



Daddy,  
I Don't Want  
to Marry!

VOLUME THREE

HONG HEESU



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*Hong Heesu*

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Daddy, I Don't Want to Marry  
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## All of a Sudden

Although it was customary for one to send letters the day after the banquet, Max couldn't wait through the night. He wanted to tell Jubelian that the crown prince was not a figure to be feared as soon as possible. For this reason, he situated himself under a large tree in her garden, staring at the brightly lit window on the second floor of the Floyen mansion.

Feeling nervous, he thought back to what he had written in the letter. Since it had been written for pigeogram, he had not composed a lengthy message, opting instead for a rather straightforward one. Nevertheless, he was confident that his letter alone would put Jubelian more at ease.

With such thoughts circulating in his mind, he began to look forward to a life filled with sunshine and rainbows. He would certainly be able to reveal to her his identity once this message reached her, so he began to fantasize about the day he would exterminate the emperor and the empress, welcoming Jubelian as his queen.

For such dreams to be fulfilled, the pigeon resting on his hand had to carry out its duties without fail. Although Fresia had said this bird was the smartest she had raised and it had never fallen through, Max couldn't help but recall what had happened the last time he had tried out this method.

“This is an important letter, alright? You’ll be in big trouble if you fail,” he threatened.

Although it couldn’t understand human words, the pigeon could sense that the man blabbering nonsense in front of him was something akin to an enemy. Taking in his intimidating aura, the poor creature began to coo pitifully.

“Off you go,” Max said, ignoring the pigeon’s desperate cry for help. He watched as the flying messenger made its way to Jubelian’s window and decided that the animal was clever enough to deserve Fresia’s praises.

Just then, a hawk began flying toward his pigeon. He narrowed his eyes at the rare sight. Hawks usually preferred living in the mountainous countryside, not anywhere near the capital.

Frightened, his little messenger hastily flapped its wings to return to him. Afraid that his letter might get ruined, Max crouched down to gain momentum and jumped up to catch the pigeon, containing it within the safety of his hand. Irritated by the unforeseen obstacle, he tried to grab the hawk’s neck with his free hand, but then he spotted the Floyen household’s seal upon the hawk’s tail.

Jubelian wouldn’t like it if he killed this creature...

While he hesitated, the hawk unsheathed its claws and opened its beak wide as if to pose a threat. However, Max effortlessly grabbed the animal’s thin, leathery legs and threw it through the air. The hawk plunged to the ground for a moment before flying back up again. After having regained its balance, it distanced itself considerably as if it had learned not to mess with this specific person.

Having dealt with that annoying obstacle, Max muttered to the bird that he had kept protected in his grip. “You better do it right this time,” he warned.

The bird cooed again, this time sounding more confident than terrified. Perhaps it was because it had been saved by the very being it had once thought to be its enemy, but now the creature seemed determined to fulfill its responsibility. Like an eagle, the pigeon flew forward and spread its wings braver than it did before.

Max smirked victoriously when the tiny creature landed on the windowsill. However, his face soon fell into a frown. Normal beings couldn’t see this far away, but as a transcendent, he was an exception, witnessing the terrified expression on Jubelian’s face as she stood on the balcony.

It would've been impossible for her to determine that the message was from the crown prince. Then, could it be...?

Suddenly, he saw her stagger back from the window. Realizing the reason why his previous letter had failed to be delivered, he cursed under his breath, scowling when he saw the pigeon eventually make its way into the frightened lady's room.

"Jubelian!" he shouted as he barged in through the veranda. He had assumed that she would remain relatively calm despite her evident fear of birds, but what he actually witnessed unfolding before his eyes existed far from those expectations. The regal woman who always seemed to remain cool and collected in the past now trembled like a terrified child in front of a tiny pigeon.

"M-Max!" she called tearfully, running up to him and immediately hiding behind him. "P-Please chase that thing away."

He couldn't help but be amused. It was hard to believe that this was the same woman who had remained indifferent when he had held a blade to her neck. In fact, after that incident, he had grown to think that Jubelian was somehow incapable of feeling any fear at all. Nevertheless, she clung to him now, shaking like a leaf.

"Hurry up, would you?" she urged.

He was fully enchanted by this aspect of her. Instead of thinking her pathetic for panicking over a bird, he found her rather cute. A smile gradually spread across his face as he answered, "All right, all right."

Still, Jubelian pulled on Max's sleeve, impatient. "Look! I-It's shedding feathers in my r-room!" she pressed. "Stop it right now! Please!"

Wishing to see her tearful expression for a little bit longer, he was tempted to leave the bird be, but when he glanced back at her with a mischievous smile, he realized she looked like she was on the verge of collapsing from shock.

Realizing he had to do something quickly, Max carefully approached the creature. "Come here," he ordered, and the pigeon advanced toward him meekly. Maybe it was a good choice to save the little guy from the hawk after all.

With the pigeon now safely captured, Max turned around, presuming that Jubelian would've calmed down. However, he was inevitably dismayed by her response; the lady was now on guard, standing about a foot away from him.



Max had caught the pigeon without a problem, but I couldn't be relieved.

"Hurry, and t-t-take it o-outside!" I pleaded.

Because I was desperate to have the evil creature out of my room, I couldn't speak properly. So, just in case he hadn't understood me well enough, I frantically pointed my finger toward the balcony.

However, Max stood still, simply observing the bird instead. "This pigeon is a little strange," he said. "There's something attached to its ankle."

Only then did I realize that there was a small strip of paper tied to its scaly leg. People only sent letters through carrier pigeons for one of two reasons: either because the sender wanted to remain anonymous, or because they wanted to communicate in secret. Nobles usually made contact by sending a formal letter if they wanted to befriend its recipients—as long as there were no problems with the contents of the letter, of course.

In any case, a message from a carrier pigeon meant that the sender wanted me to receive it directly without having the note pass through others' hands. Therefore, I was sure of what its contents would be.

It was probably a threat.

Given my social reputation, I was confident that the note bore insults directed at me. While the note seemed like a minuscule piece of paper as it sat tied to the pigeon, even a short sentence of slander could leave a lasting impact. Wanting to continue living in peace, I said, "I think it would be best if I didn't read it."

In response, Max furrowed his brows slightly and asked, "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, it's just... it might have bad things written about me, you know?"

"Has anyone done such a thing in the past?" he questioned, his tone suddenly grave and his expression hardening slightly. Thankfully, the frightening aura he customarily adopted when he would speak like this had been mitigated by the pigeon resting on his hand. The bird was even at peace, resting with its eyes closed! The strange picture before me had prompted me to wonder about how the two had managed to befriend each other so well in such a short time...

"I asked you a question," Max demanded just then, his menacing voice snapping me away from my thoughts and bringing me back to reality.



“Well, not really... but, as you know, many people hate me.”

After the royal banquet earlier in the day, I had learned that some people still found me abominable no matter how hard I tried to make up for the things I had done in the past. I couldn't help but think pessimistically because of that. No one had dared to strike up a conversation with me except for the ladies from the tea tasting party, and I hadn't received any requests for a dance. I didn't mean for such menial things to affect my mood to any considerable extent, but the lack of social interaction I experienced when I was participating in such a grand and bustling event served as a bitter confirmation of my awful reputation amongst the nobility.

“Still, why don't you just check to see what's written?” Max suggested. “It could be someone who really wants to talk to you.”

His assertion reminded me of someone. Could it be... Bea?

Bea didn't get along with her family. Thus, having a servant deliver an official letter would've been asking for trouble since it meant that her family would've immediately discovered our acquaintance. If it were actually from her, ignoring the message would wound her fragile heart, so I took a few deep breaths to calm down.

“Could you hand me the note?” I eventually asked.

Without hesitation, Max unwrapped the piece of paper on the pigeon's leg and handed it over to me. Afraid that the bird might go wild, I kept my eyes on the creature as I took the message in hand. Closing my eyes, I told myself that the letter wasn't a threat and it was simply an innocent message from someone I had befriended today.

“Don't worry so much about it. I'm sure it's good news,” Max chimed in as if to affirm my thoughts. I looked up at him, surprised by the kind gesture, and the sight he made brought a smile to my face. I couldn't take him seriously when he had such a petite creature nestled peacefully in his hand.

In any case, I took a few more deep breaths before finally opening the note. It was true that I tend to be a little too self-deprecating and overly conscious about what others think at times, after all...

Hoping this may be good news like Max had said, I plucked up my courage and unfolded the message.

Maximillian Casein Assiette? My eyes widened in astonishment at the first thing I saw in the upper left corner of the note. The crown prince had sent me a carrier pigeon.

Although I started trembling in fear, my eyes automatically began to

absorb the contents of the message, draining my blood dry. Just as I had expected, it was indeed a short note, but it contained an incomprehensible amount of meaning.

“I won’t kill you,” the note read. The fact that he had to assure me of this must’ve meant that I had already done something worthy of the death penalty in front of him.

I looked back over my actions during the banquet today, in denial of the fact that I was supposed to be receiving this message. I felt as if I had been victimized by an unknown cause, but then the things that had occurred in the dark abandoned room flashed before my eyes. I had broken into a suspicious room that appeared to be a prohibited area. I had stopped the crown prince from approaching Bea and had even talked back to him. Lastly, I displayed improper, unladylike behavior by tripping and falling while he was escorting me!

Ordinary people might’ve let such things go, but these things must’ve given that lunatic of a crown prince an excuse to murder me! I was lamenting my complacent behavior when I heard an innocent voice pipe up beside me.

“What do you think?” Max asked. “I was right, wasn’t I?” He was smiling, the pigeon still sitting in his hand.

Frowning, I glared at him. This wasn’t anything even remotely close to the good news I had hoped it to be. It was exactly what I feared it’d be: a threat. The crown prince went through the trouble of warning me through a private message, and that meant that I was basically dead meat in his eyes!

Now, he must be waiting for me to make a mistake so he could behead me. He’d take any blunder, no matter how small. That meant I needed to come up with a plan so I could avoid being seen at the coronation ceremony in two weeks!



Confident that Jubelian would react positively, Max had originally planned to reveal that he was the crown prince that very night. However, she stood before him with a dissatisfied expression, her brows slightly furrowed. Trembling like when she had encountered the carrier pigeon, she even looked a degree frightened.

Puzzled, Max couldn’t help but be confused. He thought she would be relieved... so, why does she look so taken aback? Still, he wasn’t willing to

ask these questions out loud, afraid of how she might respond.

“Max,” Jubelian called at that moment, her voice weary. Instead of answering her, he simply stared, waiting for her to continue. “I think... the crown prince has his eyes on me,” she confessed, sighing heavily.

No way. Did she already realize from that short letter that he... Max shuddered as he thought back to the events at the banquet earlier in the evening. Well, thinking it over, he did make it a little obvious—escorting her back to the palace and staring at her the whole time on her way back...

Max’s heart fluttered with anticipation, wanting to reveal that he was the crown prince at that very moment. Nevertheless, he decided to remain patient. “What do you mean by that?” he inquired, feigning a collected manner.

“I think I’ve done something to anger him,” she answered quickly.

Frowning, he once again retraced his memories. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn’t recall a single moment he was even close to angry—in fact, he had spent a rather pleasant time with her. Even if she had succumbed to the raging gossip surrounding the crown prince, it didn’t matter to him since it was something he dealt with on a daily basis. Perplexed, he pressed for further clarification. “Why? Is there anything you’ve done to irritate him?”

Sighing once more, Jubelian shook her head. “Even if I tell you, you won’t understand.”

Hoping to hear her thoughts, Max began to protest. “Whether I will understand or not is not up to you to decide, so—”

“I’m tired, Max. Could you just let me rest? I don’t have the energy to talk anymore today.”

Realizing that his plan had been ruined, he began to search for an excuse to stay and listen to her thoughts. The corner of his lips quirked up when he thought of staying under the guise of protecting her from the pigeon, but the idea was shot down before he could even broach it.

“I would appreciate it if you could send that pigeon out of here as well,” she said.

Max couldn’t believe her cruel words. He had held the banquet just for her! At his side, his little messenger cooed as if to console him.



Ever since Max had left the imperial palace to send the letter, Victor had been at the banquet hall standing in for the crown prince. His task continued until the very end. Berating his master for ruining his chances of making an acquaintance with Lady Janet—the noblewoman he had grown fond of—Victor began to curse whatever romantic encounters Max might have in the future.

Just then, the window to the bedroom he was in opened, and the crown prince entered.

“Welcome—gah!” Victor squealed, startled by the sudden appearance of a pigeon. “I-Isn’t that Lady Fresia’s p-pigeon?” he stuttered. “Why is it here?”

“Shut up,” Max muttered under his breath.

Discerning that his master was in a foul mood, Victor zipped his mouth shut. Deafening silence filled the room until the crown prince opened his mouth again.

“The word is that you’re the best womanizer in the military. Is that true?”

Gritting his teeth, Victor complained inwardly. He. Was. Not. A. Womanizer! It was just that he only dated people for a short amount of time!

In any case, Victor lacked romantic expertise since he was constantly going in and out of relationships. Also, he was always the one getting dumped, so he couldn’t figure out why rumors about him being a player were spreading.

Admitting all of this would bring him misery, however, so he suppressed his emotions and laughed wryly. “Please just refer to it as having a lot of dating experience, Your Highness.”

“Same thing,” Max said indifferently.

Victor struggled to quell the anger bubbling inside him. His job as the crown prince’s aide was indeed a difficult one. Those who were unaware of the advisors’ circumstances were envious of them for serving the heir of the throne, but frankly, he saw no advantage to being close to the prince. All he did was serve as a body double. The only reason why he remained loyal to Max was that he had saved Victor’s life in the past.

He reminded himself that he just had to bear with it until His Highness took the throne. That would be enough to repay his kindness. Even living as a serf would be better than his current job...

“If there isn’t anything else, I will be leaving,” he said. “Rest well, Your Highness.”

However, the prince stopped his aide. “Sit down, I have something to discuss with you.”

Victor's heart began pounding. He couldn't believe the crown prince was asking for a conversation! It had been six years since Victor began his service in the palace and two years since he had been promoted to the role of Max's aide. During all these years, Victor had yearned for an opportunity to confirm that the crown prince trusted him since Max had never shared any concerns with him or sought him for counsel.

Imagining that he could finally live as an aide and a close confidant, Victor felt his chest flood with joy. Swiftly putting his complaints aside, he vowed, "I, Victor, will endeavor to serve Your Highness to the best of my abilities."

The crown prince seemed a little flustered by the serious tone Victor used. "There is actually... a lady I have in mind," he said softly.

Victor doubted his ears. The monstrous crown prince—one rumored to make babies in the northern country of Norwin cry—was chasing after a lady! Just then, a memory flashed through his mind. Something markedly different had happened during the battle at the southern border a few days ago.

"Pardon me for asking—but may she be the owner of the handkerchief?"

Startled, Max stared at his aide for a moment before slowly nodding. "Yes. I see that you're quick to notice. As expected from a womanizer."

Victor didn't understand what being a womanizer had to do with anything since all the crown prince's aides and advisors were aware of the handkerchief, but he chose to ignore the subtle insult. "So, what happened with the lady that upset you so much?" he asked.

Max remained quiet for a moment, frowning. "I must have done something wrong," he admitted, "but I can't quite put a finger on what it might be."

"Well, it's difficult to please the ladies, but once their basics are met, Your Highness, it's easier than you think."

"Easy?"

"Yes. All you have to do is listen to them and respect what they are saying, and they won't get mad at you! If the lady you've mentioned was upset, I'm sure she has already said why."

Once again, Max recalled what had happened this evening, but he couldn't come to an answer. He had lent her his ear and he had caught the pigeon for her, but she just became annoyed at him before promptly asking him to leave. "I don't think so," he replied, downcast. "She just told me to go back home."

With a stern expression, Victor then asked, “Could you tell me what happened before that?”

“It seemed like she had mistaken something about me, so I tried to correct the misconceptions—using my methods, of course—but afterward, she didn’t look very happy.”

Victor got lost in thought for a while. “No matter how I look at it, it seems that way...” he murmured, contemplative.

“And what is that?”

Victor took a deep breath instead of answering.

“What the hell are you stalling about?” Max growled, frustrated.

Inhaling deeply once again, Victor opened his mouth. “I have never said this aloud because I had found it somewhat embarrassing, but I think it is time to admit it. Although I have had a lot of dating experience, Your Highness, some of my previous lovers have said that they didn’t like me, and the reason for that is...”

The longer Victor took to get to the meat of his statement, the more annoyed Max got. “Just get to the point already.”

“No, I must explain all of this for you to understand it fully, Your Highness,” Victor added quickly. Then, he gradually realized that building atmospheric tension before revealing the answer for dramatic effect wasn’t a technique that worked on the crown prince.

“Again, stop beating around the bush,” Max snarled.

“Okay, fine! They said I was no fun because I was too accommodating!” Victor blurted out.

“I see—wait, what?”

Seeing the crown prince perplexed, Victor spoke with a face full of sorrow. “They said that I was too easy... and that I wasn’t any fun.”

Max recalled everything he had done for Jubelian until now: he had lied, saying he enjoyed eating foods he didn’t actually like, such as cake; endured things that bothered him, apologized to her when he didn’t want to, and listened to all of her requests. The last thing he was worried about was that she might find him uninteresting!

He remained frozen in shock. Meanwhile, Victor posed a suggestion. “So, how about playing hard to get?”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t visit her as often and stop listening to everything she asks for! Only then will she realize how precious Your Highness is.”



Frankly, Max knew he couldn't bring himself to visit her even less than he did now, but Victor's advice was tempting since he wanted Jubelian to recognize his importance. However, he knew that Jubelian was often slow-witted, so giving her a little nudge in the right direction shouldn't hurt.

Nodding slowly, Max replied, "All right. I'll refrain from showing her such aspects of myself and I'll visit her less often."

Inferring that the crown prince meant he would be spending more time in the palace, Victor smiled and silently celebrated being free from the prince's dark, heavy armor at last. He relished the achievement of winning the crown prince's trust.

"I won't be in the palace for a while, so do your best to stand in for me," Max suddenly said.

Victor's stomach sank. "I-I'm sorry, Your Highness?" he stammered, disbelieving. "But as we've discussed, you won't visit the lady as often—"

"Yes, yes. I don't plan on showing myself to her for the next few days."

Biting his lip, Victor contemplated advising his master to stay faithful to his duties as the crown prince, but he was stopped by Max muttering something under his breath: "It's fine if she doesn't know, right?"

The prince's eyes were now glowing with a dangerous light. His low voice flooded with obsession.



Late into the night after the royal banquet, a trifling matter stirred those residing in Marquis Hessen's estate.

"Mikhail, have you skipped dinner once again? Answer me, Mikhail," cried a middle-aged woman as she repeatedly knocked on the door, but no sound came from inside. When the lady let out a troubled sigh, a young girl beside her made a great fuss.

"Dear Mother, I cannot stand this anymore!" she cried. "My beloved brother will die if this continues!"

"Do not use your mouth to speak such ill-fated words, Giselle," the woman scolded strictly.

Regardless, the girl continued to raise her voice. "But Mikhail started acting strangely after parting with that lady!" she insisted. "Have you heard him call her name? He does it while staring blankly into space sometimes! I'm confident this isn't normal behavior!"

“Stop!” the woman screamed. The girl’s claims had all been things she had been denying. Malice now flooded her expression. “We will soon come to terms with the wench who dared to insult Mikhail and this family.”



When I woke up the next morning, the uneasy thoughts that had haunted me the previous day had cleared. The chaos in my head must’ve been caused by the stress I had been under because of the pigeon and the note from the crown prince. I recalled the mistakes I made yesterday and sighed. The first thing I remembered was getting irritated at Max. It was true that I was a bit too harsh on him despite him persistently provoking me. I should’ve reminded myself of the good deeds he had done for me.

Sighing once again, I mulled over my wrongdoings in regret. Then, I realized this was not the time to worry about Max. My attention turned to a more important issue: the crown prince. First, I needed to learn more about that maniac tyrant before doing something about the message.

As soon as I reached this conclusion, a person came to mind. Given he was always visiting the palace, Father must know a lot about the prince...

Of course, he was loyal to the throne as the duke, so he wouldn’t readily disclose information about the heir. I pondered over a topic that might prompt my father to reveal confidential intelligence. Soon, I obtained insight.

If I asked him about that, he would definitely tell me things!



With a cold shadow atop his face, Regis read the letter containing the marquis’s seal, crumpling it into a ball afterward. He couldn’t allow such nonsense to reach his daughter. A mana current manifested over his palm, burning the letter to ashes and leaving no trace of its contents.

He would’ve done the same thing to the despicable man’s estate if he could have. If he simply had a justifiable reason...

His murderous thoughts were interrupted by Jubelian’s voice coming from outside the door to his office. “Father, are you there?” she called. “I have something to ask about. Are you busy?”

Although the blackened pieces of the message were long gone, Regis

tensed up. It had been a while since Jubelian had sought him.

It should've been fine, though. He had gotten rid of the evidence. Soothing his pounding heart, he answered, "Come in."

"I hope I'm not bothering you," she said, expressing her worry as she stepped through the door. Regis's foul mood instantly improved at his dear daughter's careful inquiry.

"Not at all."

Jubelian wore a faint smile in response, and Regis could feel a lump in his throat at the sight of it. He couldn't remember the last time the girl had approached him first for a friendly conversation. If only he could spend some quality time with her. He wanted to, but he knew full well that such a thing was impossible.

Reminded of the fact that he didn't have much time left to spend with her, the duke wore a bitter smile.

Jubelian parted her coral lips to speak. "Father, I didn't want to trouble you, but I think it's time for me to become serious."

Regis observed his daughter as ominous feelings pervaded him. "What do you mean?"

"Remember the time you told me to be well-informed about the crown prince?" she sighed.

He was aware. In fact, he had only said such things so that she would avoid Max, the scum of the earth. Nevertheless, this fact didn't matter so much since it seemed that she was very much in love with the man, and Regis had already allowed their relationship to continue. In any case, he affirmed her recollection.

"Since there might be talks of a marriage between me and the crown prince, I thought I should get to know more about him," Jubelian continued with a serious expression.

Marriage talks? As if struck by lightning, Regis froze in place. He didn't think that the two were already considering marriage... they only seemed to enjoy each other's presence—Jubelian mentioning such a thing was unimaginable!

"There is no need to rush, so why don't you take your time learning about him? Besides, there are still three months until you are of age." Regis wanted to steer her away from the topic of marriage entirely. He wanted to spend as much time as he could with his daughter.

Oblivious to his intentions, Jubelian shook her head vehemently and

insisted on furthering this topic. “My curiosity is troubling my sleep, Father. Could you just tell me three things about him?” Her eyes glistened, emphasizing her lovely features.

Regis wouldn’t dare to reject his precious daughter’s wish.

Realizing that it would be harmless to disclose superficial information, Regis admitted his defeat. “What would you like to know?” he asked.

However, the questions that followed only left him dumbstruck. He had never thought she would inquire about such menial things. The answers to her curiosities weren’t important or confidential, but they would hurt Max’s pride.



Regis was thinking of ways he could finish off the futile conversation when Jubelian began to apologize. “I’m sorry, Father. I’ve asked too many things, haven’t I?”

“No, it’s fine,” he assured her. Nevertheless, his daughter continued to shrink in her seat.

“I was just afraid of a situation where the crown prince might come to hate me because I said something stupid.”

Was it because of her past with Mikhail? Regis’ heart broke as he listened to his daughter’s weak voice. Prioritizing her happiness over everything else, Regis ended up confessing things his disciple had requested him not to tell anyone.



I couldn’t stop smiling once I returned to my room. I was proud of myself for talking to my father—I never thought I’d acquire so much valuable information! Taking into account how much he had told me, it seemed that Father was still lingering on his plan to marry me off to the prince.

Obviously, my intentions were completely different from my father’s. With all I had learned in the past hour, I was almost invincible against that madman of a prince. Organizing my thoughts, I began to plan how I would act when faced with the prince. I sketched out the plan in my room.

If I did that... it might work...

Suddenly, someone knocked on my door. “It’s Merylyn, my lady,” she

announced.

“Come in.”

She walked in with a silver plate of correspondence. “These are all the letters that have arrived for you.”

Without much thought, I turned to the clock; it was still sometime before lunch. I had already chatted with my acquaintances during the banquet, so I couldn’t figure out why some had already written to me like this, sending me formal letters.

Bea came to mind for a moment, but I pushed the idea away after remembering her family situation. Besides, she had promised to see me in two weeks. She also had permitted me to visit her house at any time; the expression she had on her face when I turned down her offer was quite unusual, however. My original presumption was probably right: she wouldn’t be able to send me a letter due to extenuating circumstances she couldn’t discuss, explaining why she had set our next meeting to two weeks later.

I grabbed the envelopes from the silver plate with a sigh. Then, I burst into laughter. There were two letters: one was from Max, and one was from a lady with whom I was only slightly acquainted. Since I felt terrible about what had happened last night when I kicked him out of my room, I decided to check Max’s letter first. I was eager to read what he had written.

I won’t be visiting for a while. During my absence, I hope you realize my importance.

P.S. You will only be able to meet me after you learn of my value.

Scowling, I stared at the sloppy handwriting scribbled onto the unfolded paper. Every apologetic feeling I had toward him was now long gone, frustration remaining in their wake. What was he even talking about? While it was audacious of me to usher him out of my room after spending only a few moments with him, I had been extremely fatigued after being stuck in an unpleasant social environment all day. It was even a royal banquet, at that! Afterward, I had received a threatening letter from the crown prince and I had to deal with Max’s nonsensical jokes. It was no wonder I was thoroughly exhausted by the time I crawled into bed.

This letter proved that Max was an inconsiderate person indeed. If I could, I wanted to call him to my room and give him a scolding, but such a thought was soon abandoned—I didn’t want to waste energy on such a trivial matter. The right thing to do right now was to eat some sweets to feel better.

I opened a drawer underneath my desk to store Max’s letter and flinched.

Inside was the crown prince's note from last night. I was contemplating whether or not I should discard the unlucky object when I realized something; squinting my eyes, I carefully observed the prince's letter.

That was when Merylyn called, "My lady, lunch is ready."

I immediately set Max's letter down and headed out the door.



"Was it delivered?"

The Hessen family's errand boy nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"Well done. You may leave."

The messenger bowed before stepping out of the room. A girl soon entered afterward. Her white-blond hair was tied into pigtails, and she was wearing a dress that looked as if she had just returned from an excursion.

"I have relayed the message to Christine, Mother," the girl said. "She accepted my request without hesitation—what a lovely friend she is."

Despite her daughter's charming voice, the marchioness remained indifferent in her reply. "I am only allowing such an interaction since it would be difficult for a viscount's family to become acquainted with the Floyens. Therefore, it would be much better for them to maintain good relations with us."

The girl was a little taken aback by her mother's harsh remark. "But, Mother—" she started, but the marchioness cut her off.

"Giselle, you must become more conscious of the society we live in," the coldhearted woman muttered. "How many times must I remind you that true friends don't exist amongst the nobility?"

The girl pouted. A silence descended over the two ladies for a moment before Giselle spoke up once more, her expression now vacant. "What was the reason behind sending the Floyens a letter using Christine's name, Mother?"

The marchioness smirked. "Given that the duke's household is intolerant of disgrace, they must be burning all the letters sent from our estate. That was why we borrowed the Mershas' name."

"As expected from the best!" Giselle exclaimed. "What did the letter say?"

"You will know soon, my dear," the marchioness answered, her smile growing all the more prominent.





After lunch, I laid idly in my bed. To anyone else, I probably looked carefree, but the neurons in my brain were firing at full speed. I recalled the similarities between the letters written by Max and the crown prince—their handwriting made them look alike. Still, I couldn't do anything about my concerns because Max said he wouldn't be visiting me for a while.

How irritating.

A headache emerged from the strange situation I was in, prompting me to shift my attention away to something else. I turned to face my messy desk, realizing I had yet to open the other letter I had received. I got out of bed. After removing the sealed wax with a small knife, I unfolded the letter and it read:

Lady Floyen, I know the truth about your lover. If you do not wish a rumor to begin, please visit my estate in four days.

I couldn't help but frown at the note. Crumpling the paper up, I sighed. Did Viscount Mersha's young lady hate me too? It was an undeniable fact that there weren't a lot of commoners with a face as handsome as Max's—and he was a fallen noble, at that. Although I was doing my best to hide his identity, I wouldn't be surprised if a rumor really was circulating already. To be honest, I would be thankful if word about Max somehow reached the crown prince.

I turned away from my desk to throw the note away. Then, a sense of *deja vu* suddenly overcame me. Feeling like I had witnessed a similar situation unfold previously before, I flattened the very same letter I was about to trash and carefully studied it.



Spending her teatime in solidarity, Marchioness Hessen contemplated in silence. She needed to come up with an alternative in case that girl decided to decline the invitation.

Suddenly, however, the door opened, interrupting her thoughts. "My lady, the young ladyship from the Floyen household has responded to Lady Mersha's letter, asking for a date," the chief maid said.

The corners of the marchioness's lips curled up as she listened to the report. "Just as I thought! I knew there would be a reply if I mentioned a

man.” Then, she resumed her cold demeanor. “Looks like she’s an easy one after all. I knew it the moment she began chasing my precious son around.”

The marchioness had never been satisfied with Jubelian. Her first impression of the duke’s daughter was that the girl was a halfwit who possessed no special talents whatsoever. All Jubelian had was the status ascribed to her and a pretty face. Still, she had allowed the girl to meet Mikhail because of her ridiculously obsequious behavior.

The unsophisticated lady would say things like, “Please, you needn't be concerned about formalities, Your Ladyship. You are the mother of the man I love!” and, “This is a small gift to demonstrate my sincerity toward you, so please do not feel burdened by it. I am simply happy that you find it suitable.”

The marchioness had been disgusted with Jubelian’s ill-mannered nature because it was obvious that she grew up without a mother. Therefore, the wicked marchioness decided she would use this weakness to discipline the young lady and establish dominance in their relationship.

“I am deeply sorry—I was not aware,” Jubelian would restlessly confess whenever she failed at her desperate attempts to read the room. This appearance was what the marchioness desired: a meek, obedient daughter-in-law.

Her expression relaxed as she recalled the past. She decided all that Jubelian needed was some wise advice. There was a humiliating rumor that she had been spending time with a man of common origin, but such a thing did not matter.

After all, it was an obvious fact that if a daughter-in-law wants to contribute to the family, she should stay put at home and give birth to a healthy heir. A little scolding during her learning process wouldn’t be so unreasonable.

In no time, the marchioness was smiling.



The day I promised to visit Viscount Mersha’s estate arrived. According to custom, a nobleman or woman would be considered discourteous if he or she brought many servants and escorts while visiting another noble’s home. Therefore, I only decided to take Geraldine and Merilyn as my escort and maid respectively.

Once I got on the carriage, I glanced at the Floyen mansion through the window. I didn't think my father was going to allow the outing, so I felt quite strange in light of his permissiveness. However, my attention quickly turned to a more urgent issue as the carriage began to move.

After a while, I finally arrived at the viscount's estate located on the outskirts of the capital. The main building was only three stories tall, and there seemed to be no annexes. The whole house could be seen at a glance; it was a neat little mansion.

Eventually, the carriage door opened, interrupting my appreciation of the building. I could see a man and a woman standing next to each other outside.

"Welcome, Lady Floyen. We are pleased to have you visit," the couple said. By the sight of them greeting me, I could tell they were the viscount and the viscountess. As the eldest daughter of a duke, I technically held the same social status as that of a count, but in reality, I was allowed to act as a part of the royal family. That was why I didn't need to bow to them.

"Thank you for the cordial address, Lord and Lady Mersha," I greeted.

The pair lowered their heads. Once they saw that I had only brought a guard and a maid, they appeared shocked. "Your Ladyship, is that knight your only escort?" they asked.

"Yes. There's no need for me to bring an entire group of men for a casual outing like this."

The viscount and viscountess exchanged nervous glances. "To think the young lady of the Floyen household would place such trust in us—we are extremely honored," they replied.

I scoffed quietly. Were they saying that despite knowing their daughter had threatened me?

"We will show you to the drawing-room," the couple said as they bowed again. I obediently followed the two with Merilyn behind me. When the door to the reception room opened, I was greeted by a familiar face.

Realizing my expectations had matched with reality perfectly, I chuckled softly. I had anticipated this situation. It wasn't the young lady of the Mersha family but the marchioness—Mikhail's mother—that had sent the letter in a ploy to get my attention. In the original novel, the lady had used the same method to meet with and ask Jubelian to stop chasing Mikhail around.

The noblewoman stared at me for a moment before offering a seat. "Sit down, child," she said. Her voice was perfectly calm. "You've come a long way."

I remained standing with my back straight. “It has been a while, Marchioness Hessen. What is the matter that you’ve called me all the way here?” I demanded.

“Oh, child. How could you be so cold toward me after all this time? Did you forget that you used to address me as your mother? I’m truly disappointed!”

Upset, I let out a sigh. However, I decided to calm my nerves. It wasn’t like I didn’t know about her vile personality before. I continued to stand firmly on my feet as I glared at her, and said, “Back then, I had even dated Mikhail with marriage in mind, but now, he’s nothing to me.”

“Nothing! You astound me.”

Her way of speaking was still the same, always stalling without getting to the point. I recalled how difficult it was to curry favor with her given her indirect speech. Additionally, she had chastised my shortcomings, trampling on my self-esteem and making it impossible to relax around her. Now, the only thing different between us was that I wasn’t the same Jubelian as I was before.

“If there isn’t much to be discussed, I will be leaving,” I stated simply.

“You...” The lady fumed. Then, she sighed. “Mikhail is down with an illness,” she admitted.

I honestly didn’t know how to react to her statement. Maybe it was because I wasn’t the least bit interested in him anymore, but I felt completely indifferent. “Oh, I hope he recovers quickly. He was always a strong person, so I believe he’ll regain his health soon.” I did my best to sound faultless, but the lady furrowed her brows resentfully.

Glaring at me, she began to yell. “My goodness! I would’ve never taken you to be so uncaring! He’s bedridden because of you!” she insisted. “Do you not have any sympathy for the poor boy?”

That was when it really hit me how much of a pushover and a fool I was in the past. I couldn’t believe I clung to Mikhail despite being treated like this on a daily basis! I desperately wanted to say something but I held my breath. My original goal for coming this far was to kindly tell her not to contact me anymore. Besides, she was Mikhail’s mother, so I couldn’t ignore her status and the immense influence she had upon the nobles in high society. It was all for the best, for a safe breakup. Mikhail and Beatrice would meet soon, and that was going to solve everything.

Before I could even react, the marchioness appeared before me, standing

close. Startled, I froze in place.

“You must’ve been feeling sorry for dear Mikhail, haven’t you? So, stop being proud and come with me. I’ll take you to the mansion.” The lady tried to grab my hand, but I flinched and staggered backward. Before the woman could say anything about my impolite behavior, someone rushed in to stand between us.

Merilyn? Why did she—

I couldn’t understand. She was a timid and soft-spoken person, so why was she trying to protect me?

“Your Ladyship, I apologize for the intrusion,” Merilyn began. “Lady Jubelian is—”

Slap!

The marchioness interrupted by slapping Merilyn in the face. “How dare a lowly maid intervene in a noble conversation!” she cried.

As if I had been the one to get hit, my mind went blank. A sharp noise echoed in my ears and grew louder, giving me a headache.

“Child, didn’t I say a noblewoman needs to discipline those under her so that they don’t walk all over her?” the marchioness screamed at me, her expression distorted. My heart pounded rapidly, and my head throbbed as blood-boiling anger began to overcome me.

Yes, I was well aware of these feelings. I also knew that I needed to suppress them at this point instead of letting them consume me.

I managed to quell my emotions. “I understand,” I agreed. “We’ll make our way to your mansion.”

The marchioness gave me a satisfied smile.



On the way to her estate, Marchioness Hessen observed Jubelian with care, never taking her eyes off of the young lady for even a moment. Her gaze looked slightly mellow, which was unfamiliar, but the marchioness didn’t mind the meek behavior. It seemed like the spoiled brat had finally matured after all.

The marchioness had heard once that the most effective way to tame a stubborn hound was to scare it by taking it to an unfamiliar place and it looked like the method was working well. The only issue left was reconciling with the duke, but this wasn’t a concern since his daughter was already in the

palm of her hand.

“By the way, are you still keeping the gifts from me?” Jubelian asked, breaking the silence and interrupting the older woman’s rude thoughts.

“Of course, dear. I have them stored in the safest place in the estate,” the marchioness responded with a pleasant smile. The only reason she was keeping them was because of their expensive cost, but she decided it would be better to comfort the girl at this point.

Sure enough, Jubelian grinned. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Jubelian jumped off the carriage once it arrived at the mansion. Then, she rushed to the coachman’s seat to speak to Geraldine and Merilyn. “Stay here until I come back,” she ordered. Then, she bolted to the entrance of the estate, which made the marchioness burst into laughter. Although Jubelian had acted like she didn’t care, it seemed like she had missed Mikhail very much.

Thinking so, the marchioness sauntered confidently toward the entrance to her abode.

Clang!

A loud noise sounded from inside just then, making her flinch. An ominous feeling pervaded her, prompting her to quicken her steps. Then, her eyes widened in disbelief once she stepped into the foyer. The debris scattered on the floor was likely from a porcelain pot imported from the far east.

“Who was in charge of cleaning today?” she demanded, raising her voice. “Where is the butler?” She was ready to begin a violent tantrum, angered by the fact that one of her valuables had shattered into pieces.

“Oh, that was me,” answered a voice. It wasn’t the butler or a maid. It was Jubelian, and she was holding another vase in her hands—an urn that had cost almost as much as a luxurious piece of jewelry.

With her eyes almost twitching, the marchioness snarled. “Jubelian, what are you—”

That was when the young lady threw the jar onto the floor, smashing it. The marchioness remained stock still, speechless.

When Jubelian spoke, she sounded perfectly calm and collected. “I thought these items looked unseemly sitting in your house when I parted with Mikhail a long time ago. It’s about time to clean them up, don’t you think?”





The marquis's estate and garden were the same as I had remembered them being. The maze-like pathway through the flowerbeds was still convoluted to traverse, and the uniquely grand gate was still far flashier than those of other nobles' residences, towering over me as if it would fall and flatten me against the ground at any moment. In the past, I had acted timid in this place, glimpsing at those around me so I may adopt the role of a kind and submissive lady.

Now, however, the bitter feelings I felt were slowly becoming resolved. Yes, this was analogous to playing a tumultuous game to cool my head.

“What in the world are you doing, child? Have you gone mad?” I could hear the marchioness scream from a distance, but her desperate cries were of no interest to me. The only thing currently on my mind was anger and revenge. Noticing there were no more of my gifts in the foyer, I stomped on the shattered valuables with the heel of my shoe and headed to the dressing room located on the second floor.

“Jubelian!” the woman continued to shriek behind me, but I paid no attention.

“Lady Floyen?” The maids addressed me in an attempt to stop my rampage once I was upstairs. Pushing them away, I proceeded to my target and forced open the closet door.

The object I had been looking for was right where I had expected it to be. It was a scarf made from the fur of a silver-haired fox, an expensive item that I had bought for the marchioness after she had hinted that she desired the accessory.

