scanned the surroundings. The thought that this creature was nearby chilled me to the bones.

“Shall I catch it?”

Max’s voice was that of a savior. I nodded violently. Please do. However, my desperate inner pleas were rejected by Father.

“Don’t,” he said.

Displeased, I bellowed inwardly, “Why not, Father?”

As I silently disagreed, Father’s disciple spoke perversely. “Why? Do you know who I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” Father said.

I wasn’t expecting Father to be acquainted with a rat, but then it occurred to me that I was inside a novel where anything was possible. I managed to calm down and think rationally. In fairytales, animals and humans could communicate. Father was a transcendent being, so maybe he *could* speak to animals, right? If he saw the rat often, I’m

sure he developed some semblance of affection for it. Still, I was uneasy. In the modern world, I once saw a rat the length of my arm. I was in the warehouse of a convenience store once looking for something. I must've been hovering between life and death when I saw the rat scamper away. I quit my job soon after. Now I was faced with the same dilemma in this world. What's worse was that the rat had infiltrated the Floyen household, the only place where I felt safe and secure. It might've found its way around the corridors, rooms, and elsewhere; it might've nibbled on the food I ate too! The thought of it frightened me so and the more my courage grew to take action. If I ignored this crisis, my home would be infested.

Mother was no longer with us, leaving me as the only lady of the Floyen household, and therefore the highest-ranking lady. Though I didn't have much authority, I held enough influence for the servants to take my inquiry with great weight. I should inform Father, too. Determined, I slowly moved away from the pillar but was interrupted by his emotionless voice uttering, "If you touch that child... even if it's you, I won't let it slide."

My determination waned soon after. I had never heard Father speak with chilling tenor before. It was akin to a warning. I changed my mind. I'll head back to my room. I need to live; I'm not ready to face death. I squeezed his pendant and quietly left, thinking, Father sure loves that rat.



When the womanly creature listening in to their conversation left, the tense air relaxed slightly. Those steps, how grating, Max thought, a frown adorning his alluring face from the mysterious cause of displeasure.

"Max."

He turned to his master. "Yes?"

"Did you call her that knowing who she was?" The duke's voice was monotonous, not too different from the usual, yet the look in his eyes

said otherwise. It'd been a while since the duke revealed what laid behind his facade of indifference.

“I don't know who she is,” Max replied.

There was only one person who could bring out this reaction from his master. Max knew her identity, but he continued staring at his master apathetically. Ten years had passed since he began learning swordsmanship under the duke's wing at the age of twelve. Max knew how strict and blunt he could be, but he had his soft moments, far from his usual stony demeanor.”

“She's my daughter.”

Max recalled her name. “Jubell.”

His master smiled. “Yes.”

Max had only mentioned his daughter's nickname, yet his master's countenance turned mushy. The young man frowned; his master was difficult to comprehend. When Max's mother passed away when he was young, his life had been threatened by adversaries within his own bloodline. It was the duke who protected him from dreadful circumstances and imparted his skills to defend himself. “*Since you consider me to be your master, I'll teach you swordsmanship for your survival,*” he told Max previously.

He looked up to his master once, even to the point of wanting to be like him. He had no such aspirations now. It's as if he put a leash on himself for someone like her, Max thought, I won't ever have a weakness like you for the tighter the leash, the weaker one becomes, Master. At this thought, ice seemed to freeze over his crimson eyes. The corner of his tightly closed lips raised crookedly. He knew fairly well that his master had a difficult time because of this weakness. He laughed inwardly before reverting to his usual, stony gaze.

The duke observed him and asked, “Do you happen to have someone who comes to mind frequently?”

At the unexpected question, Max shook his head, scrunching his eyebrows recalling an unpleasant experience.

His master sighed at his odd expression. “Go back before it gets too late.”

Max nodded, draping the hood of his cloak over his head while staring at the duke with sunken eyes. “You take care of yourself, Master.”

After wishing the duke a cold farewell, he jumped out the window.

The duke watched him. It’s worse than he thought. Max cherished his life, but he was growing careless and cold-blooded without a care for life. He won’t hesitate to slay his foes if needed regardless of the means or methods. A dark shadow soon fell on the duke’s ethereal face. He used to be like that as well, realizing long ago that the weak died first in times of war. Rather than sympathizing with them, he hadn’t bothered hiding his disgust. But now, the cold-blooded man changed because of a girl so fragile he had to be careful with his touch.

“Daddy!”

A gentle smile lit his face in the dark. This disciple of his, he doesn’t know anything. For the duke, his lovely daughter was his salvation and saving grace, and he wanted to teach the importance of this to his foolish disciple. It was because of that child that he could exist as a human, not a monster. She was the reason why he was able to live without losing control. And if ever that child ceased to exist in this world...



I told the maids a white lie. Said that I saw a rat running around.

“A r-rat...?”

“The butler hired a pest controller not too long ago, reporting that they hunted down every last one of them, my lady,” said one of the maids.

Merilyn shook her head. “There must’ve been leftovers hiding in the shadows. Those little creatures are good at hiding. The mansion is enormous, and rats breed rather quickly. That must be the reason.”

The thought of it made my knees weak. I rubbed my temples, wrought with fear. This was unpleasant. Seeing one of them would

have me panicking.

Merilyn noticed my distress. “Don’t worry, Lady Floyen,” she assured me. “I’ll report this to Madam Perez. We’ll make sure that they never appear gain.”

“Thank you, Merilyn,” I said, relaxed and with a beaming smile.

It’s a good thing I didn’t tell Father. Had I informed him of the matter, he’d have prevented me from requesting the maids to go on a hunt. But since he wasn’t aware of my eavesdropping, he’ll only assume that I’d seen the rat elsewhere in the mansion.

I was only able to relax after confirming the servants would take care of the matter without my interference.



“For this reason, I’ve gathered the servants to hunt the rats hiding in the shadows.”

Regis Floyen sighed upon receiving the report from the housekeeper Madam Perez. His cute, beloved daughter misunderstood the conversation with his disciple. He became anxious as he thought of means to reassure his daughter that no rats roamed freely in the mansion. This is... troublesome, he thought. There we’re no rats, but he couldn’t very well utter this word.

“I’ve instructed the servants already, but none were caught,” Madam Perez said carefully.

Regis closed his eyes and enhanced his senses to detect every breathing and living being inside the mansion. Even his daughter napping in her room was accounted for. He couldn’t detect any signs of the small beast. Regis opened his eyes and sighed dismally.

The housekeeper grumbled, unaware of his predicament. “Not only are the girls frightened, but Lady Floyen’s growing anxious by the minute.”

He flinched. Anxious?

“Get Derrick,” the duke commanded.

A moment later, the butler entered the room. “I heard you called, Master.”

The duke looked at his butler with a life-threatening gaze. “Derrick.”

“Yes?”

“I need your guidance.”

Derrick widened his eyes at the duke’s request. Master was asking for his guidance? This was a first. The duke usually handled matters himself. What on earth was going on?

The butler waited nervously.

“Where do rats typically go into hiding?”

Derrick wasn’t sure he heard correctly. He looked at his master with trembling eyes and asked, “Rats?”

The duke sighed seeing Derrick nervous. “Never mind. It was a slip of the tongue. How’s the progress with Jubelian’s list of prospective marriage partners?”

Derrick was worried that his master was ill in the mind due to the list of work piling up, so he was relieved by the change in topic. “Ah, yes. I’m still searching and considering all aspects such as family background, affluence, and fame. The list should be completed this evening.”

“Alright, and... my daughter requires a man with a beautiful face. I trust you’ve written this down?”

“Ah, y-yes. Appearance is in the list.” His master looked content. Derrick sighed in relief, then reported something he’d been hesitating to disclose. “Also... Sir Mikhail sent another letter.”

The moment he mentioned *that* name, the duke’s expression changed and the air turned cold. “What did he write?”

Derrick had nothing to do with the matter, yet he flinched at the duke’s tone. “He’s urging for an answer, casually dismissing Lady Floyen’s actions thus far as a ploy to get his attention.”

“I see.” The duke was expressionless as usual, but his eyes turned

icy and his aura hostile. “He’s unworthy of my daughter.”

Derrick watched the duke. He was incensed. To be fair, I’d be angry if I were him, he thought. Mikhail had gone too far this time. Hadn’t he realized the reason the duke treated him with kindness was because of his beloved daughter? Now he’s fallen from the duke’s good grace. A shame, truly. If only Mikhail had eyes.

A moment later, the duke rose from his seat. Derrick became apprehensive as he approached him. Did he want to read the letter? Derrick tried guessing his intentions and extended the letter, but the duke ignored it, resulting in his confusion.

“Burn it.”

When he turned around, his master left the office, leaving him behind.



“I heard the rat that’d been lurking in the shadows was finally caught, Lady Floyen.”

I snapped my head around, aghast. “Is that so?”

“Yes, but only one was trapped!” Sella said excitedly, comforting me. “They practically turned the mansion upside down and couldn’t find any more. They guessed that one came into the mansion by accident.”

Good. I sighed in relief. The mansion was now safe with infestation.

Thereafter, Marilyn delivered a letter on a silver tray. “This is addressed to you, Lady Floyen,” she said, smiling.

It was the first response I received after sending a batch of letters. I figured it was nothing but a wanton, standard reply, but still, I ought to know the reactions I’d receive communicating with others, no? Heaving a deep breath, I picked up a letter, noticing the rose on the seal; it was the Arlo seal. The House of Arlo had quite a close relationship with Father. I expected that they were among the many who cared enough to send a letter when I fell ill.

Quickly opening the letter with excitement, I was surprised to see what laid inside: an invitation. It was a long letter, the handwriting adorable, written by Count Arlo's daughter, Rose. She looked like an outgoing and forthcoming lady in the social scene. I recall that she was close friends with the royal princess, which contributed to my pitiful downfall that I was determined to avoid. Before reading the letter, I was somewhat concerned that she'd reply sarcastically, but this wasn't the case. She asked about my well-being and talked a bit about herself. She also mentioned that she'd be delighted if I were to attend her upcoming birthday banquet that'd be held three weeks from now. I had no qualms with the invitation. I was a hermit and a social recluse; I needed to acclimate to society.

“Merilyn, could you please bring me a pen and paper?”

She quickly brought me the required material. I frowned slightly looking at the yellowish paper and black ink. They looked dull. Rose invited me to a birthday banquet, after all. I thought it improper to reply half-heartedly. It'd be beneficial for me to develop friendly relations with her since she'd soon acquaint herself with the royal princess.

Digging through my memories, I pondered what Rose liked. I remembered she was fond of pretty dresses, and I could surmise from her elegant handwriting that she cared a great deal about her appearance.

I called the maids. “Sella, if you would, please bring me flowers from the garden, and Julia, some lace and ribbons.”

After a while, the materials arrived.

“Here are the things you requested, Lady Floyen.”

It was time to show off my skills.

“L-Lady Floyen...!”

The maids were appalled, but I didn't care.



Upon news of Lady Floyen's illness spreading throughout the nobility, the House of Arlo prepared a gift and a standard reply. Rose squeezed her eyes shut, thinking that their family won't receive a reply, much less a notice from her. If so, why bother sending a letter in the name of Count Arlo?

Lady Floyen, the duke's only daughter, was as beautiful as a doll delicately created by the heavens. Rose admired her from afar at one point, but when she met the lady in person, Rose found her cold and barbarous behavior unbecoming. Lady Floyen had eyes for Mikhail and no care for the existence of others. Since then, Rose thought it improper and a waste of time for the House of Arlo to send gifts and letters to Lady Floyen.

That was until she received a direct reply from her.

Dear Count Arlo,

Thank you for your consideration, which I appreciate. How have you been these days? I'm recovering well, but it's somewhat frustrating staying inside even on sunny days.

I heard from Father about the roses owned by the House of Arlo. I suppose they'll be in full bloom soon. I still remember how Father admires their beauty to this day. It's somewhat regrettable that I cannot see them with my own eyes.

Speaking of roses, is your daughter, Rose, well? Although we've not conversed much, I feel close to her as we are of the same age.

— Jubelian Eloy Floyen.

Lady Floyen ignored the whole world except for Mikhail, yet she went as far as to mention her name in the later, and the young lady knew her name? And she thought of her after thinking about roses too? How kind of Lady Floyen.

Rose was well connected with the aristocracy, but she was otherwise a run-of-the-mill aristocratic young lady. A few noble young ladies made fun of her name, which meant queen of flowers, and said she was unworthy of the name. Now that Lady Floyen, the one always

at the center of attention, mentioned her name, Rose's heart pounded with excitement.

“Father! This letter is from Lady Floyen! She wrote it herself!”

One of the count's vassals was responsible for drafting a reply, but Rose insisted she does it herself despite not knowing what to write. She invited Lady Floyen to her birthday banquet instead. She certainly didn't expect her to accept the birthday banquet invitation, but Lady Floyen proved her incorrect as she opened the letter with trembling hands.

Daughter of Count Arlo,

I was surprised by your reply and thrilled by your unexpected invitation. It's my first time communicating with someone by letter, so please understand if you find it lacking. I tried decorating it with my limited skills since I heard that the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo likes flowers. What do you think? My letter's probably nothing compared to yours, but I hope you like it.

It's fun communicating with someone who is both kind and beautiful, just like the roses that your respected family proudly owns. I look forward to meeting you and will spare my words until then.

— Jubelian Eloy Floyen.

Lady Floyen's writing was neat and creative. Rose liked the originality of the design. There was a lace frame around the paper, and was decorated with small ribbons and pressed flowers. Rose giggled, a strange sense of euphoria filling her core. She had become Lady Floyen's friend. I should reply quickly, she thought and quickly dipped the quill pen in ink. But she stopped. She couldn't reply in this manner.

Rose called for her maids and made a great fuss. “Emily, pick some flowers for me in the garden! Laura, bring some ribbons—the pretty and colorful ones!”

“You're not going to use it to decorate the letter, right? If madam finds out...”

When Laura trailed off, Rose asked sullenly, “Can’t we do something about it?”

“I can find some ribbons from torn clothes,” Laura replied with a sigh.

Rose's face brightened and she nodded with excitement. “Okay!”



I opened another letter from Rose and heaved a sigh. I didn’t think she’d send another one, and so quickly too. Did I not mention, though subtly, that she not reply until the banquet? It would seem that my subtle hints were not properly received.

I smiled, looking at the letter. The awkwardly decorated flowers and ribbons indicated the time, effort, and care she gave to this letter. It was cute.

A condensed version of it was as follows:

Dear Lady Floyen,

I am writing to you on a sunny day. You have further brightened my day by accepting my invitation and decorating your letters. I look forward to seeing your beauty and elegance at my birthday banquet!

If you don’t mind, I also hope that you will call me Rose the next time we meet. If that makes you uncomfortable, please don’t feel pressured and forgive me with an open heart.

I look forward to seeing you, Lady Floyen.

Sincerely,

Rose

In the elaborately designed letter, she sang high praises of me and give precise details about the magnificence of her banquet. As a result, it amounted to three pages long. I then felt pressured to gift her a wondrous present.

I sighed, folding the letter, and said, “Merilyn, please make preparations to go downtown.”

“Do you have something you need, Lady Floyen?” she asked, confused. “If so, I can call the trader here.”

“No, I want to choose something myself.”

Merilyn looked at me with a puzzled gaze. I cared not for it. Rose would be disappointed should my gift prove insincere. Though a hassle, it was worth it. I knew the reason why she praised me to the high heavens. She hoped for a mind-blowing gift, which wasn’t surprising considering Father’s prestige. Still, I thought it burdensome to bear such expectations.

I began pondering a suitable gift she’d like and left the mansion.



High society once again gossiped about Lady Floyen’s recent doing in cheap thrills.

“It’s a surprise that Lady Floyen didn’t ignore the banquet invitation!”

“She used to ignore every invitation that wasn’t sent by the imperial family.”

“But Count Arlo’s daughter is rather... average. What sort of charms does she possess to have Lady Floyen come knocking on her doors? Perhaps she caught wind of Lady Floyen’s secret?”

“I heard many women are decorating their letters with pressed flowers and ribbons these days.”

“Is she aware that she has started a trend?”

A young man quietly listening in to the aristocracy’s conversation turned around and pressed his lips together. “Count Arlo, huh,” he whispered, leaving the banquet hall and entering the carriage. “Let’s head home,” he ordered the coachman.

The carriage arrived at Marquess Hessen’s townhouse.

“Welcome back, young master.”

Rather than acknowledging the speaker, the young man took off his coat and threw it to him. The servant bowed and took his coat, then stilled upon hearing his master’s cold voice.

“Inform the butler...” There was a brief moment of hesitation. His domineering voice spoke over the other man’s bowed head. “...that I’ll be attending Count Arlo’s banquet.”

“Yes, young master,” the servant said, nodding.

He turned around and moved towards the exit door. Meanwhile, the young man spoke again, this time more urgent. “Oh, and... are there any letters that came for me?”

“No,” the servant replied, shaking his head. “Are you waiting for something?”

“No,” the young man said, evading his question with a cold tenor. “You may leave.”

When the servant left, the man gnashed his teeth and narrowed his eyes.

“How can you do this... Jubelian!”

He believed she feigned her illness, and sent a letter out of consideration in remembrance of the days when they were engaged. The woman who annoyed him like a stupid dog still hadn’t answered; he couldn’t accept this.

“Does she desire more of my courtesy and attention? Ugh! What more does she want?” He tried making sense of it and tried understanding her point of view, but it only left him frustrated. He gritted his teeth and hit the wall out of resentment. “Why the hell are you doing, Jubelian?”



I’ve given up on life for I’ve come to accept that I’ll never be able to live a quiet life because of Father.

I counted the number of guards trailing behind me: Geraldine, Owen, Castro, Todd, and other high-ranking knights from the House of Floyen surrounded me like ramparts. I had planned to take with me only one or two escorts to avoid unwanted attention, but it wasn't meant to be. Father refused to let me venture into the world unknown without the company of his trusted knights at all times. I mean, the security was extraordinary, though a bit too excessive inside the walls of the capital. I didn't quite see why I required this many knights.

Sighing in defeat, I know I'd not be able to shop peacefully. I'll have to make do with my predicament. Looking around for the workshop, I was glad there weren't many people out, otherwise, I'd have a field day full of embarrassment. With the thought plaguing me, I soon spotted three workshops that produced handicrafts for women in the area. Kerin Workshop, the largest and most affluent, was located at the center. However, I didn't plan on buying a present for Rose at Kerin Workshop. She'd loathe me. Kerin Workshop would soon be exposed for illegally using toxic materials. If I presented her a gift from Kerin and she fell ill because of it, it was only a matter of time till the House of Floyen became the Arlo family's public enemy. Kerin Workshop was a place to avoid now and in the future.

I walked past Kerin Workshop and stopped in front of Fyodor Workshop with a wide smile plastered on my face. Though Fyodor Workshop boasted a rich history, the business was on the verge of bankruptcy. Anyone who heard of Fyodor would turn their heads and ignore the workshop, but I knew things they didn't. On the other hand, multiple craftsmen collaborated at Grada Workshop to produce things systematically, which wasn't to my liking.

Geraldine, leader of the high-ranking knights, looked at me oddly. "Are you sure this is the place, Lady Floyen?"

It was natural that he'd question and doubt my decision; we were walking towards the shabby workshop located deep inside a dark alleyway.

"Yes," I replied, and entered the store.

A peculiar man sat at the corner of the workshop brimmed with shabby handicrafts. The average man would've backed away from the

horrid scene, perhaps even stumble, but I approached the peculiar man resolutely. His unkept appearance and long, disheveled hair covered his facial features. He looked devoid of vitality despite being at the prime of his life.

“I must apologize, but I’m in no state where I’m able to produce a fine craft. I apologize again if I’ve disrespected you or your household in any way, but please visit another workshop,” the peculiar man said to his one and only customer.

I laughed with reassurance. I patted myself on the back. It was good that I came here. Others would walk out the door with indignation, but I knew the reason for his behavior—it was from inheriting the family business. Since birth, Ian Fyodor, master of Fyodor Workshop, was under immense pressure to become an expert craftsman like his father, grandfather, and his forebears. When he was unable to handle the expectations, Ian lost all motivation and soon neglected Fyodor Workshop.

“I want to request something from you.”

“Why?” he asked, wary of my intent.

Because you’ll soon become the empire’s finest craftsman, I thought. Six months from now, the princess would wear an out-of-the-ordinary necklace with a design so peculiar much like Ian Fyodor on her coming-of-age ceremony, becoming the hot topic of aristocratic society. It propelled Ian Fyodor into fame, his value skyrocketing. It wouldn’t hurt to invest in the man destined for greatness for my sake.

I looked at my lottery ticket and smiled. “Only you can produce the vision I have in mind.”

“Are you trying to intimidate me?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

Ian looked at the high-ranking knights. “Well, it’s just that...”

I turned around. They didn’t look threatening. Not one bit. There’s no way these good-for-nothing knights would assist me in my plans. Turning back around, I looked at Ian Fyodor and cleared my throat. “Is there a reason why I can’t request a creation from you?”

“Why are you so stubborn?” he asked coldly.

“Because I believe that you’re the only person who can create it.”

At my earnest words, Ian parted his lip. “*Heh*. Me? You believe in me?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling, imagining the prosperous future awaiting me after selling his finest creation.

“Then... could you tell me what you want?” Ian asked softly. He sounded unsure, but I knew I succeeded.

I grinned, happily recalling the object I had in mind.



Derrick handed a document to Duke Floyen. “Here’s the list of Lady Floyen’s prospective marriage partners, Master.”

The duke furrowed his eyebrows after rummaging through the list. Why was *his* name here? Clicking his tongue, he circled the name with gritted teeth and called for the butler. “Derrick, please remove this name—”

The door to the office suddenly opened.

Roy Hamilton, the duke’s lieutenant, strode in. He was a prudent man who reported to the duke only when a major issue rose to the occasion.

“What is it?”

At the duke’s question, Roy swallowed nervously. “A messenger from the emperor seeks your presence. It would seem the Emperor wants you to visit the imperial palace.”



Once Rose’s gift had been nicely packaged, I thought about what else I needed to purchase while the knights continued trailing after my shadows. I did my utmost best ignoring them as I perused through

sets of cosmetics, colored inks and papers, and products pleasing to the eye. I was glad Father wasn't here, otherwise, I'd have a difficult time. I shouldn't let my mind wander to him. It'll only dampen my mood.

I sighed thinking about Father's pendant tucked away in the drawer. I should return it to him soon. I hope he won't scold me. Mulling over my predicament, something caught my eye. I studied the set of blue gemstone cufflinks with silver rims. It would suit Father well, though I wonder if he'll find it pleasing. No, he'll like it. I'll use it to bribe him too.

I pointed at them without hesitation. "I'll be buying this."

The clerk placed the cufflinks in a wooden box and handed it to me.

This should be enough, right?

"Oh, who is this? If it isn't Lady Floyen!" said a stranger.

I turned around to the voice greeting me, my expression hardening. It was Radian, a man possessing the tongue of a viper. Infamous for the cause of many rumors he started, he usually led the social gathering scene. I avoided him like a plague because of his notoriety. Worse, he was Mikhail's cousin.

"How long has it been?" I said. "I've not seen you since your aunt's birthday banquet."

"Lady Floyen, Isn't it common sense to acknowledge your cousin's ex-girlfriend?"

"Yes, it's been a long time, Esteemed Son of Droil," I said, smiling.

"What do you mean by that? Esteemed Son of Droil? I'm disappointed that you're calling me so formally. It's not the first time we've met." He kissed the back of my hand and laughed eerily. "Please call me Radian, Jubelian. You're as beautiful as a daffodil."

