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Jeanette the Genius
Defying My Evil Stepmother by Starting a Business with My Ride-or-Die Fiancé!


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Jeanette the Genius: Defying My Evil Stepmother by Starting a Business with My Ride-or-Die Fiancé! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

Jeanette had grown used to hearing slander about herself. Criticisms came her way at every turn—how she was new money, how her red hair looked crude, how her makeup was too strong. But the remark that grated on her ears most of all was:

"I pity your fiancé, Lord Claus!"

In fact, Jeanette felt more pity for her own fiancé than anyone else, and found herself thinking, *I wish I had some way to free him from our engagement!*

Jeanette Roussel, an upstart who had nothing but money to her name, and her fiancé, the handsome Count Claus Guivarch, whom she had bought with that money—or at least, such was the public view of their relationship.

Chapter 1: Father Goes Missing In An Accident

On that day, the young, pretty woman's red lips contorted in a smirk as she spoke. "Jeanette, won't you leave this house?"

As always, Jeanette's stepmother Leila was clad in an expensive dress, and her makeup was beautifully done. Her skin had a lovely glow to it, and nobody would've been able to guess by looking at her that her husband had just gone missing.

Standing next to the woman was Jeanette's younger stepsister, Ariel. Just like her mother, Ariel didn't seem sad in the slightest—in fact, she was smiling

Jeanette's eyes widened at Leila's words. "Um... What exactly do you mean by that, Mother?"

A week had passed since Jeanette's father, the pillar of the Roussel barony, had gone missing. There was no word yet as to his whereabouts, but it seemed that Leila considered him as good as dead, making her the new head of the family.

At Jeanette's question, her stepmother forced out a sigh. "You really aren't very bright, are you? If you just pause and think for a moment, the meaning in my words should be abundantly clear. I'm still young and my future is full of promise, so having a daughter of your age around would be troublesome for me."

Upon hearing that, Jeanette cast a glance at Ariel. *She's only a year younger than me, but she's allowed to stay...?*

Jeanette was eighteen years old at present, and Ariel seventeen. Just a year's difference in their age, but Jeanette didn't say that aloud. She was certain her stepmother was well aware of that fact.

All the two of them did was persecute Jeanette.

She had known for a long time that Leila and Ariel despised her. Leila had

become her father's second wife when Jeanette was ten years old, bringing Ariel along with her. In the beginning, Jeanette had hoped that the three of them would grow close, but unfortunately her feelings were not reciprocated.

Whenever Jeanette's father was around, Leila and Ariel were nice to her, but the moment he was out of sight, their attitudes towards her changed in a heartbeat. Ever since the baron had disappeared, the two women took advantage of the situation to harass Jeanette constantly...

"Oh my! Jeanette, haven't you gained some weight recently?" Leila disparaged. "At this rate, everyone will laugh at you and call you a pig! You're not getting any dinner tonight," she declared. Subsequently it became a common occurrence for her not to feed Jeanette.

On another day, Ariel exclaimed, "My, dear sister! Have you seen yourself today? You look like some harlot! People might get the wrong idea if we're seen with you, so Mother said you should stay home." Following this belittlement, the two women frequently left Jeanette behind when they went to social occasions such as tea parties.

On yet another day, Leila had wiped her finger along the edge of the window of their house and remarked, "There's still some dust left here. Your attendant is in charge of cleaning this area, no? I suppose if the mistress is incompetent, the same will be true for her maid... You should take responsibility and clean this place up!"

Although they didn't physically hurt Jeanette, the way they treated her was certainly enough to earn the term "bullying".

However, unfortunately for *them*, Jeanette was not at all discouraged by their behavior. She'd grown up hearing her father's favorite catchphrase: "*Every crisis is an opportunity for growth*!"

Those words had stuck with her, and each time her stepmother and stepsister pestered her, she became excited at the thought of a new challenge to overcome. She'd think, *The two of them are giving me a trial, and this test is the reward in and of itself!*

Displeased with Jeanette's vivacity, Leila and Ariel redoubled their efforts to upset her. Before long, Jeanette was being pushed to do work around the house

that was normally left to the servants. Her stepsister and stepmother often hurled verbal abuse and filthy threats at her, to the point where it no longer fazed her. This eventually led to her belongings being stolen from her one after another, but still Jeanette did not lose heart.

And yet...

I can't believe they're trying to throw me out... Ah! Wait! Could it be?! Jeanette clasped her hand over her mouth in realization. *Could this be...a different type of reward for me?!*

Indeed, it wasn't the *usual* course of action for someone to cast their step-child out the moment the father passed away. Therefore Leila and Ariel must have had some kind of a *reason* to be doing this.

There's a saying that goes, "Throw them in the deep end." I bet this is what Mother is trying to do here! thought Jeanette. *In fact, maybe all those times I thought she and Ariel were harassing me, they were actually just showing me their love...* She trembled with repressed emotion. *Ahh, I'm so sorry that I didn't realize it sooner, you two!*

Alas, Jeanette was very dense, and so optimistic it was downright terrifying.

Seeing Jeanette trembling all over and covering her mouth, Leila and Ariel mistook her emotions for sorrow. As though she'd been waiting for this all along, Ariel spoke up. "Don't worry, dear sister. If you turn over a new leaf and swear to work hard for us with all your might, I'm sure Mother won't throw you out," she said, her lips curving in what could be seen as a sweet smile.

Ariel's golden hair was shining in the sunlight, and her sapphire eyes sparkled as she continued in the same saccharine tone of voice. "We'll have to cancel your engagement to Lord Claus, but I'm sure Mother can find someone else for you soon enough. It might have to be someone quite a bit older than you, but I'm sure you'd prefer that to being cast out, wouldn't you?"