I contemplated how best I should ruin the item so that it suited the noble lady's tastes. Looking around, I realized I had gotten more than lucky—there was a pair of scissors used for cutting fabric nearby! Smiling, I approached the tool.

“Y-Your Ladyship!” the maids cried, continuing their desperate attempts to dissuade me.

I was determined to shake them off. “Stand back if you don't want to get hurt,” I warned.

The women staggered back once they caught my glare. Snipping sounds filled the room as the fur scarf was cut into a multitude of remnants. Unable to take action, the maids stared at me in horror.

Undaunted, I continued, grabbing bags, hats, and any other precious item that I had gifted the lady. Then, using the scissors, I frantically tore them apart. I started feeling better as I listened to the melodious sound of fabric ripping. I was glad that I had held my irritation in check for this moment; the stress that I had bottled up was finally letting itself loose.

“Y-You! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” a voice snarled. I turned around to see that the marchioness was glaring at me, her face aghast.

“I already told you—I’m taking care of the things I had gifted you.”

“On whose account? Have you finally gone insane?”

Ignoring her ear-splitting yelping, I nonchalantly destroyed yet another bag. It was adorned in leopard print.

“What are you all doing? Stop her, now!” The marchioness was stamping up and down in fury. In accordance with her command, the maids and the servants began to approach me.

Finding the situation ridiculous, I smirked. Seeing how the marchioness assumed she could stop me with verbal threats alone, I must’ve been an Oscar-worthy actress around here. Of course, I had been leading a quiet life until now, but that didn’t mean my delinquent past had disappeared into thin air. I simply stopped taking my anger out on those of a lower social status than me.

In any case, I figured a bit of a threat was necessary at this moment. I held the scissors toward the workers and cautioned, “Stop me if you can. That is, if you’re not afraid of what might happen if you dare to lay a finger on me.”

The maids and servants flinched in response. Frankly, I wouldn’t be able to approach me if I were them, either. After all, I probably looked like a lunatic.

“Y-You imbeciles! Stop standing around like fools! Stop her this instant!” The marchioness’s voice heightened another octave at the sight of her minions frozen in place.

“Don’t worry, Lady Hessen. As I said, I’m just cleaning up a few things that are probably an eyesore to you anyways,” I said, reminding her using the most charming tone of voice I could muster.

With her face as pale as a ghost, the older woman began to falter. “Wh-Wh-What is she...”

That was when I heard stomps coming from the staircase. “Jubelian! What in the world do you think you’re doing?!”

It was Mikhail’s 17-year-old younger sister. She had a lovely face but that

didn't mean she had a delightful personality.

"Giselle!" The marchioness's complexion brightened at her precious daughter's entrance.

I stifled a laugh, excited that someone the marchioness cherished dearly had finally appeared.



"My little girl! Hurry and stop this madwoman!"

Despite her mother's urging, Giselle stalled. Jubelian had gone insane! Her sapphire eyes were shining with mania, and she was mercilessly destroying the contents of the dressing room! But...

Giselle collected herself. It was just Jubelian, after all. Rumors about her infamous reputation had never made sense to Giselle because Jubelian would always get so submissive whenever they mentioned Mikhail.

"I'm truly sorry, Giselle. It was my fault, so please keep this a secret from Mikhail," she would beg. Even if she got picked on for the littlest things, her tail would remain between her legs. For this reason, Giselle felt that she had no reason to be intimidated by the duke's daughter, never treating her with respect.

By the looks of it, it seemed like Jubelian had visited due to her lingering feelings about Mikhail, but Giselle couldn't understand why she would wreak havoc like this. Infuriated, Giselle finally opened her mouth, "Stop this madness now, Jubelian," she s bolded. "What would my dear brother think of you?!"

As she had always done, Jubelian stopped what she was doing and froze in place. Giselle snorted. Her mother had mentioned once that Jubelian had grown up without a mother. Perhaps that was the reason behind her idiocy.

To everyone's surprise, however, Jubelian gradually began to shake with laughter, her voice climbing until she was howling with it.

Stunned, the young girl gaped at Jubelian. Why... why was she laughing? An eerie atmosphere permeated the room until Jubelian suddenly halted and turned to Giselle.

The ducal lady's coral lips lifted into a smirk. "There's no point in arguing, given her foolishness," she muttered to herself.

Upon hearing this, Giselle stared blankly into space before belatedly realizing exactly whom Jubelian was referring to. She began to tremble from

the resulting humiliation.

How dare Jubelian call her a fool! Having grown up as the daughter of a marquis, Giselle had never had to yield to anything or anyone. Regarding status, only the royal princess and the daughter of the duke—Jubelian—outranked her, but the princess led a reclusive life and Jubelian had never dared to talk back to Giselle before.

She believed she didn't need to surrender anything to the young ladyship. In fact, Giselle figured that she possessed a higher standing than Jubelian, and this reckless conviction caused her to raise her hand with the intent to harm the lady.

"How bold for a halfwit like you to mention such a thing as foolishness!" she cried. "You should—"

Jubelian grabbed Giselle's wrist, hindering her from executing her attack.

"Wh-What do you think you're doing? Let go of me!" she floundered. Jubelian was stronger than her appearance belied. Embarrassed by the unexpected situation, Giselle looked Jubelian in the eye and screamed. "Let go!"

The young lady finally let go of her hand. Giselle began to think of a punishment for the atrocity committed against her, but in an instant, her head jerked forcefully to her right. The bewildering impact was followed by a throbbing pain that numbed her cheek. Disbelieving, she scowled at the psychotic woman before her, but Jubelian's cold, unfamiliar gaze paralyzed her.

"The daughter of a mere marquis has no right to interfere with her superior's affairs." Adopting a voice as chilling as ice, Jubelian insulted Giselle in a domineering manner. Giselle couldn't believe this was the same lady she once knew.

Frightened and humbled, the young girl burst into tears. The marchioness, watching the argument from the side, gritted her teeth.

"Girl! Do you intend to antagonize us?" she accused, glowering.

"Your Ladyship," Jubelian smirked, "you must understand you have already antagonized me a long time ago."

"What?" the older woman scoffed. "What must you mean by that?"

"You laid your hand on one of my people," I revealed the reason behind the mess before us.

"When have I done so?" the marchioness retorted, furrowing her brows. "I have no knowledge of your acquaintances."

I frowned in disappointment. Then, scanning the estate's maids before me, I questioned, "Are maids not humans to you?"

"You... you must be joking with me. Was this all because I slapped that girl of yours?" I could infer from her tone that she did not think of her maids as human beings. In fact, it seemed like she valued the objects I destroyed more than those who diligently waited on her. "Ha! I can't believe you caused this chaos because of a measly maid!"

Dumbstruck, I began to laugh. I was a ball of trouble until now, but I still considered those who had attended to me as humans. They were the ones who took care of me when I was young.

"Ask for forgiveness now, Jubelian, and I will forget about this," the marchioness suggested. She must've assumed my silence was because I was shrinking away from her mockery.

I will forget about this—such a tempting phrase, but the meaning of it was saddeningly illogical. Only a deity could take back what had already been done. Besides, she had already become my enemy after she touched Marilyn.

"I'll think about it if you beg for reconciliation, first," I said sincerely. However, that must've touched a nerve because she began to tremble like she was having a seizure.

"You rude wench. Is that how you respond to my generosity? I would've accepted you as my daughter-in-law gladly if you hadn't acted like such a—"

I cut her off with a sneer. "Well, it seems like you're not yet ready to tame disobedience like mine. How do you plan to take care of me if you're shocked by this minor event?"

As if she had decided that there would be no merit in conversing with me any longer, she quivered in anger, giving up. "You will regret this," she menacingly intoned.

"The only thing I regret is having spent my life up until now wallowing in self-hatred all because of one pathetic man," I said, grinning.

"What did you just say? Pathetic?" She threw one of the tattered handbags on the floor. It was clear my comment about Mikhail made her upset.

I briefly considered getting hit by the bag and demanding compensation for her rashness, but its trajectory took a strange turn that almost certainly didn't align with the laws of physics. Bewitched by the phenomenon, I observed my surroundings only to notice that a window was open. Should I head over to identify a possible witness to this disaster?

Suddenly, the marchioness shouted again. "Jubelian Eloy Floyen, you will

pay for what happened today!” she howled.

A hollow chuckle escaped my lips. Frankly, I was a little afraid that all the care I put into my behavior so far had been reduced to nothing because of my actions here, but given that she was my adversary now, I didn't think I should need to hold back. “I would pay more attention to teaching your kids some manners, Marchioness Hessen,” I retorted.

Her eyes red, she yelled, “You—you lowly...!”

“And from now on, you should buy your own things. It's unsightly to see a lady use her son to get what she wants.”

As I stepped out of the room, I could hear all manner of insults directed at me. My life might get a little more tiring from now on, but I felt extremely refreshed after what I had done. Laughter bubbled from inside me as I crossed the gigantic gate. Although I hadn't been able to do anything to this annoying door, I felt accomplished with what I had done.

As I made my way out through the garden, a voice called out to me. “Jubelian!”

I turned around reflexively only to end up cringing. It was Mikhail, except his face was much thinner than I remembered it being.

“Is that... really you?” he asked quietly, his voice hoarse. His jawline was more defined than the last time I had seen him and he looked weaker overall. Perhaps he really had been ill; seeing someone who had never shown his weak side look so fragile made me begin to feel a little sorry for him. Maybe he was still recovering from our unexpected breakup.

Mikhail began to approach me but he stopped a few feet away, prompting me to recall what I had said to him during our last meeting: “Forcefully touching others without their consent is an act of violence. I hope you haven't done this to anyone else.”

Staring at me from a distance, he mumbled what sounded like, “I must be dreaming,” as he reached for me. His movements were slow, but the somewhat peculiar gesture made me push—or rather, slap—his hand away without hesitation. He immediately examined the back of his hand, finding that it had turned red from the impact. Astonished, he looked back at me.

Realizing I had made a mistake by behaving impulsively toward a sick person, I decided to apologize. However, he spoke first.

“It's not... a dream?” he murmured.

Until now, I had planned to say something harsh to him if we had ever met again, but after seeing him look so gaunt, I couldn't bring myself to do

such a thing. Deciding I had no more business here, I bid him farewell. However, he hurriedly ran to block my way.

With an urgent expression, he pleaded, “Jubelian! Please listen to what I have to say. It will only take a moment.”

I couldn’t understand why, but it sounded like he still had feelings for me. I could’ve left him there without talking to him, but if I didn’t cut things off cleanly between us now, his mother was going to chase me to the ends of the earth. Disastrous days like this were going to continue.

“Sure,” I agreed at last. After all, not doing so would be no different from running away from my problems.

Mikhail’s eyes widened at my unexpectedly accommodating attitude. “Thank you, thank you so much!” he said, nodding his head vigorously. “Should we converse inside?”

No matter how much of a troublemaker I was, I knew when to feel embarrassed. I couldn’t walk back into a mansion that I had just shat on. “I would like to talk in private—in a quiet place if possible,” I told him.

“We’ll head to the pavilion, then.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I was confident that we would be able to have a personal conversation in the summerhouse located at the corner of the garden.

“Then, my lady,” Mikhail began, holding out his hand as if to escort me. On his thin face was a faint smile.

Ignoring his gesture, I proceeded to the alcove alone. From behind, I could hear his footsteps chasing after me.



Mikhail always strove to be the cream of the crop, working toward his desire to shine brighter than anyone else. He had poured all of his energy into reaching his ambitions, becoming a renowned knight, but after that one fateful day, he couldn’t focus on anything anymore.

Jubelian’s voice crossed his mind. “From now on, don’t try to talk to me anymore,” she had said. “I don’t want to get involved with you ever again.”

Remembering his bygone days, Mikhail deemed nothing of worth anymore—his swordsmanship, success, reputation... everything was worthless except for her.

Visions of the cold-hearted lady who had thoroughly rejected him

lingered in his dreams despite the resentment he harbored for her. Whenever Mikhail tried to reach out to her, she disappeared into thin air. The empty feeling in him had grown as time passed, and when that sense of purposelessness had swallowed him whole at last, he finally admitted how dearly he missed her.

Since then, the knight had suffered many feverish nights and days chasing hallucinations of the subject of his infatuation. Earlier today, after spotting her descending the stairs from the mansion's gate, he assumed he was being fooled by yet another ghost. His instincts, however, had forced him to step out of his room to chase after her in fear of missing her once again. When he finally felt the touch of her hand, however, his senses finally awoke to accept reality.

When he realized he wasn't dreaming, his heart began to pound. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach as he perceived her astonishing beauty—the woman Mikhail saw before him far surpassed his fantasies. Her porcelain skin, rosy cheeks, and raspberry lips mesmerized him into hopeless adoration and he began to berate himself for mistreating her up until now.

He was going to ask for forgiveness. Then, everything would be solved. They would start anew. He was sure of this, pledging this to himself as he followed her to the pavilion.

Once they reached their destination, Jubelian examined him and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Mikhail was deeply moved by the fact that she had asked him about his health. Suppressing a smile, he answered, "It's bearable."

"That's good to hear."

A terse silence followed since Jubelian didn't say anything after. He began to grow restless as the quiet continued. He certainly had a lot to say, but he couldn't start blabbering out of nowhere. Strangely enough, he couldn't help but try to read what she was thinking.

"So, what was it that you needed to say?" Jubelian finally asked.

"Oh, it's..." He trailed off, changing focus. "Why have you visited today?"

She sighed at his query. "The reason I've come is because of your mother."

"Ah, I see." Mikhail had known for a long time that Jubelian had difficulty getting along with his mother. Still, he had left the two ladies be, thinking it was up to them to sort out their differences. Nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel unsettled now that he had learned the reason for her visit.



Had his dear mother wronged her, by any chance? His anxiety grew.

“She dragged me here in some other noble lady’s name. Other than that, it seems like she still thinks of me as your girlfriend.”

It was as Mikhail had expected; his mother had caused her some misfortune after all. He began to persuade her. “That’s because she thinks you’re easygoing—”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with how rudely she’s treated me until now. Also, the fact that she sees me as an easygoing person at all makes me uncomfortable.”

Confused, Mikhail struggled to interpret her enigmatic words.

“Well, I did realize that I had made a mistake today,” she continued.

“A mistake?” Mikhail asked. He silently prayed that the mistake in question would be her decision to break up with him. He swore that he would grant any and all of her wishes if she decided to return to him.

“I realized that on the day of our separation, I hadn’t clearly communicated my intentions when I said I never wanted to see you again,” Jubelian explained.

Dumbstruck, Mikhail gaped at her. “Jubelian,” he started, but the lump in his throat hindered him from saying anything else. “Stop it. Don’t say anything more,” he begged in silence, looking at her with melancholic eyes.

“Mikhail,” she began, her voice cold, “I don’t want to be involved with you anymore. I want us to live as separate individuals. This sentiment extends to your entire family.”

His head grew hot in response to her cruel statement. “Don’t joke with me, Jubelian,” he hissed. “How dare you decide this on your own? How could you say we shouldn’t be together anymore?”

The moment he spat out those impulsive words, however, he regretted it. Nevertheless, Jubelian’s response was worse.

“You are more than capable of meeting a better partner. So, let’s call it quits and—”

“Shut up!”

Mikhail’s surroundings began to spin dizzily. Her proposal reminded him of that damned commoner at the tea party. Unable to control his anger, he stood up, intent on intimidating her. Regardless, she simply watched him, undaunted. The indifference in her eyes told him that he was indeed of no interest to her anymore. Feeling defeated, he began to sag to the ground.

“You asked what I wanted to say, Jubelian?” She remained silent as she

continued to observe him. He turned to his last resort: kneeling before her, begging. "I'll treat you with the respect you deserve, so please, come back to me," he pleaded.



I had a man kneeling before me now. I sighed. What was this even about? It wasn't like I was comfortable saying things like this—I was just trying to help him by giving him some closure.

"We're done, Mikhail," I repeated.

He looked up with teary eyes. "I still love you," he said.

His desperate confession made me feel strange. It wasn't because I had changed my mind but because it felt like I was seeing my past self in his behavior. I felt embittered as I recognized how he must've felt until now. No wonder he always avoided me! Unrequited love never ends well, I realized—I ended up torturing him and myself in the process.

In any case, I didn't know what to say anymore. The only thing I knew was that I shouldn't let my emotions get the better of me.

"I don't love you anymore, so let's end it here, please," I told him again. I kept my voice as flat as possible so that every lingering expectation of his would disappear.

When he froze in place like a statue at my statement, I decided I should get out of this place. I had made my intentions clear, so he had no choice but to let me go. As I stepped off the platform of the alcove, however, I heard a vicious, angry scream from behind me.

It cut through the air, and when I turned around to investigate, I realized it was Mikhail. He was howling like an animal. His amethyst eyes gleamed with rage as he drew near.

"I already asked nicely, didn't I? I even kneeled before you—throwing away my pride just for you!" he raged. "Yet you're saying that isn't enough? Your fairytale is over, Jubelian! You can't escape me!"

Goosebumps peppered my body. I hadn't intended to create this much of a conflict. I had told my father that I would be visiting the marquis's estate, so I thought everything was going to be fine. As for the marchioness, she wasn't anyone who engaged in reckless behavior.

However, I didn't take into account that I would meet Mikhail, and I had no idea that someone previously so composed could change this much.

Why? In the past, he was a calm, gentle, and neat person—the novel’s archetypal protagonist. The Mikhail I knew would never harm me, but the person before me seemed intent to prove otherwise.

Instinctively, I began moving my legs, hastening to get away. The heels and dress that I had worn were proving worthless at the moment, only serving as obstacles in my fight-or-flight response. I could sense that I was going to get caught at any moment. To make matters worse, we were located in a corner of the garden. We were a considerable distance away from the main gate!

“That’s right, start running! Once I catch you, you’ll be mine forever!” Mikhail screamed. He advanced on me like a maniac. I didn’t know why, but I was suddenly reminded of Father. Fear engulfed me, but the only thing in my head was the memory of him waving at me, telling me to have a safe trip.

I should’ve... been a little nicer to him. Regret began to bubble within me.

Just then, I tripped over a small pebble. Why was I being such a klutz at a time like this?!

I braced for the inevitable and painful impact that awaited me, but to my surprise, I landed in someone’s arms instead. Terrified that it might’ve been Mikhail, I told myself to take deep breaths. I had been in worse situations before, and I could get through this as well. As long as I stayed calm, I was going to survive. Still, I couldn’t stop my body from shaking and my teeth from chattering.

Mustering up my courage, I looked up. As soon as I recognized my captor’s familiar face, the tension in my body loosened and tears welled up in my eyes.

“How did you...?”

“I told you that I would return once you realized my value,” he answered. Did he want to joke at a time like this? Speechless, I gaped at the playful man. His mischievous smile then turned into a furious scowl. “That was the original plan, at least. I couldn’t just stand by and watch as some bastard tried to lay a finger on someone precious to me.”

I shrunk back as Max’s crimson eyes began to burn with fury.



Camouflaged outside the balcony, Max watched as Jubelian received letters from the maid. He swallowed nervously as she opened the unsealed

envelope. Truthfully, he had no clue how she would react, but he hoped that she would come to her senses and start looking for him right away.

Unfortunately, Jubelian remained indifferent as she read his message, storing it away inside a drawer afterward. Max wondered if she wasn't feeling well or if she was irritated for some unknown reason, but when she had left her room for lunch, she did so with a wide smile on her face.

Did she value food more than my letter? Max sulked. Then, he decided that such a thing couldn't possibly be true given the time they had spent together. She was bound to think of him soon!

This conviction led him to watch her throughout the day. To his disappointment, she spent the day lounging around until she eventually went to bed. She had looked in peace as if she had completely forgotten about what he had written to her.

Jubelian slept sprawled out with her hair disheveled, yet Max couldn't help but think she looked charming. He watched her with a relaxed expression for a moment until he realized she hadn't reacted to his message at all.

She didn't even notice his absence.

Suddenly feeling restless, he regretted sending the letter in the first place. He could've been spending time with her by now if he hadn't! He recalled what Victor had said.

"Don't visit her as often and stop listening to everything she asks for! Only then will she realize how precious Your Highness is."

He couldn't believe he had fallen for a measly trick. Throughout the entire day, Jubelian hadn't even thought about him once. Resentment toward his good-for-nothing subordinate grew as he realized the consequences of his rash actions. He decided to return to the palace.

Just then, a voice broke the silence around him. "What brings you here?"

Max turned around at the sudden inquiry. It was his master appearing without notice, staring at him nearby. Was this proof that his master was still superior to him? At this rate, it would be impossible to triumph over him in a duel. Wondering why his tutor had even addressed him, Max became lost in thought for a moment.

Maybe his master was here to send him away after finding him lingering near Jubelian's bedroom. Already anxious, he didn't want to start a quarrel with the other man. Furrowing his brows, he said, "I was just about to go—"

"If you haven't anything more important to attend to, come with me. We'll have tea," his master suggested.

He narrowed his eyes. He couldn't figure out what this was about. With doubtful eyes, he watched as his teacher made his way to the entrance of the mansion. Slowly, Max followed.



Ever since he had begun the contractual relationship with Jubelian, Max had never engaged in a one-to-one conversation with his master. The long hiatus only seemed to add to the awkward atmosphere.

Did he even have anything to discuss? Max felt a little nervous.

Clink!

His master set his teacup down on its saucer and asked, "How is the tea?"

"It's suitable. I don't mind flavored tea."

"It's interesting to see you, who always favored coffee over tea, say that you don't mind it."

Max agreed, but instead of verbalizing his concurrence, he simply took another sip from his cup. As he relished the warm beverage, he couldn't help but think about Jubelian. He sighed, agonizing over his decision to send that foolishly written letter. His mind was drawing a blank on what to do next.

"What's more interesting is the letter you sent to my daughter," Regis noted.

Glaring at him, Max snarled, "You must be proud of intruding in her personal affairs."

"I just like to supervise what people send her. That way, I can prevent perverts from getting in touch with her." Max felt like Regis was implying that he was one of the 'perverts,' so he scowled. Unbothered, his master continued speaking. "So, are you staying true to your word?"

"Yes," he answered unhesitatingly. No matter what Jubelian thought of him, Max didn't want to be underestimated by his master.

Stroking his chin, Regis nodded. "If you won't be visiting for a while, then I guess inviting Duke Elios here won't be a problem."

"What does he have to do with anything?" Max glowered.

"He had asked for my permission to write a letter to my dear daughter," Regis replied, his voice calm.

"He did what?"

It was obvious to Max why the request had been made to his master first. Although no law forced nobles to obtain permission prior to sending letters,

Duke Elios was trying to curry favor with Regis before attempting to woo Jubelian. What a sly, pesky man he was! Max couldn't let his guard down.

"Frankly, I'm quite fond of his courage. I'm thinking of inviting him for dinner," Regis said, rubbing salt into the wound. Although his master's underlying motive was clear, Max couldn't help but slip into the trap anyway.

"That won't happen since I'll be back here tomorrow," he swore. Then, he stood up.

"Sit back down. I have yet to discuss everything." His master's eyes had gotten even more serious than before. He plopped back down to the couch again.

"What is it?"

Instead of answering, his master took a sip of tea. Max didn't understand why the other man was stalling, so he glared at him, the urge to throw an insult at him rising. However, Max soon disposed of this idea when he realized his master looked a bit uneasy. It was the first time he had seen his teacher possess such an expression.

A minute that felt like an hour passed in silence before Regis looked into Max's eyes, speaking at last. "Will you stay by Jubelian's side from now on—no matter what I do?"

Max furrowed his brows. "Isn't that obvious?" he answered matter-of-factly.

"I see," his master intoned, smiling faintly.

"Why don't you stop searching for others to stay by her side?" he spat out. He still felt like he was being looked down upon. "I will look out for her at all times, okay?"

"We'll see about that. It will all depend on how well you do."

Completely vexed by that vague response, Max stood up forcefully. "I'll be leaving, then."

He had already turned his back toward his master when the older man then posed a solemn request: "No matter what happens, please protect that child."

"I will. Of course. I'll keep her safe from the looneys and her overbearing father as well," Max mocked.



After only four days, Max's pledge was put to the test, for Jubelian had ended up trembling in his arms. He had never lost his temper on the battlefield, but now, his head was burning hot with anger.

How dare that bastard...

Max glared at Mikhail with menacing eyes. The blond returned the gesture, and a vicious impulse overcame Max; he wanted to rip the man who had threatened Jubelian into pieces. Unconsciously, he shifted his hand toward the hilt of his sword.

However, Jubelian halted him. "Max, let's go back now," she said.

His face crumpled. Was she asking him to back out of a fight he knew he could win? Until now, he had never lost a duel against anyone—his master being the sole exception. How could she think about fleeing? Max felt let down by her passive attitude.

"What are you saying? If we..." he trailed off. Jubelian was staring at him with teary eyes. His hesitation worsened when he recalled the night she had fallen asleep using incense. "I was so scared... I-I thought something might've happened to you," she had confessed.

Was she worried about him this time as well? Just like he usually did when they were faced with a conflict, Max decided to let her win again.

"We will go back, then," he sighed. She gave him a soft smile in response.

"Where do you think you're going? Do you think I'll let you?" Mikhail taunted from afar.

Max clenched his jaw upon seeing the other man's crazed expression. Then, he smirked, recognizing that he could take care of the bastard once and for all. He could tell Mikhail possessed some skill in swordsmanship, but it was nothing Max couldn't deal with. Choosing to behead him, Max moved to draw his sword once again. However, Jubelian grabbed his hand tightly.

"Stop the nonsense, Mikhail. I won't tolerate your loathsome acts any longer," she cautioned.



I honestly didn't know where the courage to say such a thing came from, but one thing was clear: I didn't want Max to get hurt because of me. No matter how strong he was, he couldn't possibly fight against all of the marquis' knights.

As expected, Mikhail doubted my words. "'Tolerate?' Jubelian, are you

putting trust in that commoner of yours and letting him act all high and mighty?”

Although I was indescribably frightened just moments ago, I didn't feel scared anymore. It was strange. Perhaps it was because Max was with me. Telling myself everything would be okay since I wasn't alone, I glared at Mikhail.

“Do you think that man alone can stand against my family's knights?” he jeered.

“And you believe that your knights will be able to triumph against mine?” I shot back.

Mikhail froze in place at my goading, shifting his attention to Max. “You... have you not come alone?”

“Of course I—” Max began to answer proudly, but I interrupted him by pinching his hand. I was fortunate to stop him before he could say anything. His face crumpled and he stared at me in annoyance. How could he have no common sense?!

“Of course he didn't come alone!” I quickly interjected. “Think logically. Would you have done such a thing?”

As if he was coming back to his senses, Mikhail's amethyst eyes lost their frenzy. Now that I had slowed him down, I could make him apologize for what he had done.

“I would come alone,” Max suddenly muttered under his breath. I scowled at him. From the moment of his appearance, he had done nothing to help me.

In any case, I was afraid that Mikhail had heard that quiet admission of his, so I spoke again in haste. “It's true that I've caused a ruckus here today, so I'll be grateful if you would just let us go in peace.”

I couldn't lie—I was afraid of what he would say next, but I kept my head held high as I awaited his answer.

“Get out of here,” Mikhail snarled through clenched teeth.

Thank the heavens.

Letting out a sigh of relief, I finally released Max's hand. He lifted me into his arms and scowled at Mikhail.

“If you dare to do such a thing like this again... I will behead you,” he threatened.

Was he afraid of nothing? Worried that an assassin might be sent to Max's residence, I glared at Mikhail menacingly. Maybe he was actually



intimidated because he stayed in place and didn't follow us. His eyes, however, never left mine until I turned away.



Watching as the two walked away, Mikhail sulked. Vexed and anguished, he couldn't believe Jubelian had let a commoner lift her into his arms. In fact, she hadn't even hesitated to jump toward him! Clenching his fists, Mikhail imagined punching the uncouth man to death. Then, he would retrieve Jubelian and lock her in his house forever.

If he did so, however, he knew her father would never leave him be. Mikhail stood still, his eyes shining with the need for revenge. He wholeheartedly believed that there was a way he could make her his again.



I quietly removed my arms from around Max's neck once Mikhail was out of sight. "Hey, could you let go of me now?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"You were just about to fall."

He was right, but that had mostly been because of my cumbersome attire. "I'm not hurt anywhere, so you can let me down now," I persisted, but he remained adamant. I sighed, giving up. Still, I was eternally grateful that I was able to return safely.

"Jubelian!" a voice called.

"Lady Floyen!"

From far away, I could see Marilyn and Geraldine waiting for me. Slightly embarrassed, I gave up on giving up, turning to Max once more. "Please let me down," I requested. My cheeks were probably flushed because I could feel them getting hot.

He gazed at me for a moment before finally acquiescing, carefully putting me down. I tried to take small steps. It didn't seem like I had sprained my ankle since it only ached a little bit. I was considering getting a relaxing massage to help when Max suddenly pushed an arm out toward me.

"Hold onto me," he said. Smiling, I linked my arm with his. It was definitely easier to walk like this.

We reached the carriage in no time. Looking worried, Marilyn welcomed us. "My lady, what happened there? Your dress has been crumpled..."

I didn't want to make her panic, so I answered calmly. "Oh, this was just a byproduct of me making a mess in that mansion."

Geraldine cut in. "You did what to the marquis' estate?"

I looked up to see that his eyes were trembling. "Yes. Um... the whole family was under the impression that I was still dating Mikhail, so I made sure to correct their misconceptions," I said nonchalantly.

However, Marilyn began to sob as soon as I finished speaking. "I-It was my fault for getting myself involved in your affairs, my lady. I was concerned I might have put you in a difficult position."

I had predicted how the marchioness would react, so she hadn't been of much concern. The only unforeseen variable in all this was Mikhail. Thanks to him, the fact that I had made it out of the estate alive became an extremely fortunate event. I began to wonder if he would try to pull off a similar scheme sometime again, but then I realized I would have to explain all of this to my father. He was likely to hold this incident against me.

I went over the preparations I had made just in case I would get kicked out of the house without notice. There was a chance that Father might ask me to leave once I came of age, but I wasn't worried since I had gathered enough funds that I could survive independently for a while. As for Mikhail, he would meet the princess and fall in love with her before then. My coming-of-age ceremony was about three months away—if I would even have one. Until then, I needed to bear with the difficulties of my relationship with my father.

"Didn't I say that Jubelian isn't one to be pushed around by anyone?" Geraldine laughed, suddenly applauding. I didn't think he meant his comment as a compliment, but at this moment, it somehow sounded encouraging.

"How long are you going to stand there?" Max asked. I looked up to see that he looked dissatisfied.

Giving him a nod, I got on the carriage. "We'll go now," I said. "Marilyn, get on."

However, Marilyn simply stared at me for a moment before she hurried to occupy the seat next to the coachman. "I'll sit here for the ride, milady!" she announced.

I didn't understand why she was doing such a thing. It was bound to be uncomfortable for her.

I was scrutinizing her, confused, when Max called out to me. "Here," he

said. I turned to see that he was holding his hand out toward me. I grabbed his outstretched hand and, with his help, boarded the carriage.

He sat across from me and gazed out the window. Looking at him, a warm feeling engulfed my heart. It was because of him that I had been able to return safely. When Mikhail had chased after me, I didn't think that anyone could help me.

Since I was aware of my past and the alternate ending it had brought, I had assumed that I would be alone in this version of my life as well. That was why I didn't dare to think anyone would come looking for me. Nevertheless, Max had saved me. Even though he could have been put in a perilous position if something were to go wrong, he helped me anyway.

Feeling grateful but somewhat awkward at the same time, I looked down at my hands as they sat on my lap, studying the back of them. That was when Max asked, "How is your ankle?"

"Oh, it's fine," I answered. Then, I looked up to notice that he was now facing me. Seeing that I had his attention, I decided to talk about something that had been bothering me. "Max."

"What is it?"

"Thank you for today. You saved me from a dangerous situation." He turned his head, choosing to stare out the window instead of reacting to me. I watched him for a moment longer before continuing. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

Slowly, he turned back to meet my gaze. "Go ahead," he urged. I could tell he was looking forward to what I was going to say.

I deliberated for a moment before I decided to just blurt it out. After all, this wasn't something I could forget just because he had saved me.

"The handwriting on the letter you sent me looks exactly the same as the handwriting on the note from the crown prince," I said, looking straight into his eyes. "I would like to know what happened."



Max couldn't help but anticipate Jubelian's next statement when she claimed she had something to say. Her eyes were different than usual as they looked into his. He wondered if she was planning to confess, but the next few words that had come out of her mouth fell short of expectations. She was asking about the handwriting of the notes he had written!

He sat frozen for a moment since it hadn't occurred to him that he would be caught this way. Moreover, she was staring at him coldly, making him feel like he had done something terribly wrong.

"Jubelian, I..." He tried to begin an excuse, but had no idea what to say. He gritted his teeth, bracing himself for what was to come.

"Then I guess you are the sender of both the letter and the note," she confirmed. Max clenched his fists. She wasn't usually this quick-witted, so why was she being so sharp today? "How could you do such a thing to me?" she continued.

Max flinched at her reproachful tone. "I didn't intend to," he said. He had never been nervous to speak in front of anyone—not even the king—but now, he couldn't even face Jubelian. Her expressionless face was making it difficult for him to come up with a justification for his actions. "I just wanted to help set you at ease..."

He barely managed to verbalize the purpose of his offense, but she resolutely pressed him for more. "What do you mean by that?" She was like an angel raining judgment down upon him.

"You're terrified of the crown prince, so I wanted to approach with a friendly gesture," he added quietly.

She sighed. "A friendly gesture? Do you know how I felt when I realized how similar the two letters were? I was scared out of my mind. I was so frightened that I had goosebumps throughout my body."

Frightened... goosebumps... Max couldn't believe that she hated him this much. All of his energy left his body and he forfeited. "I'm sorry," he apologized. It was a desperate attempt to convince her that he had no ill intentions, but he didn't know how she would react.

He could already feel himself returning to those hopeless days of the past—she was probably going to ask him never to show himself in front of her again. The mere thought of parting with her forever charred his insides black. Still, there was no use for explanations if she had already made a decision.

Was this the end for them? Max lowered his head in despair.

"Well, I'm relieved at least. I was going to get angry if you had done that in malice... but if you just wanted to make me feel better, then I guess it's understandable."

Max looked up in disbelief only to discover that Jubelian was giving him a warm smile. Her lovely appearance made it impossible for him to take his

eyes off her. After a moment, he finally broke the silence.

“Are you... planning to forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” she echoed, puzzled. “Why would I have to do that? You haven’t done anything out of spite.” She looked unconcerned even after finding out that he was the crown prince. Grateful for her mercy, Max smiled.

She beamed in return and said, “Honestly, I did feel a little uncomfortable that you tried to act like the crown prince, but I think it’s fine now I’ve spoken to you about why you did so.”

“I tried to act like the crown prince?” Max asked, flabbergasted.

Jubelian nodded confidently. “I know it was a private letter, but it’s still a crime to impersonate the crown prince, you know. What if word got out and it somehow reached that maniac’s ears?! You wouldn’t be alive right now.”

Max finally lost his patience.



He stared at me with a frown for a moment before dropping his head. I regretted my decision for a moment—perhaps I had spoken too harshly, but I had only said these things so that he would be safe moving forward. Impersonating the crown prince was a very big deal, and I had to make sure he knew not to do it again. After all, I didn’t want someone who saved me from trouble today to be put in an unfavorable position later.

In any case, I decided I needed to change the topic after seeing how downtrodden he had become. “By the way, I noticed that the bag that the marchioness threw... had changed its course as it flew toward me. Was that you?” I asked. Max nodded, still quiet. “Oh, as expected! Honestly, after reading your letter and learning that you wouldn’t come back to me until I realized your value, I thought that you might be watching from somewhere.”

He flinched at my theory before raising his head. “That’s not it. I only followed you because I thought you would’ve realized how important I am by now.”

I was worried that I had annoyed him, but he talked like normal. “You’re right. I was about to tell you that today,” I joked. Then, as I observed him, I started to tell him something that I had been meaning to for a while now: “I just want to thank you again for today. If it weren’t for you... I might not be here right now.”

Turning to the window, Max replied, “Don’t think about going anywhere alone for a while. It’s dangerous.”

“I understand. From now on—”

“I’ll accompany you,” he interrupted. I was planning to tell him that I would remain vigilant and take more escorts with me whenever I decided to leave the house, but his claim caught me off guard. My head shot up in surprise to see that he was looking directly at me.

“There’s no need,” I said. “You’ve helped me so many times until now; you don’t have to do such a thing...” I trailed off. There was no way he meant what he had said romantically, but I had almost mistaken his words again.

He observed me for a moment. Then, he finally opened his mouth. “It doesn’t matter. I like you, Jubelian.”

His determined tone made the smile on my face turn upside-down in an instant. It was way too out of the blue. I blamed my ears for mishearing him. Max liked me?

Puzzling over why he would, I recalled the first time we met, the time I had offered him a contractual relationship, and how he had stuck up for me in front of my father. Then, I tied that in with what had happened today.

I had always considered the things that happened between the male lead and the female lead after the former would rescue the latter in stories rather cliché... until the very same thing had happened to me, that is.

Maybe I was exaggerating the true meaning of his admission in my head. He could’ve meant that he liked me as a friend, and I was just taking things to the next level without due cause. My efforts to understand his intentions were giving me a headache.

That was when I realized he was glaring at me. “Just so you don’t mistake my words, I meant that I am charmed by you,” he said, affirming my speculations in a rather threatening manner.

Why would anyone convey their affection in such a menacing way? And was he for real? This situation was a strange one. It was true that my heart had started pounding when he appeared out of nowhere and saved me from Mikhail, but...

there was a reason why clichés were so popular, and I was no exception to their thrall.

“I’ll give you anything you want. All you have to do is love me.”

I had said such things to Mikhail simply because he had reached out to me

once. In return for that small gesture, I had fallen in love with him, giving him everything. He could have shown a similar kindness to anyone, I had eventually realized. Even a stranger. Had my gratefulness developed into a fondness for him, or had I truly fallen in love with him at first sight?

Wearing a bitter smile, I looked up at Max. I wasn't sure if I liked him or not. Also, I had yet to escape the death flag awaiting me. I didn't want to start dating him with lukewarm feelings only to get him mixed up in my unfortunate fate as well.

I was contemplating what to do when he pushed for my response. "So, what's your answer?" he demanded. As if to intimidate me, his eyes were glowing with a dangerous light. I flinched and looked away immediately. Was that how he acted around someone he was charmed by?!

In any case, I managed to calm down from the shock of his frightening aura. "Hey, this is a little too sudden for me... could you give me some time to think?" I asked.

He stared at me for a while before slowly nodding. "Sure. Just one thing, though. We need to set a date."

I let out a sigh of relief at his agreeable attitude. I, too, believed it wasn't proper to lead him on and leave him without a reply for too long. "I will give you an answer after the princess's coronation ceremony," I decided.

There was a chance that Max might ask why, but that date was a very important one for me. If I managed to make it through that day without getting tangled up in some trouble with the princess, I would be able to escape my death flag. Only after I avoided my ill fate would I be able to let go of the burden upon my shoulders, freeing me enough to give him a sincere answer—even if that meant our contractual relationship might end.

After nodding slowly, Max quickly turned his head back to face the window.