It was improper to kiss the back of a lady's hand and call them by their first name without their consent, regardless if they've met in the past. I eagerly desired to point this out but refrained. I didn't need another rumor that would complicate my current dilemma.

“I wish I could talk to you more, but there’s somewhere I need to be. Please excuse me,” I hurriedly removed my hand from his and said sternly.

Radian laughed. “Why are you in such a hurry, my lady? It’s as if you are running away from—”

I cut him off. “I have a strict schedule,” I said firmly.

Radian laughed lightheartedly. “Ah, I see. Well, it was nice to meet you. I—”

“Yes, it was nice meeting you as well. Goodbye.”

Not wanting to waster another breath, I cut him off again and turned around. The knights formed a barricade around me.

“This way, Lady Floyen,” Geraldine said politely.

I guess they do their job properly at times like this. I feigned a smile.

It didn’t matter whether Radian pioneered rumors about me nor would I bat an eye because his reputation was just as horrendous as mine. He couldn’t possibly sully my name any further than this. Even so, he sent my mood into ruins. I was fortunate enough that I was able to evade him so quickly.

I hope we never bump into each other again.

I shuddered at the unpleasant sensation that lingered on the back of my hand and rubbed it against the hem of my skirt.



An unexpected visitor arrived at Marquess Hessen’s townhouse before dinner.

“It’s been a while, Mikhail.”

It was Radian Svel Droil. Mikhail’s expression twisted at the sight of his cousin. They didn’t have the best relationship.

“My legs are on fire. Can I sit down?”

“Get ou—” Mikhail tried to order him to leave immediately, but Radian was one step ahead of him.

“Oh, you want me to sit down? How gracious of you, Cousin Mikhail!”

Mikhail frowned at Radian, who cut him off and promptly sat down on one of the parlor chairs in the drawing-room. “What do you want?” he asked wearily.

Radian laughed. “Now there, I came with good news. Shouldn’t you bring me some tea?”

“Spit it out and leave,” Mikhail said coldly.

Radian wasn’t intimidated by his cousin’s tone. He shrugged. “I guess this tone of yours is why Lady Floyen left you for a new lover.”

Mikhail’s face twisted. “Nonsense. What are you yapping on about?”

Radian showed not a hint of concern. He pulled out a pipe cigarette from the inside pocket of his coat. “Nonsense? Aren’t you being too harsh? I haven’t even uttered words of evidence yet.” He grinned as he lit the pipe cigarette. “But if you so wish to know, she was buying a set of cufflinks. I saw it with my own two eyes.”

Cufflinks? Mikhail widened his eyes. Cufflinks were usually given to family members *or* lovers. It was a way for women to demurely reveal their love and possessiveness to the receiver.

Radian smirked. Smoked puffed out of his mouth as he laughed. “Isn’t this good news for you? You were worried sick, wondering if she faked a scene to grab hold of your attention!”

Mikhail was extremely displeased by the unpleasant scent of tobacco lingering in the air and his cousin’s vulgar appearance. “Get out if you’re done. I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“I apologize if I offended you in any way. But I wonder if the displeasure you feel right now is *really* because of me,” Radian said with a smile. Then he stood up and left the room.

Mikhail frowned and clenched his fists, finding the news ludicrous. He couldn’t help but think about Jubelian, the young lady obsessed

over him these past few years. He thought it strange of her to part ways so suddenly without regrets, but now it made sense. As the truth dawned on him, his anger rose to the heavens.

Does she have a new man?

He furrowed his eyebrows and gritted his teeth. Back then, he had desperately wished for her to become interested in someone new so she could stop bothering him. But now that it had happened, he was filled with anger.

Why does a woman like that make me so... he thought as confusion ravaged him whole. A memory of Jubelian's beautiful face when she confessed to him came to mind.

"I like you, Mikhail."

In the heat of anger, he punched the wall.

"Young master! Are you okay?" His servants ran towards, their faces aghast, but he stood still without responding.

"I'm sorry for everything until now. I wish you happiness."

As he thought about the woman who left without a hint of regret, a tingling sensation arose in his chest. Mikhail ignored the pain and clenched his fists, eyes gleaming.

"She acted as if she was only going to love me for the rest of her life, but she's already seeing another man? You will pay the price for deceiving me, Jubelian!"



I planned to return the pendant and gift the cufflinks to Father soon as I came home, but he was absent. I wondered whether he'll be late again tonight.

"Master said he won't be home for the next few days because of special training sessions," Marilyn said as if she had read my mind.

It wasn't uncommon for Father to leave the mansion multiple days at a time, so I calmly went up to my room and placed the pendant and

cufflinks in the drawer. He'll have them when he returns.

After taking a warm bath and changing into comfortable clothes, I opened the military tactics book Father gave me. It was so entertaining that I quickly immersed myself in the contents.



The emperor's secret mission for Duke Floyen was a simple but laborious task.

"I've not been able to sleep well after a rat snuck into the imperial palace." Emperor Carlos ambiguously mentioned the failed attempt at assassination. "I want you, the man I trust most, to take care of them."

The purpose of the mission was to eliminate the mastermind behind the assassinations. The captured assassin committed suicide without leaving traces of evidence behind. The imperial palace had no choice but to ambush and interrogate multiple suspects.

Although it was appropriate for the emperor to order a close and trusted aide to carry out the mission, it was not so for Duke Floyen, the hero of the empire, to carry it out. But much to everyone's surprise, he accepted the mission.

After the duke left the emperor's office, the imperial guards uttered words of resentment. "Are we to follow this command? If it's an ambush we can..."

They rambled about wanting to ambush the suspected assassins in the duke's stead.

"You men don't need to become a chess piece like me," the duke said sternly.

He was being considerate to his subordinates, but the knights groaned at their superior's words.

Max, who'd been eavesdropping, silently scoffed. His master could exterminate the assassins if he so desired, yet he's still following the orders of that trash emperor.

He was utterly disappointed with the duke. In his eyes, the current

emperor was a greedy and pathetic man who could never live up to his master's name. It baffled him that such an outstanding man continues to follow the emperor's orders to this very day.

It must be because of his weakness, Max thought.

Meanwhile, a knight approached the duke and said, "I'm here to report that I've successfully escorted Lady Floyen safely!"

"What did Jubelian do today?" the duke asked indifferently.

"She went shopping today and looked very happy."

"I see," the duke smiled warmly.

Why was he like this? Max furrowed his eyebrows. He thought his master was like him, but at times, he couldn't understand the duke's line of thought. And when she marries, she'll no longer be part of the Floyen household, so why was he so devoted to her? For the sake of the family's reputation, it was common to abandon useless children who brought calamity to the household. Yet whenever his master thought about his daughter, who was nothing more than a nuisance, he revealed a soft spot in his otherwise impenetrable exterior. When the emperor noticed this weakness, he used it to exploit the duke.

"Sometimes, a person gets stronger to protect their weaknesses."

"What a load of bullcrap," Max scoffed silently, recalling his master's words. His eyes then gleamed with determination. "Maybe I should check it out myself."

He decided to pay a visit to the person who weakened his master.



It's quiet, Max thought.

He was close to becoming a transcendent like the duke, making it easy to break into the mansion, especially in the absence of his master. No one would notice him climb over the wall, walk through the garden, and approach the main building. Surveying the exterior, he noticed a window with a balcony.

“There it is,” he muttered, quietly climbing to the third floor using the building’s jagged exterior. “Is it locked?”

He approached the transparent glass door on the balcony. When he pushed it open, the lace curtains fluttered. He smirked.

“The mansion is very defenseless. Master won’t have an excuse even if she’s murdered or robbed.”

Entering the dark room, he could make out a woman’s silhouette on the bed. Max approached the woman silently. She looks weak, he thought, thinking she’d resemble his master—tall and strong—but it was not so. She was a woman of slender and frail frame; she could break at any moment like a snapping twig.

“She won’t be able to learn swordsmanship with a body like that. That means... Master doesn’t plan on making her his successor... so why on earth is he so obsessed with someone like her?” he whispered, not quite understanding the duke’s intent. Still, he had an idea, the corner of his lips lifting. “I wonder what he’ll do if she disappears.”

He silently observed Jubelian with a bloodthirsty gaze. Even in the dark, he could see the woman’s slender neck; it looked like it could easily snap at his will.

At that moment, a voice broke the silence. “I don’t know who you are, but I think you’ve come to the wrong house.”

Max reeled back with surprise when he heard the woman’s casual tone. She was awake this whole time? A person’s usual reaction was to beg for mercy or scream in fear, but she behaved rather strangely.

“This is Duke Floyen’s mansion,” she said lazily.

What was wrong with this woman? Max furrowed his eyebrows as an unfamiliar feeling washed over him for the first time. Countless people venerated and bowed to him in admiration. A few dared to patronize him. But he never met anyone like this laid-back and carefree woman. Duke Floyen would certainly be helpful at a time like this, but he wasn’t in the mansion tonight. He guessed that the woman was bluffing to hide her fear.

“I’ve come to the right house,” Max said bluntly. The corner of his lips raised as he imagined Jubelian slumping on the floor and begging

for her life, but her reactions stupefied him.

“Is that so? How about changing your mind now? I think you’ll regret coming to this house.”

The woman sat on her bed calmly. The moonlight that filtered through the window outlined her ethereal face. She looked weary, yet her expression harmonized with her peculiar, laid-back aura. No wonder she was always at the center of attention and the subject of envy of every young woman. But Max wasn’t amused. No matter how he thought about it, there was nothing useful about her, except for her outstanding appearance. She’s nothing special, he thought.

Her mouth widened with laughter, and he found himself staring. Her red lips parted. “I still have a year left before I die,” she said dryly.

She looked like she was muttering to herself, but Max could hear the confidence in her voice. Was she not understanding the gravity of the situation?

He grew vexed at how calm she looked while fearlessly stretching her body in front of him. He frowned at the unpleasant sensation, then reminded himself that she was bluffing. When he remembered those who had dared to act arrogantly in front of him, his handsome face filled with bloodlust. This act will collapse the moment her life is threatened, he thought, making up his mind to frighten the foolish woman, but she casually lit a candlestick on the bedside table.

How dare she.

He tried to extinguish the candle and knock the woman down but paused at the sight of her face, which was now brightly lit by the candle. She possessed the delicate appearance of a doll, but it was her unconventional gaze that captured his full attention. Max stepped forward without realizing it.

The woman’s doll-like face came to life. “Oh, you’re Father’s disciple,” she said, smiling.

Max had made up his mind to frighten her, but he soon forgot about his goal as he saw her smiling face.

“Oh, um... I was looking for the thing you’re buying right now.”

She was the woman who managed to irk him during their brief meeting.



I woke up with a dry and parched throat. My throat was sore. Damn this cold. I'll take some medicine in the morning. Turning to the bedside table, I reached out towards the glass of water but stopped. I noticed a black shadow looking down on me.

Was I having a nightmare? No, I was not. The gust of chilly air making its way through the open window of the balcony proved otherwise. There were two possible explanations: the man before me was a thief or... an assassin.

With this in mind, I pondered who sent him here, but there were too many people to choose from. After all, I was the villainess of this world. God, Jubelian, why did you behave as such back then? I berated myself when I came to an epiphany. In novels, there was an unspoken rule that made it impossible for the protagonists, supporting characters, and villains to die at the beginning of the story for the plot hadn't moved forward. In other words, my life as the villainess wasn't in imminent danger until the princess' coming-of-age ceremony. There were many chapters left and... maybe this was supposed to happen to me.

I shouldn't be frightened.

I calmed my anxious thoughts and stared at the suspicious shadow looming over me. An overbearing familiarity washed over me. I've seen him before. Who was he? Since he broke into the mansion at night, I thought he'd be an assassin or thief. Though I wasn't certain, I knew the man before me wasn't sane. If he was, he'd not dare aim to steal the riches of Duke Floyen, the empire's hero and skilled swordsman.

"I don't know who you are, but I think you've come to the wrong house. This is Duke Floyen's house."

"I've come to the right place," the man replied.

“Really? How about changing your mind now? I think you will regret coming to this house.” I tried persuading him out of pity, but the man stayed silent. “I still have a year left before I die,” I mumbled.

Though I’ve no intention of dying so soon because I still had the time to improve my reputation. I won’t miss a single opportunity to do so. I decided to light the candle on my bedside table to inform the knights standing guard at my door that a thief broke into my room. I kept a close eye on the man while picking up a match and wondered what he was thinking. When the candle caught on fire, the surroundings brightened. Only then could I see the man’s black hair, pale skin, and overly elegant appearance. It was impossible to forget a face like his.

“Oh, you’re Father’s disciple.”

He came to the right place, after all. *Thank God*. I was relieved that the intruder was neither an assassin nor a thief. Though I tried convincing myself that I won’t die, the truth was that I was frightened to death. Additionally, I learned an important lesson. I’ve to make sure to lock the windows and doors every night.

I sat down on my bed as the adrenaline left my system and made my legs go weak. Father’s disciple looked blankly at me before his gaze turned to the candle fiercely.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

He would dare treat the daughter of Duke Floyen rudely? He had filthy manners. If I were any other noble, I’d have long sent him to the gallows. But I’ll leave him be, for now, thinking to teach him some manners in the future.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Why do you speak to me like that?”

“Because it makes sense,” he said coldly.

Not only was he extremely arrogant, his manner of speech closely resembled Father’s. But Father doesn’t go that far. It truly is the case of the pupil surpassing the master. But this man didn’t need to surpass Father. It was vexing.

Out of relief and fatigue, I found myself unable to stop smiling. “So, what’s your name again?”

Instead of answering, the man glared and scowled. I became somewhat embarrassed and tried to explain why I was asking for his name. “Oh, it’s not that I forgot your name on purpose...”

I heard a knock on the door.

“Is something wrong, Lady Floyen?”

Although I was reassured by the knight speaking outside the door, the tip of a sword suddenly pressed against my neck. I stared at the culprit. Was he frightened? No, he was too merciless for that. I didn’t see signs of surprise in his red eyes, only ferocity. I tried understanding his point of view, and why he threatened me; he wants me to act. Well, I’m living the life of a villainess, so this was a rather simple request.

“Oh, I had a nightmare, so I decided to light the candle a little bit.”

Geraldine thought it a good enough excuse. “Really? Are you sure?” he asked to confirm.

“Yes, I’m fine. I had trouble sleeping, so I’m reading a book.” I felt as though I would pass out at any moment, but I was afraid that Father’s disciple would act rashly.

“Sleeping late is bad for your health, Lady Floyen. Go back to bed as soon as you can,” Geraldine said.

But he hasn’t slept yet. He’s one to talk. Still, he gave me fitting advice at a time like this.

“Yes, thank you for the advice,” I said.

I couldn’t hear anything by the door after that. The knights looked like they went back to their posts, but did they really? I wasn’t sure. Though the more pressing problem was Father’s disciple staring down at me with his sword pressed against my neck.

“I did what you wanted, so can you move your sword now?” I asked quietly.

His expression twisted “What did you say?” he asked sternly.

I frowned as he looked at me with a furious gaze. “I don’t know why you’re upset when you’re in the wrong.”

“Speak to me politely,” he said icily.

I wasn't able to understand his train of thought. But I shouldn't expect too much. He was Father's disciple. It didn't help that drowsiness was beaconing me to sleep the more I kept my eyes open. “If you want me to talk to you politely, you should've...” I tried snapping back only to yawn before I was able to finish the latter part of the sentence. My embarrassment roused my senses, making me forget my sleepiness for a moment. I had shown this man an unseemly sight.

How horrid.

The man suddenly removed his sword from my neck and continued staring at me. “What are you doing?”

I probably looked hideous when I yawned, but he looked at me as if he'd seen something oddly strange.

I didn't wish to upset him again, so to avoid it, I spoke politely as if I was a preschool teacher soothing a whining child. “I haven't been able to sleep because of you, so I'm tired. Don't you have to go back home as well?”

The man continued staring silently. I wondered if he planned to ignore my question. Then he said, “I don't have a home.”

I looked at him with surprise. He had a refined physical appearance that he could pass off as some foreign prince or as the empire's nobility, but I suppose this was a bit of a stretch. Due to the appearance-based nature of aristocratic society, it was unheard of—and a mockery in the name of the nobility—to venture out wearing luxurious clothing. The man in front of me wore a simple white shirt and black pants. Although he carried a long sword rather than a claymore, it was unpolished. He looked more like a wandering swordsman or mercenary than a knight or prince. He also wore a hooded cloak before. Considering his current and previous attire, he was...

“Are you a wanderer?” I asked, curious.

He nodded with an unpleasant expression.

I was right. He must be a wandering swordsman or mercenary who usually frequents inns. Judging by his simple clothes and lack of

belongings, he'd been kicked out because he was unable to pay. I guess he came to Father's mansion because he had nowhere else to go, but why tonight of all days? Though I wonder why he hadn't received an official welcome when he visited Father a few days ago; the servants didn't attend to him either, so he probably wasn't an official guest. That's why he didn't come through the front door but sneaked through my window instead. I sighed, displeased by Father's absence at times like this. But it can't be helped. Though I wasn't a kindhearted woman by nature, I wasn't so coldhearted as to ignore someone who desperately needed a roof over their heads, especially when they didn't have a home to go back to. After renting many one-bedroom apartments in the modern, I knew how depressing it was not having a permanent home I could call.

I looked at him pitifully. "If you don't have a place to sleep tonight, you can stay in my room for a while."

"What?" He stared at me with widened eyes.

His expression made me feel a little proud for some reason. "You don't have to thank me. Just pay me back when you become successful in the future."

He continued staring, eyes full of confusion. I guess this was expected. Not many would show this degree of kindness.

"I'm going back to sleep," I said, content that the situation was sorted out. "You should sleep too. Okay?" I lied back down, but suddenly felt a gust of cold air through the open window. "Hey, could you close the window?"

"Why should I?" he responded arrogantly to my request and looked down at me with folded arms.

What was Father teaching him? Not manners. When I sat up on my bed again, I noticed his thin and ragged clothes. Ah, what a troublesome man, but it can't be helped. I've to be understanding of the needy. I closed the window and brought a blanket over to him. He stood still with an arrogant posture.

"It gets cold at night because we're in-between seasons," I reminded him.

He stared at me without accepting the blanket. Seriously? He can't do this simple task on his own? It's as if I'm caring for a pet. I wanted to retort, but I didn't have the energy to argue. I stood on my tippy toes and placed the blanket over his shoulders. His red eyes stared at me as if to ask what I was doing, but I was too tired to explain myself.

“Good night.”

I immediately fell asleep thereafter.



“She... fell asleep.” Max furrowed his eyebrows and gazed at the woman in front of him. “What kind of person is she?”

He had met many people in his life, but no one had ever treated him like this. They either trembled in fear or tried to hide their fear behind words of flattery. Their fear was the only thing they shared in common. However, his master's daughter was neither of those things. He recalled the first time they met.

“Hey, can you hear me?”

She was relaxed the whole time they spoke and had even fallen asleep in front of him. Not even his strong master had shown such a defenseless state towards him. Max had no choice but to marvel at her.

This is annoying, he thought. He was bothered by her laid-back attitude and impolite manner of speech. Upon remembering his top priority, which was to deal with the source of his annoyance, Max reached towards the woman's neck with narrowed eyes. But without realizing it, his hand stopped where her lips were. The tip of his finger lightly brushed against them, but the woman continued to sleep soundly.

“She's so dull.” Max frowned and brushed away a few strands of hair that clung to the woman's face. “...And so troublesome that even I'm beginning to feel tired.” When he became aware of this odd sensation, Max hardened his expression.

Tired? Him?

After witnessing numerous deaths on the battlefield, he had never let his guard down. But Max felt himself becoming drowsy and his eyelids growing heavy; this unfamiliar sensation was fatigue. He blinked and tried to keep alert, but exhaustion swallowed him whole. He can't fall asleep here. His determination to observe the woman lost strength, and the young man who resisted eventually admitted defeat.

“...I'll just rest for a little bit.”

Max blew out the candle and slid under the woman's bed. The warm blanket that covered his body made him drowsy. When he closed his eyes, he felt a comfortable sensation that he hadn't felt since his mother passed away.



A vicious dragon ravaged the empire. It was like a natural disaster swallowed the empire whole, inflicting harm even when barriers had been set up and people were being evacuated. I quietly hid at home when the dragon began attacking our mansion. When it spotted me, the creature approached with flaring nostrils. Before it was too late, Father appeared to fight it.

“How dare you aim for my daughter,” he said. “I won't let you go!”

Although it was a dream, I felt happy when I woke up. Dragons, huh. It seemed like a lucky dream. For some reason, I had a feeling that today would be good. That was... until I saw the man sleeping under my bed. Why'd he have to fall asleep here out of all places? Does he like my bed? I sighed and observed the man's face. Now that his red, warlike eyes were closed, he looked docile. He had bad manners, but he was beautiful. I suppose I could let this slide.

I suddenly became worried about what would happen if someone saw him in my room. Perhaps they'd think that the vicious Lady Floyen kidnapped and imprisoned a handsome man. While it was true he was more attractive than Mikhail, I wasn't very fond of this situation. He should leave before someone misunderstands. The maids

won't come inside without permission, but I didn't want to risk it. I immediately locked the latch on the door and shook his shoulder, trying to wake him up.

“Hey... huh?”

The man pushed me so hard that I flopped on the floor. I was lucky there was a carpet, otherwise, my back would've been injured.

He loomed over me, eyes shining brightly. “What are you doing?”



Max hadn't felt such warmth and comfort in a long time. He wanted to sleep like this forever, but when he realized someone approaching him, goosebumps prickled his skin. After surviving many battles, his body became extremely sensitive to changes in his environment. Even before he had fully awakened, Max pushed the person who briefly touched him. He climbed over the body and instinctively tried to grab the person's neck. That's when he saw a pair of blue eyes. There was only one woman who had eyes akin to periwinkle flowers floating on a serene lake.

Oh, I remember what happened now, he thought. When his senses gradually returned, so did his reason and realized what he'd done; he'd gone insane. He originally planned to leave after resting for a while, but he lost control of himself and fell into a deep slumber. He couldn't find any traces of the drowsiness that dominated his body, but the aftermath impacted him greatly.

I can't believe I let my guard down in front of this woman, he thought, reprimanding himself, then saw Jubelian staring at him. She's was deadpanned. His actions could've been fatal, but she didn't even look frightened.

“What were you trying to do?” he spat out, attempting to scare her.

Contrary to his expectations, the woman broke out into a smile. The corner of her eyes creased and her red lips widened to reveal white, pearly teeth. When her cheeks brightened to complement her beautiful face, he was reminded of a flower in full bloom. Max tried to

look away, but an irresistible force kept him from doing so. He forgot how to think for a moment and stared blankly at her face.

3

What I've Done



I stared at Father's disciple. Why was he ungrateful? I provided him a place to slumber, even nudged him awake, yet he's irrevocably impolite. How vexing. Why was Father's disciple so perverse? Though he does give off a familiar feeling. I reminisced about a similar friend I once knew in the modern world, then recalled what'd been bothering me—I've to ask him why he's speaking impolitely again.

"What were you trying to do?" he asked aggressively. I suddenly forgot what to say and burst out laughing. "Answer me." He pressed his lips. "Why are you laughing?"

The man was displeased, but I couldn't stop myself. The way he behaved was very similar to the little guy I knew from my past life.

He glared. "Don't laugh!" he said fiercely.