Leila smiled in satisfaction. Claus had been Jeanette's fiancé for many years, so the implication was clear even to Jeanette: *"We'll definitively call off your engagement to Claus, but if you vow to be obedient, we'll let you get married off to some old nobleman."*

Why would they do such a tedious thing? Jeanette wondered. *Ah! Could it be that this is another way of them encouraging me?!* She shivered again at her new discovery.

"Worry not," Ariel went on, her cheeks flushing slightly. "From here on out, *I* will take your place, and bloom in the splendid world of high society. This was meant to be a secret, but the truth is, Lord Claus has complimented me before, saying that he finds me very adorable..."

Right, now that I think about it, Ariel has always liked Lord Claus. Jeanette's fiancé was incredibly handsome, and there was not a soul within high society who didn't know his name. Ariel had fallen in love with him at first sight and had often appealed to Jeanette's father about wanting to be engaged to him instead. She also took every opportunity to spread bad rumors about Jeanette among the nobility in order to tear her down from her position.

"So, what's your decision, Jeanette?" her stepmother prompted. "If you want to remain here, you'll first have to swear you'll turn a new leaf and pledge your loyalty to us," she declared triumphantly. Ariel snickered at her words.

Looking at the two of them, Jeanette straightened her back and vigorously responded with, "No, it's all right!"

The two women's eyes widened at this unexpected reply. "What...?"

Jeanette continued smiling brightly without batting an eye. "I'll leave this house, just as you suggested. I wish you both the best!" she exclaimed resolutely.

This is their reward for me, after all! She thought, beaming.

On one side stood the brightly smiling Jeanette, and on the other the openly flustered Leila and Ariel.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Leila demanded. "You're obviously not going to make it on your own!"

"Exactly!" Ariel joined in. "Have you finally lost your mind, Jeanette? Do you want to die on the streets?!"

The two women badgered Jeanettte, seeming a lot more anxious about her

decision than she did. *Hee hee... They really* are *worried for me!* Jeanette thought. *True, for an ordinary lady, this might be too much, but...* She fixed her gaze upon the other two.

Indeed, it would've been terrible if a girl like her, who'd grown up sheltered at home all her life, would be forced to leave. She might fall into poverty and live a miserable life, or else she might end up abducted and sold off to a brothel. Someone who was brought up as an aristocrat couldn't possibly endure the hardships of reality.

But there was something different about Jeanette.

In his lifetime, her father had been a successful merchant, and had bought peerage with his hard-earned wealth, making him a nouveau riche. Following this, he had ensured that Jeanette was educated not as a noble lady, but as an *upstart*.

While the other young ladies took their first dancing lessons, Jeanette received training on how to keep a ledger. While the ladies' love towards the noble sons flourished during evening parties, Jeanette joined the flourishing business negotiations with the tradesmen instead. While the ladies gazed longingly at the jewel-embroidered hair ornaments, Jeanette ascertained the worth of those jewels with a sparkle in her eyes.

That was all why Jeanette knew how to survive without relying on her family, and make a living by herself. Her father had raised her so that if anything were to happen, she'd be able to live as a single woman. He'd even made sure to give Jeanette practical experience, such as with serving customers in the store, and developing and selling goods.

Unfortunately for them, her stepmother and stepsister were not aware of any of that.

Though in fact, Jeanette's father had tried to raise Ariel in the same way, but she loathed the idea. She preferred dancing to accounting, she liked the handsome noble boys better than the old merchants, and she chose to gaze admiringly at the jewels rather than determine their worth. This was normal for girls her age, so the baron didn't try to push her. As a result, the things Jeanette studied daily were strange and incomprehensible to Ariel.

Having recalled all of this, Jeanette smiled cheerfully at the other two women. “Thank you for your concern, but I think I’ll be fine!” With that, she turned on her heel to walk away. She heard her stepmother calling out and asking her to stop, but Jeanette had already made up her mind and rushed recklessly forward.

I’ve always wanted to try making a living on my own! And to think I can even decide where to go next all by myself! I’m so pumped! Jeanette had a skip in her step as she walked down the hallway, and she was on the verge of humming a song as she went.

All right! Time to get everything ready!

On the days when her stepmother withheld food from her, Jeanette had secretly sneaked into the kitchens herself. Because she gave the servants money as thanks each time, her meals often ended up being even more extravagant than the ones the other two women dined upon.

On the days when they left her behind to attend social events, Jeanette disguised herself as a normal town girl and roamed the shop-lined streets. She’d infiltrate fashionable boutiques and the stores of her rivals, watching and learning from their techniques.

And whenever they forced her to do the housework, she asked the servants for advice and learned thorough methods of cleaning from them. Whenever Jeanette developed some new tool to help get the cleaning done more efficiently, they were highly grateful to her, and she even managed to sell the products for a great profit.

There were many other such instances, and each time Jeanette’s stepmother and stepsister imposed on her and made unreasonable demands of her, Jeanette uncovered a way to find new clients and connections. And she became so used to their insults and verbal abuse that the rumors spreading around in high society were little more than a gentle breeze to her.

Nothing except for having my things stolen has been a real nuisance, but... Maybe that was for the best, too! As she reflected upon everything, Jeanette entered her room.

A certain device was installed and hidden against one of the walls, and when

she input a certain sequence, a hidden shelf opened with a click. Inside were the truly important things she wouldn't want stolen from her—an assortment of gemstones, and one small key.

Her father hadn't wanted to make Jeanette work without pay, even if she was his daughter, so he always made sure to pay her properly. Thanks to that, Jeanette had a large sum of gold resting safely in the bank under her name. The key on the shelf was the very thing that would open the vault.

With a satisfied smile, Jeanette picked it up. *I'm so glad I've been hiding all of my money!* she thought as she pulled out a travel bag from underneath her bed and hurriedly began packing her belongings. *Where should I go first? I bet it's going to be so much fun to go inn-hopping!*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. The person who entered was Sara, whose tawny, braided hair swayed as she shot into the room. She was Jeanette's personal attendant—the two of them had grown up together like sisters.