Did he really like me? Shouldn't he be looking at me with loving eyes right now if he did?

"You better not forget," he spat brusquely. I watched him for a moment before I flinched, realizing that he knew I was looking. "If you don't answer by then... I'll start doing as I please," he added.

His voice was certainly intimidating, but from what I could see, his skin was flushed all the way to his ears. I followed his gaze to see what he was staring at outside the window only to find my reflection peering beyond the glass.

No way. Did he really mean it, then? Feeling awkward, I averted my gaze and zipped my mouth shut. Then, I began thinking about what had happened today. I would need to tell my father about the incident... how was he going to react?

These days, he was determined to marry me off to the crown prince. I hoped he wouldn't get angry at me for causing another unforeseen occurrence or scold me for giving the other nobles another morsel of gossip. I was starting to get another headache as I agonized over my circumstances.

I didn't want to sleep, but my eyelids were growing heavy. I normally didn't fall asleep like this when I was with Max since I would rather be talking to him, but now...

The fatigue overcame me in the end. It was an exhausting day, after all.



Frankly, Max hadn't confessed knowing that Jubelian would reciprocate his feelings. He had lost his temper after hearing Jubelian slander the crown prince—slander him. The frustration that had built inside him had finally burst out. However, since she still hated the crown prince, it meant that she had not made the connection that it was his hidden identity.

It seemed like he had been watching her reflection in the window for an eternity. Realizing that she was drifting to sleep, he sighed. She didn't feel even a little tense in front of him? Turning around, he watched her head bob up and down for another moment before moving next to her and setting her head on his shoulder.

"I'm just doing this so you won't fall forward," he told her as she peacefully slept, his crimson eyes glued to her face.

She had long eyelashes, a sharp nose, and soft, pink lips. Suddenly feeling parched, Max swallowed dryly. Just then, she jerked in her sleep, rubbing her forearm against his.

"I guess it's actually because of these indecent desires of mine," he admitted quietly.



"Jubelian."

I jumped awake at the voice calling my name. Had I nodded off until now?



I couldn't believe it; no matter how tired I was, how could I drift to sleep in front of someone who had just confessed to me? I was embarrassed until I noticed that I had slept comfortably leaning against his shoulder! My God, how worse could I get? And when did he get so close to me?

Ashamed and startled, I leaped away from him. He furrowed his eyebrows slightly and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, i-it's nothing," I answered quickly. "I was just... a little surprised. That's all."

"Good thing you're awake now. We're here, so let's get off," he said, changing the subject and eyeing me coldly. His expression led me to wonder if everything I was remembering had been a dream. "Here," he reached his hand out to me.

"Oh, thank you." I took his hand without much thought. Then, I jumped when he locked his fingers with mine. "H-Hey! Your hand—"

He looked at our clasped hands in response but otherwise said nothing, focusing his attention forward immediately. I followed suit only to realize my father was standing nearby. It was a rare sight to have him come out to meet me. I wondered why he was doing such a thing when Max reminded me of something.

"You haven't forgotten about our contract, have you?" he muttered.

Suddenly, I remembered we were still bonded under a mutual agreement. "O-Oh, of course not. We'll act close since my father is right there!" I felt a little embarrassed because it felt like I had been the only one stirred by his confession. Max was acting as he usually did.

Just then, he turned to face me. I could see his crimson eyes trembling slightly. His face was a little pinker than usual, and he gently patted our clasped fingers. Then, the brief moment ended, and he avoided my gaze to look in front of him once again.

"Let's go," he said.

Knowing that someone cared about me was a strange feeling, but the warmth didn't last long because I was reminded of the cruelty of reality once I saw Father. As I proceeded to him with Max beside me, my father watched without a word. His expression was colder than usual, which made me tense up more and more with every minute that passed. Given my poor appearance, he was bound to interrogate me.

"Did anything happen at the marquis' estate?" He demanded when we approached.

Initially, I had planned to tell him the truth right away. Given his abilities, he was going to find out about the incident even if the marchioness tried to put a blanket over it. Now, however, I was afraid of how he might react and I couldn't say anything. I was rummaging through my brain for an idea when Max carefully stroked my hand, holding it tightly. I was embarrassed by the gesture, but for some reason, I felt as empowered as I had become during my argument with Mikhail.

Besides, what was going to happen? What had been done was already done, and Father couldn't kick me out since I wasn't of age yet. Feeling relaxed, I took a deep breath. "Yes," I admitted. "In fact, I completely screwed the place up."

Father's expression changed in a way that I hadn't expected. "Why?" he asked.

"The marchioness asked me to follow her to her estate. I said no, and she slapped my maid in return as if to scare me or something." Father remained silent. However, I continued to speak confidently. "No matter how much I thought about it, the marchioness must've assumed that I was still engaged to Mikhail. That was why I decided to let her know that we broke up for good."

"So, what have you done?" Father asked. He was probably worried about having to provide compensation for the damages, but I wasn't worried about revealing this aspect at all.

"I destroyed all the gifts I had given her previously, so it wouldn't be easy for her to ask for reparations."

"I see." My father nodded. Then, he began to laugh. It was truly a rare sight to behold. In any case, it looked like he was satisfied that I had gotten my revenge without much cost. Seeing how the conversation flowed smoothly, I felt at ease.

"You look ridiculous right now," he noted.

He wasn't willing to let go of the one other fact I still had yet to mention, but was I allowed to tell him what had happened with Mikhail? I began to worry that he would reproach me for not acting as a duke's daughter should since I had been unable to take care of the situation in a noble and ladylike way.

However, the reality of the situation seemed different. "It's okay, so tell me what it is," he encouraged. His expression and voice were warmer than usual, reassuring me. Perhaps that was why my admittance naturally flowed

from my mouth.

“The thing is, I met Mikhail there as well. He seemed ill and he said he was having trouble forgetting about me, so I spoke with him for a moment to make the parting a bit easier for him, but then he got angry at me all of a sudden. I started running...”

It was weird. Just moments ago, I had forgotten about what had happened, thinking of it as nothing more than my having an unlucky day, but the pain of the incident came rushing into me like a flood at that moment. Now there was a lump in my throat, and I couldn't continue speaking.

I hadn't been able to let Mikhail down, so I had run away instead. Father was going to think of me as a good-for-nothing daughter.

As I shed silent tears, Max grabbed my hand tightly and whispered, “Don't worry. I'll protect you.”

I wasn't crying because I was scared, but I couldn't even respond to him. I belatedly wiped the tears off my face, choosing not to cry like a weakling anymore.

That was when Father spoke up. “Jubelian.” I flinched and looked up in response to his cold voice. “I'll be back,” he said.

I had expected it, but I didn't think he would leave so soon. He was disappointed in me, just as I had expected him to be. It wasn't like I didn't know Father was a cold-hearted person, but the sorrow in me continued to grow nonetheless. The pledge I swore not to cry anymore disappeared in an instant as tears began anew. I knew he probably thought of me as worthless, but I couldn't believe he had left on such short notice.

Suddenly, a soft cloth touched my face. Thinking it was Max, I lifted my head, but to my astonishment, it was Father who had thought to dab away my tears. He was wearing an expression I had never seen on him before.

“How dare he make my daughter cry? I'm going to rip him into pieces,” he snarled.

For a moment, I stood in place, dazed at Father's unbelievable utterance. Then, I cleared my mind and grasped the situation. Father was mad because... of the people who bullied me?

A strange feeling possessed me.

Father gently wiped at the tear tracks from my cheeks with his thumb and said, “It won't take long.”

Before I had any other emotional reactions, I was seized by an ominous feeling. Father was on my side for some reason, but he was different from

usual. He looked like he had lost his temper. He might end up doing something that wouldn't even compare to what I had done. It was an absurd idea, but at the moment, it felt wholly possible.

Startled at the thought, I called out to him. "F-Father!" Unwilling to let him ignore me, I impulsively grabbed his sleeve.

He turned to me. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Frankly, I was still unsure. After all, our relationship as father and daughter was a rather awkward one. However, I was worried that if I let him go like this, he would really do as he had said.

"I-I... just..."

When I couldn't say anything, he sighed. "Let's go inside first," he said, taking the hand I used to hold onto his sleeve.

Suddenly, I was between Max and Father, both of my hands in one of theirs. A sense of relief rushed through me. Father wasn't mad at me in the end. That meant I wouldn't be scolded, right?

Just a moment ago, I was crying. It was strange indeed, but a smile now blossomed on my lips.



Was it because a lot had happened today, or was it because I was full? After dinner, I was completely exhausted. Feeling sleepy, I yawned without even realizing it.

"I think it would be best for you to get to bed now," Father commented.

"Okay," I answered, lethargic. Then, I looked up at him. His cold blue eyes stared back at me, but they didn't feel as burdensome and difficult as they usually did. "Thank you for today. About what happened... you were angry... for me," I said quietly.

My father nodded curtly. "It's only natural, so you don't have to thank me every time something like this happens."

Although he wasn't being very friendly, he truly felt like a father at this moment. From now on, perhaps I could grow a little closer to him and...

I was full of hope. My dream of becoming wealthy without having to work looked like it was getting closer to coming true.

That was when I caught Max staring at me intently. He wore no expression, but somehow, he reminded me of a puppy waiting to be praised.

"Thank you for saving me, Max," I said, indulging him.

“Of course,” he nodded. A smile suddenly spread across his once blank face. Really, how could he be so handsome? I tried not to be conscious of it, but after he had confessed to me, I couldn’t help but seek glimpses of his face. Soon, my cheeks grew hot, and my heart began pounding. It was true he had saved me from trouble today, but how could I like him so much already?!

If I continued on this trajectory, I would develop a massive crush on him, just as I had with Mikhail.

I hurriedly got up from my seat.

“Good night, Father,” I said. “And you too, Max.”

Afraid that Max might read my mind, I scurried out of the dining room.



Max, watching as Jubelian left, gritted his teeth.

Damn it. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

He had kept watching her, but Jubelian didn’t even pay any attention to him, likely because all her focus was devoted to his master.

Max had no intention of giving up, of course. If she forgot about his confession... he would just have to remind her every day. His determination blazed within him.

"Didn't you tell me that you were going to protect her?" his teacher asked him coldly. Max frowned and clenched his jaw tightly. Sure, he saved her, but he couldn't deny that the incident made Jubelian cry as soon as she got home.

He should’ve stopped that bastard from talking to her from the very start...

Max's regret was cut short by his master's voice once more. “Marquis Hessen is reputed to be a resourceful man, but in reality, he’s a sly one. Since he has inherited his father's disposition, Mikhail might also be planning a scheme.”

Max could immediately determine the answer his master wanted to hear. “From now on, I will never make Jubelian cry ever again,” he swore.

In response, his master glanced at him, his tone frigid. "You best ensure as such."

After his master left the dining room, disappearing from view, Max smirked wryly, his thoughts disgruntled. It was absurd of Regis to say

something like that when he opposed their relationship.

Max frowned. By the way, where did his master go? Did he head to the marquis' estate? Max clenched his fists and opened them, brutally cracking his knuckles in the process.

First, he needed to deal with the garbage lingering around this mansion.



Late in the evening, the marchioness complained to her husband after he had returned from his duties. "Honey," she began, "that girl, Jubelian. She's a bold one. She ruined all my clothes and pottery, saying it was okay because she was the one who had gifted them to me."

"They're not worth much anyway, are they?" the marquis answered dryly.

The marchioness raised her voice; her face crumpling. "You must be joking. Today I suffered because of that girl!"

Her husband sighed at those words and regarded his wife bitterly. "So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"That damned hussy hurt our sick son! Shouldn't we demand an apology from Duke Floyen?"

The marquis furrowed his eyebrows. "Don't you realize that asking them for an apology would only turn us into a laughingstock?" he asked, voice as cold as ice.

"I just can't believe what she's done! She's dating a lowly commoner after breaking up with Mikhail. That's a disgrace to our name!"

The marquis clenched his fists. The ancestors of the Hessen family were renowned swordsmen and had trained themselves to be excellent knights for generations. However, after the rise of the Floyen family, the Hessen-born knights had become obscured by the duke's shadow. Because Regis had become the commander of the imperial knights and commander-in-chief of the imperial army, the marquis had been pushed aside, relegated to second-in-command.

Regardless, no boys had been born in the Floyen household after Regis. The only direct heir remaining was Jubelian, who was ignorant of the sword.

When the marquis found out that Jubelian had begun chasing Mikhail around, the thought of being able to manipulate the duke as an in-law and the expectations he had of reclaiming the glory of his family's name had filled the nobleman's heart.

He had believed that the Hessens would become widely known as the best swordsmen in the empire by the time his son had come of age... if the marquis had known that his son was going to fall ill like this, he wouldn't have persuaded Mikhail into a relationship he didn't want.

How dare that girl belittle his family and make his son the villain?

The marquis' blood boiled with anger. He clenched his fists so tight that his veins bulged. Then, he slowly relaxed them and calmed his mind. He wanted to bring down the duke, but it was still too early.

"I had been planning to retaliate against that damned duke anyway, so there's no need to rush me," he told his wife.

The marchioness widened her eyes. "Is that true?"

Marquis Hessen smiled slyly. "Did you think I would just let those who had looked down on my family be? I'm digging for Duke Floyen's weakness, so just wait a little longer."

The marchioness's face brightened once he finished speaking. "As expected from you, honey."

Bang!

Suddenly, there came the sound of something breaking.

Surprised, the two ran out of the room, yelling, "What's going on?!"

They gaped open-mouthed in astonishment after discovering the cause of the ruckus. Trembling, the marchioness pointed at the entrance, precisely where the front door had been.

"L-Look there...!"

The marquis' estate was especially known for its monumental front entrance, which was related to the family's motto: 'Swordsmen, the gates of the Hessen family are large, but they are not easily traversed.'

However, that front door—prized by the Hessen family and a proud symbol of prestige—had disappeared without a trace. Stepping gracefully over the wreckage, a man loftily entered the mansion.

The marquis gritted his teeth and yelled, "Duke Floyen!"

At the sound of his name, the duke gave a small smile. "It's been a while, Marquis Hessen."

The duke had greeted them politely, but there was no way he would be welcomed since he was an uninvited guest who had damaged their property.

"What in the world do you think you're doing?! You're breaking and entering!"

"The door was locked," the duke answered calmly.

"How could anyone with common sense think to break the door to enter? This is trespassing! I will not overloo—"

Cutting off the marquis, Duke Floyen spoke coldly. "You sound awfully angry, Marquis Hessen."

No matter their status, the duke had trespassed. It was obvious that the marquis would be upset. Therefore, he had forgotten to speak formally. The marquis tried to justify his position but he couldn't say anything once he met the duke's eyes. Trembling, he recognized the terrible feeling that enveloped him. It was as if he was facing a beast unarmed.

"H-Honey!"

The marchioness called out to her husband, but Marquis Hessen continued to tremble in place, helpless when met with the duke's death stare.

"Snap out of it!" she screamed.

At that moment, Duke Floyen took something out of his pocket and threw it in front of the couple. After eyeing the object with suspicion, the marchioness picked it up. It was a pouch, and upon looking inside of it, her eyes grew wide.

"Wh-What is this?"

"I heard that my daughter had disrespected this household today. Would that be enough to serve as compensation?" the duke asked.

The jewels in the pouch were plentiful and valuable enough to purchase a mansion in the capital. Was the duke serious about this?

The marchioness nodded eagerly, rejoicing at the unforeseen prosperity that had come her way. With this, she would be able to live extravagantly for a while—and still have some left over!

Bang!

Startled by the sudden noise, she dropped the bag containing the jewels. Then, she screamed at the terrible sight before her.

A wall nearby, which had been intact just a moment ago, had been destroyed. Duke Floyen had broken the wall with his bare fist.

He wore an eerie smile. "I've put in a generous amount to serve as compensation, so I would like to continue what my daughter had been unable to finish."



After Jubelian left, Mikhail had drunk himself to intoxication again,



cursing her until he fell asleep. Still, he had no choice but to open his eyes at the noise that came from downstairs since it had shaken his fatigued body awake.

Bang!

What was all the fuss about? His head throbbed from the hangover, but Mikhail vigorously shook away the pain and got up to locate the source of the commotion. He staggered through his bedroom door and headed for the staircase where the noises were coming from. The lingering tipsiness disappeared in an instant when he saw that the marble staircase he had used just yesterday had nearly broken in half.

What in the...

Mikhail wondered if this was real or if he was just seeing things again. Then, another roar resounded.

Bang!

Were his mother and father okay? Mikhail hurried to the noise. Concern for his parents grew as he spotted the destruction of the front door and the exterior walls of the building.

Where were they?!

That was when he heard a pleading voice coming from the direction of the dining room.

"Please! I beg you to stop!"

It was his mother. Whoever dared to intimidate his mother... he would never let them go!

Indignant, Mikhail opened the door to the dining room. What he found had him halting in shock. A man stood before him with elegance, unlike his frightened parents, sister, and servants. They were cowering before the intruder, begging for their lives.

"Y-Your Grace! Please don't be angry with us!" the people of the estate beseeched.

"Y-You are..." Mikhail rasped.

Hearing Mikhail's voice, the man slowly turned his head. Deep inside his calm blue eyes, fury raged a tumult. "Mikhail Albert Hessen," he recited.

Mikhail flinched and then bowed. "Your Grace," Mikhail greeted, "it has been a while since we have last seen each other."

Normally, permission would have been granted to raise his head following his greeting, but Duke Floyen remained silent.

Did Jubelian snitch on what had happened earlier? A cold sweat ran down

his back, but Mikhail knew he had nothing to feel guilty about since he hadn't done anything to her.

"Your parents are praying on their knees, but I see that you're still being proud," the duke said.

Mikhail swallowed dryly at the piercing voice and how it made his blood curdle. He could tell without raising his head that Duke Floyen was looking down at him with menace in his eyes.

"Marquis Hessen, I heard that you had once mocked me, saying that I was merely a murderer who had gotten lucky, appropriate for these times."

The marquis had jabbered about that insult at a private party while he was drunk. The fact that the duke was aware of it gave him goosebumps. "Th-That is—I don't know where you heard that, but whoever told you must be setting up a scheme against me!" the marquis denied urgently.

The duke shook his head cynically. "No, you were right. In fact, I'm even suppressing the urge to kill at this very moment."

At that revelation, everyone kneeling before the duke froze in place. It was probably because they had all just witnessed his power; he was strong enough to destroy the mansion with his bare hands.

If such a monster was determined to kill them... then they would all be annihilated!

The members of the estate were terrified, but the duke continued without paying them any mind. "I know how all of you have been treating my daughter," he said. "The only reason I tolerated it was because it was what Jubelian wished." Clenching one fist, he struck the long table. The table split into two with a loud thud, prompting everyone to quiver in fear. "However, after seeing how all of you conceited fools are trying to manipulate her, I have reached the limit of my patience."

Everyone prostrated themselves in response to the frightening atmosphere. They were afraid that they would be harmed if they even made eye contact with him.

"This is your final warning. Do not contact my daughter anymore. If you do, it will cost you more than your home," the duke concluded. Then, he leisurely walked out of the estate.

Even after he left, the marquis' family could not raise their heads—except for one person.

Mikhail seethed. Was the duke telling him to give up on her so easily? Memories spent with Jubelian flashed through his mind. She was a woman

who had always yearned for him.

"I love you, Mikhail," she would always say out of the blue. Her snow-white skin, shimmering silver hair, cherry lips, and sweet smile could all belong to him, but the duke was telling him to give her up.

His anger spiraled out of control. Hilarious! What right did that man have to order him around?

Mikhail stared hard at the floor with his bloodshot eyes before slamming his fist into the marble.

"Mikhail! What in the world is wrong with you?" his mother wept, but Mikhail didn't listen. He continued destroying the floor.

"Dear Brother! Please stop!" Giselle cried, joining her mother, but he ignored her, too. The marquis decided to step up in the end.

"I understand that you're angry, but didn't you just see what happened?" the marquis prompted. "He's a monster—he was even aware of what I had said while I was drunk. We have no choice but to remain patient for now!"

As the pain in his knuckles grew dull, Mikhail burst into laughter, cackling like a madman. Everything was pathetic—his father, who was only a marquis and the second-in-command, as well as his mother and sister, who secretly looked down on and harassed Jubelian.

And... Mikhail himself, who had no choice but to bow to the duke in helplessness.

Once again, he punched the floor. Despite his bloodstained knuckles, he didn't feel any pain.

"I will bring ruin upon the duke..." Mikhail pledged, glaring at his astonished father, "...and retrieve what was mine."



Regis scoured his surroundings once he returned to the mansion. He noted that it seemed like Max had taken care of everything. Then, he made his way to Jubelian's room without a sound.

Was she sleeping? He searched for his beloved daughter for a moment only to find that she had buried herself in blankets. Her eyes were closed. To his surprise, however, she was grinding her teeth in her sleep.

Grinding her teeth, huh...

"Mikhail, you bastard..." she began to mutter. "This isn't the end."

Regis smiled faintly.

He remembered that when she was a child, she would reach out with her tiny hands for a hug, and he would gently embrace her, all the while afraid that she might break. "Daddy!" she would cry.

Such memories were still vivid in his mind, but in reality, Jubelian was approaching adulthood.

Where had the time gone?

On the days he would return from slaughtering countless lives, he would suffer from insomnia, if not nightmares. "Dear Moon," his daughter would then sing, "please give my daddy a warm hug and take away his nightmares."

Despite the clumsy nature of her lullaby, it was the only thing that would put him to sleep. She was a haven he didn't deserve.

He gazed at Jubelian with tender eyes for a moment. Gently sweeping aside her messy hair, which had sprawled out across the bed, he murmured, "I would do anything for you."

Suppressing some indistinct fear within him, he tried to turn around. Suddenly, Jubelian took him by the wrist.

"Don't go," she murmured. Regis stood still, startled by her soft voice. "Daddy, don't... Don't go..."

After hastily observing her face, Regis smiled bitterly. She was still talking in her sleep. He wondered if she knew that a single word from her could condemn him to hell or send him to heaven in an instant. He didn't want her to remember the past, but at the time, he wanted her to run to him as freely as she used to.

He realized he was a hideous and greedy fool to want such a thing.

Holding back the words he wanted so desperately to say, Regis slowly withdrew his hand from hers. He convinced himself of what must be done.

Yes. This was all for her.



"Jubel."

Before me was a scene of Father standing toward me with his arms open. I didn't know what I was so excited about, but I was giggling as I jumped into his arms. How I addressed him brought chills to my spine.

"Daddy!" I called. I never remembered calling him that endearment. Absurdly, I settled upon his shoulders, riding them and yelling, "Giddyup!"

Maybe it was because I was interacting with Father so familiarly—which

had never happened before—but I was in a good mood.

Soon, the screen flashed red, and the scenery changed.

I was not the same joyful kid I once had been. Instead, I was crying—terrified of something.

"No! Stay away! I'm scared!" I shrieked. Surprisingly, the person I was vehemently rejecting was Father. What was even more astonishing, however, was the way he looked at me. Anguish marred his expression—it was a rare sight to see upon such a cold-hearted person.

"I'm sorry," he said, forcing a smile. Then, he turned his back toward me.

Only then did I realize my mistake.

No, that wasn't what I meant. Don't go.

Please, don't leave me.

I tried to follow him, but my body didn't listen, and he moved further and further away.

No, Daddy—don't go!

Everything turned black.



I opened my eyes only to find that my head was throbbing and tears were running down my cheeks. Why was I crying? I must've had a really bad nightmare if I ended up crying like this, but strangely enough, I couldn't remember anything.

In any case, it looked like I woke up earlier than usual today. The dawn was faintly visible, teasing the still-dark sky. I contemplated whether or not to go back to bed for a moment before deciding I would try living like a morning person for today.

After getting up, I clasped my hands together to stretch my arms and shoulders. Suddenly struck by a sense of *deja vu*, I involuntarily looked at my hands. Light from outside shone through the gaps between my fingers. I slowly lowered them and opened the window to let in the fresh morning air.

Max had confessed yesterday... and Father had stood up for me. A lot of things had happened all of a sudden, but I had a feeling things would all work out for the best.

Just like that, a new day began.



After listening to the report from Count Pyrex, the captain of the royal guards, the emperor questioned his aide with a bitter face.

"So, you're saying that the ones I sent to spy upon the duke have gone missing?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Did he kill them?"

The count shook his head. "The contact had been lost after yesterday's report, which had said that the duke had left the mansion for some unknown business."

"What about the knights?"

"The spies reported that the most skilled of the knights had not left the mansion."

Even the most talented swordsmen had been unable to identify these informants in the past. That meant that the person who had dealt with the agents had to be extremely gifted. The emperor's expression contorted.

Damn it. Who was it? Did the duke ally with another faction?

As his nerves engulfed him, the door to his study swung open.

"Good morning, Father!"

Adding to the turmoil was his son who had barged in without notice. The emperor's face crumpled.



Max stared quietly at the man kneeling before the emperor. It was Count Pyrex, commander of the royal guards. As the emperor's royal servant, the nobleman was infamous for doing anything and everything for his lord.

The way the spies swung their swords yesterday was similar to how that man tended to wield his.

Last night, after his master had left, Max had eliminated the spies lingering around the duke's mansion—sparing only one to gain information.

"Why are we doing this? Well, the only thing I can tell you is that if I don't return to the palace, my master will heighten his efforts to persecute the duke," the captive had said, threatening Max instead of confessing the truth. Regardless, he was able to obtain a hint from what had been said. There were only a few people in the empire who would dare to persecute Duke Floyen, and the most influential among them was...

Max stared at his father, who was looking down at him from the throne.

“I see that you’re not wearing your armor today. What’s the occasion?” he asked.

Grinning, Max answered, “Ah, I’m having it checked for damages.”

“What a pity. How long would it take for you to get it back?”

“About three days, I presume.”

Narrowing his eyes, the emperor observed his son. It was indeed strange to think that he would walk around with his face revealed for three whole days.

It was not an exaggeration to say that the crown prince resembled the emperor only in his hair and eye color. The prince had likely inherited his handsome appearance from the late empress. Still, this was only an evaluation coming from those who knew what the prince looked like. The emperor’s thoughts were quite different; he believed he was the source of the prince’s most attractive features.

If the grand chamberlain next to him could read the emperor’s mind, he would have tutted. In any case, such was impossible, and the emperor was free to contemplate seriously.

It could complicate things if Max’s handsome face managed to lure a woman from a powerful family. The emperor was planning to reign for several more decades, which meant he couldn’t let his son grow in power. After all, there was no guarantee that Max would remain calm while aware of the fact that he wouldn’t be sitting on the throne for many more years to come.

The moderates would want him to get married, so the emperor just needed to find a girl from a family no one knew.

Having made the decision, the emperor smiled and said, “Come to think of it, during the victory banquet...”

“What about it?”

“Was there anyone that caught your eye?”

Max was about to give a denial, but then Jubelian came to mind. She had more than just caught his eye, however. What Max was worried about was that she had no interest in him. A bitter taste filled his mouth.

In all honesty, Max wanted to force the arranged marriage that Jubelian had misunderstood, but... if he chose to do that, she would hate him.

He wanted to win her heart. Therefore, he decided he wouldn’t do anything that might earn her hatred. With these thoughts in mind, Max

answered, “No one in particular.”

The emperor smiled in satisfaction. This was the first time in a while his son had given him a favorable answer. “I see,” he said. “I agree that it wouldn’t hurt to take your time. You’re still young.”

Max smirked. Still young? Frankly, he wasn’t surprised his father was blabbering such nonsense. He was 22-years-old, which meant—according to the empire’s standards—that he was at the best age to marry.

Normally, parents within noble families would search for a marriage partner for their children even before their coming-of-age ceremony. The emperor showing such a reaction meant that he was trying to delay the marriage, or rather, hinder Max from gaining power.

His father’s motivations were as transparent as glass. Despite seeing through them, Max played the immature son. “I agree,” he said. “I want to live freely for now.”

Hearing the answer he had wanted, the emperor smiled again. Thanks to the empress, he had been able to establish and maintain his power without being threatened by Max. Now, the only thing he had to do was act like he was eventually going to give the throne to either one of them.

“Keep living freely like that,” the emperor urged silently. “I will spare your life as long as you live as a figurehead under me.”

“By the way, Beatrice’s coming-of-age ceremony is just around the corner,” Max noted.

The emperor was about to affirm that observation without much thought, but then he began planning another scheme. He realized he could benefit quite a bit from the girl. She didn’t possess any excellent abilities—unlike Max, who was an excellent swordsman and, therefore, a threat—but she nevertheless carried value. He decided his daughter could be married off for a profitable relationship across the border—for an alliance, perhaps. He had been racking his brain about what to do to establish a smooth relationship with Lagon anyway. It wouldn’t be too bad if he welcomed their newly crowned king as his son-in-law.

Having solved that troublesome issue, the emperor laughed heartily. “Indeed, the coronation ceremony is soon! Isn’t there about a week until then?”

“Nine days to be exact,” Max corrected, and the emperor nodded in agreement.

“Yes. Since it’s a big celebration, I would like to invite those outside the



kingdom as well. The more the merrier, isn't that right?" he rambled on. Then, he called out: "Grand Chamberlain."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Have you sent an invitation to Lagon?"

"Yes, invitations were sent to all the neighboring countries, including Lagon."

His aide's answer pleased him. "We will need to treat their envoys with the utmost respect since we are forming a new relationship with them."

"I will keep that in mind and relay the message to the servants, Your Majesty."

Knowing his face was exposed because he wasn't wearing his helmet, Max struggled to control his expression—barely managing to suppress a snicker. It was just as he had expected. Sooner or later, the emperor would discuss the matter of Beatrice's marriage with the empress and mention the idea of marrying the princess off to Lagon's king. In such a circumstance, it was evident that the empress would protest. After all, her goal had been to raise her grandson to sit on the throne; everything would become meaningless if Beatrice was deprived of her succession rights.

In this empire, a woman was allowed to pass the right of succession to her children as long as she was an immediate member of the royal family. However, if she were to marry the ruler of a foreign country, she would be deprived of that privilege.

This meant that the empress and the emperor would be so busy arguing with each other that they would leave Jubelian alone for a while. It didn't matter to Max whether they attacked the duke or not, but if Jubelian were to be involved, he wasn't going to let either of them survive.



Time seemed to pass more slowly than usual. Maybe it was because I had woken up so early. I couldn't believe it was still only two in the afternoon.

How could a day be so long? I was lamenting over this when Father spoke. We were in the middle of having tea.

"The coronation ceremony is soon," he commented.

The royal princess's coming-of-age ceremony—a major event that I had tried so hard to avoid after regaining my memories of my previous life—was fast approaching. Nevertheless, my mind was at peace. Even though I had

made enemies with the marquis' family, it was a good thing for the princess since I wouldn't stand in her way as an obstacle. I had saved up enough money as well. I glanced at my father without an answer.

Meeting my eyes, he asked, "Have you ordered a dress?"

I nodded. "Yes, I have."

I had learned my lesson from the victory banquet. It was best to stay quiet and unnoticed in the palace. The place was like a jungle full of beasts, and for that reason, I had picked an unremarkable color for my dress again. To avoid repeating the same mistake from last time, I had asked the seamstress to refrain from using shiny decorations. When the preparations were finished at least, they were perfect in my eyes.

Resting my chin against my hand, I gazed at Father. Then, I realized I would be entering the banquet with him this time as well. Our relationship had undergone many changes over time. Before, I never could've imagined entering a hall hand-in-hand with him.

I took a sip of the tea. For some reason, it was more fragrant today, boasting a sweeter finish. As expected, flavored tea was the best.

As I relished my beverage, Father suddenly spoke up. "What are your thoughts on the crown prince?" he asked.

His question soured my tranquil mood. The impact of his query was so great that I almost spit out my tea. I barely managed to swallow the hot liquid, but some went down the wrong way, prompting me to cough uncontrollably.

"Jubel? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm—" I began to answer, but then I stopped. Jubel? Had he just called me by my nickname? I had heard from Derrick—he was the one who frequently told me stories of my late mother—that she used to call me by that nickname. It just felt unfamiliar because Father had never addressed me that way.

Deciding that I probably imagined it, I lowered my eyes in embarrassment. However, he kept his attention fixed on me.

"Why aren't you saying anything, Jubel? Do you have a sore throat?"

"N-No. It's just..." I was already shocked that he had asked me about my opinion of the crown prince out of the blue, but he had made it worse by addressing me by my nickname. In any case, I decided to conceal my thoughts and change the subject. "I don't know where the cough came from. I guess the seasons are changing. It's a been little chilly these days—"

“Call Allen,” Father ordered, directing the servant by his side before I had even finished speaking. I was once again taken aback by his extremely protective behavior. I was only saying that the weather had gotten a little cool!

Then, he reached out to me. “Come on, I’ll help you up to your room,” he said. I sighed in embarrassment; he was treating me like a critically ill patient.

Suddenly, he placed his hand on my forehead. “You don’t seem to have a fever.”

I didn’t know why, but he looked and sounded anxious.

“I’m fine,” I answered, taking his hand. Only after his warmth had seeped into my palm did I realize something: I had always denied it, but subconsciously, I craved his attention. It brought me joy whenever he showed me that he cared about me.

As the warmth spread, doubts began to pervade me. Was this really the same novel that I had read in my previous life? By now, I should be isolated and suffering from loneliness, but the people around me—including Father—were treating me differently, dismantling my expectations. There was someone who even liked me...

“It doesn’t matter. I like you, Jubelian.”

A bitter smile crossed my lips. None of this changed the reality wherein Father had abandoned me. I slowly pulled my hand out of his grasp.

“Jubelian?” he asked.

The only thing left was to survive the princess’s coronation ceremony. If nothing happened then...

I gave Father a smile. “It’s nothing,” I assured him.

Then, I could start living without being restricted by the horrendous future that haunted my memories.



## Can I Be a Little Jealous?

Feeling buoyant, Beatrice headed to the emperor's study. He had asked her to have tea together. She didn't know why her father had made such an arrangement, so she was a bit worried, but her light steps showed that she was excited above all.

"Welcome, Beatrice," the emperor greeted. "Sit down."

Beatrice felt a sense of relief. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Once tea was served, Beatrice gracefully raised her cup. The emperor praised her as he watched. "How graceful of you. You must be the finest lady of this empire."

"I'm honored." Despite her humble reply, Beatrice was rejoicing inside. Her father was finally paying attention to her.

In accordance with her hopes, the emperor asked, "So, my dear, have you decided on a partner for your coronation ceremony?"

"Actually... I have yet to do so." There was bitterness in her voice. Earlier, Beatrice had an argument with her mother about who her partner should be.

"Didn't I tell you to ask Marquis Hessen's eldest son already?" her mother had scolded her. "Do you know how uncommon it is for a man to possess such swordsmanship and status?"

Normally, she would've followed her mother's commands without question, but there was a good reason for Beatrice's refusal. It would've been better to stand alone than to partner with someone who used to date Jubelian. Although she was disobeying her mother's orders, Beatrice didn't want to insult Jubelian. Therefore, she had no intention to submit to her mother's will.

How would Jubelian react upon discovering that Beatrice was the royal princess? Smiling faintly, she mused on the possibilities.

"I agree that there are no men in this empire worthy enough to be your partner," the emperor quipped.

The corners of Beatrice's lips rose, pleased. She was surprised to realize her father had a side like this. It was her first time seeing him treat her so warmly. Until now, he always remained distant and uncaring toward his children. Perhaps it was his prolonged neglect that allowed the minuscule attention he now gave her to take effect as strongly as it did.

It would've been better if she could enter the banquet hall with her father... but he wouldn't agree to that, would he?

He gave her a friendly grin. "In fact, I was thinking I could arrange a partner for you," he suggested.

This was basically contrary to what she had been thinking. Suppressing her disappointment, Beatrice smiled. "Ah, of course."

At his daughter's meek reply, the emperor looked satisfied. "How about the newly throned king from Lagon? I hear that he's a handsome man."

Beatrice's expression hardened. Her father was asking her to partner with a man a decade older than her.

When she remained silent, the emperor frowned slightly. He knew that the empress would ignore him and simply change the subject if he had brought this matter up with her, so he invited Beatrice instead, hoping that she could convince her mother. As the girl's silence continued, however, his mood grew foul. What was this? Was she rebelling against him?

He glared at Beatrice with fierce eyes. She parted her lips as if to speak for a moment, only to close them once again.

Beatrice wanted to protest, but she had already guessed her father's intentions. After all, Lagon had been causing trouble by the southern border for a long time. It was obvious that her father would try to use the banquet as an opportunity to establish a friendly relationship with them.

Still, this wasn't just any ordinary banquet. This was a once-in-a-lifetime

coronation ceremony and her debut into the social world. Beatrice didn't want to partner with or flatter a man much older than her on such an important day.

Moreover, she had heard that Lagon's culture was very different from the empire's and that most men were lechers. A normal father wouldn't dare to show his daughter to a man from Lagon, but it seemed like her father didn't care about her or her coming-of-age ceremony. Beatrice had been aware of this, but this conversation served as a cruel reminder.

Hot tears welled up in her eyes. Heartbroken, all Beatrice wanted to do was burst into cries. Nevertheless, she suppressed her bitter feelings. She knew how her father would react the instant she allowed him to witness her dismay. Instead of speaking her mind, she deflected. "I'm sorry, but I actually have someone I'm thinking of taking."

"And who's that?" the emperor asked. He was planning to force her to partner with Lagon's king anyway if the man she had in mind happened to be a nobody.

Enduring her father's stare head-on, Beatrice felt heavily burdened. Her claim had been impulsive, so she didn't know how to respond. She didn't actually have anyone in mind, but if she answered with a random name, she was bound to be coerced into entering the banquet hall with Lagon's king. Moreover, she would be putting her father in an unfavorable mood. She didn't want to walk hand-in-hand with a potential philanderer who was a decade older than her or give him her first dance. She had no intention of currying favor with him whatsoever. Absolutely not.

Enveloped in a terrible feeling, Beatrice squeezed her eyes shut. Then, someone flashed across her mind—someone even her father wouldn't be able to disagree with.

"I-It's my brother!" she blurted.

The emperor frowned at the unexpected answer. As far as he knew, those two weren't on good terms... he was confused at first. Then, he smirked. This was perfect, actually. His son was likely to introduce Beatrice to the king of Lagon just to irritate the empress.

Having resolved all of his issues, the emperor nodded agreeably. "I see. He hasn't decided on a partner either, so I'll talk to him about it."

Relief only lasted for a moment for Beatrice. She suppressed her desire to scream when she realized what she had done. She had gone mad. What was she thinking, saying that she was going to partner with that scum?!

Regardless, the emperor grinned. “I must say that Maximillian is a handsome man—just like me. Now that he has a beautiful partner as well, many maidens will be heartbroken at the sight of the two of you entering the banquet!”

Beatrice suddenly felt sick to her stomach. Despite feeling nauseous, however, she forced a smile.



Awash with displeasure, Max thought about his stepsister’s banquet. It was going to take place in a few days. Although he hadn’t planned on attending, he was worried about other noblemen approaching Jubelian during the event. The faces of countless men who had been lingering around her drifted through his head. The one that bothered him the most was Duke Elios’ son, whom his master had mentioned.

He needed to be there. That man could try to pull something in his absence...