I was cruel, laughing at him for no reason, but it was challenging controlling myself after seeing his grim look. He reminded me of the aggressive black kitty I often saw near my home. The man frowned, unhappy with my smiling face. "Stop laughing," he commanded.

It was difficult, especially since we weren't in a dire situation. Then I heard Marilyn's voice outside the door. "Have you awakened, Lady Floyen?"

I immediately stopped the hurling laughter and frowned. I should stay calm, I thought. First, I've to do something about the man on top of me.

"Hey, can you move?" I asked.

He frowned at my request but stood up.

“You have to help me up too,” I said, extending my hand out to him, but he simply glared and turned around, leaving me no choice but to stand up myself. I frowned and dusted off my clothes. What was his problem? He’s quite the character, but it can’t be helped. I recklessly grabbed his hand.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

He didn’t budge when I tried tugging him away. I was left with no choice but to trick him. “Come here. I have something to show you,” I lied.

He frowned but didn’t put up a fight as I dragged him into my dressing room, which was connected to my bedroom.

“If you don’t want any misunderstandings, stay here and be quiet,” I said as I opened the closet door.

“Misunderstandings?”

“You know, something like how we spent the night together... but not like that.”

“Not like that?” he asked with curiosity.

I was surprised that I had to explain this to him, but I did so in a refined way. “It’s like how animals mate.”

“What?! What kind of...”

I quickly covered his rascal mouth with both hands. *God*. What does he have for brains? Why would he raise his voice when Marilyn could hear? How careless!

When it looked like he calmed down, I removed my hands and said, “You don’t want someone thinking that, right? Great. Me neither.” His handsome face twisted at my earnest words. *Good*. He’s listening. I smiled. “I’m only asking you to cooperate since you slept in my room.”

The man stared at me, then nodded slowly. I felt somewhat dispirited now that the rebellious man suddenly became obedient.

“Fine.”

“How nice it is now that you’re listening to me,” I muttered unconsciously.

He frowned. "You..." He tried retorting, but I hurriedly closed the closet door before he could utter a word.

"Is everything okay, Lady Floyen? Why is the door locked?"

Sighing in relief, I rushed towards the bedroom door and unlocked it. It'd have been problematic had I not locked the doorknob earlier.

Merilyn stared at me with puzzled eyes. "Did something happen? You've never locked your door before..." she asked, worried.

"Oh, um..." I scrambled for an acceptable excuse. "I was afraid that someone might break-in."

"Huh?" Merilyn asked with surprise, then smiled. "My lady, there's no man in the world who'd try to break into Duke Floyen's house! If there is, they're deranged and out of their mind. It's well-known that neither assassins nor thieves dare to come near the mansion."

I sighed. There was surely no assassin nor thief, but a deranged man sitting in my closet at this very moment. Oh, Marilyn, if only you knew, I thought.

I couldn't tell her about the intruder hiding in my closet, so I hurriedly added, "We can never be too sure, especially since Father isn't here."

Merilyn's expression hardened at my words as if she suddenly realized the danger we were in. She clutched my hands with her own. "Lady Floyen," she said somberly, "Master will safely return home."

"Yes, I know," I answered, smiling. I was befuddled why she'd suddenly say all this, but I agreed with her. After all, how would others return home safely if the strongest swordsman in the empire could not?

Merilyn continued to look at me with a worried expression. "It's a wonderful day, my lady. How about taking a walk?" she asked.

I once again didn't understand why she'd suggest this out of the blue. If this were any other day, I'd joyfully agree, but I couldn't because of the man hiding in my closet.

I had no choice but to lie.

"No, I'm not feeling well today." I looked down. This wasn't a

complete lie, as I felt a little sick from the cold air last night, and my body was sore from Father's disciple pinning me down to the ground earlier.

"Really? What's wrong?" Marilyn asked.

"Oh, I'm a bit under the weather today," I reassured her. I vaguely explained my symptoms so I'd have an excuse not to go outside, but Marilyn wasn't letting it slide.

"Shall I bring Dr. Allen?"

"No, you don't have to do that," I said.

She shook her head gravely and said, "Even the smallest things should not be overlooked. You are the only heir to the Floyen family."

"It's not a big deal..."

Marilyn looked dissatisfied. "You must remember that you're the only one member who can lead the family during master's absence, my lady."

I inhaled sharply at her burdensome words for I've no intention of leading the family.

Marilyn sighed. "As I thought, I can't just let this slide. I'll call Dr. Allen," she decided.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. Even if my image was sent into ruins, I've no choice but to use this excuse. "It's really not a big deal. It's actually because... I fell from my bed."

Marilyn widened her eyes, surprised. "From your bed?"

"Yes, it doesn't hurt much because I fell on the carpet... but my back aches a little." I thought this was a good excuse, considering that I had indeed fallen on the carpet, although it was because Father's disciple pinned me to the ground.

"Oh, then I'll bring some medicine for muscle pain," Marilyn said.

I nodded, then wondered what time it was; I was hungry. The clock indicated that it was a quarter till 11 in the afternoon, which was too late for breakfast but too early for lunch. If there wasn't someone inside my closet, I would've gone downstairs and wolfed down a filling

brunch.

“Merilyn, could you bring some sandwiches as well? More than the usual please.”

“Of course, my lady. Is there anything else you need?”

“I didn’t sleep much because I was reading late into the night. I’m feeling a little cranky, so please don’t enter my room without permission,” I added. It was Father’s disciple who was cranky, but this request wasn’t strange considering Jubelian’s past personality.

“I will do as directed.”

As soon as Merilyn left, I hurriedly went to the closet. When I had pushed the man inside, it didn’t occur to me that some of my dresses were made of fabrics that wrinkle easily. I hope he didn’t move around too much, I thought as I opened the door. I observed the clothes first, thankful that they were fine. Then I saw Father’s disciple crouching uncomfortably.

I was proud of him.

“Can I go out now?” he asked bluntly.

“No, I asked my maid for something, so you’ll have to wait a little while longer.”

The man’s expression twisted with dissatisfaction. “How tiring,” he spat.

He was handsome even when he frowned. But that didn’t mean I had feelings for him. I admire his appearance, but it was left at that. It had no deeper meaning. It was akin to how an art enthusiast would admire a work of art. More than anything else, I refuse to involve myself with those who looked good on the outside but rotten on the inside.

“What are you looking at?”

It’s as if his natural way of speaking meant being disrespectful and impolite. Because I was a noble lady, this was enough to press charges, but I’ve long given up on teaching him manners. I’m not angered, not when he’s a wild animal that hadn’t been tamed. And it was a waste of time picking a fight when he’ll only stay for a little while. I shouldn’t

have to exhaust my emotions on immature men. With this in mind, I asked him something I was curious about. “How long do you plan on staying here?”

I was doing him a favor, but I couldn’t keep him forever. I’ll decide how to proceed with this matter based on his answer. But instead of answering, the man wore a surprised expression, making me expect the worst. I had hoped that he didn’t plan on staying long. Maybe until Father returns, but who knows when that’ll be. My thoughts were becoming complicatedly chaotic until he finally answered.

“I intend to leave... today.” His voice held a little hesitation. His expression wasn’t the best either, which made me feel apologetic.

Did it sound like I was kicking him out? Out of concern, I asked, “Do you have a place to go?”

He coldly stared and scoffed. “Does it look like I have no place to go?”

It was natural for others to be upset over sensitive topics like this. Well, there was no reason for him to come here in the first place if he had a place to go, and he wouldn’t have worn simple, bland clothes either.

“It’s okay to be honest,” I said with a sigh.

He frowned. “What nonsense are you spouting?” The man once again responded perversely despite my best to speak considerately.

What caused him to have crude behavior? I was absorbed in my frustrations, but I soon speculated the cause of his unhappiness. If he was kicked out yesterday, perhaps he had skipped dinner and hadn’t had anything to eat since then. As the thought plagued my mind, I empathized with his predicament a bit more. I’ve seen people become easily irritated when famished and when they had no roof over their shoulders. I couldn’t help but pity him.

“Let’s have brunch together later,” I said softly.

The man stared at me with a stony expression. “What?”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Our chef is pretty skilled, so you can expect delicious food,” I said

as I closed the closet doors again.



Eat together? As he quietly sat in the closet, Max replayed the woman's words in his head with a strange expression. Wait, why was he listening to her? Plagued by doubts, he grew incensed and became engulfed by anger upon coming to his senses. I should break the doors open and leave, he thought. But at that moment, he heard someone approaching. Judging by the rhythm of the person's feet, it was the maid who previously visited. Frankly, Max was irritated; he felt the urge to smash the closet doors and ruin the woman's plans to keep him out of sight. But upon remembering her expression when she offered to eat together, he was pacified. He supposed he could wait a little while longer.

It was the first time Max patiently waited for someone else.

"I brought some medicine and sandwiches, Lady Floyen."

"Thank you, Merilyn. Just a second."

"Yes, my lady."

"Could you come over here and apply the medicine to my back and neck?"

Max had expected to get out of this stuffy closet soon, but the woman was taking her sweet time. As his patience quickly ran out, he gritted his teeth in anger. She said it'd only take a second. What in the world was she doing? He clenched his fists, ready to break open the closet doors when he remembered what the woman said once again. "*Let's have brunch together later.*" Strangely enough, he wasn't able to succumb to his impulses when her laughing face came to mind. What's happening? Now that he thought about it, strange things were happening to him. He hadn't thought about leaving until the woman asked and he felt his heart tingle when she offered to eat together. Now, he found himself unable to defy her wishes. He furrowed his eyebrows and wondered why he was like this. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a scream that came from the very woman

who'd been bothering him this entire time.

“Ah!”

Although he couldn't see her, he became alert. Was there an ambush? What happened? All sorts of scenarios crossed his mind. Only two people should've been in the room, but there was a possibility that an adept assassin was hiding in the shadows. She also fell asleep without locking her windows, he thought, clicking his tongue. From his point of view, Jubelian was defenseless. It wouldn't be strange if she was attacked right this very moment. As the thought itched his mind, he had the urge to see what was happening outside. He reached out to push open the closet doors, then stopped.

“Why do I care?” he muttered. He frowned at himself for a moment but backtracked when he heard another groan from outside “...Right. I'm only helping her because I can use her in the future. That's all.” Max rationalized his incomprehensible behavior and reached out again. He stiffened when he heard the woman's voice for the third time.

“It's a little further down there, Marilyn.”

“Right here, Lady Floyen?”

“Yes.”

“What on earth was I doing? I can't believe I'm being swayed by a woman like that...” After listening to their conversation, Max finally figured out the situation and scrunched his face. He felt an overwhelming sense of shame, then heard the maid's voice through the thin doors.

“I think it's better to get some pain medicine from Dr. Allen, my lady.”

“It's okay. It'll get better now that you put on some medicine.”

Max frowned. She was good at putting on an act, even though she wasn't injured.

“It's only natural for your back to feel sore. There are some bruises under your shoulder blades.”

His expression hardened. Bruises? What sort of bruises? Max sank

deep into his thoughts.

“Oh, I thought it’d be okay because I fell on the carpet... I didn’t know I’d get bruises.”

It was then that Max remembered shoving her to the ground this morning. *Damn it.* It was only natural for the weak to perish first, so he usually didn’t care if others were hurt. But the moment he learned the woman was injured because of him, he felt sick to the stomach.

“Anyway, I feel much better now. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Could you bring dinner to my room later as well?”

“Yes, my lady. Please rest.”

When the maid left the room, Max continued to stay in the closet and eagerly stared at the door. A few minutes later, he sensed the woman’s light and careful gait getting closer.

She’s here.

The closet door opened, and she came into view.

“You can come out now,” the entrancing woman said. Her surroundings were bright; it looked like she was enveloped in a halo.

“Ah...” Max opened his mouth unconsciously, then closed it. He tried asking the woman if she was okay but found himself unable to do so.

She laughed brightly like a flower. “We’ll eat now as promised.”

If Max was being rational, he would’ve refused her offer. He usually wasn’t hungry and didn’t accept food from strangers. Even so, he was strangely hungry now.

“Come this way,” she said.

Max felt his heart tingle when Jubelian made hand gestures to usher him forward. This was only because he’s hungry. He once again rationalized his confusing behavior. He followed Jubelian to the small table in her room where he could see sandwiches arranged in a way that would be easy to eat. He frowned when he took a closer look.

Was that...?

Max wanted to get angry because the sandwich contained an ingredient he hated, but he found himself unable to do so when he saw Jubelian's face.

"Here you go," she offered.

Max didn't refuse when she handed him a sandwich.

"Try it," she said. "Our chef is very skilled." At her request, he took a bite and tasted the very thing that made him harden his expression.

It's indeed what I thought it was, he thought. The sandwich was full of cucumbers, which he loathed. It was truly abysmal.

"How is it?" Jubelian asked.

Truthfully, Max didn't know what it tasted like because he swallowed the sandwich whole. Even so, he continued forcing more into his mouth. Why was he doing this? Max mulled over his behavior when the woman spoke with a smile.

"Do you not like it?"

He hated it. But instead of answering truthfully, he slowly shook his head and met the woman's smiling face. Strangely, his heart tingled again.

"I was worried because I have strange preferences for food, but I'm glad you like it as well," she said as she bit into a sandwich.

Max looked at Jubelian, then at the cucumber sandwich he wouldn't usually spare a glance at. Was it that good? He took another bite of the sandwich and savored it this time. The blandness of cucumber combined with its peculiar smell reignited his dislike for the vegetable. But as he continued eating, he slowly got used to the taste. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought.



I became lethargic after eating brunch with Father's disciple, but I didn't want to take a nap when he was around, and it wasn't like I'll pass out from sleepiness. I decided to read a book to stay focused, but

my eyes kept fluttering shut. My vision gradually blurred, but I managed to stay awake for a little longer.

“Hey,” Father’s disciple suddenly said.

I flinched at his voice and unconsciously yawned, unable to control myself. Out of embarrassment, I covered my mouth with both hands and barely kept another yawn in check. Unfortunately, I couldn’t prevent the tears from forming at the corner of my eyes. At least I didn’t show my mouth this time. I squeezed my eyes shut at this thought. The tears I held back ran down my face. *God*. Why does this habit exist? I loathe it so. I tried wiping the tears with my sleeves but stopped when I saw Father’s disciple looming over me.

When did he get so close?

I stared back at him when something soft touched my eyes.

“Why are you crying?” he asked.

I widened my eyes when I saw that his sleeves became wet with tears. His shirt was surprisingly soft to the touch, perhaps softer than my handkerchief, which was made out of the finest cotton in the empire. This was the highest-grade fabric I’ve ever touched. Wasn’t he kicked out because he had not any money in his pocket? I became filled with doubt, wondering if I guessed incorrectly about his identity when a thought occurred to me. Then again, one didn’t need to be wealthy to wear high-quality materials. Some people purchase expensive clothing to feel better about themselves, regardless of their financial background. Father’s disciple was like that.

“I asked why you were crying,” he frowned, repeating himself.

“Oh... it's nothing. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Tell me now.”

Truthfully, it was humiliating. I didn’t want to tell him it was from my yawns.

“Just because... by the way, you’re fast. I was startled when you suddenly appeared in front of me,” I replied abruptly, quickly changing the topic.

I was truly surprised. He appeared in front of my eyes in a flash.

He laughed. “Surprised? How pitiful.”

Why am I surprised? Arrogance was this man’s default personality, seeing as he was mocking me.

“You must be a skilled swordsman like the Imperial Palace knights,” I said with a hint of sarcasm.

“I’m much stronger than them,” he replied, frowning.

His personality showed that he was Father’s disciple, but even though Father was cold and inconsiderate, he was not arrogant. Why was he like this? I silently lamented the man’s personality when I saw him staring at me again.

“So why did you cry?”

His persistence was vexing. I felt the urge to tell him the truth and get it over with. But before I was able to, I heard a knock on the door.

“It’s Derrick, Lady Floyen.”

I sighed with relief.

If it were a maid, I’d have dismissed her, but I couldn’t do that to Derrick. He wouldn’t have come to seek my presence without reason, I thought as I stood up. In this mansion, male servants only attended to Father while female servants attended to me. Since Derrick personally came to my room, something must’ve happened.

“If you don’t mind, could you go in there again?” I asked, pointing to the closet.

Although he wore an unpleasant expression, he obediently complied with my request. At least he listens obediently now. When the man successfully hid inside the closet, I approached the bedroom door and opened it.

“Derrick, did you need something?” I asked.

“A messenger arrived from the Marquis Crocus family. He wants to convey a message from Ronald, the eldest son of Marquis Crocus, to you, Lady Floyen.”

The House of Crocus was of imminent prestige, so it was probably an important matter. This situation called for me to go downstairs to

meet the messenger himself, but I didn't want to leave Father's disciple alone in my room. What if one of the maids sees him while I was downstairs? I couldn't let that happen. I deliberately coughed and replied, "Unfortunately, I'm not feeling well, so it'll be difficult for me to go downstairs. Derrick, could you receive the message in my stead?"

Derrick looked at me with a worried gaze and said, "Of course, my lady. Please rest."

When he left, I glanced at my closet and sighed in relief, hoping he wouldn't ask about my tears.



Max tried not to think about it, but the image of the woman's big eyes filling up with tears plagued his mind. Why did she cry? Unbeknownst to Jubelian, he was still worrying about the matter in her closet. What was so upsetting that she covered her mouth with both hands? He suddenly remembered something he had heard from his close entourage a while ago.

"I heard that Lady Floyen liked Sir Mikhail. People say that she chased him around without caring about her reputation... in some ways, it's fortunate that they separated."

"Is it because she can't forget about him?" Max clenched his fists.



"This is Derrick again, Lady Floyen."

When I opened the door, I saw him smiling. "Should I be expecting good news?"

He straightened his expression and said, "My lady, the esteemed son of Marquis Crocus sent a message about wanting to be your partner for Count Arlo's banquet."

I widened my eyes. Does an esteemed man desire to be my partner?

Marquis Crocus' son was considered to be the most suitable successor of the foreign ministry. It felt surreal that such a man of esteemed status asked to be my partner.

“What is your response, my lady?”

I pondered over this, but it was difficult to come up with a decision on the spot. At that moment, a strange sound came from my dressing room. *Oh, God.* I trembled slightly and felt the blood rush away from my face.

Derrick looked at me austerely. “Did you hear something from the dressing room?”

“No, I didn't,” I responded calmly. “What do you mean?”

Derrick gave a wary look. “I heard something... maybe it's a rat?”

“Haha... that's impossible,” I replied smoothly, waving my hand. “I'm still not feeling well, so could I rest for now? As for the reply... let the messenger know that I'll send one by letter soon.”

“Of course, Lady Floyen. Please rest well.” Derrick slightly bowed his head and left without another word as if he didn't want to irritate me.

I sighed in relief. I thought my heart would jump out of my chest. I went back to the closet and opened its doors to find Father's disciple sitting with a blank expression.

“Excuse me. Did you just make that noise?”

He stared at me and asked, “Are you going to accept his invitation?”

Why was he curious about that? Not only was it a strange thing to ask, but it wasn't something I could answer right away.

“I'm thinking about it,” I said.

The esteemed son of Marquis Crocus was more than qualified to be my partner. His appearance was stupendous and comparable to that of Mikhail's. He was also well-liked due to his exceptional social skills. The problem was that I don't know why a man of his status would want to be my partner. I sighed and saw Father's disciple scrunch his face.

“You should think about it carefully. Appearances aren’t everything,” he advised.

I gave him a dumbfounded look. This man had a difficult personality and meager social skills; his only asset was his remarkable appearance. I wasn’t quite sure I heard him well. Maybe I was but chose to ignore it. I stared at him in shock when he turned towards me.

“What are you looking at?”

“You didn’t answer my question. Did you make that noise when Derrick was here?” I frowned.

He parted his lips then replied stiffly, “That’s none of your business.”

“Do you know that we almost got caught?”

“But we didn’t. That’s all that matters.”

I shook my head at his shamelessness. “It doesn’t work like that. If you were caught, it would’ve caused a commotion and alerted the messenger downstairs. I could’ve been caught up in a scandal with you.”

In aristocratic society, a scandal with someone of a different status meant immediate ostracization. I didn’t care about what others thought of me, but I was still living in Father’s house. He’d hate me even if I did something wrong. In the worst-case scenario that I was kicked out, I’d have to face numerous dangers alone in this treacherous world. I didn’t want that. I’d like to latch on to Father’s riches for as long as possible.

“I’m taking a big risk by letting you stay here. I’d appreciate it if you were a bit more considerate of my situation.”

He turned around to look at me again. His crimson red eyes seemed to pierce through me, but I managed to meet his gaze without backing down. He finally avoided my eyes thereafter.

“Okay,” he said quietly.

I was relieved to see that he at least had some conscience. “You can come out now,” I said as I reached out to him.

He took my hand and stood up, staring at me with a determined gaze. “If such a thing were to happen... I’ll take responsibility,” he said.

What? Why was he taking the matter to heart? I couldn’t find it in myself to do the same and found his sincerity amusing that I smiled towards the end.

“Alright, but I doubt anything will happen.”

“You don’t know that,” he said as he pulled my hand slightly.

I looked into his bright red eyes. Oddly enough, it seemed that he was hoping that something would happen. I need to hand this guy over to Father as soon as possible. When will he be home? I rarely wondered when Father would return home, but I couldn’t help it after spending so much time with the man in front of me.



Rumors about Duke Floyen working as an escort for the emperor had begun spreading in secret. It was only a matter of time before it reached the prime minister’s ears, rousing the people’s resentment and resulting in the same thing that occurred in the past.

During the war with the Tezeria Kingdom 20 years ago, the young emperor abandoned the imperial palace and fled from the capital. His people whom he deserted became distressed by their leader’s cowardice and pessimism. In his absence, a young knight took the lead in defending the capital. He was Regis Floyen, a member of the Imperial Knights next in line to inherit the dukedom. Although many people advised him to give up and run away, Regis annihilated the enemies who invaded the capital.

As the successor of a prestigious family that produced great knights every generation, he became known as a war hero who led the empire to great victory. But where there is light, there is darkness. The emperor, who deserted the capital, became known as a coward and traitor. Many criticized him and urged for his disposal, but Regis turned the tables by expressing his support for the emperor. In present

times, it was not an exaggeration to say that his rapport was barely maintained by his eldest son, the crown prince, who fought for the empire at the borders.

“I need to see His Majesty.”

After realizing the crisis the empire was in, the prime minister entered the palace and asked for an audience with the emperor.



“Do you plan on keeping him in the palace for much longer, Your Majesty?” the prime minister asked.

The emperor raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious? There’s no one more skilled than him for the job.” His fierce voice revealed an underlying resentment towards Duke Floyen.

The prime minister sighed. “Of course, Your Majesty. The duke’s presence will frighten these scoundrels in advance and put their efforts to waste, but...”

You’re belittling his reputation as the empire’s hero, he thought to himself.

“If you continue to keep him in the palace, the people’s resentment will only increase. I believe it’s more important to devise a plan to identify the mastermind behind the assassinations rather than order the duke to stay.”

The emperor glared at the prime minister, displeased by his unwelcome advice. “I will make the right decision. You don’t have to be so concerned,” he said stubbornly.

“But...” The prime minister tried to make his point, but the emperor cut him off.

“You can leave, Duke Elios.”

The prime minister sighed. “Duke Floyen has a great reputation because of his previous achievements, but his current prestige is even greater. If you want to keep him in check, you must bring His Highness the Crown Prince back to the capital. Please use good

judgment.” With these parting words, he bowed and left.