Sara made no attempt to conceal her hatred of Leila and Ariel as she addressed Jeanette. "What kind of absurdities did they say *this* time, my lady? Are they asking for some rare fruit from the southern lands? Or maybe they'd like to obtain some rare, popular gemstones?" she inquired, thinking that the women had been making unreasonable demands of Jeanette again.

"No, I don't have to buy them anything this time. Actually, they told me I can leave this house!"

The moment Jeanette said as much, Sara's expression turned grim. "What? What's that supposed to mean?! Is that woman up to no good again?! I've been putting up with it until now, but I've had enough! I'm going to slap that bitch right this second!" Sara declared, rolling up her sleeves while exhaling heavily through her nose.

While her maid tried to storm off, Jeanette hurried to stop her. When it came to Jeanette, Sara had always been a little—no, *very* intense on certain matters, but physically assaulting the head of the household would be going a bit too far. "Hold on, Sara!" Jeanette appealed. "This is just my mother's expression of tough love towards me... In other words, it's a new way to reward me!"

“I *really* don’t think that’s true in the slightest,” responded Sara.

“I know it’s a little sad that I have to say goodbye to them, but they’re doing this to encourage me. I have to reciprocate their sentiments!”

Sara was about to protest this idiocy, but the moment she heard the words “say goodbye to them”, her eyes suddenly lit up. “Milady... So you’ve finally made the big decision!” she exclaimed, clasping both of Jeanette’s hands. “I’ve been waiting for this day for so long—the day you finally parted from them!”

“Really?! Sorry... I never realized!” Jeanette said.

Sara roared with laughter. “It’s all right! I mean, you always seemed fine with everything. Maybe you were even enjoying it this whole time?”

“Th-That’s a little far fetched... I just thought it’d make for a good learning experience.”

After all, her stepmother’s cynicism made for a great way to practice dealing with troublesome customers. And unlike with actual clients, even if Jeanette handled things somewhat poorly or made mistakes, the consequences would simply be the same kind of nasty remarks she’d grown used to hearing. For this reason, Leila was indeed the perfect sparring partner.

When Jeanette explained as much, Sara sighed. “I suppose your indomitable spirit is a strength of yours, my lady. But my one point of complaint lies in the fact that it’s *you* leaving the house. Rather, you should be the *head* of this household...”

“That’s not true, Sara,” Jeanette said with a shake of her head. “Even my father said that Ariel should inherit this house, remember?”

“I know, but...”

Indeed, Jeanette’s father had said that he wanted to pass his peerage onto Ariel, and allow Jeanette to succeed him as the president of the Roussel Corporation. That had been why Jeanette had dedicated herself to studying commerce every single day.

That said, Mother never mentioned anything about the company... Jeanette pondered. *Ah! Could this also be a part of my reward?!*

While Jeanette thought things over, Sara's expression soured. "Milord may have decided as much, but I truly *loathe* those two women! Pardon me for saying as much, but milord's poor discernment of women's characters was a fatal flaw of his."

Indeed, the marriage of Jeanette's biological parents was arranged between their families. In contrast, Leila had brought Jeanette's father home on a night when he'd been extremely drunk. Without knowing Leila's personality or anything about her at all, he'd been swindled into remarrying before he even realized it.

"Really?" Jeanette asked Sara. "Well, I think they're very kind for not trying to have me killed..."

"Isn't that way too risky? It'd cause a scandal if they tried going that far!"

Jeanette giggled at her maid's words. "But you know, Sara... The true owner of this house is still my father," she said, gently stroking a small painting. It was the portrait of her father in his younger days, her late mother, and Jeanette herself when she was still a baby. "Mother might have decided otherwise, but my father didn't die even when he'd been struck by lightning thrice. It's too soon to write him off like that."

Not to mention, only a week had passed since her father had gone missing. From what Jeanette had heard, while her father had been making a business trip to the neighboring nation of the Voltaire Empire, the road had been very slippery on account of heavy rain and his horse-drawn carriage had slipped off a cliff. However, though the wreck of the carriage had been discovered, there was no trace of her father anywhere.

"To be honest, I feel like I should go looking for him," Jeanette said. "But as a woman, I'd need a permit to travel abroad, and I'm not familiar with the lands anyway. So I think I should find someone trustworthy and ask *them* to find my father!" she decided, getting fired up at the idea.

Jeanette had heaps of things to get done. First things first, she'd get in touch with some of the businessmen she knew and see if any of them would be willing to hire a female helper not yet of age. Once she'd gotten a job to sustain herself, she'd then find someone who could locate her father.

And also... Jeanette thought, recalling one more very important thing she had to do. *I have to ask Lord Claus to break off our engagement!*

Count Claus Guivarch—Jeanette's fiancé of many years. At the thought of him, she squeezed her hands together tightly.

Their engagement happened when Jeanette was thirteen years old, and Claus seventeen. He was the heir of a venerable yet bankrupt family. His grandfather had borrowed large sums of money and fallen into colossal debt. During his time as count, Claus's father just about managed to eke out a living, but his budget had reached a limit one day.

Right when they were on the verge of being forced to sell their peerage and residence, Jeanette's father appeared gallantly on the horizon.

Father not only wanted to buy a peerage, but to let me get engaged with Lord Claus. After helping House Guivarch repay their debts, the family began financially assisting the Roussels in turn...

And in the end, Jeanette's fiancé Claus became so popular that the entirety of high society knew of his name. His silver hair shone with a nigh divine luster, and his violet eyes were clearer than gemstones. He looked like a beautiful archangel straight out of a painting. On top of all of that, he was so kind that he'd earned the reputation of being a saint. The first time he paid their family a visit, Jeanette herself was surprised that such a pretty man even existed.