In all honesty, Max wanted to be her partner and stay by her side throughout the day, but if he did so, she would inevitably find out that he was the crown prince. He couldn’t show up to the banquet wearing a mask this time.

He was wondering how he could hide his identity for the ball when a servant suddenly knocked on the door to his room. “Your Highness, His Majesty has sent a message,” the servant announced.

Max wrinkled his face at the mention of the emperor. At the same time, he was curious. Why would his father send a formal message like this? Shouldering an ominous feeling, he opened the door and asked, “What is it?”

The servant stared forward blankly. The crown prince wasn’t wearing his usual helmet, allowing his striking features to shine. Then, realizing the servant had behaved disrespectfully, he bowed in haste. “O-Oh, it—it’s... th-this is the message, Your Highness.”

Max took the parchment. “And what is this supposed to be?” he snarled.

Watching the crown prince crumple up the letter without even reading, the servant swallowed nervously. To make it worse, the prince was giving him a death glare. “H-Her Highness Lady Beatrice has requested Your Highness to partner with Her Highness for the banquet. His Majesty has

already accepted her wishes,” the messenger reported with a shaky voice.

Max realized what had happened and smirked. His father must’ve coerced Beatrice into helping him fulfill his plan. Max had assumed that the emperor and the empress were going to deal with this issue themselves. He hadn’t expected things to go this way.

Still, even if the means had changed, the result was the same for him and that was all that mattered. Frankly, he could refuse if he wanted to, but he had a good reason for accepting Beatrice’s request. Thanks to her, it would be easier for him to monitor what could happen during the banquet. Beatrice was likely to spend time with Jubelian, which meant he would be able to approach the lady without arousing the emperor and empress’s suspicions.

Beatrice being useful to him... that was a first.

“I see,” Max responded, suddenly feeling better. “I’ll gladly accept my lovely sister’s request to be her partner for her coronation ceremony.”



Beatrice almost passed out in shock when she received her stepbrother's reply from the servant. "He did what now? Maximillian accepted the request? Is that true?"

"Yes. His Highness also said he would be preparing a wonderful gift for the ceremony and that you are welcome to look forward to it."

Chills ran down her back. Th-That devilish man was going to give her a present? What the hell was he trying to give her? Given his cruel nature, it was unlikely to be a normal gift. Her head throbbed. She regretted what she had said to her father earlier in the day. Thinking about her uncaring parents and having to enter the banquet hall with her stepbrother almost made Beatrice want to cancel the event altogether. If she really could, she wouldn't host such an event.

Just then, she was reminded of a certain graceful lady.

"Okay," Jubelian had said. "Take care and see you in two weeks."

Beatrice managed to convince herself to hold out until the ceremony by thinking about her friend. However, she still had a minor problem. She didn't know why, but Maximillian had definitely been strange that day.

She gritted her teeth as she recalled how her abominable stepbrother had behaved in front of the lovely Jubelian. Hoping to avoid a repeat of that, she pledged to stop him from approaching Jubelian during the ball.





Hm, was that the last one?

I was occupied with writing rejection letters for most of the day since many people had asked me to be their partner for the princess's coming-of-age ceremony. It was strange that no one had ever asked me to dance during an actual party.

The clock said it was still three in the afternoon. I still had enough time for a short outing.

It had already been four days since Max last visited, and I had been feeling a bit down due to his absence. I wondered if he was going to visit today.

Was it because I didn't immediately accept his confession? As I worried over it, a wave of fatigue overcame me, forcing me to yawn. All the letters I had written must've taken a toll on me.

"Get some rest if you're tired, my lady," Merilyn said, tempting me. There was still work to be done, though.

"No, there's a place I need to visit. Could you help me get ready to go out?"

She nodded with a smile. "Of course, my lady."



It had been three days since Max had taken the armor to the blacksmith so it could be repaired. Nevertheless, he had been told the armor was still a long way from being ready, so he was left with no choice but to remain barefaced.

How annoying. Why in the world would it take so long?

He had made an excuse for the purpose behind the repairs, but the real reason was that Victor had slightly dented the breastplate while taking it off. The reason why he wanted the armor ready soon wasn't because he wanted to be back inside it. After all, it was uncomfortable. There were other reasons, like the fact that it had been three days since he had last seen Jubelian.

Max clenched his fists and opened them up, cracking his knuckles in the process. He was concerned that something might happen to her while he was gone. Given what had happened a few days ago, most of his paranoia

was due to Mikhail. Also, he was bothered by the fact that Jubelian might find it strange that he wasn't visiting her anymore after confessing to her. Perhaps she had already decided to partner with someone other than her father for the royal banquet...

Max's head almost exploded from all the disturbing thoughts going through his mind. If he stayed like this, he was going to go insane. He had to see her.

The servants might look for him, but they would have no choice but to think that he was wandering around the palace somewhere else. Victor would have to take care of the rest.

Blaming his irresponsibility on the person who ruined his armor, Max jumped out of his room.



The Fyodor Workshop had grown in size since my last visit. The owner must've expanded the store. It had been a long time since I last shopped here, after all.

The line in front of the store was no joke, either. I was standing with my mouth agape at its exploding popularity when a man who appeared to be a guard for the store approached us.

"Pardon me, but do you happen to be Lady Floyen?"

"Yes, she is," Geraldine—who had accompanied me—replied with a smile.

"Please follow me. Someone is waiting for Your Ladyship."

I followed the guard up to the second floor of the workshop where the studio was located. When the guard opened the door to the studio, a man greeted me.

"Long time no see, Lady Floyen."

There were no traces of his distressing past in his newfound, neater appearance.

"It's been a while, Ian," I greeted.

He smiled brightly in response.



After arriving at the duke's residence, Max belatedly realized Jubelian wasn't in the mansion. He clenched his jaw tightly. Where was she? Did

something happen to her? All sorts of horrible thoughts—from her going on a date with another man to her getting kidnapped—swirled through his mind. Max tried to control his reasoning but he couldn't help that he was worried. He needed to see her that very moment.

Where did she go? If something happened to her...

His heart pounded. As his anxiety reached its peak, violent feelings arose within him. He was ready to kill everyone who would dare to lay a finger on her, and he swore to follow—

Suddenly, he felt another person's presence nearby. He instantly adopted a defensive stance, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Right when he was about to draw it, a voice asked, "What are you doing here?"

Recognizing the tone, he let out a sigh of relief. It was just his master. Then, he became perplexed. If his master was still in the mansion, then that meant that Jubelian hadn't been kidnapped.

"Where is Jubelian?" he queried, barely suppressing his anxious feelings.

"What's it to you?"

The cold words reignited Max's resentment toward his teacher. "Master!" he cried. He didn't understand why the duke was being so unhelpful. Wasn't he the one who requested that Max protect Jubelian at all times?

His apprentice's glare blatantly revealed his grudges. Regis could feel Max staring but he paid him no mind. "How could you pledge to protect someone else if you can't even protect yourself?"

Max frowned at his master's disdainful question. "What're you even talking about?"

"I just find it interesting how you keep losing your mind every time my daughter's out of your sight."

Max couldn't deny it. Although he didn't want to admit it, it was true. Whenever Jubelian wasn't around him, he felt uneasy—sometimes to the point of going berserk. There were also times when he felt extremely, uproariously upset, as if a fire had been lit within and upon him. He would grow frustrated whenever that occurred since he didn't know how to control his temper.

"Maximillian," his master called. Max raised his head to face his mentor. Sighing, Regis continued. "Have you ever considered the possibility that she might not be in trouble even if you're not around? She isn't a child that can't distinguish dangerous situations from benign ones."

"I never said that," Max retorted furiously. Then, he recalled a few times

that Jubelian had smiled at him. She was sloppy, defenseless, and slow to read the atmosphere—yet she was an extremely lovely lady he couldn't tear his eyes away from. "I'm just... worried about her."

Listening to his apprentice's confession, Regis had been prompted to recall a few fragments of memory.

"It feels as if no trust exists between us."

If he hadn't been so overprotective... Regis sighed. Although he couldn't say he had been in love with his wife while she was alive, the events of that day had become an indelible scar for him.

He clenched his fists. "There are times when you must trust your partner and wait for them," he advised. Then, he observed his apprentice. Although he possessed excellent swordsmanship, Max had been a cold-blooded maniac who cared for no one. Once, Regis had even thought that Max's soul had been severely destroyed... until Jubelian managed to humanize him and bring out his emotions.

"My daughter may seem weak on the outside, but she is not so on the inside. She is a wise one. Trust her and focus on your own duties."

Max couldn't fully understand, but he decided to follow his master's instructions for now. "Understood," he said. "I'll be leaving, then."

Regis watched as his disciple left the mansion. The corners of his lips slowly rose. Max usually failed to notice his presence... but he had realized he was nearby this time. Max's skills had improved.

One was bound to hit a plateau once their swordsmanship reached a certain level, but the moment one overcame that lull, they awakened as a transcendent capable of surpassing human limits. Regis could see that Max was on the verge of leaping over the obstacle in his way. However, doing so wasn't an easy task; if it was, all the swordsmen in the world would have transcended.

Overcoming the plateau was a fight against the self, something that was much more difficult than competing against others. The road to transcendence could only be unearthed by overcoming the limitations of the body and mind and realizing what it ultimately meant to wield a sword.

From now on, it was up to Max to achieve mental growth. Only then would he be able to jump across the barricade before him.

Just as he had told his disciple to have faith in his daughter, Regis decided to have faith in Max as well.



Taking a sip of the tea, I observed the studio.

"How is the tea?" Ian asked. Unlike our last meeting, his tone was polite and full of confidence. His voice alone had me realizing how much of an impact success had on a person's speech and actions.

I smiled lightly and gave him the answer he was hoping for. "It's excellent."

Seemingly pleased, he exhaled gratefully. "That's a relief. I was nervous that it might not suit Your Ladyship's tastes. Perhaps my unease was showing."

Frankly, I had no clue that he had been feeling nervous. Just as I had expected, he was someone who was fated for success. Seeing how skilled he was at managing his facial expressions, I realized how terrible I was at controlling my own.

I better practice from now on.

"This is the account statement for this month," Ian reported, interrupting my thoughts.

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome. No matter what anyone says, Your Ladyship is our workshop's muse."

I cleared my throat in embarrassment. "Could you just address me by what I've requested before?" I asked.

Shaking his head, Ian expressed his disbelief. "You're not talking about the title of... Idea Provider... are you, Your Ladyship?"

"I am," I said, ruthlessly confirming the object of his denial. I had cringed the first time Ian had called me his muse.

After I had given him the idea to create the powder compact, I had realized that modern innovations could be used for money in this world. The item had become very popular and was now a prevalent possession amongst the ladies of the empire. Such was why I had decided to relay feasible ideas to the workshop. After all, I just needed a reliable technician to bring the plans and designs into existence, and Ian was the perfect person for the job.

He had already been sending me jewelry every month as gifts of gratitude after I helped revive his shop. Taking the chance, I had reached out to him for a collaboration, and he had enthusiastically accepted my proposal.

"It sounds like a wonderful idea, Your Ladyship," he had said.

The commission I received for providing ideas to the workshop amounted to 10% of the profits. It wasn't a high percentage, but the inventions that the workshop sold were always in demand. This alone had helped me save enough money that I wouldn't need to work for the rest of my life.

"But I like the word 'muse,'" Ian protested. "It sounds... pleasing to the ears."

I couldn't believe he still wanted to call me by that mortifying nickname. I wanted to refute him, but now I focused on the beautiful statement before me. I couldn't help but smile. The money I was to receive this month would be enough to buy a mansion in the capital.

I was beaming with hope, but Ian blushed as if he thought I was laughing at him. "Do you hate the word that much?" he asked.

Finally, I came to my senses, hurriedly denying his question. "No, no. The name doesn't matter." Of course it didn't matter—the most important thing was money.

He grinned at my not-so-sincere response before handing me something. I readied myself to open the box and he began to explain its contents. "This is the product you asked me to make three days ago, as well as a gift."

"You finished it already?"

Ian nodded. "You asked me to make it as soon as possible, didn't you?"

"I did. Thank you."

Ian regarded me for a moment before continuing. "If you need anything at any time, just let me know," he said.

He was a kind person. He was already doing enough by helping me make money, yet he still offered to do more. I was fully reassured. Indeed, he was a valuable connection.



Humming a lively tune, Fresia picked up a wig. She had many in her closet in a variety of colors—black, blonde, red, and even green—but since she decided that she didn't want to stand out today, she picked one with a subtle tone.

It had been a while since she went shopping...

Suddenly, the mirror behind her reflected a familiar face that startled her. She wondered if she was seeing things because she had been overworking herself recently. Nevertheless, she stood frozen in place.

Then, a voice muttered, “Fresia.”

She screamed.

At the sound, the guild members waiting outside her room stormed inside. Nevertheless, they couldn’t attack the unwelcome guest because...

“We greet His Highness the Crown Prince!” they shouted.

Max inspected them for a moment. “You may all leave,” he said softly. “I have something to discuss with her.”

Once the door closed, Fresia forced a smile. “Your Highness, please refrain from scaring me like that in the future.”

He had a disapproving look in his eyes. “You’ve always noticed my presence until now. Have you been neglecting your training?” he asked, disgruntled.

Who did he think he was talking to? Although it was true Fresia wasn’t a transcendent, she had been the one to teach him all the basics. Insulted, she gritted her teeth, but she forced herself to calm down. “What brings you here?” she inquired.

“Nothing. Were you going somewhere?”

“Ah, yes. I was about to head to Arcade Street.”

At the mention of that crowded plaza, Max began to wonder if he might run into Jubelian there. He quickly discarded the thought. He needed to focus on his duties as his master had advised.

He pondered what he had to do at the moment. He didn’t want to go back to the palace right away since he had been stuck in his room for the past few days. “I will go with you,” he decided in the end.

Fresia sighed. It was obvious that her liege had argued with his lady again. She had no choice but to help, she supposed.



Having finished talking business, I was at the entrance of the workshop saying my goodbyes.

“Please drop by at your leisure, Your Ladyship,” Ian said. “Our workshop always welcomes you.”

I nodded. “Of course. After all, I’ve contributed to this place a lot, haven’t I?” I smiled. That was my way of referring to myself as the ‘muse’ since I couldn’t actually bear to say the word.

He chuckled. “I hope that you’ll visit outside of business someday,” he said

shyly.

I was about to nod, assuming he meant that I could visit for any reason at my convenience, before I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head slightly to the side. A familiar man stood next to a woman.

“How does this look?” she asked, pretending to wear a headdress. The lady had a captivating aura, and the two looked awfully close to each other. Strangely, my heart ached. I felt uncomfortable and couldn’t bear to see them standing side by side for another moment.

Why did I feel this way? I had no right.

Just then, the man furrowed his brow. “I don’t like it,” he spat out.

For some reason, my discomfort eased a little at his rejection. Unlike me, however, the woman seemed a little offended. “Should I just leave?” she pouted.

I hoped that the man would nod, but he answered with a serious face, “It’s a gift... I want to get something better and more expensive.”

My face hardened immediately.



"My, my! This is gorgeous!" Fresia exclaimed as she browsed the most recent catalog. She and her liege were in a carriage on their way to Arcade Street.

Max frowned. He couldn't understand why she was making a fuss about something useless. He looked out the window, considering wandering away from her after arriving at the square.

Just then, Fresia said, “Why don't you choose a present as well, my lord?”

“What gift?” he asked mockingly. “Surely, you don't mean one for my sister?”

Fresia’s expression sobered. "Of course not. I mean one for your lady!" He stared at her in silence as if he didn't understand what she meant. Frustrated, Fresia cried, "Don't tell me you haven't gifted her anything yet?!"

"Why do you care?"

She doubted her ears. "You haven't?! Not even once?!"

Max recalled a time he had gone shopping with Jubelian. He tried to buy her things many times before. Realizing she always shopped for inexpensive items, he once told her he would buy everything in the store for her, but her reaction wasn't what he expected it to be.



"I like to buy my own things. It's a form of... stress relief. You know?" she had said.

Unwilling to give up, Max had tried many more times to buy her a gift, but she had persisted.

"No," he admitted.

Unaware of the circumstances, Fresia rubbed her temple in distress. She couldn't believe it. She had assumed that they were exchanging gifts since he would always be carrying something—like some cake or a few clothes—after a meeting with her.

All this time... he never gave, only took? He was the worst.

Having heard stories only from Max's perspective so far, Fresia had the impression that Jubelian was somewhat interested in him. After all, she always had something for him to take home. Now, however... he would be lucky if Jubelian didn't consider him a shameless brat.

"Your Highness, have you confessed to her already?" Fresia asked, desperately hoping he hadn't yet.

Unfortunately, Max nodded. "Yes, I have."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. He had confessed without a present? He was hopeless!

The more she listened, the more she realized there was no way out. Although she was appalled, Fresia did her best to keep her composure. "Then, how about gifting her something now?" she suggested calmly. "Even something small would do."

Max looked confused. "It'll be of no use to her. Wouldn't it be better to give her something that would impress her?"

Aggravated, Fresia sighed loudly. Thinking it over, however, she realized it would only be natural that he wouldn't be familiar with the concept of gift-giving. He had spent most of his life on the battlefield.

Belatedly deciding on educating her lord, she began her explanations. "Actually, gifts are like... compliments! The more you give, the better."

Max's eyes widened. "Like compliments?" he echoed.

"Yes. Instead of saying that you like them, you express your feelings by giving them something. For example, you can give her a flower saying that it reminded you of her or that you thought she would appreciate it—something like that."

Max swallowed, frowning his brows. He had planned to gift Jubelian the palace treasury once he succeeded in carrying out the rebellion, but now, he

was learning that it was better to give gifts on a more frequent basis. If that were the case, he would have to revise his plan.

She said she liked to spend money... therefore, he decided that whenever he met her, he would give her a gold bar.

"So, what was the lady's answer?" Fresia asked.

"She hasn't told me yet."

Fresia sighed. Everything's already been ruined. She should have taught him better than this!

Usually, there were only two cases wherein a lady would struggle to answer a confession: either because she was flirting with other noblemen, or because she was put in a difficult position to refuse. Knowing that Jubelian had followed Mikhail around in the past, begging for his love despite all the terrible rumors that surrounded her, Fresia decided that she wasn't the type to flirt with multiple men and lead them on. She seemed too naive. Therefore, she was likely the latter case.

Having reached that conclusion, Fresia let out another sigh of frustration. What should she do? This was the first time His Highness was interested in someone this much...

On or off the battlefield, he was a cold-blooded leader. The only person who could change him was Jubelian. Given that fact, Fresia decided that she would have to help her lord. Her mind was made up.

"Your Highness, please allow me to help you choose a present for the lady," she pleaded.

Such was how she had gotten Max to follow her to a workshop. Nevertheless, she was on the verge of running out of patience after only a few short moments. Her lord didn't seem interested in anything.

"How about this bracelet?" she asked.

His reply was the same. "I don't like the size of the jewels."

"What about this hairpin?"

"No."

After a while of this, she wrinkled her face in displeasure. "Should I just leave?" she threatened.

Max scowled, but he soon realized that he couldn't pick Jubelian's gift alone since he didn't know anything about women's accessories. Thinking about his dear lady, he revealed his honest opinion. "It's a gift... I want to get something better and more expensive," he said.

Fresia's expression softened at his hesitant yet candid confession. Until

now, she had thought that he had refused everything because he wasn't interested in giving Jubelian a present, but now she knew that wasn't the case.

Gifts didn't have to be expensive. The most important thing about them was that they were something the recipient would like. Fresia decided to advise Max to think about his lady and pick a present based on what she preferred. "Your Highness—I mean, my lord—I don't think you understand the meaning behind—"

"Jubelian?" Max interrupted. His eyes were wide at the sight of a silver-haired lady a distance away. Just when he was about to approach her, however, he noticed there was another man next to her.

Who the hell was that? His eyes narrowed in anger.



Was that really him?

I blinked multiple times to ensure the validity of the sight before me. Still, the person I was watching in the Fyodor workshop looked like Max. He was picking out women's accessories with another lady.

I thought he said he liked me...

It had been less than a week since he had confessed, yet he was already spending time with another woman. Realizing I had been played, I berated myself; I shouldn't have expected anything in the first place, but I couldn't help it since he was the first person to whom I had shown a genuine side of myself.

And, again: he had confessed to me. It was true I had been speechless at first since I didn't expect to be involved romantically with anyone after Mikhail, but I had mulled over what he had said over the past few days. I had begun to feel like maybe I really could start a new relationship. I couldn't deny that I had been waiting for him to visit me day after day, after all. The fact that he hadn't shown himself in so long had even offended me. If I had no interest in him, I wouldn't have been so bothered by these things. I had seriously considered dating him after the removal of my death flag.

If I had known that he would be shopping with another woman, however, I never would've reflected on these things. Until now, I had believed him to be a naive guy. I had no idea he was a womanizer.

Feeling betrayed, I bit my lip. That was when his eyes met mine.

“Jubelian?” he called.

I almost stepped back reflexively, but I managed to stand still, my fists clenched at my sides. I hadn’t done anything wrong. I had no reason to run away from him. If there was someone who needed to run away, it was him—not me.

Overwhelmed with vengeance, I ignored him and turned back to Ian. “Thank you so much for today,” I said.

Ian smiled. “Don’t mention it. How about we have dinner together next time?”

Unlike that playboy over there, Ian’s voice was plain and sweet—like how a business partner should sound.

Come to think of it, I never spent time with him even though we were coworkers. I was about to nod in response to his offer when someone intercepted our conversation.

“Who do you think you are?” came Max’s spine-chilling voice.

I gave him a death glare.

“And who are you to say such things to me?” Ian fought back.

Max ignored him, facing me. “Your Ladyship, you haven’t forgotten about our contract, have you?”

One of the clauses of our contract stated that neither party involved was permitted to date another person as long as the contract was in effect. In any case, Max was the one who had broken this condition first. I couldn’t believe he would be so bold as to accuse me of such a thing right when he was in the midst of doing the same.

I stood tongue-tied for a moment before I scoffed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Max sighed, his face falling. “Let’s go somewhere private,” he said. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

He was speaking to me formally, adhering to my past requests. Still, that was no reason to forgive him. “As you can see, I’m having an important conversation with an acquaintance,” I argued.

Max gritted his teeth in response and glared at Ian. I couldn’t help but fear what might happen as his crimson eyes blazed like flames.

“You! Get the hell out of here right now!” he demanded Ian.

How could he say that to the owner of the workshop? He was a customer! I was about to stop Max when someone interrupted our quarrel.

“Oh, you must be Lady Floyen.”

It was Max's companion. She spoke as if she had been acquainted with me for a long time. I realized that Max was the absolute worst. He had even told his other partner about me.

I scowled at him only to realize that he was scowling back at me, too. I couldn't believe it. I was the one being cheated on! Not only had he gone shopping with another woman, but he had also verbally harassed my colleague.

The woman who had come with Max smiled. "Thank you for the cake before. It was delicious," she praised. It almost seemed as if she was determined to irritate me. Her words only confirmed that they both thought of me as a pushover. My body trembled with anger after learning that he had shared the cake I bought for him with another woman.

Still, I tried to remain calm, tamping down my emotions. If I made a scene here, it would only bring me misery. "I'm glad to hear that," I said. "I apologize, but have I ever permitted you to address me so informally? I don't believe we've met."

After I had pointed out what she had done, she smiled awkwardly. "Ah, I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Yuri. I'm Lord Max's vassal and relative."

A vassal and relative? I listened to this new information in a daze. If that was the case, then it would be a stretch to call their relationship a romantic one...

Then, I recalled how, back when I had given Max the cake, I had told him to share it with the person he was obliged to. My eyes trembled at the revelation.

"I was accompanying my liege since he had asked me to help pick a present for his lover," Yuri continued. "I didn't know we would meet here like this."

Her words reminded me of what Max had said a few minutes ago from afar: "It's a gift... I want to get something better and more expensive."

I never would've thought he meant those words for me. I burned hot with embarrassment, glancing at Max.

He was still staring in my direction, exasperated.

Oh no. I was in trouble. I contemplated what to do for a moment before clenching my fists. I caused this mess, so I had to fix it.

I grabbed Max's wrist. Then, turning to Ian and Yuri, I said, "Excuse us for a minute. I have something I need to discuss with him."



Max stared at Jubelian, his gaze dim. Had she just rejected him?

He had anger surging in him just a moment ago when he had seen her conversing with another man. Unlike her, an innocent lady, the man was watching her with eyes full of yearning, like a dog waiting for a pat from its master. Further exciting Max's fury, the man had mentioned having dinner together with her.

Max had wanted to push the man away immediately, but he had suppressed his violent desires, afraid that Jubelian might come to dislike him. Unfortunately, she had calmly ignored him, siding with the man instead.

"As you can see, I'm having an important conversation with an acquaintance."

It didn't seem like she realized how the man was looking at her, how desperate for her attention he was. The frustration of this only exacerbated Max's raging emotions. If he could, he wanted to destroy the workshop and get rid of anyone who dared to lay their eyes upon her. Then, he would be left alone with Jubelian, serving as the sole recipient of her undivided attention.

In the end, he had no choice but to vanquish his lust for destruction once he met her ocean-hued eyes. He didn't want to incur her hatred, for he couldn't imagine a world without her anymore.

'Monster' was his nickname, and befittingly, his world had always been a bleak and colorless one. That didn't matter to him, though. It was how he had carried himself since birth, and he had been satisfied with it—until the day he accidentally stumbled upon a brilliant light that brought color to his gray world, that is.

Hoping to keep the light in his possession, he had reached out for it. The light nonetheless spoke back.

"He's scary. I heard he even kills his own subordinates."

Fear had engulfed Max for the first time in his life. He was afraid that Jubelian's light might leave him if he wasn't careful, so he pretended to be harmless whenever he was with her. He had been forced to let go of his pride at times, but that didn't matter. She mattered too much. He could endure anything to keep her by his side.

For some reason, however, it seemed like she was always just beyond

reach, continually straying away from him. He felt like he was chasing after an illusion, like running after the moon in the night sky. He could run as fast as he could and even try to fly for her, but she could never be touched.

That was when Max felt the warmth from Jubelian's hand seep into his. Unwilling to let her go, he held on tightly. She looked back with surprised eyes. Staring intently, he pledged deep in his heart: if he just had one chance... he would never let her go.



I dragged Max around for a while, looking for a private place to talk. Once we got to the roof of the workshop, I finally decided it was quiet enough. It was already dusk, and the darkness was keeping me from seeing his face clearly.

"Max," I called. He stared back without a word in response. Unlike when he was glaring at me in irritation before, his eyes now gleamed with a strange light. "I'm sorry." I apologized right away.

"About what?" he asked, his voice stern. It was different from how he usually spoke to me.

I understood why he might be upset. "Just now... I misunderstood you."

"What do you mean?"

I was dumbstruck. Then, I realized I had yet to accept his confession, so I couldn't admit that I was disappointed to see him with another woman. Just the thought of admitting it was embarrassing. I decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. "Ah, I just thought you had violated our contract," I said.

His eyes widened. "Violate the contract?" he echoed, disbelieving.

Feeling shy, I avoided speaking straightforwardly. "Well, you know what I mean... you said the same thing to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I looked up at him to realize he was smirking. He was definitely trying to get revenge for what happened earlier. Then, he continued at last, admitting his jealousy. "Yes. I was furious," he said. "I couldn't stand to see you with someone else."

I was finally able to accept my envy as well. Honestly, there was no reason why I wouldn't know what it felt like. I was just afraid to admit this was because of what had happened with Mikhail; I didn't want to repeat the same mistakes, so I wanted to wait until I eliminated my death flag before giving

him an answer.

I looked at Max and he met my gaze. We stood in silence, appreciating each other's presence for a moment.

He eventually broke the stillness. "Jubelian."

"Yes?"

"I want to get you a present."

What was he talking about all of a sudden? I was confused for a moment before I remembered why all of this had happened in the first place.

"It's a gift... I want to get something better and more expensive," I had heard him say.

I didn't know why he was suddenly trying to give me something, but I didn't dislike it. After all, no one had shown me such a gesture before. Still, was it okay to accept a present from him? I had yet to answer his confession. I glanced at him with these worries in mind, finding him watching me.

His patience was probably growing thin. "There was something I've been eyeing..." I eventually managed to admit.

"What is it?"

"A hairpin."

He held his hand out for me as soon as I finished speaking. "Let's go then," he said.

Laughter bubbled up from inside me the moment I heard his words. There hadn't even been a hint of hesitation in them. It was the complete opposite of when I had dated Mikhail—he had never chosen my gifts or cared about what I had received. Only formal gifts picked out by our maids or servants were exchanged between us.

Perhaps this was how it felt to be appreciated by someone. Enveloped in an unfamiliar feeling, I grabbed his hand.

"Anywhere is fine," he said. "Just not Fyodor's workshop."

Suddenly, I realized he still must've thought that I had violated the contract. I had no reason behind it, but I wanted to resolve the misunderstanding. "Ian Fyodor is just my business partner," I explained in haste.

He narrowed his eyes. "Business partner?"

"Yes. Once I come up with an idea for something, he makes it into a sellable product. We've been collaborating for a while. That's why I visited him today," I clarified. It sounded like I was making an excuse, but he nodded.



"I see," he said, his expression rather sullen.

I was a little offended by his reaction, but I continued anyway. I wanted to persuade him to shop at the workshop so I could get a discount. "So, I was thinking we could—"

He cut me off adamantly. "No."

Perhaps I was too late. In the end, my suggestion was ignored, and I was forced to shop at another store.



I felt apologetic toward Ian for having caused such a scene, but the guilty feelings had only lasted for a moment.

I gazed at the delicate ornaments on display before me, sufficiently swayed by their beauty. They were gorgeous.

"You may try them on," the clerk reminded me. So, I tried on the blue pin I had been eyeing.

"How do I look?" I asked Max, but the clerk answered for him.

"It looks lovely on you, ma'am!"

The person I had asked had only stared at me in silence. Frowning, I wondered if he truly liked me. It didn't seem so at times. I checked the mirror to see if it didn't suit me since his response seemed rather lackluster, but I was already captivated by how it sparkled in my grasp. Contemplating whether to choose it, I looked at the price tag. Unfortunately, its cost left me with no choice but to put it back in its place quietly.

Why was a hairpin so costly? Sixty silver coins for a measly ornament was a rip-off. To be precise, however, I could afford it, but it would've been unreasonable to ask for such a gift from a commoner like Max. Therefore, I decided to look for something cheap and pretty. A gift shouldn't burden the buyer, after all.

After much deliberation, I settled on a blue cloth headband. It was only five silver coins, which shouldn't be too much for him. Looking back at him, I declared, "I'll get this!"

He nodded with a satisfied smile. "Sure."

"Thank you."

In response, he called for the clerk. "Price?"

Grinning ear to ear, the clerk replied, "Ten gold coins in total, sir."

I doubted my ears, startled. "Isn't one headband five silver—"

Just as I was about to argue, I saw Max take ten gold coins out from his

seemingly heavy pocket, handing them to the clerk. Was he bad with currency? But he knew how to write!

Terrified, I tried to stop him. "Wait a minute," I said hurriedly. "Max, I think you're giving the wrong amount."

As soon as I finished speaking, the clerk opened a wide, flat storage box and showed it to me. There were more than ten ornaments inside of it, each one dazzling under the lights. I looked closely and realized they were all the ones I had tried on.

"His calculations are correct, ma'am. He's buying all of the accessories in this box," the clerk explained.

I tried to understand what just happened but I couldn't figure it out. "You're the same as back then, aren't you?" Max muttered.

What did he mean? Incapable of comprehending his statement, I stared at him blankly. He shot me a handsome smile in response, making my face grow hot.

Laughing, he extended his hand out to me. "Let's go."

Leaving the accessory shop, we took a stroll around the square. I continued to mull over what had happened, but everything about it seemed illogical. How could he look so calm after having spent such a large sum of money? As I observed him, I wondered if he was secretly the young master of some wealthy noble family. That wouldn't be too far-fetched to assume since Yuri stated earlier that she was his vassal.

Wanting to confirm my suspicions, I decided to converse with him in a quiet area. "There's something I've been meaning to ask..." I began once we were alone.

"What is it?"

"Is this really okay? You just spent 10 gold coins..."

He furrowed his brows. "It's only a small sum. Don't worry about it."

Small sum? I was rich, but I didn't spend money like him!

Just then, he pulled something out of his pocket and showed it to me. "Here."

It was the first hairpin I had tried on, which hadn't been in the box. I reached out to take it, but he suddenly closed his palm.

What was he doing? I thought he wanted to give it to me. Perhaps it was another one of his annoying pranks. Pulling a face, I looked up at him. Then, my eyes widened. For some reason, he was leaning toward me, slowly coming closer. I stood frozen in place. Then, I realized what might've been

happening.

Was he trying to kiss me?

I could avoid him if I wanted to, but the moment I met his crimson eyes, I couldn't move. My heart began to pound harder and harder.

"Close your eyes," he whispered.

I obeyed, slowly closing my eyes. His hand cradled the back of his head, and I could hear the sound of his breathing near me. I waited patiently.

After a few moments, I noticed that nothing was happening. What was taking him so long?

I opened my eyes at last only for them to meet Max's. He gave me a strange look and moved away from me. "Here," he said.

That was when I noticed something heavy weighing down on my hair. I touched the area. Then, I noticed what he had done. He was just putting the hairpin on me. That was all.

Humiliation overcame me once I realized I had totally misunderstood his intentions. Why did he even tell me to close my eyes when all he was going to do was help me with an accessory?!

"You look beautiful," he said softly.

I stared at him in surprise. Did he really mean to say that to me?

It was a peculiar feeling. Although I received compliments quite often, it was different now that it was Max praising me. The words felt new somehow and they made my heart beat even harder. Something was definitely wrong with me. I was beginning to worry about how red my face must've grown when he reached for me once again.

"What is it?" I asked hastily.

He frowned slightly. "It's crooked," he answered. His tone was rather brusque.

I hurriedly stopped him. "I-It's okay! I'll fix it myself!" I didn't want to misinterpret his actions and end up with embarrassing delusions again. Hurriedly gathering a chunk of my hair, I used the hairpin to fix it in place.

Then, we made eye contact once more. How many times have we done that now? I had lost count a while ago; it had happened an innumerable amount of times already...

That must've meant we were both solely focused on each other.

The heat rose to my cheeks and I averted my gaze.



“Is it okay now?” she asked. Despite the fact Max was staring intently at her, Jubelian sounded oblivious. She was driving him crazy.

Given how naive she was, she would never realize how much Max had agonized over whether or not he should kiss her while he had been putting the hairpin on her head. Even now, he was barely suppressing the burning desire within him to taste her sweet cherry lips.

Ignorant of the turmoil within him, she took out a small hand mirror and studied herself, smiling shyly. Max almost smiled at her lovely appearance before he realized something, deflating. He wasn’t just imagining it—she had been avoiding his gaze.

He had even given her a present... what did he do wrong? He felt his frustration grow. If he could, he wanted to pull her close by her slender waist and keep her in his arms. Then, he would gaze into her ocean eyes as she glanced at him in surprise. Kissing her, he would part her lips with his own, savoring her taste.

Lust pervaded his mind, prompting Max to reach out to her once again. However, he clenched his fists to stop himself. Had she known what he was thinking? Agitated, he swallowed dryly, wondering if he should try to forbid her from running away if she did.

“Max,” she suddenly called. He met her side profile in response; she still avoided his gaze. “Thank you so much for today.”

“Oh. Of course,” he answered awkwardly.

“This is the first time someone’s ever bought me a gift like this,” she smiled faintly. Max scowled, thinking of his master. Had he not given his so-called precious daughter any gifts until now?

“Max,” she said again, this time facing him with reddened cheeks. Max took a deep breath. While he was afraid of what she would say, he couldn’t help but anticipate it. Maintaining eye contact, they stood in silence for a moment.

Eventually, after a heavy sigh, Jubelian bid him farewell. Then, she ran toward her carriage. Max watched her disappear and sighed.

“I guess she was telling me I need to wait,” he mumbled to himself.

Just then, someone approached him. Alarmed, Max adopted a defensive stance, but upon recognizing who it was, he took his hand off the hilt of his sword. “You weren’t eavesdropping, were you?” he snarled.

Fresia scoffed. “Oh, come on. I only saw a little of what happened. It was

quite a romantic scene, adorning a lady with her hairpin—”

“Fresia,” Max interrupted. His voice had resumed its customary cold tone. Swallowing dryly, Fresia changed the topic.

“Ah, I have some shocking news.”

“About?”

“The empress.”

Max lifted a brow.



I changed into my pajamas once I got home and jumped into bed, releasing a sigh of regret. I was planning to ask about Max’s identity, but the conversation veered in a different direction than I had intended. I’m the end, I couldn’t ask him.

Reminiscing over what had happened this evening, I kicked my blankets in embarrassment. I already knew my answer to his confession. It was obvious; I was easily lovestruck! I ended up showcasing my jealousy and the fact that I was hopelessly in love with him. It must’ve been quite the spectacle for him.

I needed to get it together. The princess’ coming-of-age ceremony still had yet to pass. Moreover, I didn’t know what Father would say about the crown prince in the near future. As long as my death flag remained unresolved, I had to be on guard.

I was thinking of breaking the contract for Max’s safety if I ended up getting involved with the princess or the crown prince during the banquet. That was why I refrained from doing anything that would cause him to gain false hopes. Although... I ended up accepting his gifts.

The hairpins Max gave me looked dazzling under the small chandelier in my room. I couldn’t take my eyes off of them as their beauty reminded me of the person who gave them to me. As I observed the accessories, I decided that I would make sure I wouldn’t let anything happen during the coronation ceremony. Once I was safe, then I would...

I began fantasizing about my romantic future for a moment. However, fatigue soon overcame me, and I was forced to drift off to sleep.



It was midnight when Max returned to the imperial palace.

“Your Highness,” Victor greeted, bowing before bringing forth a man with a gag in his mouth.

“Let him talk,” Max ordered, his voice apathetic. Once his subordinate released the gag, the crown prince began his interrogation. “Who sent you?”

The captive simply smirked in response. “Her Majesty has sent me to kill you off, you dirty butcher...”

Max kicked the man once, twice, then many more times. Appalling screams filled the room. Eventually, he stopped the beating and resumed his interrogation. The hostage was now bleeding from his mouth.

“All these years, she had never sent me an assassin like this,” Max growled. “It isn’t like her to be so obvious, so stop with the bullshit and tell me who your true master is.”



The day before the banquet, Beatrice was busily flitting about the palace hall, making sure that everything was flawless. Decorated with red velvet curtains and tablecloths adorned with gold, the hall was a picturesque vision to behold. Red roses filled the atrium as well, enhancing the view with a fragrant scent.

Satisfied, Beatrice rejoiced silently. It was perfect!

“Red and gold. What terrible taste,” came a voice.

Beatrice frowned. The speaker had been her stepbrother, and he had been following her around the whole day, meddling in every little thing she was doing. He wore his black armor, looking every bit the devil he was. She couldn’t understand why he was trailing after her everywhere since he usually kept to himself, locked up in his room.

Frightened, the princess’ maids took wary glimpses at him. Noticing this, Beatrice spoke on their behalf. “Dear Brother, if you have no intention of helping, please leave.”