“How dare he advise me without knowing anything...” The emperor's face twisted as he stared at the ring on his middle finger. It was the eye of Kirke, a symbol of imperial sovereignty created by an archmage who became the very first emperor. A smile slowly appeared on his face. “As long as I have this, he cannot disobey me.”



Somewhere near the Central Palace, Regis sat on a tree branch with his eyes closed. He didn't budge even when a weary little bird perched on his shoulder. It jumped up and down a few times before settling comfortably on his shoulder and falling asleep. The atmosphere was so peaceful that it seemed like Regis was taking a break rather than guarding the palace.

“There's someone close by.”

He opened his eyes as the wind rustled his hair and observed the person approaching the Central Palace. When he saw who it was, he relaxed and let out a yawn. It was Roy.

“Go,” Regis ordered the bird on his shoulder. When it woke up, the bird chirped and clung to him in resistance. “My daughter dislikes small animals,” he said firmly. It gazed at Regis with rueful eyes before spreading its wings and flying away.

When the duke jumped down the tree, Roy reeled back with amazement. “S-so you were here.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I received some news from the mansion—”

“Go on.”

Roy sighed when his boss impatiently cut him off before he even finished speaking. “Yes. It's about Lady Floyen—”

“What? Did something happen to Jubelian?” Although his boss was far from talkative, he cut Roy off again.

“No, it seems like she is... anxious because of Your Grace's absence...”

Regis' blue eyes glinted when he heard the news. Jubell was looking for him and missing his absence? The corner of his lips raised slightly.

Was His Grace smiling...? Roy was surprised for a moment, but he continued reporting the news from the mansion. “Lady Floyen is also feeling unwell. It seems like she's anxious because she hasn't left her room since you left the mansion.”

The duke's smile disappeared from his face. “I see. It's time for us to drop this act.” He gazed at the window that led to the emperor's office.



I glanced at the three-seat couch that had become the bed of Father's disciple. I don't think he's aware that the couch he is lying comfortably on was originally my resting place. He's made himself at home, I noted. Four days had passed since I let him stay. Thankfully, my large room boasted a connected bathroom, so it wasn't an inconvenient accommodation. I just had to be careful when the maids occasionally came to clean the room or check my well-being. Even so, secretly cohabiting wasn't smooth sailing. I've no choice but to complain inwardly. His presence not only greatly diminished my personal space, but also made it difficult to differentiate our boundaries.

“What is it?” the man questioned with an expectant gaze. He noticed that I'd been quietly sighing to myself, so he was probing for the cause of my dissatisfaction.

“Oh, just... you look comfortable. That's all,” I mumbled.

He furrowed his eyebrows and closed his eyes. “Not really.”

I became disheartened by his words; a lazy reply. I turned my head towards the window where I could see the sunset. I wonder when Father will be back.

I was lost in thought when Father's disciple suddenly asked, "Why do you keep staring at me?"

"Oh, I was just thinking... it seems like you have a good relationship with Father."

There was a moment of silence before he finally said, "It's not on the bad side."

Of course, it isn't. I chuckled emptily. In front of his disciple, Father's facial expressions and manner of speech were so strange that he seemed like a different person. Now that I think about it, I have to give back his pendant with the cufflinks I bought, but I didn't want to do it in person. I was afraid he wouldn't like the gift because I was unfamiliar with his preferences. I didn't want him to throw them away, or else I would be the one offended.

Speaking of which, this man might know more about Father's tastes.

"Hey," I called out.

When his red eyes turned to me, I reconsidered my actions. There's no way someone with a terrible personality like him would answer me honestly.

As I contemplated whether I should ask him or not, he said, "Say what you have to say. I hate it when people stall." His tone was blunt, but it seemed like he was willing to help me.

"What do you think about giving a set of cufflinks as a gift?" I finally asked.

He frowned. "A gift?" His eyes became hostile, making me flinch.

Why is he looking at me like that? Does he not like the idea of cufflinks?



Cufflinks were usually gifted to a woman's lover. Max immediately thought of Mikhail when Jubelian asked him about cufflinks. "Who are you giving it to?"

“Who else would I give it to? You should know who,” Jubelian replied quietly.

“You’re going to give cufflinks to someone like that?”

Max felt his mood worsen. Was this stupid woman thinking about clinging to him again? He had learned to never show his true emotions, lest it could be used against him, but his expression unknowingly became fierce.

The woman’s eyes turned cold. “Hey, that’s a little too harsh,” she replied sharply.

It was unlike her.

Max rarely gave advice because he wasn’t interested in other people’s lives, but it was frustrating to see the woman defending Mikhail without thinking for herself. He felt a rush of anger and his stomach roiled. He was trying his best to be considerate, so why was she taking his side? His knuckles turned white from clenching his fists.

“How can you cling to someone who is so indifferent to you... do you have no pride?” he asked coldly.

Try refuting that, he thought snarkily. Max had never regretted insulting someone before, but the moment he saw the woman’s face turn pale, he couldn’t explain the aching in his heart. *What on earth?* His face twisted as he tried to cope with the strange pain. Although he was angry, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. The unfamiliar sensation finally subsided when she mentioned someone unexpected.

“I’m not clinging to him. I just want to get along with Father.” As soon as Jubelian said this, Max’s fierce, red eyes wavered.

“You’re planning to give them to your father, Duke Floyen?” he asked for confirmation.

Jubelian frowned. “Who else would I give them to?”

His mood suddenly improved. It seems like she doesn’t know how much he cares about her, he thought. She easily misunderstood his sharp words, which showed that they didn’t get along well. Is this what he wanted? He silently ridiculed his foolish master, who had made

countless sacrifices for his daughter but chose to keep this matter from her. Finding the situation both comical and pathetic, he chuckled.

“Hey, stop laughing and say something...” Jubelian sulked.

If I don’t listen to her... will she get upset again? Max thought. He usually wouldn’t think this far, but he couldn’t stop thinking about her shocked face, which had turned pale from his biting words. He sighed and unconsciously hardened his expression.



I had felt somewhat dispirited until I learned that we weren’t talking about the same person. Who was he thinking about, if not Father?

At that moment, the man suddenly laughed. Although his handsome face was pleasing to the eye, it didn’t make me feel any better.

“Hey, say something,” I responded brusquely, displeased by his rudeness.

At my words, he stopped laughing and looked at me. His gaze was somber that I became nervous.

“The gift is a set of cufflinks?” he finally asked.

“Yes, here they are.”

When I showed him the cufflinks, he frowned slightly. “They’re not a very useful gift for a swordsman.”

I frowned. Although I’m not a swordsman, I thought it was a good enough gift. Was he trying to pick a fight?

“You must be very good at picking gifts,” I said sarcastically.

A smile appeared on his face. He’s indeed handsome, but that was all had. My eyes lingered on him for a moment longer, captivated by the rare change in the direction of his lips.

“I did give a present to my father a while ago.” His smile was now faint on his stony face. “He looked bored these days, but it seems like

he's more energetic thanks to my gift.”

Upon seeing his content expression, I guessed that he was a filial son. But what kind of gift would help his father become more energetic?

“So, what did you give him?” I asked with sudden curiosity.

“That's none of your business,” he said sternly.

Of course, he wouldn't tell me. Although I hadn't expected an answer in the first place, I frowned at his disgusting personality.

“The duke will like anything from you,” he said.

That was only possible if Father was possessed by someone warm and friendly. I was a little offended by his disingenuous answer. He doesn't know Father well as I previously thought, even though he's his disciple. I sighed. But these cufflinks were expensive. I should gift them to Father since I've to return the pendant anyway. If I didn't leave a note, he wouldn't know they were from me. Since he's a workaholic, he'll probably stop by his office first, right? With this in mind, I decided to write a letter that would explain where the pendant and cufflinks came from before leaving everything in his office.



Four days passed since the emperor called Duke Floyen to the Imperial Palace.

“Why are you taking so long, Duke Floyen?”

Although more reinforcements were brought in, including the duke, who was guarding the Imperial Palace, the emperor couldn't be sure he was completely safe.

“I cannot be careless” he reminded himself. If the duke betrayed him, the assassins would be able to easily attack him. He gritted his teeth. “If you betray me, everything you care about will crumble to dust, Regis.”

At that moment, the grand chamberlain entered the emperor's office. “Duke Floyen has asked for a private meeting, Your Majesty.

The emperor observed his ring with a smirk. I'm very curious to know who the mastermind is, he thought.

"Tell the duke that I will see him in the evening," he ordered sternly.

Although he didn't have anything important going on right now, the emperor had a reason for stalling the meeting: the duke made him anxious by taking this long to complete the task.

At that moment, the grand chamberlain spoke carefully again. "There is another piece of news, Your Majesty."

"What is it?" the emperor asked contently.

The grand chamberlain swallowed his words nervously. "Several officials have signed a petition calling for the return of His Highness the Crown Prince."

The emperor's eyes became fierce. "Bring it here."

The grand chamberlain delivered the petition to the emperor on a golden tray. When he read it, his expression contorted with anger.

"These men should be torn to pieces! How dare they...!" He crumpled the petition and threw it to the floor. "To find a companion for the crown prince and educate him to become the next emperor? They've gone mad!" A twisted smile suddenly appeared on the emperor's face. "They dared to sign a petition like this when I'm still in good shape. They must think too lightly of the throne."

The grand chamberlain swallowed nervously; the emperor's obsession with the throne was close to madness. He did his best not to provoke the emperor any further, afraid that his anger might fall on him as well.

"Bring those impudent men in front of me right now," the emperor ordered coldly.

"Y-yes, Your Majesty," the grand chamberlain replied complacently to avoid irritating him any further.



I grabbed my quill pen to begin writing the letter, then froze. What do people normally talk about with their Father? In my previous life, I was raised by a single mother. In my present life, I had an awkward relationship with Father. I don't think Merilyn could help me with this either.

I was deep in thought when I noticed Father's disciple staring at me with curiosity.

"What?" I asked.

"What are you doing?" he replied with anticipation.

"Oh, I'm writing a letter."

"To whom?"

"To Father."

His gaze softened slightly at my answer. "I don't think that's necessary."

I wanted to counter him, but it occurred to me that he was Father's disciple. He probably knew more about him. I set down my quill pen and looked at the man.

"Hey." Although I wasn't sure if he was going to ignore me again, he responded quickly, as if he was in a good mood.

"Yes?"

"What do you usually talk about with Father?"

"You mean my master?"

"Yeah."

He stroked his chin with an upright posture for a while, then leaned back on the couch. "I'm not sure. We don't talk much."

I was disappointed by his abrupt answer. Both of them aren't talkative, so that's to be expected. After deciding that it was futile to rely on others for this matter, I began to write the letter by myself. In my previous life, I volunteered for public institutions and had a lot of experience writing for official matters, as well as writing with pen pals. It should be fine.

My letter was completed not long after. I read through it and didn't

find any mistakes.

Since I worked hard, I should reward myself with a scrumptious meal thereafter.

As I silently praised myself, I heard Father's disciple speak behind me. "Are you going to give that to him?" he asked with surprise.

"Yes," I replied earnestly, then took another look at my letter.

Dear Father,

How have you been? To think that I'm all grown up with my 19th birthday around the corner... time flies by, doesn't it? During the hectic years that have passed by, it's common to forget important things.

Did you not lose your pendant a while ago? I just want to let you know that I had it. I should've given it back to you earlier, but this was delayed due to unavoidable circumstances. I hope you understand. These cufflinks are a gift for being patient with me.

I apologize again for not returning your pendant earlier due to personal reasons.

Sincerely,

Jubelian Eloy Floyen.

I think this was good. I admitted my faults and asked for forgiveness. The letter was clear to the point; I was certain Father was going to let this incident slide.

"His reaction would be an interesting sight to see." Father's disciple smirked, but I assumed he was just envious that I was able to write an acceptable letter without his help.

"I'm going to go to his office and come back. You know what to do if someone tries to enter the room, right?"

"Whatever." Despite his response, he nodded at my request. After his initial hostility, it was a little odd to see him show some consideration for me.



Duke Regis Floyen visited the emperor's office even later than the scheduled time and bowed at his superior.

"Your Majesty."

"You came later than I expected," the emperor scolded Regis, who wore an indifferent expression.

"Yes."

What a shameless person. The emperor became irritated by Regis' stoic confidence, which never wavered even in unfavorable circumstances. He struggled to maintain his composure before speaking. "So, did you figure out the vile rat who is behind all this?"

Regis smiled instead of revealing the truth. Max had also called my daughter a rat... I guess this is retribution, he thought. He had known for a while that the assassinations were the work of his one and only disciple, who was skilled at both swordsmanship and manipulation. Max despised the emperor and hoped that he would clash with his master, but there was just one slight error: he miscalculated Regis' patience.

"I could not find who was behind the assassinations."

The emperor frowned. "Are you sure? If you didn't accomplish my order, then why..."

As he angrily went on, Regis recalled his disciple's words: "*Are you possibly afraid of a weak guy like him?*"

No, I'm only letting the emperor live because it's not the right time yet, the duke thought. When that time came, his prey wouldn't be able to run away no matter how he tried. Soon, he promised himself. He looked at the emperor with calm, blue eyes that didn't betray a hint of anger.

"Don't you know why, Your Majesty?" Regis asked.

The emperor found it difficult to breathe under Regis burdensome gaze. Was he attempting to start a rebellion? Overwhelmed by fear, he

wasn't able to respond.

It was Regis who finally broke the silence. "As long as I stay at the Imperial Palace, they won't attack you."

There was no sign of reproach in his calm voice, but the emperor, who suffered from the weight of his monstrous energy, felt as if he had heard a thousand criticisms from him. He clenched his fists with resentment.

The emperor glared at the duke and raised his voice. "How can you guarantee that when I was already attacked?"

Little did he know the duke could guarantee it because he was certain that his disciple, the mastermind behind the assassinations, wasn't going to act rashly from now on. As long as he stays calm, Max was aware that there was no revolution even if he pushed the emperor towards the extreme.

"Tell me now!" the emperor shouted.

Even now, he was causing a ruckus, oblivious to the machinations that brewed below the surface. He was a rather easy man to manipulate by nature.

In response, Regis let out a small sigh. "Your Majesty has become increasingly guarded, so the mastermind probably realized that sending out more assassins would be futile."

Although Regis spoke kindly, the emperor regarded his words as an implication that he was frightened of the assassinations. He fumed with resentment.

"There's no need to act rashly in this situation, seeing as it has already attracted a lot of attention from people."

Every word he said was right, but the emperor refused to admit it. Doing so meant admitting defeat. That vile rogue. He's running his mouth to cover up his incompetence, he cursed inwardly. The emperor was filled with indignation, but he calmed down by stroking the ring on his finger. No, as long as I have this... he cannot disobey me, he thought. Even so, he couldn't help but feel nervous. The duke didn't seem concerned about this weakness anymore; in fact, he hadn't in a long time.

“Since I can’t be sure, I should find something else that could oppose him...” he muttered to himself.

At that moment, the prime minister’s advice came to mind. *“If you want to keep him in check, you must bring His Highness the Crown Prince back to the capital.”*

The emperor had finally found a use for his son, who he always thought of as a terrible existence that threatened his place on the throne. It’s a good idea to keep this atrocious son of his in check, thinking that he’ll soon sit on the throne. No one would suspect a thing.

“I realize my personal affair has bothered you, duke,” the emperor said in a relatively mild tone.

His subjects would usually refuse to admit such a bold claim, but the duke didn’t respond. It was like a silent affirmation. The emperor clenched his fists, barely controlling his urge to throw something at him.

“Seeing as the mastermind might still be observing the situation, shouldn’t you guard the palace for at least a week, Duke Floyen? Please work hard for three more days.”

At this last-notice command, Regis bowed at the emperor. “Yes, I will do my best to serve you, Your Majesty.”

As soon as Regis left the office, he heard the sound of something breaking. Despite the commotion, he wore a slightly pleasant expression on his handsome face. He was growing tired of his predictability. Regis tilted back his head to stare at the sky with weary eyes. When he saw the moon glowing in the dark sky, a hint of warmth colored his frozen expression.

“I wonder if my child is doing well.”

If he stayed in the palace for a little longer, the people would blame the emperor for mistreating him. The duke also wanted to go back home to see his daughter.

“Jubell.”

It had only been four days since he left the mansion, but Regis

couldn't wait to go back home and see how she was doing.



It's quiet. The office without Father was far emptier than I thought it would be. I didn't know his absence would make it seem so deserted. Even so, I was relieved that Father wasn't here. I would be too mortified to give the letter to him in person.

He'll read it if I put it over there, right? I walked towards his desk. When I saw an open ink bottle, I secured the lid so it wouldn't dry up. As I wondered where I should put the letter, I glanced over a stray piece of paper without much thought. A prospective marriage partner list? I wondered if I had seen it correctly, so I carefully read it from the top to be sure. The list contained the names of noblemen around my age. Why did he make this list without confiding in me? I suddenly remembered the conversation I had with him after I broke up with Mikhail. *"What is your ideal type?"*

He's trying to find a man with all the conditions I mentioned? I looked at the list with trembling eyes. Among the many names, some were underlined. Was he setting me up on extravagant blind dates with these distinguished men? One of the underlined names was the son of a foreign royal family. Another one was Lord Frederich, the only son of Duke Elios, the prime minister. Although his family was wealthier than Mikhail's, he was the supporting character of another supporting character who never appeared in the original novel. For a brief moment, I thought it might be a good idea to marry one of these men and live happily ever after. Doing so would allow me to live comfortably, as well as escape my predestined death. Lord Frederich had the qualifications and good looks. He's probably the best choice that I could ask for. Even so, I had no intention of changing my mind about marriage. The moment I did so, I'd have to live as that man's wife and not as myself, Jubelian.

It was reassuring that both of these underlined names are from families that are just as wealthy as ours because I had asked Father for someone whose wealth exceeded ours. I could only think of one family

that was qualified in this aspect. But there's no reason for us to get involved with them.

I continued skimming through the list with a smile on my face until I stumbled upon a circled name. *Huh?* Why did Father mark this? When I looked closer with curiosity, I ended up dropping the paper I was holding.

Maximillian Casein Assiette.

I was shocked. This man was the heir of the only family that was wealthier than the Floyen House, and the person who was going to kill me in the future. Why was the crown prince's name here? I remembered a part of the novel that encapsulated the crown prince as *a psychopath who neither sheds blood nor tears*. Although this sounded harsh, it probably didn't do him justice.

"I heard that he doesn't hesitate to kill people..." many would say.

There were quite a few anecdotes about the crown prince's cruelty. One of them was about the time he sent an assassin's severed head to his sister, Beatrice, as a gift for her coming-of-age ceremony. That one incident was enough to prove his deranged mind, but his atrocities didn't end there. At the beginning of the novel, he sent assassins to kill the emperor. He wasn't just a psychopath, but a wicked man who seemed to have split personalities; a purely tyrannical character in the novel who shed neither blood nor tears.

If his name is circled, that probably means that he would be my partner... I became dizzy by this thought and barely supported myself when I stumbled. No matter how much I think about it, isn't this too cruel? Even other nobles would try to avoid marrying their daughter off to the crown prince. Although the crown princess position was usually sought after, there was another reason why it was left vacant. At the beginning of the novel, bizarre rumors about the burn scar on his face circulated, which explained why the crown prince always wore a helmet. What's more... there was another rumor that didn't concern his appearance. It was that he was a sadist who was violent in bed. These rumors caused many noblewomen to hasten their marriages with other men to avoid getting engaged with the crown prince. So did their mothers and fathers who didn't wish for their daughters to marry

a man with a violent temper.

In the memories of my future, he even visited me in prison! In the novel, Jubelian had ended her life to avoid being tortured. She thought it was better to die than fall victim to his vices. Was Father trying to sell me to this terrible man? I gritted my teeth. Although I had asked for someone who excelled in terms of wealth, competence, and fame, this was just too much. He forgot about the most important thing too. I'm sure I mentioned appearance, Father. The crown prince always covered his face, so no one knew what he looked like. But even if he was attractive enough to meet my standards, I still wanted nothing to do with him.

My life would be in danger if I marry him. But the more urgent problem is...

My head started to hurt as I mulled over my predicament. I could reject other noblemen because I was the daughter of an esteemed duke, but I couldn't reject someone from the imperial family. If I was set up on a blind date with the crown prince... I couldn't refuse to go. Of course, the prince has to like me for us to marry. But if he was truly a psychopath like he was rumored to be, it didn't matter who his partner was; it would be enough for him to have someone to harass.

The most I could do was to change Father's mind about the crown prince... but that wasn't going to be easy. I sighed and placed the paper back on the desk. I have to come up with a countermeasure without letting Father know that I saw the list. Otherwise, he might hasten the blind date so that I wouldn't be able to avoid it. For this reason, I left his office with the letter, cufflinks, and pendant back in hand.



“Was her room always this spacious?” Max looked around the desolate quarters and sat on the chair the woman always used. “It's uncomfortable.”

Nevertheless, he slumped into the chair, feeling strangely weak.

“When will she come back?”

He rarely talked with the woman when she was around, but now that her constant presence was gone, he didn't know how much longer he could endure being alone. He felt a strange sense of emptiness in the desolate room.

"Why is she taking so long?" Max looked at the door with forlorn eyes when he suddenly became alert. "Someone's here."

His gaze snapped towards the open window that faced the balcony. He moved so fast that the culprit lost track of him for an instant before he reappeared.

"Ugh!"

"Who are you?" Max grabbed the unwelcomed visitor by the neck, firm even as the man gasped and struggled in his hostile hold. "I asked who you are!"

"Please let me... ugh!"

"What business do you have here?" Max tightened his grip.

"Madam sent for—" The man squirmed and spoke with difficulty.

When Max released his grip, the man collapsed like a loosened marionette and coughed. He stared at the man, then asked coldly, "How did you know that I was here?"

"Madam said you might be here..." When the man trailed off, Max furrowed his eyebrows.

"So, what do you want?"

The man managed to catch his breath and replied, "We received a report saying that the emperor's movements have been unusual."

Max smirked. "Yes, he should be busy trying to keep himself alive."

In response, the man shook his head and said, "I was told that the emperor is calling for the return of the crown prince, at the advice of the prime minister and officials."

Max stared at him without saying a word.

"I think you should head back to the palace right away, Prince Maximillian," the man said.

Max knew that he should quickly leave the mansion because this

was an urgent matter, but for some reason, he didn't move a muscle and stayed rooted to his spot.

Did he *have* to leave now?

Max turned around with a stiff expression. She's not coming back. He glared at the door that she had tightly shut behind her, but he couldn't feel her presence no matter how he tried.

"Your Highness?" the man asked with a puzzled voice.

Max twisted his expression. "Why am I..."

Each time he made up his mind to leave, his body wouldn't listen. He was filled with worries about the woman who might look for him if he disappeared without a word.

"Wait for me outside. It'll just take a second."

The man noticed that the prince possessed an unfamiliar expression and a hesitant gaze, but he silently obeyed his orders and left the room. Max exhaled when he couldn't feel his subordinate's presence in the room anymore.

"I can't believe I'm doing something like this..." He went to the woman's desk, pulled out a piece of paper, and began writing diligently. "This should be enough."

His taut face relaxed.



It was eerily quiet when I came back to my room.

It seems like he's hiding well. I'm proud of him, I thought as I walked towards the closet. I hope he wasn't annoyed that I'd taken a long time. I opened the closet door. Instead of a frowning man huddled among the sets of dresses, there was no one. Did he hide somewhere else? I searched through the other closets, but he was nowhere to be found. Where did he go? I have a lot on my mind right now...