But there was one person who was more infatuated with Claus than Jeanette—Ariel.

It seemed Jeanette's stepsister had fallen for Claus at first sight. She made a great fuss to Jeanette's father about wanting to be engaged to Claus, but stopped upon realizing it wouldn't happen.

Instead, Ariel started relentlessly hounding Jeanette and spying on her while spreading baseless rumors about her to destroy her reputation little by little. And since there were many young noble ladies who were jealous of Jeanette, they happily swallowed those rumors.

That's why I'm pretty happy to be able to break away from the world of high society... Jeanette thought as she put her clothes away into her bag.

She'd never been able to have a proper conversation with the noble girls anyway, and Claus had told her she could do anything she wanted since their engagement. Plus, many tasteless remarks were surely reaching him because of her. Some of the noble girls would say that Claus had sold himself off, and Jeanette had even overheard the following conversation taking place in public:

"Do you think Lord Claus would marry anyone as long as they pay up?"

"I mean, think about it. He's even engaged to some nouveau riche! That speaks for itself."

"If he needs money that *badly, maybe I should have a word with him? I'm happy to splurge in exchange for spending a night with him."*

Each time Jeanette heard slander against Claus, she felt herself getting angry. It didn't bother her in the slightest when others spoke ill of her, but she couldn't allow such a wonderful, benevolent, perfect man as Claus to be disparaged in that way.

Yet whenever she tried to raise complaints against the gossiping girls, they'd just snicker and laugh at her. They seemed convinced that they could get away with treating someone they viewed as lesser than them however they pleased. That in itself was another reason Jeanette could never grow to like high society.

I bet if he wasn't engaged to me, Lord Claus wouldn't have to put up with such terrible rumors! That had been a concern of hers for years. If only he could've gotten engaged with some other young lady of a better family standing, then no matter what the people would've thought, surely they wouldn't voice their opinions so openly.

But I might finally be able to put an end to it at last! Jeanette clasped her travel bag shut with a snap, and then raised her head. *Thanks to my father, House Guivarch was able to recover. I do feel bad, since Father wanted me and Lord Claus engaged, but if I want to free Lord Claus, then now's my chance!* she decided, tightening her fist. *I've got to find a way to make me into the bad guy and have him break our engagement off!*

If they simply called off the engagement now, it might make things harmonious between herself and her stepfamily, but the naysayers might start saying that Claus tried to use the Roussel family just to get their money. To

avoid that, Jeanette had to find a way to make it clear that she'd be the one at fault for the cancellation of their engagement.

Her reputation had already hit rock bottom, so she had nothing to lose.

Having pondered upon all of that, Jeanette suddenly remembered something. "Wait, has Lord Claus come back from his study abroad yet...?"

At present, Claus was studying abroad in the eastern kingdom of Yafruska with the backing of his father. That had been the reason why Jeanette and Claus hadn't married yet.

If he's back, I should've received a letter from him by now...

While Jeanette was busy thinking, Sara smiled at the sound of Claus's name and approached her. "Are you thinking of going to Lord Claus's place? A splendid idea, milady! You two can get married and we can all live in their mansion!"

"No, Sara," Jeanette quickly refuted her maid. "I'm thinking about having him break off our engagement."

"What? Are you crazy?!" Sara exclaimed, her eyes growing wide. "You may be my lady, but I'm going to do everything in my power to stop you!"

Jeanette was bewildered by this. "Huh? Why?"

"I should be asking *you* that! Why would you want to let go of such a wonderful man?!" huffed Sara.

Jeanette gently pushed the maid away and responded with a troubled look on her face. "I mean, no matter how you look at it, it'd be better for him to *not* be engaged to me. I fully agree with you that he's a wonderful man, but it's mostly my fault that he's being disparaged."

Sara stared at Jeanette in disbelief. "Milady... Could it be that you haven't noticed?"

"Hmm? Noticed what?"

But instead of answering the question, a sullen look crossed Sara's face. "I... I see. In that case, you should meet with Lord Claus as soon as possible."

“Yes! I’ll go right awa—Er, I *would* go right away, but I should probably find an inn to stay at first.”

“Very well,” said Sara. “Then I will get ready as well, so please wait a moment!”

This time, it was Jeanette’s turn to look surprised. “Sara... Does that mean you want to come with me?”

“Of course!” Sara exclaimed. “My place is at your side!”

“Sara... I may have some savings for now, but I can’t guarantee how things will look in the future. It might get rocky, so I think it’d be safer for you to remain here...”

“My lady.” Sarah interrupted Jeanette and smiled at her. “Have you forgotten already? The reason I came to this house was because *you* found me.”

“Well... That’s true, but...”

In fact, Sara was a girl Jeanette’s family adopted from the orphanage when Jeanette was eight years old.

“Everyone always bullied me at the orphanage, and foisted all the work onto me,” Sara continued. “But it was you who called out to me and asked me to go with you, milady.”

“Yes. Of course I remember.”

Sara was two years older than Jeanette. Back when she was ten years old, she was so weak-willed that it was almost unimaginable when compared to her present self. The adults at the orphanage forced her to do all kinds of chores because she was dextrous and good with her hands.

One day, the orphanage held a bazaar selling handmade crocheting, which Jeanette had attended. The adults claimed everyone had chimed in to make the items, but in reality, Sara had made every single item all by herself. Yet only Jeanette had been able to see through the lie and realized the truth.

Jeanette smiled fondly at the nostalgic memory. “Yes, I remember it well. There was a lovely variety of things on sale during the bazaar, but I was able to determine they’d all been made by the same person based on the stitching style

and color arrangements. And judging by the sheer amount of items, I was certain the kids would have calluses on their fingers from all the knitting. But nobody else had them except for you."