Max side-eyes her for a moment before opening his mouth. “Why don’t we have a little chat?” he suggested.

“I have nothing to discuss with you,” she said flatly.

He grinned. “Well, I do. Follow me.”

Beatrice couldn’t gauge what had gotten into him. Normally, he didn’t even care enough to greet her. It was peculiar that he was suddenly sticking his nose in her business. Still, she quickly realized that he would continue to

bother her if she didn't oblige.

Ah, that wretched man. Irritated, she noted that she would have to kick him out of here sooner or later. However, since others were around at the moment, she had no choice but to answer as elegantly as she could manage.

"Sure," she said.

The two walked down a corridor for a while. Then, Max turned to her. "You," he called.

Beatrice couldn't believe it. How impudent could he be? Standing with her hands on her hips, she glared at him. "What do you want?" she asked. She emphasized her vexation on purpose, but her stepbrother didn't seem to care.

Why did he bring her here? After all, she didn't speak to him much, and the very few times they had didn't make for very fond memories.

"You better keep your distance from your mother if you don't want to die," he occasionally threatened. Before, she hadn't been able to say anything since she had been afraid of the menacing atmosphere he exuded, but now, she was confident that she could argue with him head-on. She wouldn't back down this time.

"Don't leave the palace tomorrow if possible, and don't even think about drinking," he said.

Thoroughly aggravated, Beatrice scoffed. So, he had brought her here to quarrel with her after all. "Why? I guess you've poisoned the wine or something?"

Her eyes shone with hostility. Although they were siblings, they had been enemies since birth. They were far from cordial; in fact, it was fortunate that they hadn't sent each other any assassins yet.

As he looked into her fiery eyes—so similar to his own—Max sighed. "Later on, don't blame me for not warning you," he said dismissively.

Watching him turn away, she began to mutter under her breath. "You lunatic!" she seethed. "How dare you curse my coronation ceremony!"

An ominous feeling enveloped her for a moment before she was suddenly reminded of Jubelian. Calming, a soft smile blossomed upon her face. She hoped that Jubelian would find the preparations agreeable.



In the end, the assassin hadn't revealed the identity of his master. He had

continuously insisted that the mastermind was the empress until he was slain.

"Crazy old man," Max muttered. He had already guessed who the culprit was. He thought his father would eventually give up on his plan once the empress rejected it, but that didn't seem to be the case. Instead, the emperor was devising a ruse to preoccupy his wife while he forced Beatrice into marrying into Lagon's royal family.

It befitted the sly man that he sent his son to battle to bolster the empire's defenses at the borders, and used his daughter as a pawn to ally with an enemy. Despite sacrificing his children in the process, he likely considered these measures menial in his pursuit of power. After all, he had always seen his family as nothing more than a tool.

Max's eyes grew cold as he recalled how Beatrice had glared at him. The reason the empress placed her hopes on the throne was because of her daughter. The woman knew it would be difficult for her to usurp the throne herself due to her power-hungry husband, but she believed that her grandson would have a chance, at least. That was why she had been trying to rid herself of all the obstacles in her way—like Max—for a long time.

Quite frankly, the empress could come up with a reason to exile Max from the kingdom and he wouldn't have a problem with it. The only thing bothering him would be how unpleasant it would feel to be ordered around by her.

He usually had no interest in the fight for power between the emperor and empress, but he didn't want his father to win this time. Max didn't know why he felt this way, however, because it essentially meant that he would have to help his irksome stepsister.

If the newly throned king was Avalta, then he must've been... Max recalled the foreign king's handsome appearance then smirked. The greedy old man must've been prepared for unexpected variables.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. "Your Highness, this is Dennis," came a voice beyond it.

"Come in," Max said, permitting the captain of his guards to enter.

Once he was in the room, the knight bowed and began his report. "As ordered, I've instructed the child staying in the kitchen tomorrow to inspect all the food that will enter the banquet hall."

Max felt relieved by that. Now, it would be impossible for anyone to poison the food. Still, he was concerned about Beatrice's careless attitude.



"Keep an eye on the princess on the day of the banquet," he ordered.

Finished with his business, he stood up.

Wearing a curious expression, Dennis posed a question. "Pardon me, Your Highness," he began, "but may I ask where you might be going?"

Max nodded. "I need to buy a gift," he answered nonchalantly.

"I'm sorry? Surely, you don't mean a present for Her Highness?" Dennis's bewilderment wasn't an unreasonable reaction. Although it was a well-established fact that Max considered his stepsister an eyesore, he was bound to be insulted if he didn't prepare an adequate gift for the coronation ceremony. Dennis prayed that his lord would deny the supposition, but Max betrayed that desperate wish.

"Of course I'm talking about her."

Having spat out those words, Max left the room. Contrary to his confident stride, however, he was agonizing over what to buy with a frown on his face. He couldn't figure it out. If he could, he wanted to prank her with a snake or an oversized spider, but doing such a thing would give his subordinates an excuse to nag him.

What should he do? He wished he could just choose not to give her anything.

At that moment, a familiar face popped into his head and a smile gradually brightened his complexion.

He should ask Jubelian for an idea.



## Goodbye, Deathflag

They were so beautiful.

After spending way too much time staring at the accessories Max had gifted me, I put them in a drawer and sighed. Upon the conclusion of the next day, all of my struggles would finally be over. I would be able to bid my death flag goodbye if I managed to get through the banquet without any trouble, and I would be able to tell Max my feelings.

Although Father objected to our relationship and Max's identity was mostly shrouded in mystery, it didn't matter to me. So what if he was a commoner? I could be the breadwinner of the family!

Fantasizing about my glorious future, I smiled. Then, I heard a knock resound from somewhere. Startled, I turned to the source: the window. Amidst the darkness, I could make out someone's silhouette.

Speak of the devil...

A slightly eerie feeling enveloped me. It was as if he had known what I was thinking. No, that can't be it. I laughed at myself for coming up with such nonsense.

Then, he yelled to me from outside. "What are you doing?" he asked. His voice was muffled. "Come on! Open it already."

I had been wondering this for ages, but why did he always have to come in through the window? I opened the entrance to the balcony, grumbling. "Can't you just come in through the door like a normal person?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Why should I do that? It's faster this way."

I decided to not argue. He just processed things differently from ordinary people. Indeed—although very handsome, he was really strange. Realizing I had fallen in love with someone thoroughly absurd, I felt ashamed for a moment.

"What is that on your neck?" he asked, puzzled.

"Oh, this is called a whistle," I said, smiling.

"A whistle?"

On the day I had visited the Fyodor Workshop—the same one I had that embarrassing misunderstanding with Max—I picked this item up. It was something I had asked Ian to make me for my safety.

After what had happened with Mikhail, I started thinking about defense measures I could take. I didn't even know how to hold a sword, so that wasn't an option. Besides, I could risk having my potential attacker snatch it away from me. I ended up deciding on keeping a whistle after I began wishing that I could better inform others that I was in danger. It was easy to carry and it made a loud noise whenever I blew it, making it perfect for grabbing others' attention.

I had already informed the knights about its function. I instructed them to gather in the direction of the sound since it meant that I was likely to be in a precarious situation.

"Do you want to try it?" I asked Max, handing the whistle over. He frowned slightly. Pointing to the right place, I began to explain what he should do with it. "Put this part in your mouth and blow on it," I said. "Don't do it too hard, though, or it might—"

Before I had even finished speaking, a shrill noise penetrated my eardrums. The sound echoed throughout my room and probably reverberated outside of it as well. My hands automatically shot up to protect my ears.

Max stared into space with the whistle in his mouth, looking shocked. Then, he slowly pulled the object away from his lips. "What in the world..." he muttered.

At that moment, loud noises began bursting beyond my bedroom walls, reaching my door. My maids had come running. "Lady Jubelian! Is there

something wrong?"

I hid my face in my hands. This was why I tried telling him not to blow so hard! Hastily, I began to think of an excuse.

Max returned the whistle to me. "Thanks. Now I know," he whispered.

Huh? What was he talking about? I stared at him blankly as he turned his back toward me.

"I'll be back," he promised. Then, he jumped right off the balcony.

I frowned. What was that just now? Did he just flee after having caused a ruckus? I was lost in my confusion when Merilyn called out again.

"Lady Jubelian!" she cried. "What's wrong?"

Realizing I had to come up with an explanation first, I opened my door, but I was immediately taken aback by how many people had assembled. It hadn't just been my maids... I mean, why had almost everyone come running? I was just in my room for goodness' sake! Almost all of the servants and maids working in the mansion were gazing at me with worry in their eyes.

Wiping his sweat away with a handkerchief, Derrick carefully asked, "Could you tell us what's happening?"

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth. "Oh, it's... it was just an accident." Everyone gaped at me in silence. Breaking the awkward atmosphere, I admitted my guilt. "I'm sorry."

The servants looked away.

"Oh, p-please don't worry about it," Derrick said, speaking for them. "We're just relieved that you're safe, Lady Jubelian."

I felt remorseful and somewhat embarrassed by their kindness. Suddenly, however, someone cut in.

"Jubelian, did you blow the whistle because you were bored?" Geraldine mocked.

Of course it was that good-for-nothing... I couldn't believe he was picking on me like that. Why would I ever do such a thing? I wasn't a little kid! I scowled at him.

"My lady, were you bored?" Merilyn asked. Her brown eyes were wide with curiosity.

Having no other choice, I faked a smile in response.



Originally, Max had planned on never visiting Fyodor's workshop again, but it was a different story if he intended to get a gift for someone other than Jubelian.

Having spotted an item, he picked it up for purchase, momentarily satisfied. Then, his face crumpled. He wanted to give another present to Jubelian.

He wondered what he should get her for a moment before leaving the studio since he had no intention of buying her anything from within it. Opting to look around, he took a stroll around the square. That was when something caught his eye.

He found a little object that reminded him of her. Captivated by what he saw, he stood rooted in place. Eventually, the owner found him, grinning and welcoming him.

"Come take a look! It's a cute little plush toy that kids will love! Plus, it even moves when you poke it!" the shop owner advertised enthusiastically. "Why don't you try it, sir?"

Max poked the toy. It immediately began to tremble. The small, white stuffed animal had round eyes and timid features, seemingly perfectly harmless. It reminded him of Jubelian.

"I would like this wrapped," he stated. "I want to give it as a gift."

The owner was visibly excited. "Congratulations! You, sir, are my first customer. So, I'll give you another for free!"

Deciding to keep the second one for himself, Max smiled.



After what had happened, I was forced to play ball with the maids—something only kids did, by the way!—to make up for my supposed boredom. Having exercised against my will, I was exhausted. And it was all thanks to Max.

I only had one day left until my response to his confession was due, yet he was treating me like a friend instead of a romantic interest... and, on top of that, he had disappeared after making me a mess to clean. I couldn't help getting upset. Gritting my teeth, I decided to put a little more thought into my choice to date him.

Right then, however, there was a knock at my window again. I approached the entrance to the balcony, finding Max with an elegant package in his

arms. Was that why he had suddenly rushed out? I fought back a smile as I opened the window.

"Here. This is for you," he said rather indifferently. Accepting the wrapped box, I gazed at him with loving eyes. "I bought it because it reminded me of you."

His tone carried confidence, so I opened the package with mounting anticipation.

Its contents startled me. What... was this?

The stuffed animal looked like a real mouse. Checking if it was alive, I cautiously gave it the barest touch. It squirmed in response and I screamed.

Frightened out of my mind, I had no choice but to throw the frighteningly lifelike thing across the room.



Max's gaze trembled in disbelief, gawking at Jubelian. Had she just thrown his gift across the room? He deflated, immeasurably disappointed.

"Did you just say I looked like that thing?" she asked, eyes wide with fright.

The resemblance was apparent in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Don't you think so?"

As soon as he gave his affirmation, Jubelian pointed at the abandoned toy. "Take that and get out of here," she demanded.



"What's wrong?" Max asked rather softly, responding to my angry request. He sounded like he was trying to appease me rather than question me, allowing me to calm down.

Now that I thought it over, it had only been a stuffed animal. It was something he had picked especially for me, too. He probably had no idea that I hated mice this much.

"I don't like mice, Max," I explained. "Who would like it if they were told they resembled someone or something they disliked?"

He stared at me for a moment before turning to the gift on the floor. "I don't understand. To me, it's small and cute."

I doubted my hearing. Was he basically saying that he thought I looked

small and cute? Repeating the words in my head, I turned my attention toward the small toy as well. It was eerie at first glance, but now it seemed a little more endearing.

I guess it didn't look so weird anymore...

I was convinced in an instant.

At that point, however, Max forfeited. "There's nothing I can do about it if you don't like it," he said. "I will do as you say."

I watched as he lifted the little stuffed animal off the floor and regret washed over me in an instant. It was something he had bought for me! Realizing the process he had gone through in picking out the item, I decided I had been too harsh.

If I left him be, he would throw it away... or it could fall into someone else's hands.

My eyes darted back and forth as I agonized over what to do. Eventually, I finally decided to approach him. "Max, I really hate mice," I began, taking the small toy in his hand, "but I will try to like this one."

I didn't go as far as to admit that he was the reason behind my decision, but his face brightened. Realizing that the crisis had passed, I finally said what I had been meaning to say: "Thank you for the present."

"You haven't forgotten our promise, have you?" he asked gently, gazing into my eyes. There was no way I would have forgotten it. I had to answer his confession tomorrow. The day I had been eagerly waiting for was finally nearby.

"Of course," I affirmed, nodding. "Shall we—"

"See you tomorrow," he said, cutting me off and suddenly bidding farewell.

I looked out the window he jumped from for a moment before locking the entrance to the balcony. I placed the present I had received on the bed. "The more I look at it, the cuter it gets," I mumbled to myself.

I had been thoroughly brainwashed. It was a truly frightening phenomenon. I couldn't believe I was thinking about this while looking at a doll resembling one of my most-hated animals. I spent a few more minutes staring at it.

The day where I would have my final battle was only a few hours away. Putting my hands together in front of me, I prayed silently.

"Dear heavens, please let everything go well tomorrow."



Standing on her bedroom veranda, Beatrice stared up at the night sky. The moon shone brightly, illuminating the dark earth with its faint silver rays.

She prayed silently. "Please let the banquet tomorrow be a success without incident," she pleaded. "And let that eyesore Maximillian be exiled from this kingdom as soon as possible so that I can become the sole recipient of my parents' love and attention."

Suddenly, her selfish prayers were interrupted by a brusque voice. "You."

The princess almost screamed in shock, but the man who had snuck up onto her covered her mouth with his hand.

She couldn't die like this! Not like this! She attempted to elbow her opponent's side. However, the voice spoke up once more in an attempt to calm her.

"It's me, Maximillian," it said.

Beatrice couldn't believe it was her awful stepbrother; he had appeared so suddenly in the dead of night. Then, she realized that this might be her last few moments alive, making her tremble in fear.

He removed his hand. "What's with the shaking?" he asked. "It's not even cold out."

Upon noticing how calm Max looked, Beatrice blushed, embarrassed. "M-Mind your own business! By the way, I see you have no courtesy, breaking into someone's room like this."

He frowned. "Do you think I want to be here?" he retorted. "I'm only here to give you this."

Beatrice tensed up as Max took something out of a pouch. She was afraid that it would be another terrible prank—a spider, a snake, or perhaps an inconsiderate object unfit for a lady like a weapon. However, her eyes widened when she saw it. It was just an ordinary box.

She stared at the container with curious eyes, stunned.

"Take it," he said.

Swallowing nervously, she took the box in hand. She wondered what it had to hold to make Max get it for her himself. She was about to open it, but then he had one last comment for her.

"Just so you know, don't be so reckless with it. Only use it when you're in danger."



Having said those words, he jumped off the balcony. Frowning, Beatrice complained silently. After all, he himself was the most dangerous threat to her.

When she carefully opened the box, she spotted a silver object. After observing the unfamiliar item for a while, she checked the instruction manual. There was a short but meaningful phrase that read: "The Fyodor Whistle will now protect you at all times!"

Beatrice smiled. She couldn't believe that this tiny thing was a tool made for self-defense. Still, the stamp showed that it was obviously from the Fyodor Workshop, and that was the best one in the capital.

The expression on Beatrice's face was an odd one, unpleasant and confused. For Max to care for his enemy's safety... what a weirdo.

She put the whistle around her neck. Then, she went into her room and inspected it in the mirror, finding herself quite satisfied with the gift's aesthetics.

She had no choice but to accept it, she supposed. It was her birthday present, after all.



Slamming the arm of his throne, the emperor yelled harshly. "What was that?" he demanded. "He turned down my offer?"

Count Nigel from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bowed. "That seems to be the case, Your Majesty."

"That bastard! He must think he's something just because he's the head of those southern barbarians, rejecting my favor like this!"

The emperor gritted his teeth. He had invited Lagon's monarch to have a drink together during the banquet, but the foreign king had refused the proposal.

Did the king of Lagon notice what he was planning?

Despite their consistent shortage of food, Lagon was a country rich in resources. Unfortunately, they didn't trade or communicate with the Assiette empire frequently. The emperor had tried to ally with them through marriage because he wanted to institute a new trade route.

"Damn it!" he simmered with rage. The original plan was to inundate the foreign king with drinks until he fell asleep. Then, the emperor was going to push his drunken daughter into the bedroom. Regardless of whether or not

anything happened, Beatrice's honor would be tarnished once she spent the night with an outsider. It would make an excellent reason for the emperor to force the marriage between them.

He hadn't expected Lagon's king to refuse his offer. The emperor contemplated what to do for a moment before smiling slyly.

He just had to find another way to fulfill his goals.



"I see. I've heard the rumors, but I didn't think that the old man genuinely had such filthy thoughts," a man insulted, his expression distorting into a scowl.

Max looked up. "Just show your face at the banquet hall tomorrow for a while. That will be enough," he instructed. "After that, you should stay in your room until the night ends... and don't even think about drinking."

Smirking, the man replied, "I've never been drunk in my life. Don't worry."

Realizing what he meant, Max scolded him. "Did you not hear what I just said, Avalta?"

Smiling awkwardly, the foreign king changed the subject. "By the way, I didn't think you would be the kind of person to take care of your sister like this... It's surprising."

Max narrowed his eyes. "I'm not taking care of her," he insisted. "I'm just doing this because I don't want the emperor to get what he wants."

Avalta chuckled. "How about taking this opportunity to get along with your sister?" he suggested.

Max's eyes turned cold as soon as the man finished speaking. "Stop with that nonsense. Our alliance is over if you make any mistakes tomorrow."



The day of the coronation ceremony finally dawned and the maids busily dressed their lady, the one who would receive all the attention today.

Beatrice couldn't believe this day had come so suddenly. She felt nervous. While she hadn't been hoping for it, it was still something she had been looking forward to. Today, she would finally reunite with the lady she had befriended two weeks ago.

With a smile, Beatrice began humming without realizing it. The maids who had been dressing her giggled in response. "This is the first time I've seen Your Highness so excited!" one noted.

"Indeed!" agreed another. "You've always been such a mature lady, so I didn't think you would display your emotions like this!"

Beatrice cleared her throat. "I'm human, too, you know," she said. Soon, however, her smile fell. She wondered what her mother had been up to lately. The empress hadn't summoned Beatrice for the last several days, leaving her to spend her time lonesome and disappointed.

"Your Royal Ladyship, His Highness the Crown Prince awaits," a voice from outside the room announced, bringing Beatrice back to reality.

The maids made a great fuss. "I guess he's handsome enough to partner with Her Highness!"

"Who?" Beatrice asked curiously.

"We mean His Highness, Your Ladyship. Isn't it a relief that his appearance is adequate, at least?" another maid whispered.

Her expression contorting unpleasantly, Beatrice remained silent. Once she heard from the maids that everything was ready, the princess observed her decorated visage in the mirror.

This should be good enough... to stand side-by-side with Jubelian. A surge of excitement filled her.

Suddenly, a voice outside the room called out. "Your Royal Ladyship, have you gone through all the preparations?"

It was something she had to do anyway, so it would've been better to do it now than later. Reluctantly, she began moving toward the door. She stepped out of the room to behold an unbelievable sight before her.

"Maximilian, you madman!" she exclaimed internally. For her once-in-a-lifetime debutante ball, her stepbrother was escorting her in his black armor.

Beatrice had no problems with her stepbrother degrading his dignity—in fact, it would be advantageous for her if he did such a thing—but it was evident that her dignity would take a hit as collateral damage since she had been the one to ask him to be her partner. Panicking, she tried to make sense of the situation.

Was he getting revenge for that time she had made him wear a mask at his victory banquet? She shuddered. She didn't know her malicious intentions would come back to bite her like this. She couldn't imagine entering the banquet hall hand-in-hand with someone dressed as the grim reaper.

What should she do?

She wanted to abandon the request she had made and enter the hall on her own. She honestly didn't care about having a partner at this point. Still, her vicious stepbrother had made up his mind and she would be forced to make her entrance with him by her side.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience...

Unable to overcome her despair, Beatrice sagged to the floor.

"Your Highness, please wake up."

Huh?

Startled by the familiar voice of one of her maids, Beatrice's eyes fluttered open.

Beatrice sat up and looked around in a daze; it was still dark.

Was it just a dream?

Beatrice recollected what had happened with a hazy mind. Then, she realized that there were many strange things in her dream, so it was more like a nightmare.

Yes... there was no way her mother would neglect to attend her coronation ceremony. Also...

"We mean His Highness, Your Ladyship. Isn't it a relief that his appearance is adequate, at least?"

There was no way her maids would praise that eyesore. As long as they were sane, of course.

With her stepbrother now on her mind, Beatrice scowled. Adequate appearance... ha! She couldn't believe she had such nonsense manifest in her dreams.

Chills traveled down her spine just then, prompting her to shiver. She shook her head.

She had heard that dreams were oftentimes the opposite of what reality ended up being... which meant that today would be a great day for her.

With these thoughts in mind, Beatrice went back to bed.



It was moments before dawn. Amid the fading moonlight sat a man in solitude, his eyes reflecting the pale light.

What should he do?

Once the day was over, he would finally be able to hear the long-awaited

answer to his confession. The only problem was...

If she discovered his identity before then...

Max recalled Jubelian's hatred toward the crown prince.

"Dangerous animals like bears or leopards are still known to be scary even if you've never seen them in person before. It's like that. If I meet him, then my life will be in danger."

"Do you know how I felt when I realized how similar the two letters were? I was scared out of my mind. I was so frightened that I had goosebumps throughout my body."

He had done everything he could to clear up the misunderstandings surrounding his true identity, but she still loathed him.

This wasn't the time, he decided.

It wouldn't be too late to reveal his identity after Jubelian learned what kind of person he was, letting go of her hatred toward him. For now, getting through the banquet without any problems was the most pertinent of his concerns.

Having come to such a conclusion, Max began to look for a way to hide his face. His attention lingered on his dark armor for a moment. It wasn't a bad idea, entirely... Beatrice would definitely throw a fit. He smirked.

Then, his smirk fell. No, Jubelian might fear the crown prince even more if he showed up wearing the armor...

Max had never paid attention to what others thought of him despite the numerous malicious rumors that followed him. Now, however, he found himself preoccupied with a single person's perceptions.

How did he end up like this?

Then, something caught his eye. Max laughed as he recalled how his stepsister tried to embarrass him during the victory banquet.

"Oh, Beatrice," he silently began, chiding her in his mind, "I'll get you back for what you had done."

Max wore a sinister smile, anticipating his sister's reaction the following morning.



It was early in the day, a time when I would normally be sleeping. After washing my face with cold water, I looked in the mirror. The day had finally arrived. If I got through today without getting in trouble, I would be free

from countless death flags and I'd be able to live as I wanted.

Naturally, a smile stretched my lips as I thought about my glorious future. I hummed a lively tune as I returned to my bedroom. There, I saw the stuffed mouse that Max had given me. Picking up the toy, I recalled my memories of the previous night. Today, I would be able to give him an answer to his confession.

Just then, something annoying came to mind. Mikhail wouldn't get in my way, would he?

That worry only lasted for a moment, however, because I knew he would fall in love with Beatrice at first sight. There would be no way he would even pay attention to me.

According to the original narrative, Mikhail would be unable to take his eyes off the princess from the moment of her grand entrance. His eyes would be glued to her until the end of the day despite having his lover—me—by his side. His dream of dancing with her would come true since Beatrice would reluctantly acquiesce to it at her mother's behest.

Unlike Mikhail, Beatrice would bear ill will toward him since currying favor with him was the empress's idea. However, the princess would gradually warm up to him after realizing he was sweeter and more thoughtful than she had expected him to be.

Then, I become outraged and made a great fuss at the banquet hall... only to end up being slapped in the face...

I wouldn't do that this time, though, so it didn't matter.

An ominous feeling suddenly overcame me and I decided to take my whistle just in case. I opened my jewelry cabinet and a numerous array of shiny ornaments instantly caught my attention. I chose to wear the hairpin Max had helped me put on the other day. That way, I could wear it when I admit to him how I feel after the banquet.

With these thoughts, I busily decorated myself, rife with anticipation.



Max smirked under his mask. He was going to get vengeance for what had happened that one day. The wait wasn't boring him now that he was preoccupied with thoughts of how disgusted his stepsister would be.

Just then, the door opened, revealing the royal princess elegance. Everyone unleashed exclamations of her beauty, but Max frowned.

She had such terrible taste.

Lavishly adorned with embellishments, her showy red dress was too much for him. Its skirt was larger than her usual dresses, resembling an oversized umbrella.

Wearing such a thing to her own coronation ceremony... She didn't even need him to embarrass her.

That was when he realized Beatrice was also glaring at him with a scowl.

A mask... just as she thought, he wasn't sane.

However, because she had awoken terrified by the sight of her stepbrother in her dream, the fact that he wore a mask seemed comparatively normal to Beatrice. It was better than wearing the damn armor.

The two stood strangely satisfied with the current situation.

"Your Highness, you must hurry," a servant urged.

"Let's go," Max said, extending his hand out to her. She took it, barely holding back the urge to pinch it. The thought of entering the hall with this man was horrific enough...

Max shared the sentiment. It was annoying. He could hardly believe he was wasting his time on this brat...

The siblings glared at each other before they both remembered a certain someone. It was unpleasant, but it was worth it if they could see Jubelian for a little while.

Without knowing that they actually had something in common, the siblings headed toward the banquet hall.



Father and I greeted the emperor and empress without issue. However, I was still nervous; my mouth was dry and my hands were sweaty.

I reminded myself that I just needed to survive today. I repeatedly sipped some water as I stood next to my father.

"Is everything okay, Jubelian?" he asked.

"I'm just a little thirsty," I replied with a nod. I tried to sound calm, but my voice was shaking. No wonder. It was almost time for the novel's protagonist—the one I was supposed to develop a terrible relationship with—to enter the hall.

I turned my attention to the color of my dress and once again assured myself that I would be fine. I wore a very modest, toned-down shade of sky

blue since I remembered from the novel that Beatrice would be wearing a red one.

Curious about what others were wearing, I surveyed my surroundings, checking over other noble ladies' dresses. As I did so, however, I spotted an unpleasant face.

That creep. Mikhail. He had been looking at me, his obsessive eyes seemingly permanently affixed upon me. I simply turned away to convey that I had no interest in him. Then, I resumed my optimistic chants, burning my will to survive into my mind.

Today was going to go as planned. Nothing untoward was going to happen.

"Princess Beatrice Evelyn Assiette and her partner, Crown Prince Maximillian Cassein Assiette, will now enter!" the gatekeeper shouted.

My eyes trembled as soon as I heard the announcement. My expectations were being shattered from the start! The princess wasn't supposed to have a partner! She was supposed to appear alone!

Never mind that, though—why was her partner the crown prince?!

Although Beatrice was a sweet girl in the beginning, her character underwent many changes throughout the novel. In the beginning, the crown prince had sent her the head of an assassin as a gift a day before the banquet, terrifying her out of her mind. Surprised, she hurried to the empress's chambers to visit her mother, but...

"The child I'm bearing constantly wants more meat," the empress had said. "It must be a boy this time."

"I'll bring some snacks, Your Majesty," a servant replied.

"Thank you. And, don't forget: news of my pregnancy must not reach Maximillian."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Beatrice had fallen into a state of panic after overhearing a conversation between her mother and her maid, making her realize why the empress had been neglecting her for the past few days. Returning to her room in despair, she wept.

"My worth has dwindled. I'm nothing more than a useless trinket to sell to another noble family," she had mourned. "In that case..."

Reality was harsh on her. She was someone who had endured most of her life with the hope that she would be loved someday, only to have her hopes coldly crushed. Desperate, she tried to commit suicide by throwing herself



off a balcony, but her soul forbade her death and awakened her as a wizard instead, allowing her to succeed the first emperor who founded this kingdom.

"My parents only wanted to use me and my evil stepbrother tried to kill me... I will destroy this damned bloodline!" she had sworn. After gaining power, her character underwent a complete shift and she entered the banquet hall alone.

At least... that was what was supposed to happen. Now, she entered the hall holding hands with a prince she was supposed to hate.

However, she looked somewhat familiar...

Sometimes, it took a little time for one to connect all the dots. Such was my case.

"There will be another banquet in two weeks anyway," I recalled being told. "We can see each other again then."

Bea was the royal princess?!

Strawberry blonde hair and red eyes were common around here, so I had treated her without much thought. I had no idea that she would be the very same protagonist who would cause my ruin!

Chills ran down my spine just then, replacing my frustration. I didn't make any mistakes... did I?

Just then, memories flashed before my eyes like a panorama. To be precise, I had been reminded of all the mistakes I had made.

"Hey, could you pick up that coin for me?"

"My friend and I got lost and ended up coming all the way here. Is this a restricted area by any chance?"

I had talked to her informally upon our first meeting and had even called her a friend in front of the crown prince! I stood frozen in place, shocked by the atrocities I had committed. Realizing I had set up my own demise, I sighed.

I had lived a careful life after becoming aware of my past, so I couldn't believe all the mistakes I had made. Discouraged by the bleak future awaiting me, I lamented my fate. My head was hurting. I should just do my best to hide away from the princess...

Just then, however, I met Beatrice's eyes and she gave me a bright smile. Strangely, I felt a sense of relief flood me at the sight of it.

"I'll invite you over for some tea after that," I remember her saying.

Although I had done as I pleased by calling the royal princess my friend, I

couldn't deny how friendly Bea had been. I gradually came to my senses.

Beatrice was merciless toward those with malicious intentions, but she was kind to those she considered her friends. Truthfully, I wasn't in an adverse position at all. There would be no hostility between us in the first place if I had made her my friend instead of my enemy. It was actually a much safer route for me!

I would feel uncomfortable once she became involved with Mikhail, but—

Suddenly, I noticed something. My expression hardened in an instant. The crown prince had his head turned toward me.

Although his reputation had improved in many ways recently, his existence still terrified me. I could, at least, have a logical conversation with Bea, but the same couldn't be said about the crown prince. According to the rumors, he didn't have an ounce of common sense.

After trembling in fear for a moment, a realization dawned upon me. I had been staring at the crown prince for at least a minute or so.

I must've gone crazy! I hurriedly lowered my eyes in fear as a cold sweat ran down my neck. Was I going to be okay? I was amid a few desperate attempts to calm my pounding heart when I heard murmurs arise around me.

"Oh my goodness, isn't Her Highness beautiful?"

"Agreed! How could she be so composed and elegant at such a young age? Oh, by the way—"

"His Highness is wearing a mask today, too."

"Yes, I was just about to say that. I thought I would finally get to see his face today..."

A myriad of people watched the pair enter the banquet hall. Still, I was afraid that I had irritated the madman. I had dressed unremarkably on purpose, so why was he paying attention to me? Clenching my fists, I recalled the things Max had told me and tried to restructure my thoughts.

I was just being excessively self-conscious. He might not have been looking at me.

The hope Beatrice had given me probably enabled me to think with greater optimism. I had decided that people weren't as interested in others as I had always assumed. Besides, the prince couldn't have noticed me amidst so many others.

I comforted myself. I had nothing to worry about.



Doubts piled up as Max walked down the long hallway to the banquet hall. He predicted that Beatrice was going to make a great fuss about the mask, but she was being unusually quiet. The unexpected reaction made him feel uncomfortable. He would be stuck with her all day; it wouldn't be any fun if she remained indifferent like this for the rest of the ball.

The two walked in unbroken silence, arriving at the entrance of the hall before they knew it.

"Princess Beatrice Evelyn Assiette and her partner, Crown Prince Maximillian Cassein Assiette, will now enter!"

Hearing the loud announcement, the prince entered the atrium hand-in-hand with the princess. He felt Beatrice squeeze his hand tightly, nervous. Although she remained silent, Max could tell from her expression that she was excited by the view before her. Turning his gaze away slightly, he scanned the court.

Noblemen and women dressed in colorful clothes showed their respect by bowing. The scene was as pretty as a picture, but all of it bored Max to death. Suddenly, he spotted a faint light. At the same time, he realized Beatrice was captivated by the very same sight

Jubelian looked lovely as always.

His lady stood amidst the large crowd wearing a sky-blue dress that only seemed to enhance her angelic visage. The topaz ornaments adorning her silver hair shone beautifully under the chandeliers. When he realized she was wearing one of the accessories he had gifted her, his heart began to beat with excitement. A smile sat upon his lips without him noticing. He was looking forward to the answer she would give him later today.

Nevertheless, his elation didn't last long. He scowled when he recalled that this was not the time to drool over her gorgeous appearance. With the hairpin, she was more charming than ever, but Max was afraid that she would stand out too much and attract other noblemen.

Once the day was over... should he ask her only to wear that dress when she was at home? Contemplating this, he stared at her with an unintentionally harsh gaze.

Paling in trepidation, Jubelian bowed her head. Max couldn't figure out what had happened, so he began to worry. If he could, he wanted to run to her side immediately, grab her, and ask her if she was okay, but...

"Welcome, Beatrice and Max."

Right now, he needed to perform the role of a proper son and deal with his father and stepmother. With his hand still holding Beatrice's, he lowered his head slowly.

Laughing heartily, the emperor praised them, "How nice it is to see you two getting along like this!" he chortled.

Realizing the act his father was putting on, Max played along. "I was very happy when I heard that Beatrice had asked me to be her partner."

"Yes. Why don't you two continue these friendly relations from now on?"

The empress cut in. "Dear Max, why have you worn that mask again? I realize my beloved Beatrice had made a mistake last time, but that was then and this is now, isn't it?"

From the moment he had settled on the mask, Max had predicted that the empress would ask such a question. "Beatrice surprised me last time, so I wanted to return the gesture. She was the one who gave me this accessory, after all," he answered calmly.

Max expected her to continue finding fault with him, but contrary to his expectations, the empress simply nodded to her husband with a gentle smile. "I'm quite delighted to see him take such good care of our Beatrice."

Feeling disgusted by her hypocrisy, Max gave himself credit for choosing to cover his face with a mask. If not, the whole empire would've witnessed his irritation. Nonetheless, he appreciated the empress's incomprehensible pliancy.

He furtively glanced at Beatrice and realized it would be difficult to monitor both his stepsister and the empress throughout the banquet—he would be suffering a headache by now if either of them had decided to go after him.



I sighed as I watched Beatrice converse with her parents. I was positive that she would soon dance with Mikhail and I worried about her becoming involved with such a terrible man. Fortunately, according to the original plot, Mikhail would transform into one of the best men in the empire after meeting her.

Besides, how she approached her love life was for her to decide. It would be discourteous for me to intervene, and that wasn't the problem at the

moment. Swallowing nervously, I shifted my attention to the person next to Bea—her partner, the crown prince.

Everything was strange. Bea had partnered with her archenemy, and the king of Lagon had attended this banquet after losing the war against the Assiette Empire. He should have been renouncing this kingdom by now. It was bothersome that the events before me were different from the future I knew. I wondered if my attempts to avoid my death flag were changing the future.

Enveloped by an ominous feeling, I began making up all kinds of crazy logic.

"Lady Jubelian!" a voice called just then, bringing me back to reality.

Members of my tea tasting party greeted me just as they had at the banquet two weeks ago. I looked up at Father, questioning. "Go hang out with your friends," he replied indifferently. He left my side with those words, once again keeping his distance from me.

Confused by his ever-changing attitude, I watched Father as he disappeared into the crowd. Then, the ladies from the tea tasting party soon approached me, and I plastered on a smile. "Hi, everyone. Is something the matter?" I asked.

It was Mary Ann who replied first. "Lady Jubelian, you look even more beautiful today than usual! Your skin is flawless—not even the finest china could compare!"

Catherine chimed in. "I'm so jealous! Could you tell us your secret?"

Smiling in embarrassment, I kept my reply to myself: "The secret is... you just have to be scared out of your mind."

It certainly wasn't something I could say to my acquaintances. I sighed and looked around. My eyes landed upon the crown prince and princess conversing with their parents again.

Today was the last day, so I had to take great care.

I slowly lowered my eyes to the marble floor.



Beatrice was smiling, but she was far from feeling content. She had argued with her mother earlier in the day.

"Beatrice, your first dance must be with Marquis Hessen's eldest son," her mother had said. "Their intelligence and military are essential to our plans.

Do you understand?”

Prior to that, it had been quite a few days since Beatrice had last seen or spoken to her mother. She hadn't expected any grandiose promises, she simply wanted to be congratulated for her coming of age. However, her mother used the moment to ask her to dance with some random man instead.

What was she to her mother? Did her mother even care about her?

She recalled how her mother's attitude had been recently. Ascending the throne seemed to be the only thing on the woman's mind. Increasingly doubtful about how she had led her life until now, the princess fell into despair.

At this point, she didn't know why she had to keep doing any of this...

In contrast to Beatrice's depression, however, Jubelian seemed to be enjoying a lively conversation with her friends. Beatrice watched with envy at the simple life her friend seemed to live.

Realizing her daughter was staring blankly into the ballroom, the empress met her eyes. “My dear Beatrice, all your guests are dancing,” she began. “As the star of this banquet, it would be discourteous of you to keep as still as you are now.”

Beatrice stared at the woman before her, seething with anger. The empress's claims had explicitly conveyed her wishes. She was forcing the dance with the heir of Marquis Hessen to commence.

Beatrice shifted her crimson gaze over to Jubelian. She wasn't doing anything special, yet so many people had their attention riveted upon her. She was like the moon atop the night sky.

The princess's thoughts began to deviate, hinged on the temptation to rebel. “I'm never going to follow my mother's wishes,” she silently swore to herself. “I will do what I want to do.”

Contrary to her pledge, however, she nodded meekly. “Yes, Mother. I have always wanted to dance with someone in this gorgeous hall. I will need a chaperone to help me, so could you summon my maid, please?” she asked.

The empress smiled once Beatrice rose from her seat, pleased. Now, this was what a good daughter looked like. She would win the heart of a useful man so she may lay a good foundation for her younger brother and bring him one step closer to the throne. Wonderful.

However, the empress's face soon hardened. “Wait,” she ordered. She couldn't understand why Maximillian, the crown prince, had stood up as

well. That barbaric fool was walking toward Beatrice, who now stood still.

He reached for her. "I'm your partner. Did you plan on leaving me behind?" he teased. His friendly voice left the empress, the emperor, and Beatrice thoroughly shocked and revolted.

Why the hell was he doing this? Confused, Beatrice was about to reject him when a voice cut in before she could.