I was about to place Father's letter on my desk before searching for

him elsewhere when I saw a piece of paper with scribbled words. Curious, I inspected the letter with a strange sense of foreboding and frowned. I concentrated on the content of the letter and read what it said: *Don't look for me. I'll come back when the time comes.* Also, the handwriting was horrible. Even a cat could write better than this.

“I never told him he could come again.” I sighed unconsciously and sprawled on the couch that he used to occupy.

I finally got my place back. I relaxed on the comfortable couch, which was still warm from his body heat. It felt as if I had gone back to my quiet and peaceful days. He said he would return, but when will that be? I pondered over what he wrote but quickly came up with an explanation. He probably intends to come back to see Father, so it had nothing to do with me.

I frowned when my head started to ache. I'm tired. I was drained from worrying about how to avoid the disaster that was the crown prince, my prospective partner.

What should I do now?

Although I was anxious, the fatigue that weighed down on my body was persistent. I closed my eyes.



When Max left the duke's mansion, his body tensed and his senses sharpened.

“I'm back to how I used to be. That woman. I wonder if she read my letter,” he wondered.

Max unconsciously looked back at the duke's mansion. When he spotted the marble building, he realized what he had done and twisted his face.

A letter... it was unlike him to leave such a thing. Why did he do that?

When he was a child, Max learned that carelessness directly led to

death, so he was always vigilant. But strangely, his days in the woman's room had not been spent in perpetual alertness. He had even been defenseless several times without realizing it.

“If my subordinate didn't come, I might have continued staying there.”

Max couldn't understand this change in heart; it was as if he had been placed under a spell. He wondered if the woman had a secret method to make him feel this way, but didn't dwell on it for long. First, I need to go back and do something, he thought. Max fastened his pace and headed towards his destination.

4

Chosen Partner



WHY is it so bright? I glanced at the clock in my half-awake state and was startled to see the time. Although I had only planned to sleep for a short while, I had fallen into a deep slumber! I worried about Father's disciple, who depended on me for food. He must've been hungry, so why didn't he wake me up...? *Oh. Right.* I realized habits were hard to break, seeing as I was looking for someone who had left yesterday. Since he left so abruptly, he probably found another place to stay... I had already packed some travel necessities for him in advance, but I didn't expect him to leave so abruptly. He could've at least said goodbye. But no matter. I quickly replaced my frown with a smile. I shouldn't be upset. He's just a stranger. Although I tried to comfort myself, I couldn't help but feel a little empty inside.

I barely managed to collect myself with a sigh. First, I should take care of the impending problem. I didn't get much sleep last night because I was busy thinking about a solution for my prospective marriage. I ended up empty-handed. I don't know what to do.

I sighed again, feeling uneasy about my predicament when my maid spoke outside the door.

"This is Marilyn, my lady."

I opened the door for her. "Hello."

"Good morning, Lady Floyen," Marilyn greeted. She suddenly stopped short and looked at me with a surprised expression. "Oh..."

"You don't look well, my lady. A-are you okay?" she asked with a stutter.

Huh? I don't look well? I was wondering why Marilyn looked so surprised, then I remembered that I had stayed up all night. I probably

have dark circles under my eyes because I didn't sleep much.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said with a smile so that she wouldn't unnecessarily worry about me.

Although I was upset about the prospective marriage partner list, I did my best to look calm. I didn't want her to think that I was behaving suspiciously. I wonder when Father is coming back. I hope it won't be sooner than expected... It would be terrible if Father came back when I hadn't devised a plan to escape the marriage yet.

I trembled as I imagined that situation and said, "Um, Merilyn, did Father say when he would come back by any chance?"

Merilyn flinched and shook her head. "No, but I think he'll return in two days."

I became reassured by what she said. I don't need to be so hasty. I still have some time. With this in mind, I felt more at peace.



Lately, the servants were worried about Lady Floyen's unusual behavior. The lady has become strange, they thought. Jubelian used to frequently wander around the mansion, but now she spent most of her time in her room. It was even more unusual that she restricted the maids from entering her room.

The butler sighed with worry. She started behaving like this after the master left for training. Because his return was delayed, five days had passed in his absence. The servants in the Floyen household interacted with the lady with great care, anxious that she might return to her old, unreasonable self.

Derrick sighed again. His worries were interrupted by Madam Perez, the head of housekeeping.

"Is it true that the master will be back in two days, Derrick?"

"Yes. Why do you ask...?"

Madam Perez sighed. "The girl who takes care of Lady Floyen told me she was acting strange again."

“Strange? Can you elaborate...?” Derrick trailed off and looked at her with wavering eyes.

“She said that Lady Floyen asked when the master would return with a pallid face,” Madam Perez replied.

“What?” Derrick was shocked. What she had just told him reminded him of a certain day in the distant past.

“*Derrick, why isn’t daddy coming back?*” Jubelian had asked him. His heart still ached when he remembered her tearful, periwinkle eyes. I shouldn’t have done that back then, he thought.

Derrick sighed with regret and said, “I will contact master right away.”

Madam Perez sighed as well and nodded. “Thank you.”



“Ah...”

As the wind blew through the open window, Merilyn heard Jubelian sigh in the middle of reading a book on her couch. Although her face was full of worries, she was still beautiful.

Lady Floyen must be sighing because she misses master, right? she wondered. She looked so sad that Merilyn couldn’t help but strike a conversation with her.

“The weather is so nice today, my lady.”

“Yes, it is,” Jubelian replied weakly.

Merilyn looked at her with pity. This was the first time she’s seen her look so weak. Although she was in higher spirits these days because Jubelian was treating everyone kindly, she was now worried about the despondent lady.

I want to help her. Although this was a presumptuous thought, one that might even reignite Jubelian’s temper, she felt the urge to do something.

“How about taking a walk, my lady? Basking in the warm sunlight

will surely make you feel better.”

Jubelian looked up. Although she gazed at her calmly, Marilyn became frightened. She had gathered up her courage to speak, but she was still afraid that Jubelian might get angry since the lady was known for being fickle. Marilyn looked down nervously.

Jubelian parted her red lips. “Alright.”

Marilyn looked at her, dumbfounded.

“I do feel a little suffocated, staying inside all the time.”

Marilyn suddenly recalled something Jubelian had said in the past.

“I hate being home. Daddy is never here... and I’m always alone.”

Marilyn looked at Jubelian with pity. Although it wasn’t too long ago that she had been subject to her violent episodes, Marilyn felt sympathetic when she remembered Jubelian’s lonely childhood.

She used to be a violent and perverse person, but the more I got to know her, the more I found that she’s a considerate person, Marilyn thought, smiling pitifully. She was rather attached to Jubelian now, so she couldn’t bear to leave her in low spirits.

“I will always stay by your side, my lady.” When she expressed her heartfelt thoughts for the first time, the corner of Jubelian’s lips raised slightly.

“Thank you.” Although her smile looked lovely on her youthful face, it also contained a hint of sorrow.

Marilyn thought about her plan with conviction. It’s not enough to say that... I have to cheer her up, she decided.



“The crown prince just sent a message saying that it will take longer for him to return due to a problem at the border, Your Majesty.”

The emperor gritted his teeth.

“That vile Maximillian. If I tell you to come here, you should come here immediately. Why are you taking so long?” he cursed inwardly.

His son was already an eyesore, so it didn't help that he was resisting an imperial order. The emperor felt a surge of anger as he thought about his arrogant child. He continued to grit his teeth when his office door opened roughly.

Bang!

"Y-Your Grace! You can't..." The royal guards tried to restrain the intruder, but they were no match for the skillful man. He easily traversed the line of guards and soon stood before the emperor.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

The emperor, who had barely calmed down after learning about his son's disobedience, witnessed Duke Floyen's impudence and flushed with anger again. "What on earth do you think you are doing?"

Regis bowed his head without a hint of fear. "I came here to have an urgent word with you."

"So, what's all the fuss about?" the emperor asked coldly, showing that he would not let the duke's rashness slide if it wasn't important.

Regis looked at the emperor with determination. "I caught wind of the assassins who troubled Your Majesty these past few days."

The emperor widened his eyes. "What? Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Then bring the culprits to me!"

Regis shook his head. "I will need to go back home to find more clues," he said softly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I suspect an intruder visited my mansion while I was away."

The emperor twisted his face. "What? What does that have to do with the assassin who tried to kill me?"

"The intruder's footwork was similar to the assassin who infiltrated the palace."

The emperor glared at Regis. He knew that this was just an excuse for him to leave the palace. Even so, the emperor himself had ordered the duke to head the investigation. Now that he had presented

reasonable evidence, he had no choice but to grant his request.

Regis met the emperor's piercing gaze and raised the corner of his lips as if he knew what he was thinking. "To acquire more clues, please grant me the permission to leave the palace."



Even people need sunlight once in a while. Although I enjoyed spending the past few days in my room, I could feel my energy slowly draining away. A walk in the garden would be a more productive place to think about a countermeasure for father's plan.

Merilyn interrupted my thoughts. "Aren't the flowers very pretty, my lady?"

"Ah, yes."

Even though I had replied shortly, Merilyn looked at me patiently and said, "The flowers are pretty, but you're even more beautiful, my lady."

It was a bit burdensome for Merilyn to follow me around and shower me with nonsensical compliments. And she was becoming strange recently. Has she been working too much? As I pondered over whether I should give her a vacation, I found a bench at the side of the garden and sat down. Let me think about the matter of marriage first. There were only two days left until Father returns. Although I thought of it as only two days, that was enough time for me to formulate a plan. It would look strange if I was staring into space, so I opened the book that I brought with me.

It's the military tactics book. Although it was entertaining, I wasn't in the best situation to be reading a book that Father recommended.

"Ah, will you be reading a book, my lady?" Merilyn stared at me with widened eyes, as if it was a strange thing for me to do outside.

"Yes, it's perfect for spending some time alone."

Merilyn observed me when I said the word alone, then lowered her head. "But, my lady..."

“I’ll head inside when I’m done, so you can go ahead,” I said politely, not wanting to directly order her to leave me alone so I could read quietly. At that moment, someone spoke up. It was a familiar voice, but one that I certainly didn’t expect to hear.

“Jubelian.”

At my name, I reflexively turned towards the speaker. Father, who I had hoped would return two days later, was standing in front of me.

Why is he here?!

I tried to keep calm and said, “Welcome back, Father.”

He stared at me as I struggled to gather my words. “Thank you,” he finally said.

“You must be tired from the training. Why don’t you get some rest?” I began to get up from the bench to avoid spending more time with him, but he gently placed his hand on my shoulder.

“No, I have something that I need to say right now.”

I observed him with trembling eyes and became aware of my predicament.

I’m ruined...

“Jubelian,” Father said. As he gazed at me with cold eyes, I braced myself for his next words.

He’s taking his time to get to the point. It’s obvious what he wants to talk about. When I made up my mind to steer the topic away from the marriage list, Father took his hand off my shoulder.

“From now on... you won’t be left alone,” he said quietly.

What did he mean by that? I doubted having heard him correctly. He didn’t even mention the person who wouldn’t leave me alone, but I was soon able to come up with various explanations. Was he going to keep me under surveillance, so I won’t be able to run away from the marriage? As I imagined such possibilities, I looked at him with confusion.

He stared at me and asked, “Have you eaten dinner?”

“No,” I replied truthfully to his sudden question.

Father furrowed his eyebrows. “If you keep skipping meals, you will pass out again.”

It seemed like he was worried about me, but I knew better. If I keep passing out, it will be difficult to marry me off to the crown prince. He just wants me to be in prime condition for marriage.

I was wondering if I should pass out at a social event to ruin his plans when he said, “You must never pass out again.”

He sounded like he was going to punish me if I did, so I discarded this idea. Ah, maybe there’s a limit to what I can do. As I lamented to myself for being the villainess in this novel, Father took my hand.

“Let’s go eat.”

I wasn’t hungry because of all the snacks I ate earlier, but I didn’t refuse him out of worry that he might get upset. I’ll have a meal with him to avoid trouble. I convinced myself to hold Father’s hand. Although he was cruel for trying to marry me off to a tyrant prince, his hand was big and warm. When I was little, I used to follow him around... just because I wanted to hold this hand. It was amusing that I couldn’t hold his hand when I desperately wanted to, but I could now that I had let all lingering attachments go. He means nothing to me anymore.

I let him guide me into the dining room. The time it took us to get here felt longer than usual.

“Sit down.”

This is awkward, I thought as I followed his order. Although this wasn’t the first time I was dining with Father, we usually didn’t talk when we were eating. Our silence became so ingrained that I didn’t find it awkward, but today was different because... I’m anticipating his words.

When I sighed, Father said, “I heard that you’re going to the banquet next week.”

It was obvious why he suddenly mentioned Rose's birthday party. He’s going to criticize my decision to go.

I collected my thoughts. “Yes,” I replied with a smile. “I was invited

to a birthday banquet hosted by Rose Mario Arlo, the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo.”

My dad raised his knife and gracefully sliced his steak. “Who will your partner be?”

In the book that Father had given me, several tactics could be employed in conversations. One method was to disturb the opponent’s emotions. Another, the standard method, was precise in that it cut to the chase and kept the opponent from escaping. Of all methods, Father had used the standard one on me! He wouldn’t find fault with me if I had a partner, but the problem was... I don’t have one yet. It wasn’t like I didn’t try. Although it was more comfortable to be alone, I didn’t want to stick out in the cliquish and conservative aristocratic social scene. Several people even wanted to be my partner. All I had to do was choose one. There was a reason why I didn’t, however. After seeing the marriage list, I became so occupied with finding a countermeasure that it had completely slipped my mind.

I smiled awkwardly at Father. What should I say?

I tried to calm myself down first. If I showed any sign of uneasiness, Father might take advantage of that and talk about the marriage list. I must not panic and respond steadily at times like this. When I effectively gained control over my emotions, I feigned ignorance. “Ah, I haven’t decided on my partner yet,” I said.

Father stared at me. His observant gaze was uncomfortable that I suddenly lost my appetite.

Instead of becoming agitated, I casually said, “There are quite a few people who wrote to me, asking to be my partner. they’re all wonderful, so it’s been difficult to make a decision.”

“I see,” Father said quietly after staring at me for a while longer. The sound of his silverware resumed.

Did I just successfully defend myself? I let out a soft sigh of relief. The rest of dinner was accompanied by a series of dizzying questions from Father, but as long as he didn’t mention the marriage list, it could be considered a success. I should also take a look at the letters after I finish eating. I decided to quickly finish my food, so I could

head back to my room and find a partner.

“Jubelian.” At the sound of his voice, I became nervous and inhaled sharply. He might mention the marriage list after all.

“Yes?” I managed to ask. His piercing gaze seemed to urge me to meet the crown prince at once. I unconsciously swallowed and tried to breathe through the thick tension. As Father continued to stare at me, he cut a piece of his juicy steak and placed it on my plate. All of a sudden...? Although I would’ve normally declined it, there was a problem. Out of everything on his plate, why did it have to be meat...

During these past few days, I hadn’t been able to eat properly because of Father’s disciple. The maids would’ve found it suspicious if I had asked them to bring me two sets of silverware, so I had ordered finger foods. As a result, I was craving meat. The problem was that I couldn’t afford to stay in the same room with Father any longer, as it would increase the chances of him mentioning the marriage list.

I must... decline... but determination faltered when the steak's savory aroma suddenly entered my nose. It'll surely melt in my mouth if I eat it, right?

As I worried about what to do, Father said firmly, “Eat.”

Since he’s telling me to eat, I guess I have no choice. I admit defeat in this round, Father. When I came to this decision, I took a bite of the steak without hesitation. The soft meat immediately melted in my mouth, exuding rich juices. It was exactly the high-quality taste that I had been salivating over these past few days. Although I was deeply immersed in the flavor, my troubles didn’t end there.

“Eat slowly. You’ll get sick.”

Father was the only reason I would get sick, but I didn’t dare to tell him this. I continued to eat quietly.



As soon as I finished eating, I went to my room and checked the letters I received.

There's one from the esteemed son of Count Rowen, Sir Boromir, and another one from the esteemed son of Marquis Crocus.

I was startled that so many respectable people had requested to be my partner. It didn't make sense at first, considering my social reputation, but then I remembered my lofty status as the duke's daughter. Many people would seek me out, just to have an excuse to meet him. Thanks to Father, it won't be so hard to choose a partner. It was ironic that he was the very reason I could avoid the predicament he had placed me in. I sighed in relief, eager to finally resolve this annoying problem of choosing a partner.

But who should I choose?

As a member of the Imperial Knights, Sir Boromir was popular for his excellent swordsmanship, manners, and decent looks. Another candidate, Count Rowen's son, was famous for his beautiful appearance. The last candidate, Marquis Crocus' son, was the successor of a wealthy and well-known family. He would also lead the Foreign Ministry in the future. All three men were worth more than my terrible social reputation. If someone else heard about my dilemma, they would think I was bragging.

The esteemed son of Marquis Crocus did ask first, but... I would like someone who is least likely to cause trouble in the future. I made a decision quicker than I had anticipated. There was no way someone as handsome and capable as Marquis Crocus' son would ask to be my partner without an underlying motive. For this reason, I chose the esteemed son of Count Rowen, who had nothing but his appearance, which was handsome enough to be compared to Mikhail.

In the end, it's best to have a handsome partner. I made up my mind and wrote a letter to the esteemed son of Count Rowen, permitting him to take me as his partner for the banquet. Then I gave it to Marilyn.

"It's too late today, so please send it tomorrow."

"Yes, my lady."

Now that this problem had been solved, I was relieved that Father hadn't mentioned anything else to me. Writing the letter quickly

drained my energy.

There was something else I needed to do... but I was drowsy. I eventually gave up trying to stay awake. As soon as I rolled into bed, I fell into deep slumber.



When Jubelian fell asleep, the maids turned off the lights and left her room. They were startled to find someone waiting for them at the door.

“Master!”

They soon heard the duke’s indifferent voice. “Where’s Jubelian?” he asked.

Merilyn, who was expected to answer as Jubelian’s head maid, gulped nervously. The duke rarely comes to Lady Floyen’s room. He must have something urgent to tell her.

“Please wait a moment. I will let the lady know that you’re looking for her,” she said after coming to this conclusion. Merilyn was about to go back into Jubelian’s room and wake her up, but the duke shook his head.

“No, just leave her be.”

In response, Merilyn lowered her head and asked politely, “Could you tell me what kind of business you have to discuss with the lady, Master? If it’s something I can answer, I will.”

At the word business, the duke looked at the door to his daughters’ room blankly. “Did she choose a partner for the banquet?”

Merilyn nodded with a cheerful expression. “Ah, yes! She decided to go with Mister Edmund, the esteemed son of Count Rowen. Isn’t that great?”

At the name of the handsome man who was well-known in high society, Regis murmured to himself for a bit. “I see...” he finally said.

When he returned to his room, he recalled how uncomfortable his

daughter looked during dinner.

“There are quite a few people who wrote to me asking to be my partner. They’re all wonderful, so it’s been difficult to make a decision.”

Regis sighed, recalling how she had used the word wonderful. I’d better check him out myself, he decided.



It was late in the day. Count Rowen was tense due to the appearance of an unexpected visitor. Even his second son, a usually arrogant boy, had no choice but to be polite in front of the visitor. After all, he was the father of the lady he fancied and the hero of this empire, Duke Floyen.

“W-what’s your purpose for visiting us this late at night, Your Grace?”

Regis coldly glared at the young man in front of him.

“I’m not going to marry someone unless he has everything. I want the most wealthy, affluent, and competent man there is.”

As he observed the young man, the duke pondered over what his daughter had said. “You fall short of the standards, Edmund Anshan Rowen.”



The next morning, I woke up in a groggy state.

“Ugh, my back hurts.”

Although I had solved yesterday’s problem and avoided talking about the marriage list, something felt a little off. I tried thinking about the cause of this unpleasantness, but I could only focus on my empty stomach. It must be because I didn’t eat breakfast.

I pulled the line to summon an attendant, and Marilyn soon

entered my room. “Good morning, Lady Floyen.”

“Could you help me get ready for breakfast?”

“Of course.”

I washed my face, changed into casual clothes, and braided my hair. After doing so I felt more refreshed and looked more suitable to go downstairs for breakfast. Even so, the unpleasant feeling did not go away.

At that moment, Merilyn said, “A package arrived from Fyodor’s workshop, my lady.”

I nodded. So that’s why I felt uncomfortable. Rose's birthday was coming up, but her gift just arrived. “Could you bring it to my room?” I asked.

“Yes, my lady.” Merilyn left my room to get the gift. I waited for her to return with high expectations.

I wonder how it turned out. I hope he did what I instructed him to do... Not long after, Merilyn entered with a box in her hands.

“Here it is.”

When I opened the box, I found an object that perfectly replicated my spoken order, as well as another item that had a different color next to it. I’m satisfied with my order... but why is there another object? Is this like a one plus one thing? I looked at the object with bewilderment, then found a note inside the box.

For you, my muse.

Although it was merely a note, the word muse made me feel uncomfortable. I pondered over the meaning of the note, then speculated that it was simply an exaggerated phrase used by most artists. As I looked at the objects with satisfaction, the maids started asking questions.

“What is this, my lady?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’ll tell you its purpose soon,” I said to the maids, who were looking at the objects with curiosity. Then I placed the gifts in my

drawer. I have something more important to do now. Everything else was of no importance.

“Breakfast is ready, my lady.”

I quickly left my room with a cheerful expression. I’ll have breakfast first.



At Madam Freesia’s Blooms Salon, women wearing masquerade masks were engaged in an animated conversation about the birthday banquet that was to be held a week later.

“I look forward to seeing how Count Arlo decorated the mansion,” one woman said.

“Me too. The venue was beautifully decorated with red roses last year, so I wonder how it will look this year...” another said.

“I am also curious about what the esteemed daughter of Count Arlo will wear.”

“She’s a lovely lady, so she will look pretty no matter what she wears. Anyway...”

When the woman trailed off, another woman lit up her eyes and asked, “What’s wrong? Go ahead and tell us.”

Her lips curled up as if she had been waiting for this very affirmation. “I am very curious about who Lady Floyen’s partner is.”

The main star of the banquet had only been mentioned for a little while. When the topic quickly shifted, the women began to reveal their true nature.

“It was Lady Floyen who made me interested in attending the banquet, especially since she always causes trouble...”

“There have been more scandalous rumors about her recently, right?”

“Ah, there’s a rumor about the man she’s seeing. I heard that he cannot be revealed because of his inferior status...”

Smash!

The woman trailed off when an intense, shattering sound resonated throughout the salon. Transparent debris lay haphazardly on the floor. People briefly looked at the glass shards, seeming to think that it was an accident. As they were about to resume their conversations, a man's low voice broke the silence.

“Does babbling about groundless rumors make you pleased?”

The salon was a place of socialization for nobles; a place for honorable guests to gather. Although everyone's faces were covered with masks, there was an unwritten rule to respect each other. In response to the man's harsh language, the women who had been chatting sharpened their gazes.

“How dare you say something so rude? People have even witnessed the man she was with!” She fanned herself, but her anger quickly fizzled out when she sensed the man's dangerous aura. She became overwhelmed by a strange force and silently gasped for air.

The man gave her a crooked smile. “But did you see it for yourself?”

“E-even if I didn't see it, she committed many misdeeds. That's probably how the rumors started.”

“Misdeeds, you say?” The man chuckled, then lowered the corner of his lips. “Try saying that in front of Lady Floyen,” he muttered coldly.

He observed the silent masses around him, but everyone avoided his gaze.

The mocking smile on his face disappeared. “I see you don't even dare to speak to the person involved.”

There was still no response.