When Jeanette had said as much to the director of the orphanage, they simply scoffed and laughed at her. But when she proclaimed she wanted her family to adopt Sara, the director immediately began panicking. Jeanette's father silenced their protests in the end, but Jeanette still remembered their crestfallen expression.

Sara's face broke into a smile at Jeanette's recollections. "The moment you held out your hand to me back then, my life gained meaning. So wherever you go, milady, I shall follow you to the ends of the earth! If you try to leave me behind, I'll definitely chase you down and find you!" The maid started rolling up her sleeves while huffing and puffing, and Jeanette let out a laugh.

Grateful for Sara's kindness, she gently held the other girl's hand. "All right then," she conceded. "If you're *that* determined, then let's go together. And, to be honest... I *did* feel a little disheartened at the idea of going off all by myself. So, I'm really happy that you want to accompany me!"

"My lady..." Sara's eyes had grown damp, and she quickly wiped her tears before they streamed down her cheeks. "If you've made your decision, then I shall go and make preparations as well!"

In mere minutes, thanks to her efficiency, Sara returned to Jeanette's side with her own bag of belongings. Then, the two of them sneaked towards the back gate of the house, with the staff helping them to stay concealed so that Leila and Ariel would be none the wiser.

For a moment, Jeanette lingered outside, looking up at the mansion. "My precious family home... Goodbye for now," she said calmly, and then turned her back on it.

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"*What* did you say...? What do you mean, Jeanette is *gone*?"

Claus had just made his way to House Roussel's reception room, when Leila had informed him Jeanette wasn't there. Her words caused his eyebrows to

twitch in concern. Both mother and daughter looked surprised to see Claus's expression, since they'd only ever seen him smile in the past, and he'd never raised his voice before.

"I came back from my studies abroad right away when they informed me about Sir Roussel's disappearance, but for Jeanette to disappear too..." Claus murmured, pressing a hand to his forehead.

Leila and Ariel quickly tried to reassure him. "Th-There's no need to be so concerned, Lord Claus. That girl herself said that she wanted to leave, I assure you. Right, Ariel?"

"That's right, Lord Claus. Besides, even though Jeanette is a noble lady, she'd always try to get herself involved in business and go around doing the sort of thing gentlemen should do. I'm sure she'll find some impudent way to live, so there's no need for you to worry."

Something flashed in Claus's eyes at their words. Though he was usually known to be so gentle and amicable that others called him a "saint", that was merely a front. In reality, in his heart of hearts, he'd always harbored much harsher thoughts than anyone had ever realized. *Jeanette's father has just gone missing, and now she's suddenly decided to leave her house of her own volition? Even if that* was *true, I have no doubt that these two women are behind it somehow.*

However, that was just Claus's conjecture, and he had no way to prove it. He suppressed the urge to snap at them and said, "So where did Jeanette go?"

"My, I haven't got a clue," Leila responded. "Perhaps she went off to a distant relative or some such thing?"

"Right, since she has no friends," Ariel added, and the two women snickered.

Claus had to do everything in his power to stop himself from raising his voice. *I want to curse these harpies at full throttle, but...as unlikely as it is, if Jeanette's life is in their hands, that could be a fatal move on my part right now.*



Claus leveled his breathing to avoid showing his anger, then silently got to his

feet. The two women didn't seem to pick up on his true feelings in the slightest, and hurried to call after him.

"Ah! Please wait, Lord Claus!" Ariel exclaimed, her cheeks flushed red. "Since Jeanette has left this house, we've been thinking of canceling your engagement to her!" she went on, taking advantage of the opportunity. "A-And you could be engaged to me instea—!"

"Excuse me. I'm in a hurry," Claus interrupted ruthlessly.

"What?!"

"Lord Claus?!"

The two women made a racket, but Claus didn't even glance over his shoulder at them as he briskly stepped outside. Usually, he'd never act in such a rude manner, but today was different. His heart was so crushed by worry over Jeanette that it felt like it'd burst at any second.

He swiftly boarded his horse-drawn carriage, then tightened his hands into fists. *Please, Jeanette... Be safe...*

After all, Baroness Jeanette Roussel was Claus's beloved angel—and that was putting it lightly.

Her red hair reminded him of the setting sun, and her gray pupils were flecked with a green he could only describe as mystical. Those large, round eyes of hers always sparkled brightly, and her lovely features made her resemble a fairy.

Claus remembered the first time they met, during a tea party that Jeanette's father had invited him to. *When I first saw how strong her makeup was, I thought she was an odd girl, but there's a lot more to her than that. No other woman is as clever, skilled, or beautiful as her...!*

Even though Jeanette was still thirteen when they first met, her makeup was so strong it was downright clownish. Dark eyeshadow surrounded her eyes, her cheeks were bedaubed with blush, and her lips were an unnatural shade of bright red.

Claus had been shocked to see her excessively gaudy appearance, but he

knew his marriage would decide the fate of the comital family of House Guivarch, so he kept his mouth shut. Surely it'd be fine if he just acted like a gentleman towards her, same as he did with the other ladies.

Yet one day, surrounded by other noble sons and daughters during a tea party, he would come to change his mind...

"Hey, Claus! I heard you sold yourself off to those Roussel upstarts?" exclaimed one of the boys with a smirk, not even bothering to hide his contempt.

Claus's tranquil smile didn't falter as he looked over. *Ah, just as I thought I finally managed to shake off the girls,* these *guys show up?*

Standing before him was a group of noble sons who he'd attended boarding school with. They couldn't compare to Claus in anything—not in grades, reputation among teachers, nor popularity with the ladies. Unable to stomach it, they jumped at every little opportunity to try and make jabs at him.

"So they bought that pretty face of yours, huh? Good for you!"