"Yes, Max is right," the emperor agreed. "There are important guests here. It would be wonderful for him to introduce you to some of these people."

Beatrice gritted her teeth at those words. She knew her father only said as much because he was trying to tie her up with the king of Lagon. Beatrice turned to her mother for help, but she nodded indifferently. It seemed that she was, for some reason, agreeing with the scheme.

"Go ahead, my little Bea," she said.

Beatrice felt her blood boil when she realized that things weren't going her way. As if he had read her mind, Max spoke, his voice soft. "Your hand, my lady," he said.

Chills raced down her spine in response to his abominable voice. She stared at her stepbrother's masked face.

Was this all a trick of his? He was someone capable of pulling such a feat and more. He might lead her to that foreign king...

In any case, the situation made it impossible to refuse his offer to escort her. Her face crumpled as she accepted his hand at last, berating herself for asking her horrible stepbrother to be her partner in the first place.



Max smirked once he witnessed Beatrice's disgruntled appearance. Seeing her struggle to manage her facial expressions, he realized she was still rather immature. He turned to the emperor and empress—by the looks on their faces, they were both anticipating their plans to succeed. Having no intention to aid their selfish schemes, Max gently let go of Beatrice's hand and said, "One's choice of acquaintances is up to oneself to create. This applies to Beatrice as well—she has made her debut in high society. It would only be the right to let her choose her friends."

Both his father and stepmother seemed aggrieved at those words. On the other hand, Beatrice turned to Max in disbelief. What was wrong with him

today? Being kind... wasn't like him at all.

However, her thoughts were cut short by Max. "Let's go," he said amiably.

Suddenly, Beatrice realized something: she had heard him speak like this before.

"Let's get out of here first."

He only played the courteous gentleman in front of Jubelian, likely to hide his true nature. Having deciphered why she had been so disgusted by this act of his, Beatrice gave him a dirty look.

Was he... sticking to her because he knew she was looking for Jubelian? The princess glanced at her friend in the distance. Dressed in light blue, the young lady looked like a small, fragile lark. She couldn't let her demonic stepbrother approach her precious friend.

She glared at him again. She was going to lead him somewhere else and meet Jubelian all by herself. Just wait for it, Max...

Grinning to conceal her thoughts, she went along with her brother's ruse. "Of course, Your Highness."

The two wandered around the banquet hall greeting nobles from throughout the empire. Eventually, much time had passed and Beatrice was slowly getting tired. She had always wondered why her stepbrother never attended banquets, but now she understood. They weren't entertaining at all.

Just then, Max suddenly let go of her hand. Puzzled, Beatrice turned to him. "I need to be somewhere at this moment," he said. He was back to normal, speaking in a stern tone. "Be patient and wait here until I return."

Beatrice stifled a laugh at that unexpected command. She couldn't believe he was going to leave her like this so soon. Suppressing her excitement to avoid suspicion, she replied calmly. "I understand, Your Highness."

Once her stepbrother disappeared into the crowd, Beatrice smirked. Now, it was time to fulfill the promise she had made. The princess began approaching Jubelian, but someone stopped her in her tracks.

"I, Mikhail Albert Hessen, greet Her Royal Ladyship."

Beatrice's face hardened at the man's sudden appearance.



Tensing up, I watched as the crown prince and princess made their rounds throughout the banquet hall.



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

I remembered the crown prince’s voice from the past, and suddenly, it became all I could think about. I didn’t want to be involved with someone who would come to torture me in the future.

Since I couldn’t greet Bea, I felt down. If it weren’t for the crown prince, I would’ve done so already. Then, I noticed that she was smiling as she greeted the nobles and the realization brought me relief; she seemed to have brightened up since our last meeting.

I still remembered the dark expression she had worn on the day of the victory banquet. Since we both suffered from similar problems, I naturally sympathized with her. It was ironic that the both of us—the heroine and the villain—shared the same scars from our neglectful parents.

Still, there was something different about her. Eventually, the princess would be loved by Mikhail. In fact, he would go as far as to stand stock still even as she deliberately stepped on his foot. He would listen to her insults in silence, cherishing her too much to leave.

“How foolish of you,” Beatrice would say at the start, insulting his blind love.

Nevertheless, it was thanks to that love that Beatrice would begin smiling again. As he rekindled her abandoned soul, he fell even further in love with her and pledged to protect her forever. He became someone who would do anything for his lady. Recognizing his efforts, she gradually warmed up to him.

All in all, I wasn’t worried. Although he had treated me like a piece of trash, it would be different for Bea since they were fated to be lovers.

Somewhat relieved, I thoughtlessly glanced in Mikhail’s direction and flinched. I didn’t understand why, but he was looking in my direction. I quickly averted my gaze and took deep breaths to calm down.

At that moment, I caught the crown prince leaving Bea’s side. Realizing that she would be left alone, I instantly tried to catch her eye, but before I could, someone placed their hand on my shoulder. I turned my head in surprise only to realize it was Rose.

“Lady Jubelian, Veronica and I are going to the powder room for a moment,” she informed me.

I sighed in relief and nodded. “Of course! Go ahead,” I said.

I directed my attention back to where Bea had been once the two left. I

could tell she was looking at me, too. I was wondering whether I should approach her first when Mary Ann and Catherine began a conversation with me, chuckling about something.

“Lady Jubelian! Would you like to do something fun with us?”

“Fun?” I questioned, and the two ladies pointed at a group of young men nearby. They were all handsome, but the one that stood out the most was the eldest son of Duke Elios. To most young noblewomen, he was considered the most eligible bachelor in the empire.

“The gentlemen over there suggested that we play a card game in one of the lounges.”

I sighed when I realized what they were talking about. Ah, so this was... it was like a blind date, wasn't it? I was tempted because it had been a long time since I had received an invitation like this, but I felt uncomfortable leaving Rose and Veronica behind—not to mention that I was still thinking about speaking to Bea.

“Then, why don't we all go together once Rose and Veronica return from the powder room?” I suggested.

Mary Ann and Catherine exchanged glances. Then they began whispering in unison: “There is one gentleman among them whose family doesn't have a favorable relationship with Lady Veronica's family.”

I understood what kind of situation I was in. They were afraid that I would tell the two absent ladies their whereabouts once they returned. Also, it was dangerous for me to be in the banquet hall right now, so I was had almost been persuaded to go along.

The fact of the matter was that I didn't want to leave Bea here alone, though. Given how the original plot's changed so far, there was a chance that Mikhail might do something stupid to her.

Suddenly, Catherine shouted, interrupting my thoughts. “Oh my gosh, look at that!” she exclaimed, her wide eyes bright with excitement.

I turned to see Mikhail courteously greeting the princess. Ah, of course. There was no way he would do something foolish. Bittersweet feelings overcame me as I realized fate had finally brought the two together. Mikhail would finally become Beatrice's knight in shining armor. She wouldn't have to cry in secret anymore.

“May you be happy in the future,” I prayed for Bea's sake.

Then, I turned to the two ladies. “Okay, let's go.”



The man before her had bright blond hair and amethyst eyes. He definitely deserved to be counted amongst the best bachelors in the empire along with the eldest son of Duke Elios. Despite that, though, he failed to measure up in Beatrice's eyes.

He was beloved by Jubelian... with that face? Beatrice glared at him. Her friend deserved so much better.

"Your Highness, pardon me for blocking your way. I was drawn by your beauty," he said. The ladies surrounding Mikhail swooned over the bold statement, but Beatrice, the recipient of the praise, simply wasn't listening.

How annoying. She decided to push him out of the way and rush to Jubelian—what? The princess had been keeping her eyes on her friend, so she frowned once she realized what was happening. Where was Jubelian going? Did she... forget about their promise?

Bewildered, Beatrice stepped toward Jubelian without realizing it

"Will you grant me the honor to dance, Your Highness?" Mikhail suddenly asked, distracting her for a moment.

Unfortunately, it was a moment too long. Jubelian had disappeared from her view in the brief second she had turned to look at him. Enraged by the obstacle he posed, the princess scowled.

"I have no intention of granting you such glory, so get out of my way," she hissed. The lively party froze at the royal's harsh command. Beatrice could see the shock in her parents' faces but didn't care anymore.

She had to find Jubelian! Swiftly, she fled the banquet hall. Dennis, who had been instructed to watch the princess, didn't even realize she had left.



The two ladies and I matched up with impromptu partners in the banquet hall and the gentlemen escorted us to the lounge room.

"Lady Floyen," Lord Elios said, calling for me with a sweet voice as we walked down the spacious hall of the royal palace.

I looked up. "Yes? What is it?"

He smiled brightly. "I just wanted to say your name, my lady."

I didn't understand. Why did he call me if he didn't have anything to say? I simply nodded. "I see."

Come to think of it, I had done the same thing to Max when I had been bored. Perhaps Lord Elios was feeling the same way.

Gently stroking my hand, he said, "It's amazing, isn't it? I never imagined that an opportunity like this would come to me."

"What kind of opportunity?"

His eyes curved as he smiled. "I've always wanted to play card games with you," he admitted,

Perhaps he thought I had a talent for such things.... however, in truth, I was terrible at card games. He was bound to be disappointed.

"Jubelian!" came an infuriated yell.

I whipped my head around in response, my eyes widening after I realized who it was. How did she get here?

The rest of the group I was with saw the person calling after me and they lowered their heads in deference, a necessity around a member of the royal family. I was about to bow as well when she addressed me by my full name.

"Jubelian Eloy Floyen."

Although her voice was familiar, I kept my eyes lowered, confused by the situation. Then, she grabbed me by the chin and lifted my face. She seemed to carry with her a hint of sadness, and her eyebrows were furrowed, disappointment swimming in her crimson gaze.

Swallowing nervously, I met her eyes. Why had she come here instead of dancing with Mikhail? A flurry of questions swam through my mind.

"You do not have to lower your head in front of me," she intoned, her stare boring into me, "because you are one of my people."

I raised my brows in surprise. This was a line I was all too familiar with.

It was what she would say after opening up to Mikhail.



"Look, these guys attacked me."

Max looked at the man before him with disapproving eyes. Avalta had tied up more than ten strong men and was complaining about it.

"And you called me here just because of this?"

Grinning, he offered something to Max. "They shot me with this needle dipped in poison. I'm just saying you should watch out for your sister as well."

"She's going to be fine. I told her to stay in the banquet hall. You're the one who drank the whole morning in your room. Don't whine about it."

Avalta smiled awkwardly at the scolding. Suddenly, one of Max's subordinates barged in. "Your Highness, Her Highness the Princess has disappeared from the hall!"

"What? What about Dennis?"

"A-About that... The princess started running out of the court, and she was so swift that no one could catch her..."

"Useless bastard," Max muttered under his breath, rushing out of the guest room.



Beatrice was a powerful wizard and the heroine of this novel. I met her gaze in silence despite being burdened by her unclouded crimson eyes. For some reason, they reminded me of Max's, but I quickly shook these thoughts off.

In any case, I couldn't understand what had happened. As if it wasn't enough for her to enter the banquet hall with her mortal enemy, the crown prince, she had refused the male lead and came running after me, the villain she was supposed to despise. Was this the aftermath of my actions? Feeling a headache begin to emerge, I sighed.

Beatrice scanned the group accompanying me. "All, you may raise your heads," she declared.

Once they were given permission to rise, my acquaintances began introducing themselves to Bea. "Your Royal Highness, it is an honor to meet you. My name is—"

However, she cut them off. "You don't have to introduce yourselves to me. In fact, I would like to spend some time alone with Jubelian, so all of you may now leave."

I glanced at my party. They stared at me and Bea in astonishment before turning around in a hurry. "Please pardon us, Your Royal Highness," they apologized. Feeling bittersweet, I watched them all go.

Then, Bea grabbed my hand. "Jubelian, come have tea with me. My tea room has the finest leaves in the empire."

I wondered how she came to like me. The only thing I had done for her was talk to her a little... it was nothing compared to what Mikhail had done in the original novel. Confused, I tried to reply as best as I could. "Yes, Your —"

Bea gave me a death stare, stopping me. “You don’t have to be so formal when it’s just us,” she commanded. It seemed like I didn’t even have a choice.



Where in the world did she run off to? Max cursed his stepsister as he frantically searched the palace. Realizing what a delinquent she was, he gritted his teeth. He told her over and over to stay in the banquet hall... so why the hell did she leave?

Then, he remembered something. Was she following Jubelian? His heart began racing once his beloved came to mind. His master usually watched over her, but what if he decided not to this time? Or worse: what if he was in a situation where he couldn’t stay near her? An ominous feeling consumed Max and exacerbated his worries. He regretted leaving the hall in the first place.

At first, Max thought of ignoring his subordinate’s call since Jubelian was already in the banquet hall, but once he realized that Beatrice wasn’t approaching her anytime soon, he assumed he had some time to spare. He would only be gone for about half an hour, intervening as soon as his stepsister reached Jubelian’s side, but his plan had gone astray. If he had known that his brief absence would cause this, he wouldn’t have left.

“Please, where are you?” he quietly agonized.



Despite taking a shortcut, the two ladies had walked for a while from the main hall of the palace to the annex where Beatrice’s room was located. Glancing at Jubelian, the princess began wondering about her. What kind of tea did she like? According to rumors, she also participated in tea tasting parties...

She was the first friend Beatrice had made, as well as a savior who had rescued her from the depths of her misery. Therefore, Beatrice was curious about Jubelian’s preferences and wanted to know more about her.

She didn’t look pleased. Was it because Beatrice made all of her friends leave? Still, the princess couldn’t have done it any other way because she had been upset about how the lady had left her behind at the banquet hall.

Was she being too harsh...? Regret began to course through her, prompting her to sigh in frustration. Once a familiar building appeared before her, Beatrice decided she would apologize first thing while they had tea.

However, she eventually had to halt her stride. The emperor's guards were roaming near the castle that would lead to the tea room. Beatrice could tell they weren't ordinary knights as they had a golden dragon embroidered onto their uniforms and only elites that served the emperor directly were permitted to wear the symbol.

Why were the Dragon Knights standing guard in front of the annex? Beatrice was confused, but her instincts told her she was in danger. There was no good reason her father would look for her after she ignored the eldest son of Marquis Hessen and fled the banquet hall.

Grabbing Jubelian by the arm, Beatrice dragged the lady off the pathway.

"Bea?" she asked, taken aback.

Beatrice suddenly had only one goal in mind: they needed to get out of this place. She tried to lead Jubelian back to the banquet hall, but when they turned a corner of the garden bordered with boxwoods, the two ladies were faced with another group of Dragon Knights patrolling.

Here, too? Beatrice despaired. Just then, one of the knights turned their head. The two hastily hid behind a sculpture decorating the garden. Nevertheless, Beatrice could hear footsteps approaching.

What should she do? She didn't want to drag Jubelian into this. It was one of the emperor's hobbies to note his vassals' weaknesses and use that to his advantage. The Dragon Knights helped the tyrant achieve this goal by acting as his minions. Beatrice knew something would happen to Duke Floyen if Jubelian were to be found here.

She had to get rid of those knights first. She turned to Jubelian, who looked visibly bewildered.

"Stay here for a second, okay?"



Perplexed, I raised a brow. What was she talking about? If I wasn't mistaken, those were the emperor's guards. I didn't understand why I had to hide, but Bea smiled at me and got up instead of stating her reasoning.

"It's you, Your Highness. I thought I saw someone similar," I heard a

masculine voice say.

"Why are you all chasing me?" Bea asked.

"His Majesty is looking for Your Royal Ladyship. We will act as your escorts back to the banquet hall."

"And why is Father looking for me?"

Instead of answering, the man shouted to the other guards. "What are you all doing? Hurry up and escort the princess!"

It sounded like they were taking her by force. I couldn't understand why this was happening. If the future had progressed as it should have, Bea would've been using magic to subdue those men, but all she seemed capable of doing was threatening the guards verbally.

"How dare you!" she shrieked. "I will have you all punished if you lay a finger on me!"

Was it possible that she couldn't use magic because she decided to befriend me? Assuming that was true, I began to search for a solution. How could I save the powerless princess?

First of all, the emperor was a person who didn't want his faults to be seen. It was obvious he would try to handle these atrocious affairs in secret. So, what if someone witnessed this event? If there was a crowd, he wouldn't be able to do as he pleased. On the other hand, however, if there were only one or two bystanders, these people would be captured along with Bea to silence the incident.

"Stay away! This is an order! Help! Is there anyone nearby?!" Bea screamed, but it was doubtful that anyone could hear us in the remote area we occupied.

I needed to make up my mind soon. What was the best thing I could do right now? If only I could get someone else to hear what was happening...

Ah, of course! If I use this...

I took my whistle out of my pocket.



Meanwhile, Max had finished his search around the banquet hall. He was now thoroughly perturbed because Jubelian was nowhere to be found, either.

Damn it, where were they? Regretting his actions, Max continued to wander. That was when he heard a voice that caught his attention.



"I failed once again. I couldn't confess to Lady Floyen."

Max quickly hid and scanned his vicinity for the person who dared to mention his lady's name, discovering Frederick Lionel Elios, the man who had constantly irritated him throughout the ball.

Confess to her? That man didn't even deserve to look at her. Max glared at his evident competition with burning eyes.

Then, he sighed. This wasn't the time to be doing this. He didn't even know where she ran off to...

He was about to leave when he heard a hint come right from the man he had just insulted. "I guess it was just bad timing," Lord Elios said. "I can't believe Her Highness picked Lady Floyen for her tea party."

Max's eyes widened. His sister took Jubelian to her room? He quickly headed toward where they might be. Upon reaching the gardens and seeing how the Dragon Knights were still wandering the vicinity, Max deduced that Beatrice hadn't been caught yet.

Damn it. If only he could figure out where they were right at this instant!

Then, he heard a faint noise—something like the whistle Jubelian had shown him.



The knights approached the corner where I had been hiding after I blew the whistle as loud as I could.

"You're... Lady Floyen?" One of the knights—seemingly the group's leader—recognized me.

"Oh, I got lost and needed some help. I'm so glad you sirs were nearby!" I answered, feigning nonchalance. However, the head knight's expression hardened. It looked like he had no intention of believing my excuse.

"This is a restricted area. How did you get in?"

"You heard me—I got lost."

The knight furrowed his brows. "You seem pretty relaxed for someone who's lost."

"That's because I found you all! Now, I'll be able to get back to the party."

The knights glanced at each other in response. Then, they slowly began walking toward me. "What was that loud noise just now?" the head knight asked.

"Oh, this?" I lifted the whistle to show them and blew it again. I did so a

few more times to buy some time, but no one was showing up. My plan was a total failure. This was a restricted area, after all.

The knights began frowning at the high-pitched sound, so I stopped making the noise. "It's called a whistle," I explained. "It's a great item to use when you're lost or in a dangerous situation."

The head knight smirked. "What an interesting item. It doesn't look very useful right now, though."

His gaze looked sinister, so I tried to blow the whistle again. However, he snatched the item from my hand and said, "You overheard our conversation just now, didn't you? You should come with us, my beautiful lady."

He grabbed me by the wrist and began dragging me once he finished speaking. His strong grip forced me to adhere to him. In the distance, the knights had Bea gagged with cloth, and she watched me helplessly, tears in her eyes.

"I will take care of Lady Floyen. You put Her Highness in the sack," the head knight ordered.

I clenched my fists in response. If I couldn't avoid the situation anymore, I had to fight. I swallowed nervously as I watched the head knight approach me with a cloth.

Bam!

Suddenly, the knight went flying in the other direction. Did someone finally come to my rescue? How? Only two possibilities came to mind.

"I told you that I would return once you realized my value," Max had once said.

"How dare he make my daughter cry?" I remember my father saying. "I'm going to rip him into pieces."

Since it would've been impossible for Max to be here, I had assumed it would be Father, but I was quickly proven wrong. Terrified, my jaw dropped.

Why was the crown prince here? Why was he looking at me?

He was wearing a mask, but I could tell that his gaze was focused on me. Just then, he spoke in a low, eerie voice that frightened me enough to make my knees shake.

"How dare you touch what is mine..." he seethed. "I will kill you all."



Normally, Max would've hesitated for a moment before jumping into the scene since the Dragon Knights were under the emperor's beck and call. Nevertheless, the sight of his lady being dragged away by force ignited his anger. Moreover, one of the men wore a disgustingly wicked smile.

How dare he touch her...

Max had always treated Jubelian with utmost care. The fact that his father's dogs dared to lay a finger on her infuriated him.



Stepping on the fallen knight's hand, Max snatched the man's sword.

These were to be his last moments.

Possessed by a murderous spirit, he raised the sword high to strike his captive. Just then, in the periphery of his vision, he caught Jubelian staring at him from next to Beatrice. Although her complexion was ghastly pale, her periwinkle eyes were fixed securely upon him.

He forgot she was there. Quickly coming to his senses and feeling vaguely helpless, he lowered his arms and gritted his teeth. These unfortunate circumstances irritated him, but the most important thing he needed to do right now was chase away his father's minions.

Instead of beheading the knight, Max pointed the sword at the man's neck and began to interrogate him. "What were you doing to my sister?"

The leader of the Dragon Knights—a man by the name of Gale—swallowed dryly. His face had been thoroughly blanched. His original goal was to intimidate Duke Floyen's daughter for breaking into a prohibited area so he could silence her about this incident, but the plan was ruined now that the crown prince was involved. He decided to answer honestly.

"His Majesty commanded us to find Her Highness and escort her back to the ball because she had suddenly disappeared. She was resisting us, so we —" Gale's head jerked violently to the side and he tasted blood in his mouth. The crown prince had punched him again.

"How bold of you to place the blame on the emperor for your own efforts debasing the royal family," Max said. "Remember that you are no more than His Majesty's servant."

The knight's jawbone ached viciously; it must've been broken. He had no choice but to remain silent. The crown prince's anger was justified. Although they were acting under the emperor's orders, it was true that Gale

and his knights had ignored the royal princess's wishes.

Hurriedly lowering his head, he apologized. "What I've done was extremely rude," he admitted. "Please forgive me, Your Highness and Your Royal Ladyship."

"I can't bear the sight of you. Leave," Max spat.

Gale hastily scrambled to his feet upon hearing those words. Then, he gathered his subordinates. "Let's get going," he instructed.

Max turned to the two ladies once the emperor's dogs disappeared. He was afraid that Jubelian might have hidden somewhere due to his violent actions, but she had stayed, undoing the gag on Beatrice.

"Are you okay, Your Highness?" she asked.

Max couldn't believe how calm she was despite the frightening situation she had just been in. Hidden behind the mask, his face brightened with a smile. He wanted to hug her immediately. He took a step forward, but Jubelian positioned herself in front of Beatrice once she noticed his approach, looking as if to protect her.

Max let out a sigh. He helped them... and he had even kept himself from killing those bastards... so why was she so wary of him?



Although his face was covered by a mask, I could tell that he was vexed. The sight of him holding the tip of a sword at the knight's neck as if poised to behead the man reminded me of why the crown prince was called a devil on the battlefield. It was ironic that I ended up meeting my greatest adversary while trying to avoid a small mishap.

Swallowing nervously, I watched the situation unfold.

"What were you doing to my sister?" the prince asked.

Had he just called Bea his sister? What was he saying? I only understood the crown prince's frustration after I listened to the two men's exchange. It looked like the madman was upset that someone else had laid hands on his prey. Well, that was how I interpreted it, at least.

After the knights began retreating, I realized that Bea was still tied up next to me. I did my best to quickly release her from the restraints, asking, "Are you okay, Your Highness?"

She nodded in response, her eyes on the crown prince. Looking at the way her eyes shook, I could guess what she was thinking. She seemed grateful—

at least for the moment—that he had saved her. She was a merciless person to her enemies yet an infinitely generous and loving person to her friends. That was the Bea I knew.

Nevertheless, I was aware of the crown prince's true colors. How did everything end up like this? I was aware that the original story had changed, but it had changed more than I could have anticipated. According to the novel, the crown prince and the princess should have become sworn enemies right now. My attempts at escaping my death flag weren't just rearranging a few things, they were transforming the story entirely.

Just then, I noticed the crown prince approaching us and I couldn't help but be nervous. I didn't know what he was thinking, but I knew how cruel he could be. He sent the head of an assassin he had beheaded to his sister as a gift and he had even killed his servants. He wasn't a normal human being. It was just impossible.

I swallowed dryly as I wondered what he would do to Bea. To my surprise, he held out his hand toward me.

"I'll escort you," he said. I stared at the outstretched hand before me. Then, I smiled softly. All my efforts to escape my doom had been useless.

I felt as if I was being mocked by the world itself; the very same grim reaper who would try to torture me in the future had offered me his hand twice already. I had no choice but to admit that he was interested in me—even if his gaze was that of a ferocious beast supervising its prey.

I turned to Bea to find that her crimson eyes were focused on me, brimming with overwhelming trust and affection. She might've been moved by what I had done.

I guess she was another person I had to take care of from now on. She chose me over Mikhail, after all.

Also, the crown prince was interested in me for some reason. Now that things had become like this, I had no reason to continue running away from my death flag. The only choice left was to fight against the unavoidable crises before me.

"Thank you for saving us, Your Highness," I said, taking hold of his hand.

"I was only doing the right thing," he answered, tightening his grip upon me.

The atmosphere felt strangely familiar, so I looked up at his masked face for the very first time.

Was he...

I had always avoided looking into his eyes out of fear, but now I noticed just how familiar they looked.



A heavy silence stifled those in the emperor's study.

"Where are the ones who were sent to Avalta?"

"We cannot deny the fact that the foreign monarch is a man of great agility, Your Majesty..."

"Then what about Beatrice? Where is she?!"

"Regarding Her Highness... our reports have claimed that she has not returned to her room yet. As a result, we've ordered the Dragon Knights to search for potential hiding places within the palace."

Count Pyrex was in the middle of giving reports to the ornery emperor when the leader of the Dragon Knights entered. His face looked swollen on one side.

"Did you find her?" the emperor asked, anxious.

"Y-Your Majesty, His Highness the Crown Prince spotted us while we were in the middle of capturing Her Ladyship and asked us what we were doing. I answered honestly and... he assaulted me without asking any further."

His face contorting in vicious displeasure, the emperor smashed the arm of his chair, enraged by what his indecent son had done. Still, Max's actions could be justified. "How incompetent of you," the emperor muttered under his breath.

Gale lowered his head. "I apologize about the mishap, Your Majesty. It was my fault for misguiding my subordinates."

Gritting his teeth, the emperor recalled what his daughter had done. He supposed even the savages from the south now had reasons to reject her given what that wench had done to the Hessen household's eldest son...

The emperor was able to control Duke Floyen with Circe's Eye, but the same could not be said for the rest of the influential nobles in the empire since a lot had changed after the war against Tezeria. One of the most powerful individuals included Marquis Hessen, who was the second-ranked imperial swordsman and the eldest of the nobles.

It was all because of that stupid girl. Although she was the Assiette Empire's only princess, the emperor never had any expectations for her. She

possessed a captivating aura, but marrying her off to a dominant nobleman's family wouldn't be enough to convince them to side with him.

It was better to be the emperor's daughter-in-law rather than the emperor's son-in-law, so he had planned to send Beatrice to another country. Unfortunately, she had done more than ruin this plan; she had also rejected Mikhail in public.

The emperor decided that he needed to fix that head of hers...

Just then, the grand chamberlain called from outside the study. "Your Majesty, Mikhail Albert Hessen, the eldest son of Marquis Hessen, is asking for an audience."

The emperor sighed deeply. Did that sly man send his son for a shell game already? Calming his mind, he opened his mouth. "Let him in."

"I greet the Great Sun of our empire," Mikhail said, bowing once he entered.

The emperor smirked. Mikhail was certainly handsome, but not as handsome as the emperor was when he was younger. He cleared his throat. "Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"I have something to ask of you, Your Majesty," Mikhail admitted slowly.

Realizing what was coming, the emperor narrowed his eyes. "Speak what it is that you wish for, heir of the great Hessen household."

The knight kneeled in response to the emperor's grave tone, which had the latter somewhat taken aback. What was this young man up to?

"I would like to apologize directly to Her Highness as I understand I have made her upset."

The corners of the emperor's lips slowly rose in response to the unbelievable words. He did need more servants. He couldn't believe Beatrice would become of use like this!

Only now realizing his daughter's potential, the emperor chuckled. "Of course. I will appoint a date for you two to meet."



Throughout the banquet, Regis had been hiding, watching everything his daughter was going through.

He sighed as he recalled what he had told Max previously. "There are times when you must trust your partner and wait for them," he had said, but it was difficult to put his own words to practice. He had decided to trust his

disciple, but he almost made a mistake due to his impatience. When the leader of the Dragon Knights had grabbed his daughter by the wrist with his filthy hand, Regis had to fight back the incredible urge to leave everything behind and attack the man. If Max had shown up even a minute later, Regis would've slaughtered every knight in front of the two girls.

He almost went against his own plan. A murderous smile characterized his face for a moment. Then, he turned his eyes to his beloved daughter. Just a moment ago, she had gladly embraced another person, even amidst a threat.

She had always been that way.

"Daddy, you trust me, don't you?"

Regis could feel a lump in his throat as he recalled precious memories of his daughter when she had only been a child. Grasping the pendant hanging from his neck, he spoke quietly with a soft smile. "I always believed you, Jubel. You were always my light, and there wasn't a day I wasn't proud of you." Then, clenching the pendant even tighter, he pledged, "For that reason, I will protect you until the very end."





## How About We Stop Here?

Just like the last time, he let go of my hand once we arrived at the banquet hall. "I'll be going then," he said.

I swiftly grabbed him by the wrist and asked, "Won't you be entering the hall, Your Highness?" He observed me in silence for a moment before nodding slowly. "Then, let's go together," I suggested, smiling.

It was Bea who responded to my offer first. "What? What are you doing, Jubelian?" she asked.

It was only natural I would look crazy to her, but I didn't want to ignore him anymore. I looked into Bea's eyes. "We had only been able to return to the banquet hall thanks to His Highness. Not only that, but he is also Your Ladyship's partner for the ball."

Bea bit her lower lip once she realized she couldn't deny my claim. "All right," she acquiesced. "We shall enter the hall together then."

Turning around, I invited the crown prince to come with us once more. "Will that be okay, Your Highness?"

He nodded instead of giving me verbal affirmation. I let go of his arm, and he immediately reached for me. "Let's go," he said.

Instead of taking his hand, I looked between Bea and the crown prince.

"It's you two who must hold hands now," I told them, and they visibly stiffened in unison.

"Is that necessary?" the crown prince asked, rebelling. Bea nodded to show her agreement; her face evidenced her disgust.

I put on an innocent smile and ignored their comments. "Yes. You are partners, aren't you?"

They sighed and began giving me death glares. Looking at the two of them, I realized that they didn't want to follow my suggestion at all. They were siblings, after all. They possessed awfully similar auras.

In any case, I elucidated my thoughts. "It would be strange for me—someone who isn't close to either of you two—to enter together with you."

"But—" Beatrice began to protest, but I continued.

"Besides, you deserve the spotlight, Your Ladyship. The guests present today might find fault with Your Ladyship for suddenly leaving the banquet for a long time. I believe it would be safe to return with His Highness."

The siblings began a staring contest after listening to my reasoning, keeping silent as they glowered at each other. Eventually, the crown prince sighed and held a hand out to Bea.

"Let's go," he said for the last time.

Bea stared at his hand with emotion in her eyes—the same as I had seen just a few moments ago—before replying softly. "Okay," she said. Although her tone was brusque, I could tell that she had loosened up from before. Happily watching the siblings bond, I followed them from behind.



Although it was quite dark outside, the banquet hall was as bright as if it was midday. Moreover, the people seemed to be in a lively mood

"Has Her Highness returned?"

"I wonder why she ran out of here just a while ago..."

The crowd began to murmur amongst themselves. However, they eventually zipped their mouths shut once they saw who was beside the princess. They wondered if Beatrice had chased after the crown prince when she had left the banquet earlier.

The general public's impression was that the siblings didn't have a very friendly relationship with each other. However, the princess looked very comfortable holding the prince's hand. Taking that into account, the nobles

decided that there must've been a misunderstanding between the two, which was why Beatrice had run out so hurriedly. Everyone continued trying to guess what had happened between them, but they weren't the only ones confused.

Beatrice kept trying to puzzle out Max's behavior. He had saved her and he was being so kind to her. Why? Although Jubelian had been the one to blow the whistle, Beatrice had one that Max had given her.

Did he come running... knowing it could've been her? She furtively glanced at her stepbrother. His face, always characterized by arrogance, was now covered with a mask. Normally, Beatrice would've been happy with such an accessory, but now, she felt differently for once.

She didn't think he had to keep wearing it...

Just then, she spotted her infuriated father entering the hall. He was back. She usually tried to stand out in front of him, but now she wanted to hide. How could he... do such a thing to her? Overwhelmed with fear and anger, Beatrice's grip on her brother's hand tightened before she realized it.

"Don't worry," Max whispered. She turned to him and he met her eyes. "I'll take care of it, so you can just stand still and stay quiet," he explained.

She didn't know why she felt reassured by this. Just the sight of his face used to terrify her, and they always had an uncomfortable relationship until now, but she still nodded at his instructions. He kept his gentle grip upon her hand even as he strode closer to the emperor.

"Beatrice, you... where the hell have you been?" The emperor likely didn't mention anything about the Dragon Knights because people were watching. Nevertheless, his voice carried fury within it, showing that he was quite upset.

"Ah, I had been the one to ask her to leave the hall," Max answered in his sister's place.

The emperor smirked as if he had expected this. "And for what reason may that be?"

Having thought of an excuse to deceive the old fox, Max was about to open his mouth, but Beatrice joined in before he could speak. "Dear Max told me he would be at my room with my present, Father," she explained. "I couldn't hold back due to the excitement... I'm sorry for leaving the banquet hall."

Her performance was immaculate. As expected, she was excellent at putting on an act. Max admired her skill.

"Your Majesty, it's true that Beatrice has just come of age today, but she is still a young girl. Please forgive her with your generous heart," the empress said, butting in with her annoying voice. Max normally considered her an enemy, but he didn't mind her meddling at the moment.

Keeping in mind the attention he was currently receiving from the people, the emperor simply glared at the empress. Turning back to his daughter, he said, "Beatrice, you are the royal princess. You should set an example for others. Please don't make the same mistake again."

"I will bear that in mind, Your Majesty."

The emperor smiled, seemingly satisfied with the obedient reply. "As far as I know, you haven't danced with anyone yet..."

From the hesitant comment, Max deduced what the emperor would say next. He must've found a replacement for Avalta.

Swiftly grabbing his sister's hand, Max dragged Beatrice toward the center of the hall. "It's your banquet," he said. "You should dance with someone at least once. His Majesty has forgiven you with a generous heart, so let's go and dance."

Beatrice's eyes widened slightly but she still managed to nod along. "Of course."



I watched as the crowds paid rapt attention to the royal siblings' dance.

"Oh my, Her Highness is dancing for the first time today!"

"Yes, I was just about to say that. To have her first partner be His Highness... they must be close, after all."

I stayed and observed the two together. They suited each other well. To say they were fated enemies didn't seem to make sense in light of the perfect harmony they seemed to create between them. They were so similar to each other, both in personality and appearance.

"Lady Floyen, you've returned," someone called. I turned around to realize that it was Lord Elios. He was a charming gentleman, and as a result, he had been receiving a lot of attention from the ladies.

"Hello," I bowed.

Letting out a sigh, he began to inform me of his concerns. "I was worried about what had happened. That noblewoman had called after you very urgently."

The noblewoman... I admired his subtle way of addressing Beatrice. Perhaps his quick-witted nature was part of what made him so well-liked.

I shook my head in response. "Ah, she had asked me where I had bought my accessories. She liked them, it seems. However, she didn't want to ask in front of everyone, so she brought me to a private place."

A smile brightened his fair face. "I see. That's a relief."

I was in the midst of thinking that he was a very caring person when he extended his hand to me. "Will you grant me the honor of a dance, Lady Floyen?" he asked.



Max had always been on the battlefield, so no one believed he would be able to dance during a banquet. Nevertheless, the people were in awe of the crown prince's graceful movements. Beatrice was astonished as well. She had assumed that he was nothing more than a barbarian, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Dancing in the banquet hall was completely different from practicing in a confined space. The once antiquated hall now reflected opalescent colors, resembling a luxurious oil painting. Beatrice enjoyed the scenery of the nobles before her as if appreciating a work of art. However, she flinched when she realized something.

How troublesome.

The problem was Frederich Lionel Elios. Although he was rumored amongst noblewomen to be the current most eligible bachelor, there was a reason why the empress had excluded him from the list of suitable bridegrooms for Beatrice.

"We are excluding the eldest son of Duke Elios," her mother had explained, "because if we choose his family, they might try to usurp the throne."

Due to her mother's teachings, Beatrice knew that the duke was a sly and meticulous politician, so the same could obviously be said of his son—after all, the duke himself had once stated that he didn't need to teach his son anything more.

If Jubelian got involved with a man like that, she could end up suffering. Beatrice could even say that Max would be a better match for her.

She glared at the nobleman with hostility in her eyes. Suddenly, however,

she staggered because Maximillian took an out-of-sync step.

What the hell? Did he go crazy? Beatrice looked up at her brother intending to insult him, but she couldn't. Even though his face was concealed by a mask, she could tell that he was glowering at Lord Elios.

Why was he staying here, then? He could go if he wanted. Just then, however, she realized something and frowned. Was he stuck because Jubelian had asked him to take care of her?

With trembling eyes, she looked up at her brother and sighed. Releasing his hand, she said, "Go on. Before it's too late." Tutting, she watched as he almost immediately left her.

A thought then came to mind: if Max and Jubelian married in the future... then did that mean she would become Beatrice's family?

Beatrice smiled without realizing it.

That didn't sound too bad, actually.



I looked vacantly at Lord Elios in response to his unexpected request. His appearance was as beautiful as the rumors lauded; certainly, he was handsome enough to make any lady exclaim in admiration at the sight of him. His blond hair looked spun from honey, and his turquoise eyes reminded me of a rich forest on a sunny summer day.

Basically, I couldn't believe that a gentleman like him was asking me to dance with him. I began doubting him, my suspicions lending me to believe that he was just joking with me. However, his expression seemed to say that he was being completely serious.

To be fair, he was Lord Elios, which meant that he could simply be asking me to maintain his popularity. After all, in this world, dancing was considered nothing more than a social activity between friends, family, and acquaintances. Even so, I couldn't help but worry. I had to think over his request before finally coming to a decision.

"Lord Elios, I—"

Just then, a familiar silhouette stepped in between us. It was the crown prince.

"What's happening?" the crowd began to whisper. Like the growing buzz of an annoying bug, a commotion arose around us. I was irritated by the attention I was getting.

“You must dance with me, Lady Floyen—” he paused, catching himself and enunciating his next few words much more clearly. “I’m sorry. I mean, would you like to?”

I sighed. The crown prince was asking me to dance with him.



Max almost lost control of himself when he spotted the crafty nobleman approaching Jubelian. The eldest son of Duke Elios had bothered Max throughout the entirety of the banquet, and for that reason, he had impulsively asked Jubelian for a dance. However, now that he was facing her, he was nervous. He could feel cold sweat forming on his back. There was a chance she would reject him.