“Clean this mess up,” the man ordered the attendants with a cold voice. They obeyed his order without hesitation. The nobles soon recovered their senses and began to criticize the man.

“Who on earth is he? Why is he so uncouth?”

“He has no respect for the ladies. How disrespectful...”

The man stared at the nobles who dared to speak against him. They became overwhelmed by a strange, eerie feeling and shut their mouths right away. The man laughed. “Pathetic trash,” he spit out.

Although it was a more explicit insult compared to before, no one dared to stand up against him this time. They could sense that if they continued to offend the callous man, they might pay for it with their lives. When the man turned around and left, the nobles watched with bated breaths, only exhaling when he became completely out of sight.



After eating breakfast, I went back to my room and began to write replies to the letters I had received. I’ll let the two men know I already found a partner. I should also reply to my other letters as well.

At that moment, someone knocked on my door. “This is Derrick, my lady.”

His visits were always to be taken seriously. Derrick only sought me if there was an important matter during Father’s absence, or if there was a guest for me.

I turned towards Merilyn. “Please open the door.” When she did, Derrick came into view and bowed with a slightly tense expression.

“Did something happen, Derrick?”

“Edmund, the youngest son of Count Rowen, is here in response to your letter, my lady.”

I was a bit taken aback, but since he was going to be my partner for the banquet, there was no harm in getting to know each other in advance. “I’ll prepare to go down. Can you please tell him to wait a moment?”

“Yes, my lady.”

When Derrick left, I turned towards my maids. “Alright, then...” I barely got out a few words, but they were already busy preparing my outfit.

“Come this way, my lady. We will dress you as quickly and

beautifully as possible.”

I sighed upon seeing Sella and Merilyn’s determined expressions. I just wanted to change my clothes... I guess it can’t be helped.



The woman parted her red lips and swept her long, red hair to the side. “Oh my, it’s been a long time!” The voice belonged to Freesia, the owner of Blooms Salon. She greeted the man with smiling eyes, but the man responded bluntly.

“I see that you’ve been letting filthy nobles pollute this place.”

“It can’t be helped. They like to talk about other people.”

The man smirked. “That’s a pretty honest thing to say for an information guild master.”

“The guild will go under if I don’t keep a sense of reality,” the woman lightly joked.

When the man poured himself a glass of liquor and drank willfully, she frowned. The drink he had casually poured was as expensive as an entire estate. Although it was very wasteful for him to chug down the expensive beverage, she was powerless against her financier. Instead of scolding the man, Fresia directed her attention towards something else that she had been meaning to talk about.

“You usually hide your feelings well and never treat other nobles as human beings. Why are you so angry today?”

The man coldly dismissed Fresia’s observations. “I simply told some barking dogs to be quiet because they were annoying me. That’s all.”

He had become strange since visiting Duke Floyen’s mansion. The woman sighed. Although she didn’t want to criticize him any further, she was determined to protect her master—that meant preventing him from behaving as he pleased.

“I hope you will be more careful about your behavior from now on,”

she said.

The man sat on the couch and took off his mask, revealing a youthful face. “Dig deeper into the rumor about Lady Floyen.”

The woman frowned. “Do you mean the rumor about Lady Floyen’s secret meetings with a lover she cannot reveal?”

“Yes.” There was a chance that he might become responsible for her in the future. When he thought about that possibility, the man felt an odd sensation in his heart. “I want to know every little detail about her,” he said without showing any sign of affection.

Why was he looking after her? Maybe he’s trying to find the duke’s weakness? Fresia stared at the young man with a puzzled gaze for a while, then lowered her head. “I will serve you to the best of my abilities, Your Highness Maximillian.”



After getting dressed without seeming like I tried too hard, I stepped into the drawing-room. The young man waiting for me possessed blond hair and a handsome appearance. His bored expression lit up as soon as he saw me.

“It’s been a while, Lady Floyen,” he greeted me.

“Welcome, Lord Rowen.”

The man stepped forward and bowed politely. “I apologize for seeing you so abruptly without prior notice.”

“No, guests are always welcome. Please have a seat.”

He smiled as he looked at me. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

The young man had blue eyes and blond hair that shined like threads of gold. He was even more charming when he smiled. Although he couldn’t be compared to Mikhail, he was nonetheless a handsome man who lived up to his reputation. There are many handsome side characters in this novel, I observed. I suddenly thought about Father’s disciple. Although his personality sucks, he’s probably the most handsome man I’ve ever met. There were times I would

blankly stare at him sleeping under my bed in the morning, wondering if this was a dream. I hope he's not starving for food out there. He should be doing well, right? I sighed upon realizing that Father's disciple was the cause of the unpleasantness I had felt since this morning. I indulged in such thoughts for a while until a low voice called me.

"My lady."

Oh, right. I was reminded of the current situation and directed my attention back to the esteemed son of Count Rowen, a fair and handsome man.

"Please bring us some refreshments, Merilyn."

When she left to do so, we became alone in the drawing-room.

"I must tell you why I visited, my lady."

His reason was obvious. He probably came to thank me for becoming his partner and wanted to get acquainted with me before the banquet next week.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I was very surprised to receive a letter from you. You're rather different from what I've heard."

What did he mean by heard? Who did he hear from?

"What do you mean?" I asked with bewilderment.

He looked at me with an embarrassed expression. "Do you know what kind of rumors are being said in high society these days?"

Rumors? I stayed at home all day, so there's no way I would know any.

"I haven't been to any social gatherings lately. What are the rumors about?"

He hardened his expression and sighed. "It's said that you're deeply in love with another man. That's why I was surprised when I got a reply from you."

"What?"

I'm deeply in love? What kind of nonsense is this? All this time, I

had been reading books at home and wandering around the mansion. Even when I went out, an entourage of knights would escort me. Since I spent most days living in seclusion, I couldn't possibly find the chance to be in a relationship. I was confused by this ridiculous rumor when a thought suddenly occurred to me. Did someone see Father's disciple enter or leave my room through the window? Although I was taken aback by this unexpected predicament, I didn't reveal my uneasiness in fear that the rumors might be established as a fact. I calmed myself down and glared at the young man.

"Who said I was deeply in love?" I asked, acting as if he had just said something ridiculous.

He shook his head. "I don't know the details either. This rumor has been spreading around lately... I just happened to overhear it."

I frowned. If everyone knew that I was the subject of this rumor but no one knew my supposed lover's identity, it must've been created out of malice. If someone indeed saw Father disciple, the person who started this rumor probably guessed his identity to add details. They might have mentioned his handsome appearance as well. After grasping the situation, I deliberately raised my voice to show my bewilderment. "I stay at home most of the time, so that is not possible! If necessary, I can gather witnesses who recently visited the estate."

In response to my stubborn denial, he let out a sigh of relief. "So the rumors weren't true after all."

I smiled. "Yes, so you can rest assured."

"My lady."

He suddenly kneeled before me.

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Rowen?" I asked with surprise.

He continued to stare at me with a serious expression without standing up. Was there something else that he needed to tell me? As I looked at him anxiously, he lowered his head.

"I'm sorry," he muttered regretfully.

I frowned at his sudden apology. "You're sorry? What do you mean...?"

He stared at me intensely. "I made a big mistake."

"A mistake? What do you mean by that?"

"I thought you were going to refuse my request, so I have already partnered with another lady."

His unexpected declaration hit me like a ton of bricks. You mean you acted rashly before even receiving my reply? It was proper etiquette to always respond to requests, as well as wait for a response before asking another prospective partner. I was lucky that I hadn't sent a response to the two other men yet, otherwise, I would've had to attend the banquet by myself. And if I did that, Father would mention the marriage list to me.

The man in front of me twisted his expression as if he was truly troubled. "I have always dreamed of this day. Unfortunately, I lack... no, it's because of my carelessness."

He was acting with such distress that it seemed like he was truly sorry. I felt relieved that he came. Thanks to him, I had the chance to learn about the ill-intended rumor. If I ignore what he had just told me about, it might cause a mess in the future... although it's bothersome, I will have to dig deeper into it.

I forced out a laugh to show that I wasn't offended. "Don't worry, I can just find another partner. Why don't you get up?"

"Are you an angel?" he muttered under his breath.

"What?" I asked, wondering if I had heard him wrong.

"Oh, no. I meant that... you have the heart of an angel," he quickly amended.

I'm a villainess, but he compared me to an angel. Other people would laugh at this comparison, but I forgave him, knowing that he was exaggerating.

"Although I can't make up for one of the biggest mistakes in my life, I truly regret it."

It was obvious why he was apologizing excessively to me; he didn't want me to tell Father about this incident. I never intended on telling him even if he doesn't do that... I looked back at his gaze which was

making me uncomfortable and tried to console him. But he spoke again in a sorrowful voice before I could do so.

“Most of all, I’m afraid that my careless actions may have hurt your feelings.”

I was growing tired of his excessive apologies, despite my repeated attempts to tell him that it was okay. “Don’t be, Lord Rowen. I must thank you for bringing this rumor to my attention and for taking the time to visit.”

“Thank you for forgiving me, Lady Floyen,” he said with a bitter smile. When it looked like he was about to leave, he suddenly leaned into me and whispered, “I was upset because I thought I wasn’t qualified... but I’m comforted by your words, my lady.”

Not qualified? I was about to ask him what he meant by that, but he continued to speak.

“In that case, why don’t we...” The man trailed off and abruptly shut his mouth. He stared at the window behind me with a pale expression.

Why is he acting like that? It seems like he saw something scary. I turned around to see what caused him to look so pale, but there was nothing unusual.

“Did something happen, Lord Rowen?” I asked him with a puzzled expression.

He stood up abruptly. “Please excuse me for leaving me in a hurry, Lady Floyen.”

“What?” It was considered rude for guests to leave before having tea. He already committed a breach of etiquette once, and he’s going to disrespect me again? I stared at him with bewilderment.

“I forgot that I had some urgent business today. It’s all because I’m lacking... please forgive me,” he said with some struggle.

I guess it can’t be helped. Although it was rude for him to leave this abruptly, I didn’t want to hold onto someone who looked sick. “I understand. It looks like you’re not feeling well, so please take care of yourself.”

“I wish the kind and beautiful lady happiness, as well as a good partner.” After rambling more blessings, he bowed deeply and left in a hurry.

Well, it’s not a big deal because there are others too who I haven’t responded to yet. Not long after he left, Marilyn came back with a cart full of snacks and refreshments. It was a blessing in disguise that he left early since I preferred drinking tea alone.

“Marilyn, please set...” Before I could tell her to only arrange the table for me, someone else stepped into the drawing-room. “Oh, Father... how are you.” I managed to greet him as naturally as I could. He merely nodded instead of answering.

I hope he didn’t overhear my conversation with Lord Rowen, otherwise, he might talk about the marriage list. His sudden appearance made me anxious, and that feeling only grew when he slowly approached me.

“Are you drinking tea?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He sat in the chair across from me as if it was the natural thing to do. “Good. I’m thirsty as well.”

I looked at the steaming teapot, then at him with quivering eyes. You’re going to drink hot tea when you’re thirsty? Nevertheless, I didn’t comment on the strangeness of this.

“The tea is hot, so you should probably drink it when it cools down... or you could just drink some water.”

“I can talk to you until the tea cools down,” Father said.

It’s more reasonable to leave and drink water. I can’t believe he’s waiting here to have tea with me. As I pondered over this, two cups of tea were placed on the table. I guess I won’t be drinking tea alone. Father lifted the teacup gracefully and gazed at me with a warlike aura. I smiled brightly and picked up a cookie.

Now I have to drink in this tense atmosphere. What a mess.



“What did you just say?” a low voice asked.

Madam Fresia smiled brightly and said, “Lady Floyen accepted Lord Rowen’s offer to become her partner.”

Max felt a surge of annoyance at the word partner. “I see,” he said, trying to look calm.

“On the surface, he is a handsome and well-mannered young man, but it's rumored that he’s a womanizer who has reduced many young ladies to tears,” Fresia added playfully.

Max twisted his expression. “That woman. I told her not to only look at appearances!” For some reason, anger flared up inside him. “So, are those two going to the ball together?”

Fresia clicked her tongue and said, “I don’t know if this is a good or bad thing, but he turned the lady down.”

Max raised his voice. “How dare a count's son reject someone like her!”

Fresia clicked her tongue again and sighed. Judging by his reaction alone, it was impossible to figure out what kind of news Max wanted to hear. If he’s concerned about the lady, he should just offer to become her partner... she wondered.

“Did you find out who started the rumors about her?”

Fresia’s eyes lit up. “Ah, yes.”

“Who did it?” Max asked with a bloodthirsty growl.

Fresia smiled. “It turned out to be Viscount Droil.” When Max’s expression hardened, she added, “Isn’t it funny? She used to be his lover, but he does nothing while his troubled cousin slanders her.”

Max was deep in thought for a while, then he said, “Find out every weakness of Marquis Hessen and Viscount Droil. I also want a report on the other people who offered to become her partner.”

“What? But...!” Before Fresia had a chance to answer, he disappeared. She sighed and muttered, “That information was already purchased by Duke Floyen.”

Freesia looked out the window sighing dismally, feeling pity for Marquis Hessen and Viscount Droil.



Although the atmosphere was tense, I was relatively calm. I slowly sipped my tea with this thought. Now that I'm used to Father acting like this, I've learned to control my emotions.

"Did you find a partner?" he suddenly asked.

I had been expecting this question. If I told him that I got rejected, he might mention the marriage list. It won't do me any good to tell him the truth. I'll need to buy some time before I can find a different partner.

"I'm still trying to choose," I said calmly, setting down the teacup.

"If you can't find a partner..." Father trailed off and stared at me. "Be sure to tell me," he said firmly as if trying to imprint these words into my mind.

What are you going to do if I tell you, Father?

I could only think of ominous possibilities. In one scenario, Father would call me pathetic and demand that I meet someone from the marriage list. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself, as well as thirsty, so I lifted my teacup to my lips.

"The tea is still hot," Father said unexpectedly.

I stopped myself and swallowed a dry laugh. It was as if he knew that couldn't drink hot beverages. I don't think he said that on purpose. I still had trouble understanding Father's intentions, so it didn't hurt to be careful around him. I couldn't afford to slip up with my life at risk. I only had a week left until the banquet, so I didn't have much time to find another partner.

Now I have the rumors and the marriage list to worry about... Ugh, why are things getting so complicated? I need to make a decision quickly but carefully. I stared at my steaming cup of tea and carefully sipped it to avoid burning my tongue.



Max had decided to visit the Floyen household, but his master's sudden appearance forced him to stay at a distance.

“He’s rarely at home... why is he here?”

Max was displeased by this situation, but he unconsciously deviated his attention to the Jubelian’s room.

“Is she in there?” He tried to sense her presence but felt nothing. “Where did she go?”

She was almost always in her room, so her absence filled Max with annoyance.

“Is she in the library?” He was guessing where the woman was when his face suddenly fell. “Did she... go out to ask another man to be her partner?”

Max gritted his teeth with displeasure. He felt the same, strange feeling as he did back in the salon.

“Whether she finds a partner or not has nothing to do with me.”

He tried to convince himself of this, but as he prepared to leave, he couldn’t take his eyes off a certain window on the third floor. It was as if a part of him was waiting for her to come back to her room.



“I’ll be going back to my room, Father.”

He nodded and said, “I will be heading out later today.”

Father frequently left home without a word, so I didn’t understand why he was suddenly reporting this to me. I tried to come up with an explanation for his behavior, but I didn’t dwell on it for long, thinking that it would be more beneficial to solve my problems first.

“Ah, yes. Have a nice trip,” I said, preparing to stand up.

“There’s something I need to solve,” Father said.

Oh, I see. I didn’t ask though? I was tempted to say this, but as the inferior one in our relationship, I had no choice but to lead the conversation in the direction he wanted.

“What needs to be solved?” I forced out.

“I have to finish warning some people,” Father said with a nod.

Although I didn’t understand what he meant, I knew that the people who he was going to warn weren’t going to sleep well tonight.

As I was sympathizing with them, Father looked at me and said, “I will be back before dinner.”

I didn’t care when he would come back, whether it was tomorrow or the next few days. Even so, I didn’t voice such thoughts in fear that I might incur his wrath and be forced to meet the men on the marriage list.

“I will wait for you,” I said insincerely.

“Alright.” Father stared at me for a while, then nodded. His sudden change of attitude was strange, but I could guess his intentions and wanted to laugh.

By telling me that he plans to warn some people... is he trying to make an example of them? My heart ached at this thought, but I managed to overcome the discomfort and left the drawing-room. When I entered my room, Marilyn approached me.

“A letter from Count Arlo’s daughter has arrived, my lady.”

Rose frequently wrote to me these days, even though my last letter said that I would spare further words until her birthday banquet. It seemed like she was having a lot of fun with it. I wonder what she wrote this time.

I opened the letter with a sigh, then widened my eyes upon seeing that she had written about the rumors.

Dear Lady Floyen,

How are you? Although this isn’t an important matter, I wanted

to inform you about a ridiculous rumor I overheard. In short, it's said that you have a lover who you gifted cufflinks made of blue diamonds.

As my head started to ache from reading this, I realized two things. First, I still had to give back Father's pendant and cufflinks. And second, the cufflinks were the source of the rumors. The only people who knew about them were the escort knights, the shopkeepers, and Radian, who I had briefly encountered in the store. The former was out of the equation. Not only were the escort knights our vassals, but they also knew that I was usually alone at home. The shopkeepers couldn't be so bold as to start such rumors either, in fear of decapitation. Even if these weren't valid reasons, the answer was obvious from the beginning: Radian. How could he be so delusional to start rumors just because I bought a pair of cufflinks? His notoriety as a viper was fitting, seeing as how he bit off more than he could chew. Now that I think about it, Lord Rowen made a lot of excuses. He must've found another partner after hearing this rumor... the same thing will probably happen if I accept Sir Boromir's or Lord Crocus' offers to become my partner.

My only option was to find a partner who wouldn't be deterred by this rumor, otherwise, Father might mention the marriage list. The problem is... is there such a person?

As I became lost in thought, a knocking sound on my window broke my concentration. I turned around to look at the source.

A familiar, handsome face came into view. He looked at me and pointed at the latch. Ah, Father's disciple is here again. I didn't think that he was being sincere in the note he had written with his eccentric handwriting.

Coming and going as he pleases... how bothersome. I sighed and released the latch. He opened the window and entered my room.

He's still handsome... no, I can't think about that right now. I was reminded of what was troubling me and snapped out of my foolish thoughts. If someone witnessed him coming into my room, the rumor might become a fact. Well... that's not the only reason. Nothing good

will come from being closer to him either. For these reasons, I decided to ask him not to visit for the time being.

“Hey, you know you can’t—”

He cut me off. “Where were you just now?” he asked with a piercing gaze.

He’s being ridiculous. I frowned slightly. His question was absurd, considering that we hadn’t met in a while.

“I said, where were you just now?” he repeated.

Although I wanted to ask him the same thing, such as where he went and why he came back so suddenly, I didn’t want to argue with an immature man like him. I already had a lot on my mind.

“Downstairs,” I said.

He loosened his tense expression. “I see.” He even smiled slightly, much to my bewilderment. His emotions were difficult to follow.

I don’t have time to deal with him today... I have many other things to think about. I glanced at him and decided to make him Father’s responsibility. “If you’re here to see Father, I think he’s still home—”

He cut me off again. “No, he just left.”

If he doesn’t want to see Father, why did he come here? Was he kicked out again? My thoughts became more complicated as I tried to think about all possible scenarios on top of my existing problems.

“Why are you sighing?” he asked with a frown. Although we became closer after spending a few days together, I wasn’t comfortable enough to tell him my troubles.

“I’m just worried about a lot of things,” I said vaguely.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“It’s not a big deal...” I trailed off, hoping to end the conversation there.

“Tell me. I won’t tell anyone else,” he said.

When I gazed into his red eyes, I recalled the time I had told him about my troubles with Father. Will I feel better like I did back then?

“Then please promise me that you won’t tell Father,” I said. I stared at him and waited for a response.

He nodded gently. “Okay, I promise.”

“100 gold bars if you break the promise?” I joked, amused that he was strangely being obedient.

He twisted his expression. “Stop joking around and just tell me. I will never break my promise.”

I was still worried, but I remembered the days we spent together. His firm voice and gaze also made me trust him a little more. Even if he tells someone, the worst that can happen is getting scolded.

When I made up my mind to tell him, he must’ve thought I was still hesitating because he said, “If I say anything, even by accident, I will give you all my wealth. So, go ahead and tell me.”

I burst out laughing because he had said those words quite seriously. He doesn’t even have a home, but he’s betting all his money? I quickly forgot about how upset I was.

“Why are you laughing?” His face became a little red as if he was displeased by my amusement.

I barely suppressed my laughter, thinking that he would get angry if I continued.

“Then that’s a deal. If I find out that Father knows, I’ll make sure to take everything you have.”

He scowled. “Yes, so hurry up and tell me,” he said sharply, unlike his previous tone. Although I didn’t like his attitude, I kind of felt like I could trust him.

“Well...” I began slowly.



Max’s foul mood improved when he saw her. He was relieved when he found out that she had been downstairs. Now that Jubelian was smiling, Max felt his face burning. Did he catch a cold? Although he

had never gotten sick after mastering swordsmanship, he had been busy roaming around and investigating the rumors about her. If she sees him like this, she'll think he's weak.

To prevent her from noticing his flushed appearance, Max quickly looked away and said, "Yes, so hurry up and tell me."

"Well..." She hesitated for a moment. "There have been malicious rumors about me."

Max clenched his fists. I guess it was only a matter of time before she found out, he thought. He carefully observed Jubelian for any changes in her expression, worried that she might have been distressed by the rumors.

"I'm not worried about that," she said. Any noblewoman would've been ashamed by such disgraceful rumors, but she didn't seem to be.

"You're not?" he asked.

"I have a clear conscience. Besides, a relationship like that is nothing to be ashamed of. It's just..."

"Just?"

Jubelian smiled bitterly. "It seems like all the people who offered to become my partner will back out because of that."

Max clenched his fists unconsciously.

Why on earth are those stupid people being swayed by such rumors? I would never do such... Max became surprised by his thoughts for a moment. What am I thinking...

A sense of shame washed over him until Jubelian's pleasant voice snapped him to attention.

"Of course, I wasn't upset about that. It doesn't matter whether I have a partner or not."

Max sighed, feeling somewhat discouraged. "What are you so upset about then?" he asked sharply.

The woman's eyes suddenly dropped. Did he sound too harsh? He had never asked himself this question before, but he found himself reflecting upon his tone. His regret was fleeting, however, because the

woman began speaking again.

“The problem is... Father made a list of prospective marriage partners. I ended up finding out about it.”

Max froze when he heard those unexpected words. “A list of prospective marriage partners?” he asked to confirm.

“Yes, I saw a marked-up list of noblemen from wealthy families. He didn’t even ask for my opinion, so it’s likely that he’ll force me to meet them.”

Max clenched his fists at the thought of his master. He was trying to marry his daughter off...? If he had heard about this in the past, he would’ve praised his actions, thinking that his master had finally come to his senses. But for some reason, Max felt angry.

“Is this the type of person you are? Were you only pretending to care about your daughter in front of me?” he cursed inwardly. He wore a menacing expression, inexplicably furious.

“That’s why I have to find a partner,” the woman said. “I don’t want to go on a blind date with the men on the list.”

Max unconsciously stared at her, unable to grow tired of her eyes no matter how many times he saw them. They looked like a field of periwinkle flowers scattered across a clear lake. He parted his lips, powerless against a strange impulse that constantly jabbed his heart.