"Wait, could it be? Maybe Baron Roussel is just using your engagement to his daughter as a front, while *he's* the one being affectionate with you..." All the boys burst into roaring laughter following this crude remark.

"Baron Roussel is an upstanding man, so don't slander him," Claus told them, glancing at them coolly.

If they have enough free time to be concerned about me, they might as well use it to do something good for their families instead.

It was true that Claus had gotten engaged for the sake of House Guivarch, making it look like he sold himself off. But that only happened because Baron Roussel had acknowledged the extent of Claus's abilities and looks, and Claus himself took pride in the fact that he'd been able to save his family.

We've been in such dire straits that I had to sell off my keepsakes for scraps just to survive. But these guys have no idea what that's like... They don't realize how lucky they are.

The sorrow of seeing his mother's piano, which she loved to play every day,

carried off somewhere by a bunch of strangers. The heartache in having each of the servants leave one by one when the family couldn't afford to pay their wages anymore. The dread of the knowledge that they might be forced out of the house they'd lived in for generations.

Recalling all these instances, Claus calmly gazed at the other boys. *Regardless, I'm in no mood to tell them about my hardships, or try to make them understand.* After all, trying to argue with these people would be a useless effort in the first place.

Claus had been ready to give a perfunctory response and let things slide...but right then, a loud rustle resounded from nearby. In the next second, a young girl popped out from a hedge, leaves sticking to her hair left and right.

"Please don't say mean things about Lord Claus!!!" she yelled, shaking her bright red hair around. She was, indeed, Jeanette—Claus's fiancée.

Jeanette?! Claus exclaimed inwardly as he and the rest of the boys sprung to their feet from surprise.

"Who the heck is that?!"

"Wait, isn't she Claus's fiancée?"

"So *this* is Jeanette Roussel?"

The boys were all seventeen years old, with heights and physiques to match their age. In contrast, Jeanette was still a girl of thirteen, her stature much smaller than theirs. It must've been quite the intimidating sight for her to see all these large men staring down at her.

Yet the undaunted Jeanette glared at them all fiercely. Perhaps thanks to her intense makeup, her countenance was mystifyingly powerful.

"Lord Claus is a great man! He's diligent, hard-working, and always treats me kindly! Do any of you even realize what he's been through for the sake of his family ever since he was a child?! And yet you all gang up on him... How cowardly!" Jeanette shrieked, becoming more worked up with every word. Tears started to drip down from her large eyes, startling the boys.

"Hey, she's crying..."

“If someone sees this, it’s gonna cause a mess.”

“Tch... Fine, let’s get out of here!”

Indeed, their reputation would’ve taken quite a hit if a group of older boys were seen ganging up against a young girl and making her cry.

Watching them all rush away, Claus took out a handkerchief and pressed it to Jeanette’s cheek. “You stood up for me... Thank you.”

“I-It’s nothing...! This is the least I could do as your fiancée... And I’m really sorry! I wanted to be more firm, but when I started thinking about what it’s like for you, I just got so frustrated...!” Jeanette explained, heaving with sobs as tears continued pouring out of her eyes.

Though she looked childish, there was also something noble about her, and Claus’s eyes widened with surprise. *I think this is the first time in my life anyone’s ever tried defending me*, he thought. Whenever people picked quarrels with him, everyone else just turned a blind eye. Even Claus himself didn’t usually care much since he didn’t want to stir the pot, but...

“Please don’t say mean things about Lord Claus!!!”

Remembering the way Jeanette earnestly jumped to his defense, Claus couldn’t hold back a smile. *You’re the only one who tried to protect me.*

Rather than saying as much, Claus quietly wiped away Jeanette’s tears. But the girl gasped, looking a little panicked.

“L-Lord Claus! My makeup’s going to get all over your handkerchief! It’ll be ruined!”

“I don’t mind. Wiping away your tears is a privilege,” he told her with a warm smile.

Jeanette flushed at his words. “H-How kind of you... In that case, next time we meet, I’ll give you a top quality handkerchief in return!”

“*You’re* the kind one, Jeanette,” Claus said, and then his eyes widened as they looked down on her face. “Oh?” he murmured, surprised.

Her makeup had smudged, but as he gently and meticulously wiped it off, Jeanette’s true face came into view. It was so small that it could easily fit in the

palm of his hand. Her gray pupils were flecked with green, and her red hair shone as if it had soaked up all of the sunlight. Her face was cherubic, and yet she also reminded him of a fairy, magical yet adorable.

Jeanette was a beauty, to say the least.

“You’re so lovely, Jeanette. Why do you always wear that makeup?” Claus inquired curiously.

The flustered Jeanette quickly waved her hands dismissively. “I-I’m not...! My face is really plain and unappealing, so Mother always picks this makeup for me!”

“You mean your stepmother...?” Claus murmured. *Is that woman being cruel to Jeanette on purpose?*

But just as Claus was about to ask Jeanette about it, a sweet, radiant smile graced her face. “She likes this makeup on me, so wearing it makes me happy too! And I feel like it makes me look tougher, so I like it!” she said, and the way her eyes sparkled with sincerity suggested she was being truthful.

If she likes it, then I shouldn’t meddle. Plus... Claus thought as he stared fixedly at Jeanette, *I’m the only one who gets to see her true face, and that’s enough.*

Indeed, it was when Claus was seventeen years old that, for the first time in his life, a possessive urge stirred within his heart.

Chapter 2: Jeanette's Fiancé

"All right! We'll be staying here for a while!" Jeanette said, nodding in satisfaction as she and Sara surveyed their room at the inn.

It had been a week since they'd left House Roussel. For the past few days, they'd been staying in different inns, and had finally arrived at this one. It was close to the royal capital's busiest district, and the interior of the room itself looked classy. Most critically of all, it was reputable for having good security, and it made the perfect base.

Jeanette had already taken all the money she would need out from the bank, and she'd completed the preparations for starting the search for her father.