Max’s mind flashed through a countless array of potential scenarios—most of which were terrifying disasters. Then, he realized that Lord Elios's eyes had grown cold. As expected, the sly man was just like his father.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but I believe the person that first asks a lady for a dance has the claim over her," Lord Elios argued back.

The colossal urge to murder the man surged within Max when he realized Lord Elios had dared to claim ownership of Jubelian before she had ever permitted him to do so. In addition, his way of speaking was irksome. He spoke formally, but he managed to do so in a manner that sounded as if he intended to order Max around.



Sighing, I stared at the crown prince. Then, Lord Elios cut back in with a smile.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but I believe the person that first asks a lady for a dance has the claim over her," he said.

In other words, he was asking the crown prince to wait his turn. To subtly insult the prince in such a way meant that Lord Elios was confident that I would dance with him. Indeed, he was rather full of himself. It was a trait that befitted a socialite and the successor of one of the only two dukes in the empire. Given that he was Duke Elios' son, he would also rise to fill the position of the next prime minister.

I didn't mind him at first, but I couldn't help but feel sorry for the prince.

I observed the smirk on Lord Elios' face for a moment before glancing back at the prince. Contrary to the rumor that he was a cold-blooded man who proved merciless toward any and all those who dared to oppose him, he now stood in perfect silence.

Clenching my fists, I declared, "If that's the case, I owe my first dance to His Highness."

"I'm sorry?" Duke Elios questioned, taken aback. Instead of explaining, I took the crown prince's hand.

"I apologize, but I had a prior arrangement to dance with him," I explained.

Dumbstruck, Lord Elios chuckled. Then, he sighed and admitted defeat. "I'll just have to wait my turn then, it seems."

His turn would never come because I had no intention of dancing with him. Nonetheless, I smiled, concealing the thought. "Yes," I agreed. "I'll see you later, Lord Elios."

Walking away, he briefly leaned closer to whisper in my ear. "You can call me Fred from now on," he said.

Grimacing, I turned away. Why was he acting so friendly all of a sudden? Anyway...

There was something more important I had to attend to at the moment. If looks could kill, the crown prince would've had Lord Elios' head; he was like a timebomb waiting to explode at any moment. Although he wore a mask, I could tell he was fuming.

I should stop him, right? In the past, I would've been frightened to death by his menacing aura. However, such sentiments were nowhere to be found within me now.

I settled closer to him. "It's an honor to be able to dance with you, Your Highness," I said.

At last, I was the object of his attention. "Likewise," he replied gently.

Hand-in-hand, we moved to the center of the banquet hall. I curtsied before starting our dance and he greeted me with flawless etiquette. His left hand overlapped with my right. I grabbed his hand tightly and stared into his eyes—the only feature his mask didn't hide. We made eye contact, and he flinched slightly, but the crowd was unlikely to notice it.

In any case, whatever he thought of me didn't matter anymore... because I knew who he was.

Keeping my body close to his, I gently swayed and surrendered myself to



the music. We weren't in a confined space like the terrace this time. Rather, this was a large banquet hall where we could dance to our heart's content. Using his hand as my center of mass, I spun in circles before attaching myself to him once more. It was something I had done on a whim, but he supported my movements with ease.

The audience exclaimed excitedly, admiring the crown prince's elegant gestures. I would've done so as well, but I had already known how skilled he was because I had danced with him before. In fact, he was graceful yet swift enough to keep me from falling several times. As our bodies grew closer, I whispered something only he could hear.

"Did you have fun deceiving me all this time?"



His blood grew cold the moment he heard Jubelian's question. He told himself he had heard wrong. After all, she was the slow-witted type. There was no way she could've found out his secret.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he claimed, barely managing to feign ignorance.

Parting her coral-hued lips, she uttered the final nail in the coffin. "Max."

He pledged to himself that he would never show himself shaken. However, he couldn't help but tremble once he heard her call his name.

When did she find out?

He glanced at her, pulling back slightly when he realized her periwinkle eyes were fixed on him. Under the light of the chandeliers, they shone like brilliant jewels. He immediately avoided her gaze, but she moved her fingers, interlocking his hand with hers. It was a weak restraint, but Max could tell that she was telling him not to run away.

All he felt at the moment was fear.

He wondered what she was thinking. He wanted her to yell at him in anger or start arguing with him, but she remained as impassive as a doll, simply observing him before her. Max felt like he was falling into an endless abyss.

Once he realized he might never see her again, he felt his insides flip upside down.

"I'll be at the terrace located on the left side of the hall," she suddenly whispered. "Meet me there. I have something I need to tell you."

Her voice was devoid of emotion. Max lowered his head in despair instead of giving her a verbal answer. However, she probably assumed his gesture was an affirmative nod because she instantly let go of his hand and said, "Thank you for granting me the honor, Your Highness."

Max watched her bow as if to engrave her graceful appearance into his mind. Wearing a light blue dress, she looked more than beautiful, but realizing this made his heart clench.

Was this... the end? Recalling all the time he had spent with her, he clenched his fists. No, he couldn't let it end like this. First, he would pretend not to know what she was talking about. Then, if that didn't work, he would get down on his knees and beg for her forgiveness.



Once I entered the terrace, I closed the door back to the hall and let out a sigh of relief. I had finally said it. Throughout every little exchange we had during the dance, I feared that other people might notice that something was going on between us. After all, there must have been a reason why Max kept his identity a secret all this time.

I was surprised that he had asked me to dance with him. Still, I didn't immediately accept his request, so most people would simply think I had danced with him as a courtesy.

Dance was one of the most common means of communication among aristocrats. It was a tool for socializing with acquaintances, reaching out to people one wanted to get to know, and initiating courtship. One was allowed to dance with a single person up to three times. However, this only happened if the two were romantically interested in each other. On the other hand, dancing with a person only once was considered a polite rejection. Therefore, people were likely thinking that the crown prince was interested in me, but I had rejected him. Hopefully, no one would be able to guess that I knew him personally.

A giggle escaped from me just then. I had always thought Max was a little strange but couldn't believe he was the crown prince. Now that I thought about it, however, there were many times he had acted out of place. He spoke very arrogantly for an ordinary commoner and he tended to act elegant yet haughty like the young master of a wealthy family. I had guessed that he could either be an illegitimate child of an affluent family or a

runaway noble... but I never concluded that he would be the crown prince.

I was starting to feel betrayed, so I quickly shook off my thoughts.

Just then, he found me. "Lady Floyen," he called.

What? Lady Floyen? Frowning, I turned my head at his formal address. I had expected to see his handsome face, but he was still wearing his mask. I felt disappointed for a moment, but then I shook my head. There must've been a reason behind covering his face. I sympathized with him.

"What did you call me here for?" he asked.

I sighed in response to his arrogant tone and decided to get straight to the point. "How about we stop right here, Max?"

I could tell he was startled, but he continued to pretend. "I don't know what you're talking about—"

I didn't want to waste any more time, so I cut him off. "Our contractual relationship," I said. "It's time to end it."

He sagged to the floor once I finished speaking.

"M-Max?" His reaction startled me. I could see the despair in his eyes.

"Are you really... thinking of ending it? Just like this?" I nodded right away. Lowering his head, he mumbled, "Can't we continue it?"

I began to feel sorry for him, but I couldn't put this off any longer because I had already made up my mind. "Max, don't do this..."

I approached him to help him stand, but he grabbed my hand instead, pleading with a tremulous voice. "I'll be a better boyfriend," he swore. "I won't do anything you don't like... so please reconsider, Jubelian."

His desperation made me feel like I was a bad person. Sighing, I forfeited. "Will you promise, then? Promise that you won't do something like this again."

Instead of answering, he nodded eagerly. The gesture was rather cute, but there was something that bothered me. His attractive features were still covered by the mask. With my free hand, I removed the hideous mask that had been hiding his identity, revealing his familiar yet stunning face.

"Jubelian." His ruby eyes were teary, and I reflected within them. A single drop fell to stain his cheeks.

No matter how dense I was, I knew what I had done. I had tamed the very person I had feared my whole life.

"I love you," he confessed. The short but impassioned phrase was enough to convey his sincerity.

I stared blankly in response for a moment before I gathered my wits about

me and realized that I had made him cry. Due to his beauty, he looked like a work of art even as he wept. Considering ways I could console him, I pressed my lips to his cheek.

Startled, he turned to me with wide eyes. "Jubelian, just now..."

I froze in place. Had I gone too far? I wanted to kiss him on the lips, but he might've considered it harassment if I didn't obtain his consent first, so I kissed him on the cheek like I would my friends and acquaintances.

However, his naive expression told me he was astonished by the casual gesture. To be fair, Mikhail had loathed even the lightest kiss on the cheek. Suppressing my desires, I sighed. Maybe I had been too forward.

I needed to stop being greedy. I had to take it slow from now on.

Just then, he let go of my hand. Puzzled, I looked up to meet his eyes. He grabbed me by the waist and urgently pulled me toward him. Suddenly in his arms, I gazed at him in shock. "M-Max?" His name escaped my lips almost reflexively.

His eyes had a dangerous light to them, reminding me of a beast before its prey. I could feel my cheeks redden from the attention I was receiving.

Gently caressing my cheek, he asked, "Can I... can I do it, too?"

I was surprised by his rather straightforward request, but I nodded. "You don't have to ask for my permission—"

His lips overtook mine before I could finish speaking. I stood frozen in place, astonished by what was happening. Nevertheless, I found myself smiling as he gave me light, childlike kisses.

He was adorable.

My smile reached my eyes and I could feel it. I studied him once he was finished. A shadow descended over his ruby eyes then, shifting their appearance.

"Jubelian."

After calling my name slowly, he gently caressed my neck and jaw before pressing his lips against mine. Parting his mouth, he licked my lip as if to taste it. Swept away by the unexpected nature of the situation, I opened my mouth as well. He slipped his tongue inside, and I stared at him in amazement. His gaze was fierce as he crushed his lips against mine.



Would she taste like a fragrant flower or like a sweet fruit?

Max had always wondered this, and now that he had received a taste... it was much more enchanting than he had imagined. He had been hesitant to kiss her until now, afraid that she might not appreciate the gesture, but now that she had given him permission, he had no need to hold back.

He devoured her lips greedily. He had led a stoic life until now, devoid of any desires beyond killing, yet this ecstatic sensation he was essentially experiencing for the first time made his body burn hot. Surrounded by uncontrollable heat, he slowly lowered the hand that had been resting upon her jaw, allowing it to caress her pale neck.

How annoying. Irritation arose when he realized a part of her dress kept her slender neck covered. However, at the same time, he was glad. Without the intrusive adornment, he would've dug his fangs into her soft neck, carving his mark upon her.

Jubelian gasped for breath, trembling and flinching in his arms, and her reactions made the flame within him blaze even hotter.

That was when she pushed him away by the chest. "Max, we should stop here..." she whispered, retreating. Her lips were red and slightly swollen. She looked so provocative—Max would tear apart anyone else who saw her like this.

He was going crazy. In fact, it wasn't just her neck he wanted to taste. He wanted to savor her from head to toe, but if he did that, she might want to run away from him. He had finally met her halfway after much meandering, so he couldn't blow his chance now. Gathering whatever leftover patience he had, he slowly drew away. Still, he didn't want to quit like this. Turning his head, he pressed another gentle kiss to her cheek.

His eyes were aflame with desire, but he decided that he needed to do something so that she wouldn't run away from him. His first thought was marriage, but he knew she hated it. Regardless, he began contemplating if he should propose to her once she came of age.

Oblivious to his wicked, impassioned desires, Jubelian stroked his head proudly. "Good job," she whispered.

Max tilted his head slightly so that she couldn't see his smile.



At first, I was bewildered because he had acted like a wild beast out of control, but as soon as I stopped him, he halted his rough and clumsy kiss.

Well, clumsy... but it was more lustful than I had expected. He was old enough to know what he needed to know, though.

Currently, I was two months away from coming of age. Mentally, I was an adult, but going beyond this would be going against my morals. Glad that he had listened to me, I patted his head.

As the energy between us subsided and my heart gradually stabilized, I decided to bring up what I had been curious about. "Um... Max?"

"Yes?"

"Why were you wearing the mask today? It wasn't because you were afraid an ill-rumored girl like me would say hello to you, was it?" I asked playfully, but he responded gravely.

"It's far from that," he said. "I just don't want to show my face to my enemies."

My heart sank. Now that I thought about it, Max must have led a perilous life toeing the line between the power-hungry emperor and the empress.

I observed his precious face and came to a decision: I wouldn't let him suffer anymore. In an attempt to lift the heavy atmosphere, I asked lightheartedly, "Then why did you hide your identity from me? Am I your enemy as well?"

He furrowed his brows slightly in response to my question. "You told me... that you were afraid of the crown prince."

I was speechless. It was true I had spoken negatively about the crown prince, but...

Just then, everything I had said about the crown prince and the things I had done to avoid him crossed my mind.

"Dangerous animals like bears or leopards are still known to be scary even if you've never seen them in person before. It's like that. If I meet him, then my life will be in danger."

"Even if he poses as a good person on the outside, it is unknown what his true intentions are."

"Do you know how I felt when I realized how similar the two letters were? I was scared out of my mind. I was so frightened that I had goosebumps throughout my body."

I had spoken out of turn many times in front of the crown prince himself. It honestly seemed like he had no choice but to do everything he could to hide his identity from me... I sighed.

"Would you believe me if I told you that all the rumors you've heard

about me were made up by the empress?" he asked.

Maybe I was mistaking him for defending himself, but in any case, he seemed really charming to me just then. Barely managing to mask how I felt with a serious expression, I nodded. "I'd believe you."

Now that I had learned his true identity, it occurred to me once again how prejudiced I had been. I had said a lot of things I shouldn't have. For this reason, I decided to shower him with praise. "Now I know what a warm person you are," I said.

He grinned as if he was genuinely content with my compliment. "I'm glad." His current expression was an arrogant one, but I could tell that he was elated. It was a pleasant sight to behold. He was so lovable that I couldn't help but laugh.

Perhaps mistaking my laughter for something else, he scowled. "Why are you laughing?"

I had already begun complimenting him, so I decided to be generous. "You're kind to your subordinates, aren't you?"

He averted his gaze, but he nodded. "Of course."

"You won't use abusive language or violence against people of a lower status than you."

He nodded, still looking away. "That's common sense."

Turning to meet his eyes, I stated one last thing. "And you'll get along with your sister."

He shot me a resentful look. I had expected it, though. Due to the empress's schemes, two siblings had been at odds since birth.

"Beatrice—your sister—" I began, to which he frowned.

"I have nothing to say about her."

I pouted at his indifferent tone. "Didn't you say you would be a better boyfriend from now on?" I reminded him.

He flinched. Then, he sighed. "So... what do you want then?"

I grabbed his hands tightly. Looking directly into his eyes, I enunciated each word clearly: "I hope that you will continue to protect her as you had done tonight."

"What? Why would I do that?" His face twisted in confusion.

"I want both of you to be happy," I said.

From what had happened today, I was convinced that what I had done until now to avoid my death flag had prevented Bea from awakening as a wizard. Additionally, since she didn't have Mikhail, she didn't have anyone

to serve as her protector. The trials awaiting her in the future would be too severe for her to withstand.

Although she hadn't awakened yet, her magical talent was bound to bloom in times of crisis. If she and Max continued to be adversaries, one of them might die in the worst-case scenario. Given that Beatrice was the protagonist of this novel, Max was likely to be defeated eventually.

I had always aimed to teach him social skills, but he had been the one to approach me without hesitation. He had brought joy to my lonesome life. Suddenly, I remembered a few of our exchanges from when we first met.

"Talk respectfully to me. Now," I had said. It was true that we didn't get along from the beginning, but he had always been by my side and he listened to me as I whined through my hardships.

I didn't want to lose him. Tears welled up in my eyes as I imagined such a dire situation. For some reason, I didn't want him to see me like this, so I decided I should pretend to yawn.

Unexpectedly, however, he took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from my eyes.

"I will do as you say, so don't cry," he said.

His words only brought me more tears. Even if he had said it without much weight, it must've been difficult for him to decide on this since he despised the princess.

"Thank you," I smiled, my vision blurring.

He flushed. "You don't have to say thank you for every little thing—"

Before he could finish speaking, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him.



Staring at the entrance to the terrace, Beatrice sulked. Now that Jubelian was gone, she didn't have anyone she knew at the banquet. Of course, many nobles had greeted her...

"Your Highness, I am Viscount Shaer's..."

"I greet Her Royal Highness. My name is..."

...but they left after saying only a few words—most likely because Beatrice had reacted coldly to their greetings. After all, she only saw those people as snobs and she was exhausted by those who approached her with ulterior motives. Regrets overcame her when she realized she shouldn't have



expected anything from the banquet.

The princess' eyes were still on the doors leading to the terrace. She knew that Jubelian was probably with Maximillian. Nevertheless, she couldn't believe that her only friend had left her alone.

She had realized that becoming a family with Jubelian was a great idea, but she couldn't do it if her parents arranged a marriage for her since she would have no choice but to obey them.

Beatrice began feeling a little melancholy.

At some point, she felt someone's gaze upon her, so she turned around. Scowling, she tried to recall the man's name. Was it Mikhail, the heir of Marquis Hessen? It was unsettling because he had been following her around for a while. She couldn't understand why he was so persistent in tailing her; she had moved plenty of times, yet he was relentless.

Why was he doing this? Frustrated, Beatrice wondered if she should just address the bothersome issue. Then, she saw him approach.

"Is everything okay, Your Highness?" he asked. He seemed innocent at first glance—even kind since he was asking for her wellbeing—but there was something in his eyes that made Beatrice feel unpleasant. Unwilling to answer him, she turned her back to him. Just then, several women surrounded her.

Huh?

Beatrice wanted to scold them for what they had done. However, she stopped herself before she could speak since she recognized their faces. They were the ones who were with Jubelian a while ago...

They began chatting with bright expressions.

"Your Highness! You were here!"

"We've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Have you forgotten that you decided to play a card game with us in the drawing-room?"

Beatrice stood frozen in place, confused by the girls' sudden meddling. One of them with red hair locked her arm around Beatrice's and whispered, "Please pardon our rudeness. This was a request from Lady Floyen."

Beatrice's heart pounded harder at the mention of Jubelian. "A request, you say?"

The girl nodded in response to the question. "She asked us to protect you from any strange people that might approach Your Ladyship."

A strange expression characterized the princess' face. Jubelian had asked

her friends to protect Beatrice? It was ridiculous how just knowing that Jubelian cared about her made her feel better. Beatrice glanced at Mikhail and discovered he was no longer staring at her. For some reason, he looked as if he had achieved some grand purpose. This guy was a strange one. Spooked, Beatrice followed the group to the drawing-room.

Once the ladies were somewhere private, the red-haired girl—Rose—let go of her arm and bowed in embarrassment.

"Please forgive us, Your Highness."

Seeing the noblewomen bowing, Beatrice smirked. Of course. Even Jubelian's friends were those who sought her favor in the end. Nevertheless, Beatrice didn't dare ignore them. "Don't worry about it," she replied sternly.

She was confident that she would now be left alone, but Rose smiled and stayed instead. "If there isn't anything you need to attend to, would you actually like to play a card game with us?" she asked shyly.

Beatrice frowned slightly in response to the girl's reckless attitude. She wondered what one had to do to possess such naivety. Was it because she was one of Jubelian's friends? Oddly enough, the interaction didn't displease the princess; it reminded her of the time when she had first met Jubelian.

"Um... you can keep that handkerchief," she had said, handing over a piece of cloth.

Jubelian had made friends who were just like her. Beatrice didn't understand why, but she decided it shouldn't be a bad idea to hang out here for a while. "All right then," she said, relenting, "I will give it a try—"

Before she could finish speaking, however, Rose ushered her into the room, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Great! We will do our best to make your coronation ceremony memorable!"

"Agreed! You'll enjoy it, Your Highness!"

For a moment, Beatrice was completely taken aback by their zeal. However, her chest grew warm and she smiled, softened by the realization that the girls Jubelian had sent were almost as sweet as her.



Our relationship started with a sweet kiss, but there was a problem: I was afraid that the emperor and empress would notice us. It was true that they were foolish people, but they were also avaricious and mad for power. If it

became known to them that the crown prince that threatened their positions was dating me—a lady of the Floyen household—either one of them could try to get rid of us. Since we had no need for more problems, I had asked Max to keep our relationship a secret for the time being. He disapproved of my suggestion initially, but I managed to somewhat convince him later.

"I understand. It might put you in danger... so we will do that," he had said. After a short chat, he covered his face with the mask again and jumped off the terrace.

I didn't mind that he didn't look back to say goodbye because it was just a momentary farewell. I was confident that we would reunite again as we always did.

I needed to return to the banquet hall, too, but once I did, I realized that there were no familiar faces anywhere to be found. All my friends were apparently with Bea. I was confident that they would approach her without hesitation as they were all destined to be friends with her in the original story, but I couldn't deny that I was a little concerned.

Should I say goodbye to them before leaving? It was now dusk, so it would be the perfect time to bid farewell.

Just then, I realized someone was approaching me. I stiffened. It was Mikhail again. We had parted on bad terms the last time we met, and I was worried that he might do something strange to me again. I had already braced myself to begin an argument with him, but he simply passed me by, treating me like I was invisible.

Huh? What was that?

I watched him in amazement as he grew far away. Then, I frowned. This made it clear that he had fallen in love with Beatrice, consistent with the original writing. Such a thing was natural, of course—in the novel, he had fallen in love with her during the banquet, so he broke off our engagement. It was up to Bea to accept or reject his confession, and that would depend on how far Mikhail was willing to go to win her heart. I sighed and hoped that Bea would make the best decision.

Just then, I heard someone call for me. "Jubelian," came a familiar voice.

I had no idea when he approached me, but rather than becoming startled, I giggled.

There was one thing I knew for sure, at least.

Father gave me a strange look in response to my laugh. Then, he held out his hand. "It's gotten late. Let's head back," he said.

I took his hand without hesitation. I felt comfortable and safe once the warmth of his hand met mine. Walking like this with Father used to be awkward, but now I was used to it. I glanced at him, and he met my eyes. Suddenly, I realized that he only seemed indifferent and cold on the surface.

I had experienced many things today, but the most important lesson I learned was that avoiding a problem might give rise to more of them. Therefore, rather than running away from him, I decided to get to know Father better. Although I would've put a lot of effort into doing so, I resolved to live my life the way I wanted to from now on.



Mikhail turned around, his violet eyes betraying a fervent thirst for a certain lady.

Jubelian.

The moment he saw the very person he had been dreaming of, he had almost lost control of himself. However, there was a reason he had to suppress his desires.

He needed to be patient for now.

Turning around, he stared at the highest seat in the hall, the throne. Upon it sat a status-seeking fool who didn't belong there, looking down at the nobles dancing and chatting away.

Mikhail smirked. To destroy the duke, he must gain the emperor's trust first.



In the end, I left the banquet hall without saying goodbye to Bea. Still, I didn't think it would be a problem since I figured that it might've been better for the ladies to get to know each other rather than have me intervene. Then, I sighed, remembering that I should be worrying more about myself.

Although I had ambitiously vowed to improve my relationship with Father, I hadn't said a word to him since. We were sitting in the carriage in silence. Glancing up at him, I wondered how I was supposed to talk to him.

I recalled the few times we had chatted before.

"Father, there's something I need to speak to you about. Do you have

time?"

"Father, this is the pendant you left behind."

Seriously, it wasn't just Father who had been indifferent to me. I had been the same as well! I had only talked to him whenever I had a reason. Desperate, I began thinking of ways to improve our relationship.

Just then, he sighed and asked, "Is there something you want to say?"

I flinched at his excellent mind-reading abilities. There were a lot of things I wanted to say, but I didn't know where to begin. All I knew was that I didn't want to miss this opportunity. "Oh, I was just wondering... what did you do at the ball today?" I asked.

He looked out the window, humming thoughtfully. "I can't recall anything important," he said. "I just killed some time."

Not wanting our conversation to end, I continued. "Ah, I see, but there was a lot to see today, wasn't there? I heard there had even been a short performance."

He didn't bother to turn around to meet my gaze. "Was there? I see."

My endeavors were futile as he was only giving me short answers. Realizing all my efforts were in vain, I gave Father a death glare then sighed. Holding a conversation with him was more difficult than I had imagined.



Regis glanced at his daughter. She had grown quiet. Did she notice? As a protective measure, he always followed her around when she went somewhere alone despite knowing that she would detest it if she were to find out.

Her reflection clear in his eyes, Regis sighed. He could tell there was something atypical about her expression. Nevertheless, she seemed to be holding back her queries.

In any case, he was glad she didn't ask any more questions. However, that relief only lasted for a moment. A bitter feeling joined him the moment he looked out the window of the carriage, spotting the imperial palace in the distance. The emperor came to mind and Regis clenched his fists without realizing it.

The nobles had likely interpreted Jubelian and Max's dance as a ceremonial one, but Regis knew that the emperor had noticed something. His vermilion eyes had shown with a conspicuous light as they trailed after

the couple.

There was a chance he might have come to a realization. The emperor cared so little for his son that he couldn't distinguish the crown prince from his subordinates. Nonetheless, the greedy man was keen when it came to spotting others' weaknesses. If he had succeeded in making the connection between the two, he would most likely use Jubelian to control the crown prince.

Just like he had done to Regis.

The mere thought of the emperor ignited the rage hibernating within the depths of Regis's heart. It slammed him with murderous intent, urging him to behead the damned man, tear his body to pieces, and leave it as food for the stray dogs. However, there was a reason why Regis endured and suppressed his atrocious desires.

It wasn't the right time yet.

His expressionless face masked the fire raging within him and he continued to watch the palace grow distant.

"Father?" his daughter suddenly called. He turned. "Is everything all right?"

He was taken aback by her inquiry. As far as he knew, he hadn't done anything to make her worried. Although he was bewildered, he maintained a calm appearance without fail. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

She seemed somewhat embarrassed. "Oh, I just thought you looked a bit pale... that's all," she said.

Regis could barely contain a chuckle. Pale... that was something he hadn't heard in a long time. After becoming a transcendent being, no one had worried about his well-being. After all, possessing supernatural abilities meant that his body was capable of defeating almost every illness.

Perhaps she was concerned about him. Once again, Regis was struck by how lovable his daughter was and he smiled. "You must know that even the most terrible illnesses cannot dare to approach me," he explained.

He had meant to alleviate her distress, but Jubelian blushed as if she thought she was being criticized. "O-oh, of course," she agreed. "I didn't mean to underestimate your abilities as a transcendent being. You just seemed a little uneasy..."

Watching his dear daughter made Regis realize how displeased he was with her relationship with Max. That senseless rascal. He should've been more careful about getting caught if he decided on having a secret

relationship with Regis' daughter. Suddenly reminded of the two dancing, he gritted his teeth.

Come to think of it, Max was way too close to Jubel. That pervert.

After their dance, Regis had to suppress the urge to follow his daughter out to the terrace to watch over her. She was still young... she was only two months away from coming of age, but to Regis, she was no more than an innocent, naive little girl. That was why he couldn't stand his manipulative disciple spending time around her.

However, they both knew that he hadn't permitted them to date yet. Regis decided that he would protect his daughter from any malicious influences until she came of age.

Having come to a conclusion, he nodded. "It's nothing you need to be worried about, Jubelian," he told her. Once again, he had meant to comfort her, but his daughter simply nodded with a pitiful expression.

"Okay, Father."

Regis sighed. This was truly... difficult.



Slouching on the throne and staring off into the distance, the emperor was lost in thought.

So... Maximillian was interested in a girl, huh? Vexed by his son's crafty remarks, the emperor had kept a close eye on his son throughout the banquet. He was usually very careful about maintaining an indifferent expression, so the emperor hadn't expected much. All he wanted was to find some fault with the young man. Surprisingly, Maximillian had ended up revealing that he was restless about a certain lady.

That girl—she was Regis' girl, wasn't she? Silver hair, fair skin, and jewel-like periwinkle eyes. Recalling her remarkable appearance, the emperor smirked. She was quite the beauty. What a pleasant surprise; he had always been anxious to find a way to manipulate his son since he was someone who possessed outstanding swordsmanship.

To reduce his son to a mere figurehead, there had been countless attempts to search for the younger man's weaknesses. This meant that the nobles would no longer bear animosity toward the current emperor—himself—for refusing to hand over the throne.

The problem was that his damned son wasn't interested in women, liquor,

or other entertaining vices like gambling. There had been attempts to get him addicted to drugs, but he was an extremely careful one. He often asked his servants to taste his food first or forced the cooks to prepare meals in front of him.

To learn that his abominable son was interested in a lady—and Regis's daughter, at that—satisfied the emperor. To prohibit his son from gaining influence, the emperor had originally planned to match Maximillian with a woman from a powerless noble family, but if he was interested in Regis' daughter, that made it all the better. Then, he could keep both of those dogs on leashes.

Wearing a sinister smile, the emperor stroked his chin. He needed to consider how he would use the girl first.



I changed into comfortable clothes once I returned home. Then, I recalled the conversation I had with Father. No matter how I thought about it, I was being mistreated. It was true that he didn't look much different from usual, but I could tell that he was in a foul mood somehow. Concerned, I had asked him many questions, but...

"It's nothing you need to be worried about," he would say.

Aren't people usually given the privilege to listen to their parents' concerns once they come of age? I wanted to listen to what he had to say so I could comfort him, but there didn't seem to be any room for me in his life. It felt like I was talking to a robot instead of a person!

For a moment, I considered giving up on my ambitious goal of forming an adequate relationship with Father. However, I clenched my fists before I was swept away by the dreary thought. I couldn't give up after only one try. I had learned a lot after everything that had happened with Max, and one of the most important lessons was that taking what I thought to be the safe path might actually just lead me to circle around the truth instead.

Although he had spoken coldly, I could see the affection in Father's eyes. I wanted to put my hopes on the weak possibility that he cared for me.

First, I needed to find out if there were any existing problems between us.

The reason behind our awkwardness was that we didn't converse much. So, by creating opportunities to have a chat, I could get closer to him.

But... how would I create an opportunity?



I began to brainstorm.



Ordinarily, the emperor would've called on Max to vent his anger and give him a scolding. The emperor was quiet today for an unknown reason, however, so Max lay in his bed to rest after having changed into comfortable clothes.

Feeling slightly fatigued, he closed his eyes for a moment, and several scenes flashed through his mind: Jubelian gasping for breath, her swollen lips moist with his saliva, and her soft, reddened cheeks.

Max felt his face heat up as he relived the kiss in his mind. He was going crazy. No amount of sugar could outdo the sweetness he sampled from her.

He wondered what she was doing now... her visage flitted before his eyes. Unable to suppress his desire to see her, he got up. Then, he decided it would only take a moment, so to prepare for the possibility that the emperor might look for him, Max called Victor.

"Your Highness," his subordinate greeted upon entering the room.

Throwing the mask he wore during the banquet over to Victor, Max ordered, "Wear this in case the emperor comes looking for me."

Victor sighed at yet another act he had to put on. However, he stopped the crown prince this time. "Your Highness, what if the emperor ends up finding out about this?!" he asked urgently.

"If you get caught, just tell him I asked you to do it."

Victor turned pale in response to the ruthless answer. "I might go to jail for impersonating a member of the royal family!"

Max smirked, irritated. His subordinate didn't seem to know his place. He should give Victor a beating—

"You're kind to your subordinates, aren't you?" Jubelian's charming voice interrupted his thoughts, and Max felt his boiling anger subside.

She wouldn't like it if he did that. He should speak kindly...

Normally, Max would've made a sarcastic remark, but he held back this time. "Do you hate it that much?"

The unfamiliar tone gave Victor chills. Was he...

According to the rumors, the crown prince behaved like a wild beast on the battlefield. However, there were times when he was calm, like when he was getting ready to torture his prisoners...

His eyes trembling, Victor looked up at his liege. There was a smile on Max's lips. "You can be honest with me," he said.

The eerie sight terrified Victor. He quickly lowered his head. "I will endeavor to serve you to the best of my abilities, Your Highness," he swore.

Victor was the type to say what he felt even if it meant he would receive a beating. It was strange to see him suddenly become so obedient.

Being kind wasn't so bad, after all... with Jubelian on his mind, Max smiled. She was really good at dealing with people.

Filled with pride, Max stepped out of his room.



The silvery moon served as guidance for Max as he maneuvered through the thickets in the dark of the night.

He'll just look at her for a moment and check if she was sleeping. If she was awake...

Her appetizing lips alighted upon his mind again and Max swallowed dryly. He wanted to see her as soon as possible, so he moved faster than usual.

Upon spotting the Floyen mansion in the distance, he smiled. He would be able to see her soon. He hadn't given her a proper goodbye back at the banquet and he regretted not doing so because it meant that he hadn't been able to look into her periwinkle eyes before they parted. He had wanted to hug her tightly and give her another passionate kiss before leaving her.

Well, he had done something praiseworthy before coming here. Anticipating his reward, Max grinned.

Then, he felt something approaching him and he swiftly avoided it. It was a small stone.

Someone who would throw something like this at him... Max looked back in the direction where the stone came from. His master stood amidst the darkness, his eyes shining with a dangerous light.



## Can I?

Furious, his disciple protested. "What do you think you're doing?"

Unconcerned, Regis studied Max, recalling what Jubelian had mentioned in the past about her ideal type.

"I'm not sure," she had said. "Maybe someone stronger than you, Father."

Regis sighed. Max still had a long way to go. Also... aside from his daughter's condition, his disciple needed to grow stronger if he wanted to dethrone the emperor in the future. Max had yet to make the leap to becoming a transcendent being.

He couldn't leave him be. With a patronizing smile, Regis sought to provoke the young man. "I can't leave a wild beast to hover around my daughter unsupervised," he said.

A wild beast? His master's blatantly condescending attitude did its job and ignited Max's anger. All right. If his master was that bent on dueling against him, then... Max's hand immediately hovered over the hilt of his sword. However, he suddenly remembered what Jubelian had told him before.

"I never wanted you to be exiled. Nor did I ever want you to be rude to Father."

His murderous desire gradually faded. She would hate it if she knew what

he was doing.

As Max lost the will to fight, his master jeered at him. "Are you too frightened?"

He furrowed his brows. "You keep ridiculing me as if to pick a fight. Why is that?"

With an objective gaze, Regis studied his disciple. His patience had indeed improved. He felt proud for a moment. Nevertheless, it was merely a fleeting thought.

He adopted a chilling voice. "You're sneaking in to visit my daughter at a late hour. No father would approve of a good-for-nothing like you," he rebuked, confident that Max would be enraged. He chuckled.

"A good-for-nothing?!" Max cried. "You're my father-in-law. Don't you think you're being too harsh?"

Regis scowled in response at the uncomfortable title. It was only a subtle shift in expression, but Max, having spent many years with his master, noticed it quickly.

Regis looked irritated.

As if to confirm his speculations, Regis threatened him, saying, "Did you think I would recognize you as my daughter's companion easily?"

Max had been frequently displeased by statements like this in the past. However, after realizing that Jubelian was fond of him, he stopped being bothered by them in the slightest. "Isn't it time to admit what's true?" he goaded. "You'll be my father-in-law, after all."

Regis stiffened even further. Sighing heavily, he broke off a branch from a tree beside him. Having sharpened the wood into a fragile weapon, he declared, "You're allowed to use your sword, but you must surpass this test if you want to see my daughter. I will let you pass if you manage to touch even the hem of my clothes."

Max's forehead wrinkled slightly at the simple challenge. His master was underestimating him. He was also due to become a transcendent being soon; no matter how skilled his master was, Max was confident that he would at least be able to reach him. After all, the other man was only wielding a wooden branch.

If his master wanted to test him, so be it. He should take this opportunity to show the arrogant man how much he had grown. Smirking, Max met his master's vexed eyes. "It's a deal."



I had been racking my brains for an adequate reason to begin a conversation with Father, but my attempts were fruitless—no matter how much I thought about it, I simply didn't know what a normal relationship between a child and their parents looked like. I grew up with a single mother in my previous life, and we didn't have a particularly close relationship, so I simply wasn't familiar with these things. To make it worse, my current life was no different in terms of this parental-child relationship. No wonder I was struggling.

Maybe I should ask someone for advice... oh! Rose suddenly came to mind. I had noted previously that she had a particularly favorable relationship with her father. Maybe I could be open about my problem and write her a letter asking for help. It was something I wouldn't have done in the past, but I felt differently about it now. Perhaps it was because I trusted her.

My original plan was to become independent. I was even willing to isolate myself from others, so I found it amusing that my life had taken such a turn.

I guess it was true that no one could predict the future.



I jumped into bed after I finished writing the letter to Rose. Allowing my heavy eyelids to close, I recalled everything that had happened until now. I had begun a contractual relationship with Max to avoid getting married off to the crown prince, but little did I know, I was essentially dating the crown prince himself. I could finally understand why Father had told me so many little things regarding the prince. He likely thought I already knew who it was I was actually dating.

Still, there were some things that I couldn't understand. Father had made a list of prospective marriage partners for me and had even circled the crown prince's name. In that case, why did he oppose our relationship? The two barely conversed with each other these days... I hoped that they would start getting along again. I had been secretly envious of their relationship in the past—I didn't know what had happened to ruin their bond.

Could it have been because of me? No, what nonsensical thought. I snickered. There was no way I was important enough to ruin their

relationship.



Sprawled out on the ground in an unsightly manner, Max glared up at his master, muttering vulgar words under his breath. He ached all over, his clothes were now tattered, and his hair was disheveled from being repeatedly thrown into the dirt.

On the other hand, however, his master remained unscathed. He looked the same as he did when he first arrived.

Max gritted his teeth as he recalled the malicious rumors about him. He wasn't the monster. The real monster was right here, standing in front of him...

He had been aware that their skill levels differed, but he never thought the difference would be this large. Having been born a genius, Max had seldom felt inferior to others. This engraved a scar on his pride.

"As expected from someone of the royal bloodline," his master had once said. "I can feel the mana pulsing through your veins. If you train diligently, it will only take you a decade to surpass me."

His heart had swelled with his master's words and he had trained nonstop since he was a child. Many years had passed since then, yet even after a decade, his master still remained an unconquerable goal.

Sneering, Regis looked down at his fallen disciple. "How dare you try to sneak into my daughter's room with such shabby skills," he scoffed.

Piqued, Max got up to grab the sword lying next to him. Before he could, however, his master snatched it away, pointing the blade at his disciple's neck. "This is a warning," he said, voice pitched dangerously low. "Don't you dare set foot near my mansion at night."

Max's face crumpled. The only time he could spend with Jubelian was at night because he was busy with his duties during the day.

Unrepentant, his master continued nonetheless. "Besides, my daughter's ideal type is a man stronger than me."

Max's eyes widened at the unexpected comment.



Three days had passed since the banquet. One could say that it had only

been three days, but to me, it felt like a whole week—or even a month—had passed. Blankly gazing out the window, I sighed. It had been three days since I had last seen Max. Why wasn't he visiting? Was he busy?

There had been times before when a similar thing would happen wherein he wouldn't visit for a few days, but I still couldn't help but feel downcast. How could he leave me like this after what had happened at the banquet? I told myself that it was because there were many things he had to do as the empire's crown prince.

But couldn't he at least send a letter? I squeezed the mouse doll he gifted me a few days ago.