“There could be a suitable partner nearby,” he said.

“Nearby?”

When she stared at him with quivering eyes, Max felt his heart tingle. She has a good eye... seeing as how she turned to me right away, he smiled. Max felt like he was going to burst into laughter if he let his guard down, but he hurriedly turned away the moment he realized this. What was he thinking?

“You’re right,” she said.

“What?” Max stared at the woman, surprised that she had agreed so easily. She suddenly grabbed his hand with a bright smile. If he wanted to, he could easily shake off her soft, dainty hands, but he simply stared at her without moving.

“What was I thinking? There was a suitable partner all this time,” she said.

Max became alert and felt his mouth go dry. She was still holding his hand, which became increasingly warm. Why was he nervous? He frowned at his body’s unusual reactions. Because of a weak woman like her... Max glared at Jubelian, but the moment he met her eyes, he became embarrassed and hurriedly pulled away from her.

“I can’t believe you’re realizing this just now,” he said bluntly.

A bright smile appeared on Jubelian’s beautiful face. “I know, right? If it weren’t for you, I would’ve been worried for the rest of the day.”

His heart tingled with increasing intensity. A partner... Although it’ll be bothersome, this was something he could do for her. Max made up his mind to attend the banquet with her.

“A man who Father trusts and approves of... I will ask Geraldine.”

Although the woman didn’t mention Mikhail or any of the men who had asked to be her partner, Max felt his mood plunge at the mention of a man that his master approved of. “Who is that?” he asked with irritation.

“Ah, he’s one of my escort knights. He’s also my maternal cousin, so I won’t have to worry about any rumors because of him. There’s no one else better suited for this job,” Jubelian said with a bright expression. She seemed so content that this problem was solved that she was unaware of Max’s foul mood.

Max’s displeasure gradually subsided. He’s a relative; acceptable. Max twisted his expression. And what did this have to do with him anyway? He was here to search for his master’s weakness. As Max recalled his original purpose, the woman’s defenseless smile came into view.

“Thank you,” she said.

Her smile was so radiant that the dull ache in Max’s heart was followed by intense pounding. When he became aware of this, he became afraid.

“I will be going now,” he said abruptly. If he stayed any longer, Max wasn’t sure if he could control himself. When he tried to leave, almost as if he was running away from something, Jubelian called out to him.

“Hey, wait a second!”

Instead of responding, Max glared at her fiercely, warning her to not come closer. Strangely, his heart throbbed when she seemed to understand this. Jubelian stared at him calmly and wore the same expression as she did when she saw him through the window today.

She proceeded to place some pouches on the floor before stepping back. “Take these,” she said.

Max checked what was inside and frowned. Money? Why was she giving him this? He was about to throw the pouches back on the floor and tell her he didn’t need them, but he suddenly met her kind eyes. Her gaze reminded him of the times she had covered him with a blanket and given him food to eat. Max slowly lowered his arm.

“It’s not for free. As repayment, you can help me out if I ever need it,” she said.

"..."

Max had planned to never come back again, but he couldn’t bring himself to say that. He slipped the money into his pockets and prepared to leave the room.

“If you have no place to go, you can always come back,” she said. “Okay?”

Max impulsively nodded upon seeing her warm smile as if there was an irresistible force controlling him.



Lord Boromir decided to give up after one word from me, the duke pondered. Despite the easy obedience from the previous two men he had visited, it was a mistake to think that the last person would be the same.

Regis coldly stared at the young man drinking tea in front of him,

but he seemed to be relaxed.

“So, you’re warning me to stay away from your daughter because I don’t meet her standards, Your Excellency?” Although the young man’s smiling face was quite handsome, he was still lacking compared to Jubelian’s appearance.

“Yes,” Regis said. Despite his straightforward answer, the young man managed to remain calm.

“Well, it’s true she’s better than all the other ladies.”

Although Regis agreed with him, it didn’t mean he approved of the young man. “I clearly told you not to approach my daughter, Ronald Herman Crocus.”

After giving this final warning, he stood up. Now that he thought about it, he was also on the marriage list. The duke was determined to revise the very thing that had been bothering him recently and prepared to return home to do so.

“You should change your mind soon. Your daughter will come to love me.”

In response to his boastful words, Regis turned around and stared at the young man. His eyes lowered when he imagined Mikhail’s fine characteristics on the young man’s face.

“Do you really think my daughter will like a lowly thing like you?”

The young man tried to maintain his composure, he suddenly had trouble breathing through the oppressive aura of the unrestrained, transcendent being. It seemed like the young man had pushed the duke too far. By showing interest in his daughter, he had wanted to bring the empire's hero to his side for his family’s benefit. Although he tried making their meeting memorable, it had backfired.

“I have met a lot of people like you... opportunists who treat people like tools to get what they want,” the duke said.

From a young age, the young man had been taught by his father, the minister of foreign affairs, to never back down. He had learned to never be the first one to break a stare, to relax in any tense situation, and to always be confident and fearless. But despite years of practice,

the young man was frightened by Duke Floyen's chilling glare.

"Does my daughter seem easy to you?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry..."

When he managed to apologize, the duke's intangible energy loosened its hold on the young man. He stared at him coldly.

"One mistake is enough," Regis muttered underneath his breath. Then he left the drawing-room, his blue eyes filled with bitterness.



After he had left without another word last time, I had been feeling quite restless for not giving him travel expenses. It was like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders when he took the money. I don't have to worry about him being hungry for the time being, I thought with relief. I disliked it when other people didn't eat properly, so I was discomfited by the thought of him starving outside. Perhaps it was because I was often hungry in my past life, due to my impoverished circumstances. Or perhaps it was because I felt attached to this man, who had stayed in my room for a few days.

Well, I gave him a way to repay me so he won't feel bad. It should be okay. Although I had told him to help me if I needed it, this was an empty request. As a noblewoman, there was no need for me to ask a commoner for help. I only said that because I didn't want him to think I was patronizing him.

Now, I have to solve the root of my problem. Before I asked Geraldine to be my partner for the banquet, I needed to find a way to undo Radian's damage. How could I screw him over? I thought. The cufflinks I bought for Father were made of blue diamonds, a rare and precious gemstone, that were fashioned with a unique design, as nobles tended to avoid things that had the same design. It made sense that the rumors got out of control because I still held onto these expensive jewels.

I need to find evidence to defend myself... But despite my determination, I couldn't think of anything and began to feel helpless.

As a dull ache began to spread in my head, a thought suddenly occurred to me. It wouldn't hurt to try this idea, even if it didn't work.

I called Merilyn over. "When Father comes back, tell him that I want to see him. I have something to give to him," I said.



The sun had yet to set when Regis returned, thanks to his efficiency in dealing with matters. Dinner was usually after seven, so he still had some time to spare. Fortunately, he wasn't late. He was relieved to be able to catch dinner with his daughter.

Regis handed his coat to Derrick and ordered, "The men on the prospective marriage list are substandard. Redo it."

Derrick sighed. He chose from noble families ranked higher than marquis. If he had to leave more men out of the list, there won't be many left...

Although he was displeased, Derrick replied with a businesslike tone. "Yes, master. I will do my best."

"If you can, please find candidates with nice personalities as well."

In the aristocracy, finding someone with a good character was like finding a needle in a haystack. Although he felt helpless, Derrick nodded without betraying a hint of dissatisfaction. "I will do as directed."

"Let me know when it's dinnertime."

Derrick turned around, then stopped as if he just remembered something. "Oh, the lady says that she has something to give to you, master."

"Give?" The duke turned towards him and widened his eyes with disbelief. "Alright. Tell her that we can have tea before dinner."

"I will inform the lady."

When Derrick left, Regis glanced at the clock. It was now 4:30 pm. The usual time for tea was around 5:00 pm, so there were still 30

minutes until then. He'll have to wait a while longer. He sighed softly, then stared at the paper on his desk. There were many names written below the heading *Prospective Marriage Partners*. Among them were foreign royals, high-ranking aristocrats, and distinguished men from high society. Except for a few names, most of them were crossed out. Regis fixated his gaze on an unmarked name, Ronald Herman Crocus. He picked up his pen and scratched out his name before studying the list with a sigh.

“There is no one here who meets all of my daughter’s conditions.”

“I’m not going to marry someone unless he has everything. I want the most wealthy, affluent, and competent man there is.”

Regis mulled over her words for a while, then spotted a circled name on the list. It was his only disciple and the imperial family’s only successor to the throne, Maximillian. He’s the only man who meets all of her requirements. He had originally intended to cross him out but had accidentally made it look like a mark of approval. Regis softly chuckled at this blunder for a while, then furrowed his eyebrows.

“My daughter is more than what this crafty guy deserves.”

As he prepared to cross out his name, Derrick's voice came from outside the door. “It’s time for tea with the lady, master.”

“Ah, it’s already time.”

Regis ended up leaving his office without crossing out the name.



When I arrived in the living room, Father was already sitting down.

“Take a seat,” he said.

“Yes, Father.” I sat down in front of him and deliberately tried to seem friendly. “I’m delighted to be drinking tea with you.”

Although I felt the opposite of affectionate inside, I was flattering him for a reason. I have to make him wear the cufflinks. Radian's rumors gained credibility because the whereabouts of these cufflinks were unknown, so this misunderstanding could only be cleared up if

Father wore them in public. There was something else that was bothering me, however.

“You’re at home more often these days, Father,” I said.

He nodded. “Because I promised,” he said vaguely.

Although I didn’t know what he had promised or who he had promised to, his frequent presence at home would only make my life more difficult. If he keeps acting like this, my plan will... anyway, I have to persuade him to wear these first. If I could get Father to wear the cufflinks and visit a crowded place like the imperial palace, the rumors would end.

“I heard that there was an assassination attempt at the imperial palace. Is everyone okay?” I asked.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with those matters,” Father said coldly.

I usually would be offended by his tone and stopped talking, but I had an important goal to accomplish today.

“I’m just worried that if you stay at home for too long, the imperial palace won’t be as safe. You are the strongest swordsman in the empire after all. I understand if you are desperately needed there, Father.”

As I was busy flattering him, he suddenly said, “I plan to retire within this year.”

What? Retire? I was taken aback because he was still relatively young to even think about that. If that’s the case, my plan won’t work... if he planned on living in seclusion after retiring, I could only convince him to go to social gatherings... But I have never seen Father attend parties. In the novel, the duke didn’t even attend his daughter’s debutante. My idea was close to impossible.

“But—”

Although I wanted to persuade him otherwise, he cut me off. “I have been thinking about it for a long time, so don’t try to convince me.”

He seemed to be warning me to not interfere with his personal

matters, so I backed down, worried that he wouldn't bother wearing the cufflinks if I offended him any further.

"Alright. It's good that you'll be at home more often, but staying inside all the time can get boring. You should think about attending social gatherings to occasionally refresh yourself," I said cheerfully, wearing a forced smile.

Instead of answering my subtle invitation, he nodded slightly. It seemed like he wasn't in a bad mood now, so I decided to use this opening to give him his pendant and cufflinks.

"This is the pendant you left in the library some time ago, Father." I gave him the object, which he took impassively.

"I see that it was in your possession until now," he said indifferently.

I briefly wondered if he even knew that he had misplaced it, but that thought disappeared when I realized that his response was natural, given his dry personality. He will probably receive the gift the same way. Without expecting much, I gave him the box that contained the cufflinks. "Here's this, too."

Father glared at the box and asked, "What... is this?" His voice held a little hesitation, which was unlike him.

"It's a gift," I said before he could comment any further, in case he thought it was something strange. "You can open it."

He silently unwrapped the box and did as I said. When he saw the cufflinks, his eyes widened.

"..."

He stayed silent, so I assumed that he didn't like my gift very much. It doesn't matter because I had already expected this reaction.

"I was reminded of you when I went shopping recently. I bought this because I thought it would compliment you," I added with a casual laugh, to which he nodded.

I'm glad he accepted the gift. If he refused it, I'd have to give it to Geraldine. He wasn't just a vassal or the head of the Floyen knights; he was also my cousin from my mother's side. Since the custom was to

give cufflinks to both family members and lovers, he was the most suitable option besides Father, as it would prove that I had purchased it for platonic purposes. He was also needed to show up at Rose's banquet as my partner. Doing so would imply that I still nursed a wounded heart and had no intention of dating other people at the moment. In this scenario, Father wouldn't be able to force me to meet someone on the marriage list. High society was unusually obsessed with appearances, so if people found out that Father arranged a blind date for his heartbroken daughter, he would be criticized. This plan was the best way to resolve the problem concerning the marriage list, as well as the rumors.

“About my partner...” I trailed off, but Father nodded at me to go on. “I know you are very busy, Father, but for the banquet tomorrow —”

I wanted to ask him if I could borrow Geraldine, his precious subordinate and nephew, but Father's low voice cut me off.

“Alright.”

Did you know what I was going to say, Father? Although I was confused, I decided not to question his decision in case he might change his mind. Now that I have Father's permission, I need to ask Geraldine to go to the banquet with me. Everything was working out as smoothly as I had planned. I picked up a madeleine and was about to take a bite when Father suddenly looked at me and said, “Since that's your wish, I'll accompany you to the banquet.”

I dropped the madeleine that was in my hand. That wasn't part of my plan, Father!

5 As Planned



THE young man was standing in a tower next to Madam Fresia's salon with a confused expression. That woman. What in the world was she planning? Max neither understood why she looked at him with those eyes nor why she was so kind to him. What did she want him to do...? He recalled Jubelian's face, then sighed. He was discomfited by her caring eyes, which were devoid of expectations, and suddenly felt distressed. This was pathetic. He had no reason to see her anymore, so why was he always thinking about her? Max tried to erase her existence from his mind, but he was strangely reminded of her smiling expression and friendly eyes time and time again. *Damn it!* When Max's expression twisted violently, the door swung open.

"Oh, dear. Why do you look so irritated, my lord?"

"If you have something to report, say it and leave," Max replied coldly.

He didn't need to be so hostile when I'm simply worried about him, she thought, frowning. Although displeased, she managed to control her expression. "It's nothing much. Your stand-in, Victor, has sent a letter."

"Concerning?"

"Ah, it looks like the emperor's envoys are refusing to return to the imperial palace because Your Highness keeps delaying your return to the capital."

Simply put, he was now under surveillance. A bloodthirsty smile appeared on Max's face. "He was the one who delayed my return indefinitely when I wanted to go back before. Why can't he wait a little longer now?" he wondered out loud, then continued with a cold voice.

“Tell Victor that his act must be flawless.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Fresia was about to leave the room, but she suddenly turned around as if she just remembered something. “Ah, about Lady Floyen. It seems like she will be ignored by many people at the banquet since there are rumors that she doesn’t get along with her father.”

Max had barely managed to forget about her, but now he was reminded of her again. He twisted his expression and said angrily, “You don’t have to report anything about her from now on.”

He was so curious about her until now. What caused this change of heart? Fresia was puzzled, but she nodded, knowing how capricious her lord could be.

“Yes, Your Highness.” She tried to leave again, but a soft voice stopped her.

“Where are you going?”

“Huh?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Shouldn’t you at least finish the work you’ve started?” Max asked coldly.

“What?” No matter how hard she tried, Fresia couldn’t keep up with her lord.



“Have you decided to attend Count Arlo’s banquet this week, Lady Daffodil?”

“Of course. And you, Lady Cosmos?”

“Yes, I will be attending as well.”

In Madam Fresia’s salon, nobles concealed their identity with masks and aliases. Now they were busy talking about Count Arlo’s banquet, which would take place over the weekend. This was natural, given that the person at the very center of the rumor mill these days had unexpectedly decided to attend the banquet.

“I’m really curious about who Lady Floyen’s partner is going to be. What do you think, Madam?”

Fresia was quietly drinking a glass of expensive liquor in the corner. When all the attention turned on her, she smiled as if she indeed knew something. “I’m not sure. She might attend with her relative, Sir Ronel... or she might come alone.”

“Oh my! What makes you think that?”

Fresia took another sip of the amber drink and parted her red lips. “If she enters with another man after breaking up with Sir Mikhail, she will only be adding fuel to the fire. But if she enters with a relative such as Sir Ronel, or even alone, she will be able to avoid criticism.”

Everyone admired her speculations.

“Now that I think about it, it’s not a bad idea for her to enter alone,” some

“Although there is a lot of talk regarding her behavior, many noblemen have long admired her beauty.”

“As expected of Madam Fresia! How wise!”

Fresia laughed at the compliments, and the corner of her eyes wrinkled. “No, no, it’s all uncertain. I just made a guess.”

“Even so, your insights are amazing!”

Fresia’s smile became more prominent. She thought it appealing that they couldn’t think this far. Even so, it felt nice to be at the center of attention, even if the target of the people’s admiration was not her but the character she was playing. Fresia slightly raised the corner of her lips as she continued to drink out of her glass.

“Will you be attending the banquet as well, madam?”

When someone asked her this question, Fresia recalled what her lord had said.

“Fresia, attend the banquet and approach Lady Floyen. If she gets into trouble, help her. I’m asking you to do this because she might be useful in the future, not because I like her. Don’t misunderstand. She will be useful to me in the future.”

She had been ordered to take care of Lady Floyen, as well keep watch on her. And as if that wasn't enough...

“Just in case, I will also attend the banquet and keep an eye on her. I'll also be watching you.”

Her unpredictable lord was also going to follow her to the banquet! Why does he give her many tedious tasks? She'll have to assist the rumored lady and selfish master all by herself! Fresia sighed, brooding over her lord's command. Then she gathered herself and met the noblewoman's curious gazes.

“Ah, yes. I received an invitation, so I must go,” she said with a graceful tone.

Not going means disobeying a direct order. She had no choice. She sighed and downed more liquor. The nobles around her didn't seem to understand her thoughts, so they started to chatter again.

“Then we can make a bet about the lady's partner,” a noblewoman joked while laughing. Instead of answering her, Fresia nodded and laughed along.

At that moment, another lady asked a question that she had been withholding. “What happens if Lady Floyen attends by herself, as Madam speculated? We will never be able to ascertain whether the rumors about her are true, will we?”

“No, no, that's not true. We can just find the person with the cufflinks!” another woman said. As they began guessing among themselves, Fresia didn't feel the need to intervene and continued to drink without a word.

“By the way, I heard that the successor of Marquis Hessen, Sir Mikhail, will be attending the banquet as well.”

“Oh!” Everyone showed interest in the news that the parted lovers were going to reunite at the banquet hall.

“I wonder who his partner will be.”

“Me too! He's so handsome that Lady Floyen did all sorts of things for him.”

“He's very competent as well... I'm sure many of the young ladies

want to be his partner.” All the women in the salon smiled happily, thinking about Mikhail’s outstanding appearance.

“He must be relieved that the lady who used to harass him has found a new lover...”

“Ah, that’s right! They were said to be lovers, but Sir Mikhail didn’t reciprocate her feelings. It’s well-known that Lady Floyen was the only one in love.”

Fresia nodded slightly in agreement, but her smile fell from her lips when a man passed by her table. He’s drunk, she thought. Although the dreadful people who gathered in this salon acted refined for appearance’s sake, there were occasions when people couldn’t control their impulses and threw a fit. It was enough that her lord caused trouble a few days ago. Fresia frowned and beckoned a guard who was standing nearby.

“Watch that guy,” she commanded.

The guard carefully followed the man without making a sound, as was expected from an elite member of her information guild. It looked like he was leaving. The exit was right around the corner, which meant his task would be over soon. At that moment, the man who he had been following suddenly turned around, and to his surprise, approached him. The guard tried to defend himself, but the man’s hands were faster.

“Why are you following me?” he asked angrily. The guard could tell he wasn’t an ordinary person, as he possessed a sort of advanced agility that could overpower his opponent instantly.

What on earth? Although the guard was confused, he responded quickly to manage the situation. “Oh... I thought you were drunk, so I was worried.”

The man’s eyes peered through his mask and observed the guard. When he saw the salons badge on his jacket, he loosened his grip. “I’m not drunk,” he said. Then he turned back around and headed for the exit.

The guard stared at his retreating back with a blank expression, wondering what he should do, then sighed.

“It’s alright. He didn’t cause a commotion, and he’s leaving anyway... it won’t make a difference if I continue following him or not.” After making this judgment, the guard went back to the main hall.

The man who he had been following boarded a carriage with a covered household seal.

“Let’s go home.” After informing the coachman of his destination, the man took off his mask. A pained, twisted expression was soon revealed. Jubelian, he thought. Even if she was deceiving him, the man had tried to ignore any news of her, thinking that it would be a waste of time to care about her any longer. But now that it became clear that the rumors were true, he couldn’t act like before.

“Did you give cufflinks to another man? To a lowly person who can’t even reveal his identity at that...!” Mikhail’s expression crumpled in anger, although he still couldn’t understand why he felt this way. He then recalled how Jubelian used to cling to him.

“I only did that because I was so upset about you spending time with someone else, Mikhail. It won’t happen again, so please don’t abandon me.”

Jubelian was someone who always repeated the same mistakes while endlessly clinging to him. He thought he would only feel happiness when they parted, but every time he heard about her, he only felt anger.

“Why does this woman make me feel this way...!” Mikhail clenched his fists, confused by his emotions. His eyes suddenly lit up when he thought about the very thing that would hurt her. “Yes, you’ll surely be regretful if you see me with another woman, Jubelian!”

Mikhail slowly closed his eyes, pledging to make the woman who deceived him suffer. Although his heart strangely ached, he assumed it was because of all the drinks he had.



I entered my room and sighed.

What do I do now? I never planned for Father to be my partner. If I went with him to the banquet, I'd have to be careful with every little thing I did. I worried about how to act for a while, but when it became too cumbersome to worry any longer, I quickly came to a conclusion. It won't be a problem if I stay as quiet as possible. No one will even know I'm there.



Time passed until it was finally the day of the banquet. The carriage ride to Count Arlo's residence was a little boring, as I could only see a series of indistinguishable buildings near the capital. The view reminded me of downtown Seoul, where it was also crowded with similar-looking skyscrapers. Everything near the capital looks the same. Nothing is interesting to see.

I wanted to yawn because I strangely felt tired, but I restrained myself, afraid that Father might scold me for showing an unrefined appearance. My vision was beginning to blur when I heard his voice.

"Don't worry." I glanced at Father, who was looking out the window. "I will stay by your side today," he continued.

I didn't know why he was saying this, but it seemed like he was uneasy about what other people would think about our family. They might find it strange if we entered as partners but interacted awkwardly. He was probably concerned about me causing a scene at the banquet too. I'm mostly worried about you, Father... I couldn't figure out what he was thinking lately, so I was nervous that he might interfere with my plans. Nevertheless, I wore a smile to cover up my true thoughts.

"Oh, I appreciate that you're coming with me, Father."

As long as I don't make any mistakes today, there won't be any problems. At that moment, I noticed Father smiling softly as he continued to look out the window. What is he smiling at? I turned around to look outside the window as well. A pretty mansion was surrounded by flower beds brimming with red roses, giving it a lively

appearance. We had arrived at Count Arlo's townhouse, which was located at the capital's outskirts. It's a pretty house, just as Rose said.

I was staring blankly at the beautiful mansion when Father said, "Jubelian."

I turned my attention to him, then saw him reaching out to me.

"Let's go," he said.

I looked at his hand for a moment, then tentatively took it. I held it delicately in case it would bother him, but he grabbed my hand tightly.



"Announcing Duke Regis Audrey Floyen and his esteemed daughter, Lady Jubelian Eloy Floyen!"