"Milady, please let me know your plan from here on out. How can I assist you?" Sara prompted, looking at Jeanette expectantly.

Jeanette sorted through her thoughts, then answered. "Of course, the first order of business is to break off my engagement with Lord Claus! I must set him free. Afterwards, I'll have to find an employer. I just hope we can find someone willing to hire me..."

Sara's brows creased. "I doubt things will turn out that way..."

"Right. The merchants and I might get along, but that doesn't mean they'll want me to work for them," Jeanette conceded. "Since I'm a woman, they can't treat me the same way as they do the men... It might be really tough in the beginning."

"No, that's not what I meant," said Sara. "I was talking about Lord Claus."

"What?" Jeanette replied.

"What?" Sara said.

Jeanette's eyes widened as she stared at her maid. They had been talking about two different things, it seemed. "What do you mean...?"

Before Jeanette could ask for more details, Sara pushed her towards the door. "No, nothing! You should make haste and meet up with Lord Claus already.

Come now! It'll grow dark outside before we know it if we don't hurry, so let's leave right away!" She continued pushing even after they left the inn.

The disoriented Jeanette found herself flung into a fiacre by a fervent Sara. The carriage rocked into movement, and some time later the two girls alighted in front of the beautiful, unobtrusive gate of House Guivarch's mansion.

Jeanette furrowed her brow in concern. "I don't know about just gatecrashing like this without any notice... Now that I think about it, we don't even know if Lord Claus is home right now."

In contrast to the anxious Jeanette, Sara was brimming with confidence. "It's all right, milady. On the off chance that he's not, we can just come back on another day." The maid then walked over to the gatekeeper and whispered something to him.

The man looked startled for a moment, before loudly shouting out, "Lady Jeanette has arrived!!!"

In an instant, a number of servants who'd been in the estate grounds or the gardens came rushing forth. "Did you just say Lady Jeanette?!"

"Oh my goodness! We must inform the young master right away!"

"Quick! Secure her!"

Before Jeanette even knew what was happening, everyone swarmed around her as if they were trying to capture some rare creature. "Um, excuse me?!" she squeaked, turning to look to Sara for help. But for some reason, the maid was simply grinning at her.

Not long after, someone raced out of the mansion in a fluster. He had a slender figure, and even from afar his silver hair glistened dazzlingly. His expression was twisted with desperation, as if he wasn't even paying any attention to his expression right now.

"Jeanette!" he called out as he rushed over to her, and indeed, it was none other than her fiancé, Claus.

"Lord Claus!" Jeanette greeted him. "I'm glad to see you're back from abroad. I actually have something I'd like to discuss with—" But she didn't get to finish

her sentence, for in the next instant, she found herself pressed into Claus's chest as he held her tightly in his arms. "L-Lord Claus?!" she exclaimed in bewilderment.

"I'm so glad you're okay! My heart almost stopped when I heard you left your house! Ah... Pardon me." Noticing how stiff Jeanette was in his arms, Claus hurriedly released her. "Sorry, that wasn't very gentlemanly of me. But there's no need for us to stand around here and talk—how about you come inside?"

"R-Right!" Jeanette agreed. Claus's beautiful smile made her breath hitch as always, and he had such an air of refinement around him that she wouldn't have been surprised to see a bunch of roses and lilies floating behind him in the background.

Ahh, the way he hugged me just now startled me so much! Still, to think he was that *worried about me... Lord Claus is truly so very kind!*

Indeed, Claus had always been kind to her. Though people spoke ill of him because of Jeanette, he never blamed her for it. In fact, if he ever heard any slander about *her*, he'd calmly but firmly object to it.



Whenever seasonal events occurred, Claus never forgot to give Jeanette a

tasteful gift for the occasion, and he'd escorted her perfectly during evening parties. Better yet, when Jeanette started talking about commerce, Claus didn't look displeased or put off by it—instead, he gave her advice about it.

All the noble ladies just laughed at me if I tried talking about business with them, and the noblemen brushed me off, saying women shouldn't learn about such matters. Only Lord Claus ever took me seriously, and sincerely listened to me...

No matter the time or place, Claus was always a calm and kind gentleman. He was the ideal man to have as a fiancé.

That's exactly why I don't want to keep standing in his way to success! I have to get him to break our engagement as soon as possible...! With renewed determination, Jeanette walked down House Guivarch's hallway together with Sara.

The furnishings inside the mansion were all sophisticated without being overly flashy. Every important point in the estate was decorated according to the leading edges of current trends, displaying the owner's fashionable taste. This was true for the reception room they soon arrived in too, and Jeanette admired the beautiful white candelabra atop the table as she took a seat upon the sofa.

Claus sat down facing her, and then breathed a sigh of relief. "I was truly shocked when I found out that your father—that is, Sir Roussel, had gone missing. I came back to the country as soon as I heard of it, only to find out that you were gone as well."

As it turned out, Claus had come back from his studies abroad right after Jeanette left her family home.

"Yes, I've decided to part from my stepfamily and live by myself from now on," she told him.

For some reason, he frowned at her words. "What do you mean, Jeanette...? Is this what you came here to discuss?" he prompted, and his violet pupils emitted a warlike glint. "Will you tell me the *full* story, without hiding anything?" he added, speaking slowly as he punctuated each word for emphasis. Despite the fact he was smiling, it didn't seem to reach his eyes.

Lord Claus...? Jeanette whispered inwardly, curious at seeing such an expression upon his face for the first time. She went on to explain to him the sequence of events, starting with the morning she left.

Claus responded in a subdued tone of voice.“I see... So that’s what happened.” His voice was so low that Jeanette’s eyebrows furrowed.

Could it be that he’s angry? Even though he’s such a composed man who never stops smiling? I wonder why...?