Then, a voice came from outside my door. "Lady Jubelian, this is Merilyn."

"Oh! Come in."

Merilyn entered my room with a silver tray. Surprised, she noted, "My lady, you always seem to be always carrying that little mouse around these days..."

Only then did I realize I was still holding the toy. "Oh, it's..." I trailed off.

Smiling, Merilyn applauded. "I'm glad," she enthused. "You admire him enough to overlook the things you dislike."

I gave an awkward laugh. What did that matter, though? He hadn't even visited me the last few days... feeling dejected, I lowered my eyes. Merilyn held out the silver tray she was holding.

"There are two letters for you today, my lady."

I checked the seals on each letter. One was from the Arlo household, and the other was from... the Herend household? Why would they send me a letter?

The Herend family rarely showed themselves during social events. Our families didn't interact much, either. I was skeptical about the legitimacy of the letter at first but I opened it anyway.

Dear Lady Floyen,

How are you?

I do not know if you remember, but this is Yuri. I met you in front of Fyodor's Workshop a few days ago.

I just wanted to let you know that my liege will not be able to visit you for the next few days due to some things he has to work through. I am writing this letter in his stead.

He is doing his best to take care of his duties so he could see Your

Ladyship as soon as possible. Please do not fret about his prolonged absence.

Thanks to her letter, I finally confirmed that Max really had been swamped with work. Wearing a smile, I let out a sigh of relief, gladdened to hear some news about him.

Please feel free to come by whenever Lord Max frustrates you. We can talk over some tea and sweets. I can guarantee an enjoyable time.

In any case, I hope you have a wonderful day. I look forward to your visit.

Sincerely,

Yulia Frey Herend.

The smile on my face never left as I read through the letter. The end, however, caught me by surprise.

Yulia... she had the same name as the head of the former empress' guards.



Fresia grimaced at her lord. He was swinging his blade in the air nonstop. She didn't know he would fall for the duke's trap so easily...

She had instantly deduced that what the duke had said was bait. Nonetheless, her lord had taken it seriously, training intensely to surpass his master. Knowing Max's prideful and stubborn character well, she could tell that there was only one thing she could do to fix the issue at hand.

She had to nag him to stop by the Floyen mansion before the end of the week. Otherwise, he would get dumped in no time.

Fresia sighed as she watched her lord grunt and swing his sword around. She was reminded of the very person she had missed dearly: her cousin, someone who had supported her to become a swordswoman despite her status as an illegitimate child.

"Yuri, I beg you," her cousin once pleaded. "Please help this child so that he doesn't go astray."

It was because of her that Fresia had been accepted into the family. For her, the former empress, Fresia was willing to do anything, and that included taking care of Max. Despite her determination, however, doing so was difficult at times. Once he made up his mind, he refused to listen to anyone else.

Just then, Max angrily pushed his sword into its scabbard. "I can't do this," he muttered, turning to face Fresia. "I'll be back. I'm just going to stop by the Floyen mansion for a moment."



A smile brightened Fresia's face. Her lord had let go of his stubborn attitude without her intervention! Did Jubelian cure his obstinacy? Fresia had never thought that a cold person like him could grow to care about someone enough to abandon his pride. How delightful.

A soft smile adorned her face.



Max was frustrated because his swordsmanship hadn't progressed for several days despite training day and night. On top of that, he hadn't seen Jubelian at all. He strove to block her out of his mind, telling himself that winning against his master was his top priority, but her lovely appearance continued to linger before him. Some days, he would see hallucinations and think he had gone mad.

His stubbornness gradually faded as he began to rationalize his longing for her. Did it even matter what her ideal type was if he couldn't meet her? Unable to withstand the separation, Max ended up running out of his hiding place and sprinting nonstop to the Floyen mansion.

About to enter through the window as usual, he remembered what Jubelian had said previously: "Can't you just come in through the door like a normal person?"

He headed to the front door immediately. There would be nothing stopping him since it was still daytime.

"Oh, hello there!" one of Jubelian's maids greeted, her expression bright. "It's wonderful to see you."

Unfortunately, Max was too distressed to smile back. He deemed it unreasonable to be kind to anyone other than Jubelian.

"Take me to her," he muttered in a low voice.



Count Herend belonged to the late empress' extended family. Combining my knowledge of the novel with my current situation, I was able to make an educated guess: per the late empress's request, Yuri must've been running the crown prince's information guild, which had been mentioned in the novel.

I contemplated whether I should go and pay a visit for more information,

but then I remembered something more pertinent that I needed to address: Rose's letter. After removing the wax seal, I opened and read the writing on the parchment.

My face hardened. She must be... joking with me.

Unable to believe what I read, I stood frozen in the middle of my room. At that moment, Merilyn called after me with a lively voice. "My lady, you have a visitor," she reported.

I hurriedly hid the letter in the drawer of my desk. "Okay, I'll be right out."

Derrick usually reported to me when it came to more formal visitors. Knowing that it was Merilyn who had warned me, I gauged that it must've been a friend of mine. Choosing to ask who it was first, I opened my door. I was still in my comfortable clothes since I had just been lounging around.

"Merilyn, who's—"

I found myself rendered speechless once I realized the identity of my visitor. His sharp jawline looked even more chiseled than before. Maybe he had been troubled with his duties, because it looked like he hadn't eaten very well for the past few days. His clothes, which were more disheveled than usual, and his tired eyes added to his decadent aura. Meeting my eyes, he smiled. My heart began pounding.

"Jubelian, I missed—"

Bang!

I closed the door before he could finish speaking because I had just realized something. Wh-What was he doing? Why didn't he tell me he would be visiting? I had opened the door thinking it would only be Merilyn there. I was dressed in whatever I had lying around—it wasn't even one of the prettier chemises that I wore from time to time.

Thank the heavens I washed my face this morning, at least. I sighed as I decided to change into acceptable attire. Calming my startled heart, I headed to my closet.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar noise coming from the window. I stiffened in response. When I slowly turned around, I saw that Max was standing on the balcony with pitiful eyes. I shrunk at such a sight; I wasn't aware that he could wear such an expression. Sighing, I headed to the balcony.



The moment he saw Jubelian, Max could feel his accumulated fatigue and frustration dissipate.

She was beautiful. It felt like he hadn't seen her for centuries, but she looked as elegant as always. Her silver hair was braided loosely, and those baggy clothes he had never seen on her before made her look like an angel. How could a person be so lovely? If he could, he would've hugged her slender body against his, kissing her right away.

He barely suppressed his feral desires. With his eyes fixed on her, he swallowed nervously. He should enter the room first before he...

However, Jubelian's face hardened and she suddenly slammed the door.

Max felt as if he had been hit in the head with a brick. She closed the door on him? Why? What did he do?!

Just then, he realized something, clenching his fists. Damn it! He probably looked hideous in her eyes. He hadn't realized that his appearance might not have been on par with his usual standard because he had come running after abandoning his training.

He forgot that there were many noblemen anxious to win her heart... he should've paid more attention to how he presented himself. Max grew impatient once he realized that Jubelian might be disappointed with his appearance. Unable to stand still, he left the mansion to approach her by the window to her room.



"Come in."

After entering the room, he stood in front of me as if he was waiting for something. I was expecting a hug, but he sighed instead. "Jubelian, about today's attire..." he began.

Was he trying to point out what I was wearing? It was true that I was dressed more comfortably than normal. Still, I couldn't help but think of it as unfair. How could he criticize me so openly when he was the one who had visited me without any prior notice?

Embarrassed, I hastily changed the topic. "The weather is wonderful today, isn't it?!" I exclaimed, before realizing that I had made a mistake. I shouldn't have blurted the first thing on my mind. It was a cloudy day today, and it looked as if it was going to rain at any moment. Desperate to redeem myself, I added, "Oh, I just like these kinds of days. The sun isn't in your

face, you know?"

I barely managed to stay calm. Max attentively listened to my nonsense then nodded with a smile. "You're right."

I ended up staring at his face without realizing it. It looked like he had gotten even handsomer somehow.

Hurriedly, I turned away and asked, "What have you been up to? I haven't seen you for a few days."

He stiffened at my question. "It's nothing that should concern you," he replied sternly.

I sighed. Did he not trust me? Although a lot had changed, I was aware of the events that had taken place in the original story. There was a chance that I could be of help to him. "Is it top-secret? I want to know, Max," I pleaded, taking his hands in mine.

He blushed. Then, he nodded. "Fine."

"Thank you."

He gave me a faint smile before sheepishly averting his gaze. "Before that, I wanted to ask something..." he began. "About my attire today: do I look bad?"

I froze in place. Was he referring to himself earlier? I was embarrassed that I had misunderstood him. Now that I thought about it, I had misjudged him many times before, oftentimes right in front of him. At least I didn't do that anymore. I sighed.

"From now on, I will never show myself before you with such a hideous appearance," he promised. "So, please forgive me."

What was he saying?! He didn't know that his appearance was handsome enough to make everything okay. Hell, he could wear clothes made out of straws and I would say he looked fine.

I rushed to clear his misunderstanding. "What are you talking about?! You look amazing! Just like any other day!" I insisted. "You're probably the most handsome man I know!"

His expression went vacant. Perhaps I had been too enthusiastic in expressing my opinion... I was humiliated, but there was nothing I could do now. The last thing I wanted to do was trample on a loved one's self-esteem.

I tried ushering him to a chair. "Let's sit down now a—"

Just then, he hugged me from behind. His lean but muscular arms wrapped themselves around my body as if to entrap me. I felt my face grow hot. To make it worse, however, he began to whisper into my ear. "I was

worried because you closed the door so suddenly. I hadn't visited for the past few days, and I—"

"That's because of what I'm wearing today," I confessed, essentially exposing myself. I guess I had dug my own grave since it seemed that both of us had forgotten about what I was wearing.

In any case, I shifted my head slightly in his direction and felt a soft touch on my cheek. I quickly turned around in astonishment only to find his ruby eyes upon me. They shone brighter than usual.

"You look beautiful no matter what you wear," he said seriously. Normally, I would think a comment like that was cringy, but strangely enough, I felt nothing but loved. Maybe it was because this was the first time I had received someone's attention head-on like this.

My heart tickled as we held each other's gaze. He slowly approached me, and I closed my eyes, listening to the sound of his breath growing closer.

"Jubelian, are you in there?" a voice suddenly interrupted.

Thoroughly startled by Father's voice, I pushed Max away.



"Y-Yes, Father! Is something the matter?"

Jubelian was surprised, but Max was irritated. He knew his master had interrupted them on purpose.

He scoffed to himself. His master was willing to go this far?

"I have something to discuss with Max," Regis said from outside the door. Jubelian turned to Max in response. He hoped that she would hold him back, but she pushed him forth without hesitation.

"Go ahead."

Disappointment arose within him in response to her heartless encouragement. He wouldn't dare to pull something like this if she said something...

Then, he felt something soft on his cheek. He turned to realize Jubelian had stood on her tiptoes to give him a light kiss on the cheek.

Blushing, she said, "I hope you guys have a good time."

A smile tugged at Max's lips without him realizing it. He lowered his head to meet her eyes.

He wondered if she knew how much she meant to him. He didn't think he would be able to...

"I will," he replied quietly. Looking at her once more before leaving, he realized he was now helpless. He would do anything for her.



I had only been able to calm down after Max left the room. He had literally sucked the soul out of me with his sweet talk. I had taken countless deep breaths, but the tickling in my heart never subsided. I dove into bed and squealed; I was beautiful no matter what I wore? How could he say something like that?!

I giggled under my blanket for a while. Then, I started worrying about what Father had to discuss with him. As far as I knew, they weren't on good terms. I wondered what he had called Max for.

Deciding to find out for myself, I got up from my bed and placed a shawl over my shabby clothes before I headed out of the room.



The emperor sat in his armchair in the royal study, stroking his chin. He was thinking about his son.

Maximillian sure was quiet these days.

The crown prince had been roaming about aimlessly until Beatrice's coronation ceremony. It was a surprise that he was now staying put in his room. In any case, the emperor was relieved about it. Perhaps his son was trying to stay out of his sight after what he had done during the ball.

The grand chamberlain called from outside the door at that moment. "Your Majesty, Mikhail from the Hessen family has arrived."

The emperor's eyes glistened. He had definitely taken a liking to Mikhail. The young man was a cunning one, just like his father. The only difference between the two was that the marquis was a selfish geezer while Mikhail was a young man faithful to the royal family. The emperor decided that this should have been enough of a reason to satisfy the empress when it came to having Mikhail marry Beatrice.

Everything was perfect. Grinning ear to ear, the emperor answered, "Let him in."

At his command, the door opened. After entering the study, Mikhail bowed. "I greet the Great Sun of our empire," he said.

The emperor gave him a broad smile. "Welcome, eldest son of Marquis

Hessen. You seem in good health as always."

"Thank you. As do you, Your Majesty."

The emperor felt his mood improve. Mikhail sure knew how to please him. Gazing warmly at the young man, the emperor began speaking. "I have called you here because I want to arrange a meeting for you to meet my daughter," he explained. "What do you think of it?"

"It would be a great honor to meet Her Royal Ladyship, who I adore very much," Mikhail responded, smiling.

As expected, he was unlike the other indolent young man. He had the proper attitude. Hastily making up his mind, the emperor decided that he wouldn't mind having someone like Mikhail as his son-in-law.

"However, there is one thing that bothers me, Your Majesty," Mikhail noted hesitantly.

"What is it? Let your worries be heard."

Recognizing the older man's tone had grown friendlier than before, Mikhail answered candidly. "I was previously engaged to a woman before, and I am concerned that this might undermine Her Royal Highness' reputation," he confessed.

The emperor furrowed his brows. He gritted his teeth once he remembered Mikhail's ex-fiancé. Out of all the women in the empire, it had to be that girl. Jubelian Eloy Floyen. This news was disappointing because the emperor had planned to use her to manipulate both Regis and Maximillian. If he wasn't careful, the two former lovers might end up becoming family.

However, the emperor soon realized something and smirked. No, no. There was no need for the two to get married if he simply wanted her as a hostage...

The emperor was scrambling for an idea when Mikhail lowered his head. "Duke Floyen is likely to protest if I ever have an affair with Her Highness," he said. "You must be aware of this, Your Majesty."

The emperor burst into laughter. "Don't worry. The duke will not dare to protest against me."



"Drink."

Instead of listening to his master, Max glared at him. "I'm aware that you

deliberately interfered just now."

Ignoring the criticism, Regis sipped his tea elegantly. He appeared unbothered, and Max had to resist the urge to knock the tea table over.

Soon enough, however, his master placed his cup down on its saucer. "Jubel is still a minor," he said. "I cannot accept unnecessary physical contact."

Pulling a face, Max objected. "A kiss is nothing once one makes their debut into the social world. Besides, I'm not thinking of doing anything out of line."

Brutality lay within his master's eyes. "If you do so before she reaches adulthood, you won't leave this place alive," the older man threatened.

Max flinched at the harsh warning, but he gathered himself quickly. "Is that all you wanted to say?" he asked

"Jubel will come of age in two months."

Max nodded. "I know that." It was a day he was looking forward to, so there wouldn't be any reason he wouldn't know. He began to fantasize. Once she came of age, he would propose to her...

"Surely you must not be thinking of proposing to her as soon as she comes of age?" Regis interrupted as if reading Max's mind. "After all, you're currently in a situation where you don't know when you'll be struck down by the emperor."

Feeling his mood grow foul, Max scowled. "If I wanted to, I could deal with the emperor right now," he hissed.

His master smirked. "How arrogant. This is why you haven't been able to transcend for the past few years, Maximilian."

His master had hit a sore spot that had been bothering Max for a long time. Outraged, his voice. "What is it that you want from me?"

Regis met his disciple's eyes. "The emperor has a secret weapon that you don't know about. This is something even I can't do anything about."

Not even Regis? Max's eyes widened in disbelief. What was it to render the empire's hero and Assiette's strongest swordsman helpless?

"Did you think you could win against the emperor with your cheap tricks?" Regis challenged again. "You'll have no choice but to accept defeat if you keep going like this, Maximilian."

Max clenched his fists. His master wasn't someone who told lies, so his claim must've been true.

"Are you going to put my daughter in danger?"



Jubelian might be in danger? The moment he made that terrible assumption, Max couldn't help but strengthen his grip. Veins bulged in the backs of his coiled hands. Gritting his teeth, Max glared at his master ferociously, looking ready to attack.

Instead of charging, however, he just lowered his head. "Please help me, Master."

Perhaps he had matured a little... Regis let out a small sigh at his disciple's plea. "Visit me whenever you have time. I will help you break through the obstacles hindering your progress," he instructed.

Max's expression hardened. He had put a lot of effort into overcoming the hurdles to becoming a transcendent. In turn, however, he had only been left with frustration. No amount of training gave him the results he wanted. Thus, it was natural for him to be swayed by his master's offer. He valued his identity as a swordsman more than he did his title as the crown prince.

"Is there a way?" he asked in anticipation.

Regis smirked. "There is indeed. Would you like me to show you right now?"

If there was a way, he had no reason to decline.

"Yes. Let's go."



Oh, they weren't in the drawing-room? I looked for Father and Max, but they were nowhere to be found. Where in the world did they go? I think I had already checked everywhere in the mansion...

Just then, Derrick emerged from the break room. He looked satisfied. Noticing how happy he seemed, I wondered if he just had tea time again.

It was the lady of the household's duty to grant high-quality goods to the butler and head maid because they managed the employees. Since mother wasn't alive, Derrick and Madam Perez led a rather frugal lifestyle. I had been indebted to them as they had taken care of my foolish self in the past. For this reason, I gave both of them some flavored tea I had made. Derrick seemed to have taken quite a liking to it because he always took a tea break during his free time.

Thinking he might know where Max and my father were, I approached him. Smiling, he greeted me. "Lady Jubelian!" he exclaimed. "What brings you here? You should be in your room."

"Where are my father and my lover?"

Caught off guard, he averted his eyes.

Bingo. It must be as I had thought. I purposefully sought to catch his eye. "Tell me where the two are. In return, I will give you some of the rose tea I had made recently," I offered.

At my trade offer, Derrick gulped. Then, he sighed before revealing the secret.



Max barely managed to block his master's blade as it flew at him at the speed of light. He tried to suppress his nausea. He had assumed that his master knew of a means to become a transcendent being, but instead, he had simply led Max to the drill hall.

Throwing him a sword, Regis had said, "Enlightenment is bound to come amidst a moment of crisis. Try surviving my blade."

His master's onslaught felt more threatening than the six years Max had spent on the battlefield. He muttered curses under his breath for falling into his master's trap as easily as this.

Suddenly, Regis began to move swiftly as if to catch Max's attention. From Max's perspective, his master's body looked as if it had doubled. He was forced to pay a disastrous price for becoming momentarily distracted as a blade rushed in and took control of his sword. It was as if his weapon had become wrapped inside his opponent's.

His master pushed against his blade and it flew back, spinning in a circle. Max stood with his mouth agape at the unbelievable sight. He had never been forced to let go of his sword like this, and his pride took the hit.

"Too weak," his master sneered.

Damn him! Max's head grew hot with anger. Since he was the father of the woman he loved, he had tried to remain patient, but he was now at his limit. Drawing another sword from his waist, he crouched, ready to pounce. Nevertheless, his master manifested before him in an instant, aiming his blade at Max's throat.

"Too slow."

"Damn it to hell."

Regis furrowed his brows at the sight of his disciple swearing under his breath. The duke then let out a sigh. If he did this, Jubel would become even

more frightened of him...

Little did he know, his daughter was standing at the entrance of the training ground, pale-faced. She had been watching.



After I heard that the two were at the drill hall, I wondered what they were doing there. Surely... they weren't fighting, were they?

Anxious thoughts overcame me and I sighed. Was that really the best way? I had consulted Rose on how to get close to my father, but her reply was shorter than usual:

I'll be blunt about it, Lady Floyen. I just address Father as 'Daddy.'

"Daddy," I tried to say. It felt awkward to utter the word out loud because I had never used it in my previous life, let alone the present. Moreover, I was approaching adulthood. There was a chance Father might think I had gone crazy if I referred to him that way. No matter how much I thought about it, calling him 'daddy' was unreasonable. I needed to figure something out my way.

Sighing with frustration, I hastened my steps. The drill hall, which was located a distance away from the mansion, grew closer.

I wondered what they were doing there. Carefully, I opened the door to the hall, sneaking in. An astonishing scene presented itself before me. What were they doing? Father and Max were exchanging furious blows. I couldn't even follow their swords' movements with my eyes.

Wouldn't they get hurt? Although I was ignorant of the sword, I could tell that the match between the two was an extremely dangerous one.

Just then, I remembered that knights sometimes got injured during their training. They tended to practice with handicaps like wooden weapons to avoid injury. On the other hand, the two men's blades looked sharper than ever. I could feel a vicious aura resonate from them just by watching. Were they actually battling?

I gulped in nervousness as I watched. Max was forced to let go of his sword due to Father's attack.

Ah, maybe I could approach them now. I was about to take a step forward, thinking that the duel was over, when a strong headache suddenly overcame me.

"I'm... sorry... for... making... you... frightened..."

A strange memory flashed before me. My heart stuttered. Realizing my father was pushing his blade closer to Max, however, I yelled out.

"D-Daddy!"

A deafening silence filled the room.

It was Father who broke it. He regarded me with eyes wrought with surprise. "Jubel, did you just..."

The astonishment in his voice reminded me of the ridiculous act I had just committed. A shiver ran down my spine.

What... had I done? I couldn't believe I just called him that! I was only two months away from coming of age. Unable to comprehend my own actions, I stood rooted in place. Father had approached me, and in no time, he stood before me.

He held me by the shoulders. "Tell me, do you remember what happened?"

Impatience and despair characterized his expression. Why did he look so miserable? I didn't know why, but my heart felt torn to pieces as well. Another sharp headache emerged, followed by a vision drenched in a reddish hue.

"I'm sorry. I wanted—"

It was Father's voice that brought me back to reality. "Jubel, what was that just now?" He sighed. My heart sank, thinking he was disappointed in me. Still, I couldn't undo what had already been done. I didn't want to blow this chance I had to get closer to Father.

"The embarrassment is temporary," I told myself. I needed to be honest.

"Oh, I... I just wanted to try calling you by a different name this time," I explained, trying for some subtlety. Father's eyes widened. I waited for his response, nervous and afraid that he would scold me for not acting my age.

"I see," he replied. A warm smile began to settle upon his handsome face, reaching his eyes and softening his gaze. The caring expression brought forth feelings I had repressed since childhood.

Honestly, I had always wanted to call him something more than 'father.' I wanted to be like the other girls who were close to their dads. Still, I couldn't reveal these earnest thoughts. They would probably sound peevish.

"You can keep calling me that if you want," he said.

I was flooded with disbelief for a moment. Then, I couldn't take it anymore. A tumult of emotions surged from within me, and I began to weep.

"Jubelian?"

I tried to feign calm so I could answer him, but it was too late—the dam that I had built to stifle everything I felt had shattered. I swayed in whichever direction my sentiments took me, drowning as if caught in the rapids of a relentless river. I belatedly covered my mouth, muffling my sobs with my hand.

Father was confused as to why I had suddenly broken down. He fretted over me. "Jubelian, what's wrong? Are you hurt anywhere?"

I knew that I had to stop crying, but his questions only made me more sorrowful. The answer had been right here all this time... yet it had been so difficult for me.

"Do not come here again."

I had been afraid that Father would reject me as he did in the past. For that reason, I never dared to address him familiarly. I had no choice but to watch him from afar and follow him around in a manner that he wouldn't notice.

"Tell me what's going on."

I met his eyes in response to his request. Although his tone had left him coldly, there was worry in his eyes.

"Can... I do that?" I tried to ask.

"Do what?" he asked in return, perplexed.

"Can I—keep calling you 'daddy' or—or 'dad' from now on?" I struggled to speak between sobs.

He remained silent for a moment. Then, he nodded. "Of course," he said. Then, he patted me on the head.

It was an awkward and extremely carefully accomplished gesture, but it had been something I had desperately craved since I was a child. I understood how I truly felt now. I always told myself that I didn't need his love anymore, but that had only been a means of self-defense. In truth, I still held a deep, boundless love for him.

I continued to cry. Father watched me do so without saying anything, holding my hand. Although there came no words of consolation or a hug, it was still a turning point in our clumsy relationship.



Max clenched his fists as he watched Jubelian cry. Even though he knew that his master loved his daughter, he hadn't told her anything about how

much her father cherished her. The only thing that had been on his mind until now was winning her heart.

Regret overcame him.

The first time he had slaughtered someone on the battlefield, he promised something to himself as he vomited, horrified by the grimy bloodshed. He had pledged that he would never be sorry about anything that had happened in the past. Even if he were to be called a monster by the people, he would deem it necessary for his survival.

This was how Max had rationalized the countless executions he had carried out. He had been injured from numerous blades, yet the wounds had never brought him pain. Strangely, however, he felt heartbroken the moment he saw Jubelian shed her first tear.

He was stupid. He should've placed her feelings before his...

He had never thought that Jubelian could sob so dismally. If he had known about how inadequate she felt, he would've told her over and over again how much her father praised her and doted on her. Only after he learned of her scars did Max learn of his faults.

Remorse weighing heavily upon his heart, Max made a silent promise. "I will attend to you first from now on," he decided, "so please don't cry anymore."

"Max." He raised his head at the sound of his name. Her eyes bloodshot from crying, Jubelian held out her hand toward him. "Let's go have dinner."

Confused, Max simply stared at her for a moment before slowly approaching her. Did he have the right to hold that hand? He hesitated, so she took a step forward for him, placing his hand in hers.

"It's all right. My dad is just a strong person," she assured him. "There's no need to feel bad because you didn't win the duel."

Was it okay for a monster like him to stay by her side? Max knew she was more than he deserved. Nevertheless, he didn't want to let his savior go, for she had rescued him from the darkness.

He held tight onto her soft, pale hand.



Daddy was a cold person by nature. For that reason, there had never been much conversation at the dinner table. There was, however, one thing different this evening...

"Eat," he said.

He was piling my plate with all of my favorite dishes. Was this his way of showing affection? If he didn't care about me, he wouldn't have known about all my favorite foods. I was holding back a giggle inspired by his blunt ways when I remembered something.

"You who go against time, let go of prejudice and face the truth before you."

I thought I had been scammed back then, but now that I thought about it, the prophecy was true to some extent.

I had been ignoring the truth before me all along. If I had paid attention to Daddy's small acts of kindness, our relationship wouldn't have become so twisted. It was my fault. I was too scared to look, fearful of being rejected once more. That fear was likely what had made us misunderstand each other.

Anyway, I was glad we were able to resolve this. It was a relief.

At that moment, I noticed that Max wasn't eating very much. Instead, he sat tersely, wearing a stiff expression.

Was there something wrong? I stared at him until he met my eyes. However, he instantly avoided my gaze. He still must've felt resentful about losing the duel against Daddy. He seemed very skilled as well... normally, he was an arrogant and overconfident person, but I felt sorry to see him look so miserable.

I should cheer him up.

Once the meal was over, I forced a smile. "Daddy, Max and I are going for a walk!" I announced. It was still a little awkward since I wasn't used to calling him 'Daddy,' but I was determined to use the term whenever possible. That would be the only way the both of us would get used to it.

Looking at me, he sighed and nodded. "Sure."

Frankly, I wanted to stay home so I could spend some time talking to Dad, but I decided that there would now be more time for that moving forward. In fact, there was plenty of time. I was planning to stay by his side for a while. We'll be making new memories in the future. I observed Daddy with contentment as I pondered everything.

Suddenly, he reminded me of something. "You better wear a thick coat," he said.

He sounded indifferent, but I knew now that he was concerned about my well-being. "Of course, it's chilly outside, after all," I agreed. He looked a bit surprised at my nonchalant response. "Thank you for worrying about me,

Dad.”

Although our relationship was still rather stilted, I now felt that I could tell him anything I wanted to.



Watching his daughter and disciple leave the mansion, Regis clenched his fists.

Daddy. That was what Jubelian used to call him when she was a child, and to him, she was the most lovable child in the whole world. The title was unfamiliar at first, but Regis had gradually gotten used to it.

He used to feel like his mansion was a prison at times. On days he would come back from butchering his prey, he felt like a hunting dog forced to return to its cage. His only salvation was...

"Daddy!"

Whenever his little girl called him, Regis felt that he was home. His precious child liberated him from his chains, yet he had ruined their relationship. He didn't want to do so, to be precise, but he nevertheless blamed himself for the disaster that wrenched them apart.

He didn't deserve her affection... he clenched his fists tightly, his veins standing in stark relief. A tear fell onto the floor. "Am I allowed to be happy?" he asked himself.

He was constantly tempted to get along with his daughter. He wanted to act as if he knew nothing about what had happened. Donning a mirthless smile, Regis realized that once she discovered the truth... she would come to resent him.

Retrieving a pendant from his pocket, he began a pledge: "I will never use this again, and..."

Her voice cut through his thoughts. "Can I keep calling you 'Daddy' or 'Dad' from now on?"

Clasping the necklace, Regis despaired. "I will make sure that you are happy in this life."



The silvery moonlight illuminated the grass and leaves. Because of Paul, our gardener who always boasted about the landscaping, the garden was as



beautiful in the evening as it was in the morning. Once I spotted a bench, I dragged Max by his hand and sat him down.

"You've been through a lot today."

"I suppose."

I turned toward him only to notice he looked a little depressed. After studying his expression for a moment, I rested my head on his shoulder. He flinched. "Jubelian?" he asked.

Until now, I had never rested on someone I was dating like this because I had been afraid of them thinking I was childish and dependent upon them. However, I knew now that Max didn't mind. I knew that he would never try to harm me.

"Max." He flinched again at the sound of his name, looking as if he had done me wrong. I grabbed his hand to squeeze it and reassure him. "It's okay," I said.

I liked him as he was, even if he wasn't on par with Dad in terms of swordsmanship and the empire's people believed the terrible rumors about him—even if he was an arrogant and foul-tempered person. Thanks to the attention and care he had afforded me, I learned how to love properly as well.

"I like you just the way you are," I told him.

Instead of answering, he squeezed my hand back. I smiled. He must've been feeling down because of what had happened in the drill hall. I hope I gave him the confidence boost he needed.



Max flinched once he heard Jubelian's words. Just the way he was...? Had she found out what he had been thinking about? She had taken him by surprise, and he felt uneasy that she seemed aware of his secret thoughts. Afraid that she might run away, he held her hand tight. He told himself that there could be no way she would know.

"Isn't there something you want to tell me?" she asked.

Gulping nervously, he clenched his fists. She would be disappointed if she found out. Calming his anxious mind, he feigned ignorance. "What are you talking about?"

Jubelian turned to meet his eyes, but looking into those periwinkle pools made Max feel guilty. Damn it. He couldn't do this.

He was about to turn away when she grabbed him by the chin, forcing him to make eye contact. "Don't look away," she ordered. "I find it extremely unpleasant when you look elsewhere when I'm right next to you."

Captivated by her confidence, Max nodded. "Fine."

Her face brightened with a smile, and Max felt his mood improve as if he had been praised for listening to her.

"Anyway, you didn't answer my question."

"Question? Oh, you mean..." He thought back to a conversation they had earlier.

"What have you been up to?" she had asked. "I haven't seen you for a few days."

Was that what she was referring to? Max let out a sigh of relief. Her being upset about not answering that had been the last thing on his mind. "Actually... I've been busy with training," he said.

"Training? Why? You didn't spend so much time on it until now."

Seeing how confused she was, Max had no choice but to tell the truth. He sighed. "Well... I heard that your ideal type is a man that's stronger than your father."

Jubelian groaned. "That's because I was afraid of Dad setting me up with anyone. I just said that so he wouldn't be able to find anyone. After all, there's no one stronger than him in this empire."

Nonetheless, Max wasn't satisfied. She was trying to make him feel better... so why was he so bothered? Hiding his feelings, Max forced a smile and asked, "Is that all? For your ideal type, I mean."

Shaking her head, Jubelian began the rest of the list. "I said the man must also be from a reputable family. He must be the wealthiest man in the empire and the most honorable. Oh, and he must be very skilled at what he does."

Max's lips curled into a smile. That was totally him. Without a doubt, Max was wealthy, of honorable origin, and from a reputable family. Additionally, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call him a genius swordsman since he was close to becoming a transcendent being. It was only natural that she would like him.

Narcissism overtook him.

"But, honestly... I only said those things because I had been thinking of my Dad," Jubelian continued. "He's probably the only man in this world who fits all those traits. He's perfect!"

Max realized the source of his discomfort. She thought of her father as the best in the world...

Objectively speaking, his master was a decent man. Still, Max believed that he wasn't too far behind in terms of all the aspects Jubelian had mentioned. He was already superior to him in terms of wealth, appearance, and origin. There was nothing that he lacked—

Reminded of his tragic loss in the last duel, his thoughts halted.

Yeah, well, it didn't matter since he was better than his master in all other things, anyway.

He decided to use his other strengths to appeal to her. "Jubelian, I am to become the next emperor," he stated.

She nodded. "I'm aware."

"I also have a lot of money and a fairly decent appearance."

She smiled. "You're right!" she agreed enthusiastically. "You're a very handsome man!" Max smiled contentedly. Then, she added, "So, don't be so disappointed about losing the duel against my Dad. Okay?"

Reminded of the terrible truth he had almost moved on from, Max was rendered speechless.



Dressed in black armor, Victor practiced numerous dances in the crown prince's absence.

Dancing was the most important skill for a gentleman. No banquets would be held in the royal palace for a while, but there were quite a few noble families who would be holding parties and ladies who would be coming of age soon. Several faces came to Victor's mind at once. Then, he grinned when he thought of a specific lady. She had been quiet lately... but she was still gorgeous. As the rumors claimed, she was truly the most beautiful woman in the empire.

The sight of the infamous lady dancing with the crown prince had ignited a fire in Victor's heart. She only danced with His Highness once, so she surely wasn't interested in him... however, she might be interested in Victor!

Victor was tall and slender, yet he didn't seem lanky thanks to his slightly muscular build. He also had a fine appearance; he had been told a few times that he looked a bit like the crown prince, albeit that had only been when he was passing by in a carriage.

Full of self-love, Victor promised something silently to himself: "Lady Floyen, I will win your heart!"

He had immersed himself in dangerous ambitions.

Suddenly, a voice called for him. "Victor."

Startled by the sudden alert, Victor hastily turned to realize that the crown prince was staring at him with a stern expression. Why does he look so upset? Oh no—it must've been because Max caught him dancing while wearing the armor! Victor swallowed dryly.

Then another voice chimed in. "Your Highness, this is Dennis."

Relieved at his comrade's unexpected appearance, Victor answered before Max could. "Come in."

Once Dennis entered the room, he read the room and frowned. "Victor, was it you who answered?" he asked.

Although Dennis was his superior, Victor remained nonchalant. "I mean... you told me to act like His Highness whenever I was wearing the armor, Captain!"

"You...!"

"Shut up, both of you," Max commanded coldly, putting an end to the brewing quarrel. The two knights zipped their mouths shut. Then, they exchanged glances and whispered to each other.

"What's making His Highness so upset?" Dennis asked.

"I don't know, captain! But I've been relieved because it seems he's grown softer these days."

Unaware of their chatter, Max addressed them. "There's something I am curious about," he began.

Dennis and Victor kneeled on one knee in unison. "We will do our best to answer, Your Highness."

After much thought, he said, "There's someone I am very fond of."

The two knights looked at each other in response and nodded in unison. They had been expecting this news for a while because Max had kept a pink handkerchief attached to the hilt of his sword while he fought. It would've been stranger not to notice that he had someone he adored. Moreover, Victor had already counseled the crown prince on dating advice.

Nevertheless, both men pretended to be surprised. "Does that mean... you've found true happiness? What great news!" Victor exclaimed.

Dennis glared at his subordinate with a frown before quickly turning back to his superior. "May I ask who she is, Your Highness?"

The crown prince's face brightened up like a blooming flower. Chuckling, Victor quipped, "I don't know who she is, but judging from Your Highness's face, she must be as beautiful as Lady Floyen."

Max instantly scowled. "Don't even think about approaching her," he threatened in a wintry tone.

Victor's face fell. It was just a compliment! What had gotten into him?!

Unlike the oblivious Victor, Dennis had deduced who the owner of the handkerchief was. So, it was Lady Floyen... Although she was once ill-reputed, that now seemed to be a thing of the past. In fact, it was strategically favorable for the crown prince to win the lady's heart if he wanted Duke Floyen's support during the rebellion.

As expected, His Highness has been preparing a lot of things for their cause. Dennis smiled proudly. "So, what is it that you are curious about, Your Highness?" he asked.

Max sighed. "I've made a mistake and... every time I see her, I feel guilty about it," he confessed. Startled by the fact that the crown prince was feeling guilty, the two knights looked up, curiously observing their lord. Then, they lowered their heads in haste. Glancing at each other, they began to whisper again.

"Does any of this make sense? His Highness feels guilty!"

"We should keep listening."

Max continued. "So, what should I do?"

Dennis swallowed nervously. "I think you should think carefully about apologizing. If it is something she hasn't noticed, asking for forgiveness might only make it worse."

Max let out a sigh of relief. Just as he thought... that must've been the right answer, then.

That was when Victor gave some rather simple advice: "How about just admitting what you've done wrong, Your Highness?" he suggested. "It might sound counterintuitive, but ladies often open their hearts to sincere apologies."

Max wavered. This option sounded convincing.

Then, Dennis argued, "What if she ends up despising His Highness for what he had done? It sounds like you're giving rash advice because it's not your business, Victor."

After a moment, Max came to a decision. He would rather follow Dennis's suggestion than listen to the frivolous Victor.

Unfortunately, another disturbing thought came to mind just then. "I have another problem," he said.

Dennis and Victor tensed up again. What was he going to ask, and why did he look so serious?!

"She told me about her ideal type... but it's someone other than me."

Shocked, the two men stared at their lord with their mouths agape. What kind of person was he dating?!

Unlike the confused Victor, Dennis's mind spun with the implications. Lady Floyen was rumored to have a secret lover. He was a commoner, as far as Dennis knew. Was it him?

"Why don't you threaten that man?" Victor suggested.

Dennis was about to scold his subordinate for his thoughtless idea, but Max furrowed his brow and responded first. "That's impossible. Her ideal type is Duke Floyen," he explained. Having processed the situation their lord was in, the two knights smiled.

"Ah, that makes sense... if that's the case, you needn't worry about it."

Max was puzzled by Victor's statement. With a gentle smile, Dennis elaborated. "The duke is everyone's ideal type, Your Highness."

Everyone's ideal type? Normally, he wouldn't have cared much, but this irritated Max for some reason. He glared at his subordinates. "How am I compared to him?"

Dennis tensed up. He knew he might be punished if he didn't come up with an adequate answer quickly enough. The duke was Lady Floyen's father... he needed to answer this question carefully.

He was deep in thoughts when Victor piped up. "You can't compare to him, Your Highness! Duke Floyen is flawless, you know—"

A deafening silence filled the room.

Finally reading the atmosphere, Victor swallowed nervously and backtracked, attempting to fix his mistakes. "He doesn't feel human!" he clarified. "I mean, he's so unreal!"

Max felt his mood grow even fouler.

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