The banquet hall stirred at the herald's introduction, especially since the famous Duke Floyen usually didn't attend social events. As everyone held their breaths, the picturesque father and daughter duo entered the banquet hall. Those who saw them gaped in astonishment. Lady Floyen was dressed in a white dress embroidered with gold threads. She looked so beautiful and elegant that for a moment, her notoriety escaped everyone's thoughts.

"Her reputation precedes her beauty," someone said.

As they admired her, the duke gently wrapped his arm around his daughter's shoulders. Their attention immediately followed his movements, and everyone noticed that he was wearing a white robe that matched her dress. Despite his age, the duke was still youthful and handsome, comparable to a man in his twenties. The only part of his appearance that revealed his age was his sunken eyes.

"That's His Grace, Duke Floyen, right?"

"Yes, you're right. It's been a while since he's attended a banquet."

Unmarried ladies, as well as noble ladies who had admired him in the past, blushed when they saw him.

"He still looks great."

“Yes, he does.”

The nobles stared at Duke Floyen as if they were possessed, following his movements as he slightly raised his hand. When he revealed something shiny under his sleeve, everyone realized what it was and widened their eyes. The blue diamond cufflinks that everyone had been looking for could be seen on the duke’s wrists, gleaming from the light. The nobles were mesmerized for a moment, realizing why they hadn’t seen the cufflinks until now. If they were a gift for him, it made sense why the cufflinks hadn’t appeared. The duke usually doesn’t wear accessories and spends most of his time at home.

The man in question slowly observed the banquet hall. His cold eyes seemed to warn people to not draw hasty conclusions, making onlookers recoil with fright. Even so, some people smiled in response to his frightening gaze.

Rose glanced at her mother with an elated expression, since she had been scolded by her for exchanging letters with Jubelian. Are you seeing this? I told you Lady Floyen wasn’t at fault, her gaze seemed to say.

Countess Arlo fanned herself with embarrassment. Other nobles who had believed in the rumors looked away in embarrassment as well. There was only one man who fixed his gaze on the duo.

“What? The cufflinks were for the duke?”

It was Mikhail, Jubelian’s ex-boyfriend.

“Of course. She can’t possibly have eyes for anyone else besides me.”

He stared at Jubelian and slowly raised the corner of his lips.



As soon as I entered the banquet hall, I detected the scent of lilies. What a pretty house. Rose’s mansion wasn’t as big as ours, but the antique interior sported mahogany walls, lily decorations, and cream-colored fabrics that made the place look elegant and spacious.

My current home was made entirely out of white marble, so the servants had to do a lot more work than usual to clean it every day. In addition to sweeping and wiping the floors and walls, they also had to polish them. For this reason, I always felt bad when I came home after spending my day outside on a rainy day.

I might live somewhere like this when I become independent. I'll decorate the interior with wood when I live on my own! It'll be nice to have a rocking chair in the library as well.

I was planning out my future when Father suddenly released my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

“Don't worry. Just have fun.”

What? I was daydreaming about my bright future without any worries.

I was dumbfounded by his words when he took off his hand and whispered, “Don't forget whose daughter you are.”

I gulped nervously and flashed a smile. For some reason, my hands were starting to get sweaty. He will probably kill me if I make a mistake today. Even if Father didn't warn me, I had every intention to behave properly and attend this banquet inconspicuously.

“We greet our empire's hero and his daughter.”

The Arlo family rose from their seats and stepped forward to greet us, as it was customary for the host and his family to greet guests of higher status. I observed the girl who seemed to be around my age, standing at the very end. As soon as our eyes met, she smiled like a blossoming flower.

Rose.

Now that I'm looking at her closely, she seems to be a very lovely lady. I could only recall Mikhail's appearance from the memories of the past Jubelian, so other people were merely formless figures. It seems like I had been missing out on a lot of precious things. People would often overlook the stars in the night sky because they were distracted by all kinds of artificial lights and neon signs. My past life was like that as well. But now, I simply wanted to live happily and enjoy what I had missed out, instead of obsessing over Mikhail, the

very light that had been distracting me.

To do that, I must be reserved today and go home without making any mistakes. As I repeated this inside my head, members of the Arlo family bowed.

“It’s an honor for Your Grace and the lady to attend my daughter’s birthday banquet,” Count Arlo said.

After royalty, dukes were the highest rank in the hierarchy, so we weren’t expected to maintain the same formality. Father opened his mouth after bowing silently.

“Happy birthday, esteemed daughter of Count Arlo.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

The scene of Rose receiving a congratulatory message from Father highlighted the fact that she was the banquet's main character. She approached me while I was still observing her, then took my hands.

“Thank you for coming today, Lady Floyen.”

Although this was the first time I was seeing her in person, she was very friendly. Perhaps it was because of all the letters we wrote to each other, but I also felt very close to her.

“Happy birthday, Rose,” I greeted. Then I turned around to look at Merilyn, who was holding her present. Noblewomen usually exchanged expensive perfumes, poetry books, tea leaves, and teacups as gifts. What I had prepared was neither flashy nor substandard, which made me think she was at least not going to become offended by it. When I signaled Merilyn, she presented the gift.

“This is...”

I smiled at Rose, who was looking at the box with slightly trembling eyes. “I sincerely prepared this small gift for you, my dear friend.”

Rose burst into bright laughter, her eyes brimming with anticipation. “Ah, thank you so very much!”

Although her smile exuded a teenage-like vitality, the countess frowned at her daughter’s reaction, which may have seemed unrefined by some onlookers. Hm... As expected from a lady who’s rumored to be strict. Even so, her displeased reaction was somewhat justified, as

her daughter was being friendly towards a lady rumored to be rude.

“You can hand the gift to me,” a servant said.

As the servant accepted the gift from Merilyn, I noticed that Rose was looking at the box with curiosity. Although it was good manners to check gifts after the banquet was over, an exception could be made if the guest permitted to open them. It’s not a big deal, so it should be okay, I thought. I smiled at Rose, who continued to stare at the gift box with eyes full of anticipation.

“You can open it if you’re curious,” I encouraged.

Rose didn’t hesitate at my approval. “Thank you,” she said.

She took the gift with twinkling eyes, then unwrapped the ribbon and opened the box to reveal what was inside. The black object was almost as big as a fist, but it was shaped like a flat cylinder. The surface possessed a smooth luster and bore a delicately crafted red rose on the top, giving it a very beautiful appearance. Rose soon opened the lid and widened her eyes. Any young lady who wore makeup could identify the fluffy velvet puff, which was somewhat thinner than the ones used here. Its design was also improved to look like the portable compact powder with an attached mirror commonly used in my past life.

Well, I don’t think she’ll like this gift very much because it’s just a modification of something that already exists...

Rose had been murmuring to herself, but at that moment, she frowned slightly.

She’s probably disappointed. It seems like she doesn’t need my gift because her maids already carry all her makeup supplies.

I was a bit taken aback because I didn’t think her reaction would be this bad, but her disappointment was justified when I thought about it again. She had spent so much time writing letters to me, but I had given her such a common gift. I’m just grateful that she wrote me all those letters until now. I tried to be unfeeling about this situation, but I couldn’t help but feel sorry that she had been so kind to an outsider like me.

“I should get going now...”

I was about to leave when Rose's voice held me back. "Please wait a second, Lady Floyen."

I braced for what was coming, wondering if she was going to criticize me, but her next words were so unexpected that I doubted having heard them correctly.

"To give me such an innovative gift, I'm touched!"



At first glance, Jubelian's gift looked suspicious to many onlookers. Everyone observed the flat, round object decorated with a rose. It looked like a small, aesthetically pleasing container used for storing miscellaneous accessories, but it was difficult to tell if that was the purpose of the gift. It was only when Rose opened the case did people exclaim.

"Puff? Is that a powder container?"

Everyone felt like they had been hit with a ton of bricks. When noblewomen went out, a maid would usually bring puff to correct their makeup throughout the day. But since this was impossible to do if they weren't accompanied by a maid, a dull and greasy face was a discomfort many ladies had to endure alone. Jubelian's gift easily solved this common problem.

"Oh, a powder container small and thin enough to fit inside a purse!"

"I've never seen anything like it before."

"To think of such an object and request production of it... incredible."

The object was both charming and practical, so it was no wonder many eyes possessed a covetous gleam.

"If she's presenting something like that, wouldn't this year's Star go to Lady Floyen?"

The Star was a brooch awarded to the noble who spearheaded the biggest trend in high society that year. This annual event was a great

honor for nobles, who tended to be sensitive about outward appearances.

“I agree. Seeing as so many people’s eyes are already shining... isn’t that a sign it’ll become a trend?”

“Of course, but I doubt Lady Floyen will disclose which workshop she ordered it from.”

Everyone was curious about this, but it was a sensitive subject because nobles rarely disclosed such information. Moreover, it was difficult to approach the lady in question, who was notorious for her wickedness. As everyone cowered, someone started a conversation with Lady Floyen and brought up what none dared to ask. The girl was none other than Rose, the star of today’s banquet.

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me which workshop you commissioned to make this powder container, Lady Floyen? I would like to order one for my mother as well.”

Even those who had openly disapproved of Jubelian were nervous by this situation. If she was the Lady Floyen they thought they knew, she wouldn’t stop at just causing trouble. Unexpectedly, a soft voice came from Jubelian’s red lips.

“Ah, it was Fyodor’s workshop. The craftsman is young but skilled, so you can trust him.”

Many people became amazed by her smooth response.

“Thank you so much for giving me this valuable information,” Rose gushed.

Jubelian waved her hand. “It’s nothing much. I’m quite embarrassed by your extensive praise, so I’m not sure how to react. I can only thank you for liking the gift I gave you.”

She had not only answered, but also answered humbly. At this point, people were wondering if someone was impersonating the lady. While everyone’s minds were in disarray, it was Countess Arlo, Rose’s mother and the lady of the Arlo household, who set out to calm the chaotic atmosphere.

“I am very pleased that you gave my daughter an unforgettable gift

today.”

In response to her gratitude, Jubelian gracefully lowered her head. “And I am honored to have been invited to such a high-class banquet, Countess,” she said.

The countess unconsciously marveled at her response. Jubelian had not only praised her and other guests but also herself to avoid seeming servile. She had truly mastered the aristocratic way of only saying what was necessary. The countess’ expression, which had been frozen like ice in the middle of winter, became warm like the spring breeze.

“I hope you have a great time, Lady Floyen.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

When Jubelian expressed her gratitude, the countess and her husband bowed at Duke Floyen, who stood next to her. The duke likewise bowed in silence, then reached out to his daughter.

“Let’s go.”

They walked toward the corner of the banquet hall. It was usually an inconspicuous spot, but everyone’s attention strayed there to observe the lady.

“How can she be so different?”

“She’s really pretty when she smiles. Did you catch a glimpse of it?”

In response to the numerous praises from the surrounding noblewomen, who had been gossiping about Lady Floyen just yesterday, Countess Arlo spread her fan.

“My daughter certainly has an eye for people. The lady I met today was befitting of Duke Floyen’s prestigious household.”

Although people noticed her shift in attitude, they nonetheless nodded in agreement.



I sighed softly as the banquet hall became noisy, a bit taken aback

by everyone's unexpected attention. I thought it was a simple gift... but I guess it wasn't. This isn't what I wanted. I forced a smile, tired from all the unanticipated curiosity I drew from other people.

I want to go home and rest.

At that moment, Father reached out to me. "Let's go."

It would be nice to go home at this point, but we simply moved to a set of chairs by the window and sat down. It's a bit awkward to sit with Father like this. I looked at him with this thought, but he was staring at a distant place with a cold expression. It seems like being here has put him in a bad mood. Although I didn't force him to come with me, I felt somewhat uncomfortable. No, I shouldn't pay so much attention to him.

I turned away from Father and looked at the center of the banquet hall, where men and women were dancing in pairs. What a pretty sight. I was quite entertained by the beautifully dressed couples dancing expertly, so much so that I felt like I was watching a splendid performance of professional dancers. As I thought, it's more fun to watch other people dance than to dance myself.

I was still sitting next to Father when I saw the backside of a familiar figure, who was surrounded by many women. Huh? He looks a bit like Mikhail. Is it him? Even if it were him, I remembered the warning he had given me. "*Fine, I'll trust you. Just don't appear in front of me ever again,*"

It's a small world, but he couldn't have possibly come to this banquet, right? I knew that Mikhail didn't enjoy banquets, so it was unlikely it was him. The last thing I wanted to do was get involved with him, as many people perceived him as a pitiful, handsome man who had been harassed by me, a villainess, for two years.

"I'll go to the terrace and stay there for a while, Father."

He sighed in response and said, "Okay."

I had been worried that he would order me to fulfill my responsibility as his partner, so I was relieved that he permitted me. I rose from my seat in a good mood when he spoke again.

"Don't forget that I'm here."

When he said those words, a burdensome feeling weighed on me. I can't even rest in peace. The thought of staying in the banquet hall any longer made me exhausted, so I trudged towards the terrace.



Many people watched Lady Floyen enter the terrace with regretful gazes.

“It’s a pity I couldn’t ask her to be my partner.”

The duke's hostile glare prevented people from approaching her, much less asking her to be their partner. Mikhail frowned. As one of these people, he had been conscious about Jubelian’s presence since she entered the banquet hall.

“She went to the terrace. Is she signaling for me?”

Mikhail was about to follow Jubelian when Duke Floyen, who had been sitting this entire time, stood up and leaned against the wall near the entrance to the terrace. *Damn!* Mikhail couldn’t even move one step forward because the man who had once shown him favor was now exuding candid hostility. Although this uncomfortable encounter left Mikhail feeling uneasy, Regis lifted a corner of his lips.

“This is ridiculous. I can’t believe he was such an unpleasant person.”

In the past, Regis approved of Mikhail simply because Jubelian liked him. But now that they had parted ways, Regis couldn’t bother with someone who was nothing more than a nuisance. When he turned around, Regis relaxed his fierce gaze.

“I can’t ruin the banquet my daughter is enjoying just to catch a bug like him,” the Duke muttered.



When I left the stuffy banquet hall and entered the terrace, I felt like it was easier to breathe. Because I was on the first floor, the Arlo

family's garden was right in front of me.

It's nice that it's quiet. I stared blankly at the rose garden and took a deep breath. The wind carried a fresh and fragrant scent of roses towards me. Although the colorful roses were trimmed by human hands, they were still beautiful products of nature. I began to feel at ease as I watched them.

I should move to the countryside when I become independent. It'll be a good idea to plant some flowers and start a farm as well.

As I was making a plan for my future, my eyelids slowly became heavier. I felt my eyes growing drowsy. Just as I was about to rub them unconsciously, I stopped. I almost forgot I had makeup on. I could have messed it up if I touched my face. At that moment, I felt the sudden urge to yawn, so I covered my mouth and yawned with a lowered head. Ah, the tears are coming out again. The makeup shouldn't be erased because of a few tears, right? They always came out when I yawned, but I couldn't help this physiological phenomenon.

I left my powder compact at home... I was about to wipe my tears, hoping that there wouldn't be an unfortunate event where I had to correct my makeup.

“What are you doing?”

I turned towards the direction of the familiar voice and saw a very attractive face come into view. He was the last person I had expected to be here.

“Hey, how did you...?” I tried asking him for an explanation but stopped short when his long, masculine fingers gently wiped the area around my eyes.

“Did someone harass you by any chance?” he asked with a harsh voice, akin to a beast's growl. Unlike his tender touch, which had wiped away my tears, Father's disciple stared at me with fierce red eyes.



The man glanced at the azure sky, vibrant roses, crowded banquet hall, and lovey-dovey guests who displayed affection on the terrace. As someone who survived many near-death experiences, Max felt irritated and uncomfortable by his surroundings.

It might be difficult to find each other, so please stay at the arranged meeting place, Your Highness,” Fresia told him.

Max tried to endure his boredom by thinking about her earnest request, but this was difficult to do, considering that he had already been hiding in a tree all day long.

“Should I just leave?”

Although he wanted to abandon the plan and return to Salon Blooms right away, he practiced patience.

“Ah, about Lady Floyen. It seems like she will be ignored by many people at the banquet since there are rumors that she doesn’t get along with her father,” Fresia had said.

“There is a lot to gain from this banquet.”

Many nobles who worked at the imperial palace were in attendance. Max decided it would be a good idea to make a mental note of who approached his master and nip them in the bud later. Despite his resolve, Max suddenly thought about Jubelian wearing a gorgeous dress and dancing in someone else’s arms. She should be dancing by now. His gaze became increasingly bloodthirsty as he stared at the banquet hall.

“If I reveal my identity and go in now...”

Max was overcome by an intense impulse when the door to the terrace, his arranged meeting place with Fresia, opened. When he saw who it was, he widened his eyes. *Jubelian?* He thought he was hallucinating at first, so he blinked to affirm that the person who entered the terrace was indeed Jubelian. Why did she come here? Various thoughts crowded his mind, but he felt strangely content by her appearance, so much so that the boring and dull scenery now looked lively.

“I guess she likes roses, seeing as she’s gazing at them so seriously.”

Max unconsciously smiled as he observed Jubelian, but he was soon puzzled by what she did next. Why was she lowering her head? When Jubelian lifted her head back up again, he realized why. Was she crying? He thought he was hallucinating again, but the sight of her tears dripping down her jewel-like, periwinkle eyes was unmistakable.

At that moment, Fresia's earnest words occurred to Max. *"It might be difficult to find each other, so please stay at the arranged meeting place, Your Highness."*

Max paid no heed to her request and already jumped off the tree.



I stared at Father's disciple and frowned slightly. Why's he suddenly saying this? I didn't know what he thought of me, but I was still the only daughter of a duke. Although I was infamous for being vicious to others and never having to experience difficulties, it seemed like he thought I was a pushover because I had been kind to him.

"Tell me," Father's disciple said in a bloodthirsty tone as if interrogating me.

I stared at him. "If I tell you who harassed me, are you going to punish that person?"

"Yes. I promised to help you, after all," he responded immediately.

I sighed, dumbfounded by how he had so casually distorted my words. Foolish guy, helping me will take you closer to death! Although I overlooked his arrogance because I didn't want to seem overbearing and haughty, other nobles weren't as forgiving. They considered it mutiny for commoners to speak informally to nobles, unhesitant to dole out harsh punishments right away. As a commoner, he would meet the same end if he used force against a nobleman. Perhaps that wouldn't even be enough. He could be bluffing, but this person... he might actually do such a thing. After observing Father's disciple for a few days, I realized that he didn't know many social norms, almost as if he was raised in the wild. His mind was like a blank sheet of paper that could lead to his death if he wasn't careful.

We've known each other for quite a while, so I couldn't let him die. Although we weren't close, I sometimes felt comfortable with this person. He didn't seem to have any ulterior motives and treated me like a normal person, instead of the unapproachable Lady Floyen.

"Excuse me."

"What."

He turned to me. "Yes?"

"If you want to help me going forward, please speak to me formally in public," I said

"What?" he asked as if I had said something ridiculous.

"I'm still in a situation where I'm being ignored by people in high society," I reiterated. "How much of a joke will they think I am if you disrespect me as well?"

He stared at me in response, deep in thought.

I gazed into his red eyes and said, "You can make enemies or friends depending on how you say things, especially when it concerns nobles. Although this will be a different story if the class system is abolished, I'm just warning you to be careful."

His red eyes continued to stare at me when I finished speaking. If he's dissatisfied, he should just say so instead of looking at me so seriously. Why is he staring at me like that? Before his gaze got even more strange, he slowly nodded. *How nice.* He looked like an obedient child when he nodded. I unconsciously felt the urge to stroke his hair, as if to praise him, but hastily pulled my hand back before I did.

"Oh, why are you here at the banquet?" I asked.

"Because of work," he responded quietly.

This made sense. It wasn't uncommon for nobles to hire mercenaries as security guards for banquets. I wondered if he was overqualified to work as a temporary guard, but that wasn't as big of a problem as his appearance, which was very unusual for a commoner.

"If nobles speak to you, you must respond formally. Okay?" I reiterated, making sure he understood to ease my worries.

He sighed. "Alright."

Despite his affirmation, I knew how ignorant of the world and arrogant he was, so I stretched out my pinky finger. "Promise me."

He frowned in response, then sighed and gently hooked his pinky finger around mine. After we stamped our thumbs together, he pulled back his hand and spoke with an irritated tone. "By the way, why did your partner leave you alone, making you look like an abandoned person?"

Hmm, I guess I probably looked like that. The terrace was a place where guests could, in a positive light, take a break. It was also, in a negative light, a place where people could escape if they were left out or unable to acclimate themselves. With my partner being a certain someone, I wasn't in a situation where I could enjoy the banquet.

"Father is in the banquet hall..."

He stared at me with amazement when I mentioned Father. "What? Didn't you decide to partner with a relative?"

"Well, it ended up being Father."

He frowned in response and stared at me. "Have you danced yet?"

I sighed. "If someone asked me to dance, would I be acting like an abandoned person, like you said?"

As soon as I finished speaking, he snickered. Yeah, he probably thinks this is funny. In the past, people often asked me to dance with them out of reverence for my status as a duke's daughter. But oddly enough, I hadn't received a dance request from a single person today. It's probably karma for the life I've been living until now. I was lost in my thoughts when a hand extended in front of me. I looked at Father's disciple, who wore a serious expression with his outstretched hand in the air, unwavering.

"Why are you extending your hand?" I asked.

He slightly frowned. "Don't you understand? I'm asking you to dance with me."

"You even know how to dance?" I asked with surprise. "My goodness."

He nodded in response. “You should be honored. I don’t dance with just anyone,” he said proudly.

I was a bit worried that he might step on my feet, but I couldn’t refuse someone who seemed so eager to dance and decided to be generous. I took his outstretched hand. “Yes, it’s an honor to dance with you.”

At that moment, I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me. my eyes. For a second, he looked like an arrogant prince with a smile filled with confidence, which was quite unusual. I was staring at him, almost as if I was possessed when he raised my hand.

“Then, let’s start.”

The orchestra echoing across the banquet hall could also be heard at the terrace. I moved slowly, trying to be considerate toward him, a beginner. To my surprise, he began to lead me. His steps were too skilled for a beginner; even his guidance was perfect without any faults. It was as if he had practiced dancing many times. I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“Ah!”

Perhaps it was because I wasn’t concentrating on my steps, despite wearing high heels, but I missed a step and almost fell.

“You are not paying attention,” he scolded me.

In no time, his red eyes got closer while he hugged my waist tightly. I became flustered and tried to get out of his arms.

“Is your ankle okay?” he asked. Although he spoke brusquely, his words showed that he was worried about me. I felt strange for some reason.

“Ah, it’s okay. Now...”

I tried to distance myself, but he suddenly lifted me in bridal style. As I was taken aback by his unexpected actions, he sat me on a nearby bench and applied something to my ankle. The cool sensation reminded me of a pain relief patch. When I looked at him in amazement, he forcefully lowered his head and complained. “You’re lucky I brought this ointment... if I didn’t, what would you have done?”

Does he carry around household medicine because he's a mercenary? I stole a glance at him in amazement.

"Thank you," I said.

He lowered his head even more in response, seeming to become irritated. "There's no need to say thank you. Just don't get hurt."

I caught sight of a leaf on top of his head.

"It's done n—"

At that moment, he raised his head slightly. I became embarrassed because it seemed like I was trying to stroke his hair.

He took my hand. "What are you..."

His face had turned slightly red, so he must've been angry at me. I was about to apologize when I suddenly heard a voice.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I turned towards the entrance of the terrace, where Father was staring at us with a terrifying expression.

"F-father..."

Continues in Volume 2

COMING SOON

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