Before she could ask as much, Claus changed the topic. “More importantly, where are you staying right now?”

“Oh, in an inn by the main street!”

“An *inn*?!”

Jeanette had thought her words would reassure him, but instead they had the opposite effect.

Claus’s countenance clouded over. “I know you’re familiar with the town, but what if some scoundrels get their eyes on you...?! You’re my fiancée, Jeanette, so you should stay right here with me,” he asserted, then smiled gently as if to say, *“That should’ve been obvious, no?”*

Jeanette felt herself growing disordered at his words. *Ahh, he really is so kind! But at this rate, it’ll be so awkward to tell him I plan to use that inn as a base for now... Plus...*

“Um... About that, Lord Claus...” she started timidly.

Claus’s eyes filled with even more fondness at this. It was an expression that suggested he couldn’t have possibly imagined what Jeanette was about to say. “Of course, you don’t need to worry about money,” he told her. “I know we had to delay our marriage because of my studies abroad, but we can proceed with that right away. I’m sure your father will understand.”

It seemed that Claus was convinced Jeanette was concerned about her finances. However, that was not correct—in fact, it was *far* from the actual topic on her mind.

“Th-That’s not it, Lord Claus!” Jeanette said, breaking out in cold sweat. “I... I

came over because I have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor...? What is it? Go on,” he urged, smiling warmly.

Though her heart was pounding, Jeanette opened her mouth and spilled her thoughts. “I don’t want to get married. Rather, I... Um... Lord Claus! Please break off our engagement!!!”

I did it! I finally said it! Jeanette released a relieved breath, feeling a sense of accomplishment. But then she looked up and realized...

“What...?”

...that Claus looked like something had died inside of him.

He paused before speaking again. “Perhaps I misheard you... I seem to have heard you say you want me to break our engagement...” he said, still looking vacant.

“No, you heard me correctly!” Jeanette responded, nodding vigorously.

Claus’s shapely lips twitched and then pursed. “There’s a lot I’d like to ask you, but... Why so suddenly? I thought we got along well...”

“Of course, you’re a brilliant fiancé, Lord Claus. *I’m* the problem,” she explained. “I’m not worthy of you—in fact, I’m only holding you back! So I thought it’d be best for you to cancel your engagement to me,” she argued with conviction. “I mean, you’ve always faced a world of troubles because of me, right? But now, you can make any kind of excuse that suits you, like how I disgraced myself by leaving House Roussel, or maybe something about how I eloped with another man, or—”

“You’re in love with another man?!” Claus interjected, springing to his feet with a clamor. He’d grown completely pale, and it was the first time Jeanette had seen the usually graceful man pull such a face.

“Ah, no!” Jeanette denied in a fluster. “I was speaking purely hypothetically!”

“Oh, thank goodness...” he murmured, sighing with relief as he sat back down. Jeanette hadn’t ever seen him like this, either.

Lord Claus is acting differently from his usual self today... Maybe he’s just really shaken because of my father’s disappearance? Jeanette wondered,

casting a glance at Sara, who was standing by her side. For some reason, the maid was staring at Jeanette with a disgruntled expression.

“In any case,” Jeanette went on. “I thought that if you make me into a bad guy, you could unashamedly break our—”

“Hold on,” Claus interrupted again. “I’ve never thought of my engagement to you as something troublesome.”

“Huh?” This time, it was Jeanette’s turn to look surprised.

“And obviously, I’ve never thought of breaking up with you, either. Making you into a bad guy...? That’s out of the question.”

“R-Really?”

But in that instant, Jeanette remembered something—Claus was a man of tremendous character. *Ah, I know! I almost forgot about how kind of a person he is. He’s probably worried about hurting my feelings!*

“No, it’s okay! I’m fine with being the bad guy!” she insisted. “I’d be happy to resolve things that way.”

“You... Are you saying canceling our engagement would make you happy?” Claus asked, once more looking pallid.

Huh...? Did I choose my words poorly again?! Jeanette panicked, seeing the way he’d grown dispirited right before her eyes. But then she felt something repeatedly strike her back. She looked over her shoulder and spotted Sara, who quickly took the opportunity to whisper something to Jeanette.

“Milady, may I say something to Lord Claus?”

“Huh...?” Jeanette found this odd, but nevertheless nodded and turned to look at the man. “Um, Lord Claus. My maid would like to say a word to you.”

“Hmm...? Very well, I don’t mind,” he replied.

“Well then, excuse me,” Sara said, taking a step forward. She released a long breath, then fixed her eyes on him, and declared: “Lord Claus! My lady hasn’t noticed at all. Not at *all*! She’s not aware of your feelings!”

Feelings? Jeanette wondered, inclining her head to the side.

Meanwhile, Claus's eyes widened. "I had a hunch about that, but... Really? I was sure I was making it obvious, but you're telling me she *hasn't noticed at all*?" he asked Sara, not paying the surprised Jeanette any mind for now.

The maid nodded fiercely. "That's right! Not in the *slightest*!"

"I see... It's no wonder, then. That would explain a lot from before too, actually."

What does he mean by that? Did I do something wrong? Jeanette continued to wonder. Her head was filled with question marks, and she couldn't imagine what they were talking about. But Claus and Sara both nodded at each other in understanding.

"Jeanette," Claus called to her.

"Y-Yes?!" she exclaimed, reflexively straightening up in her seat.

For some reason, Claus was smiling at her. His smile was strangely beautiful, and full of such masculine allure that Jeanette couldn't stop herself from gasping and covering her mouth with her hand.

When Claus spoke next, he did so slowly, as if he were gently admonishing her. "I have zero intentions of breaking our engagement."

"Right... Wait, what? You don't?"

"And..." Claus paused for a moment. "I thought I was being quite straightforward, but I see now that it wasn't enough. So from now on, I'll make every effort to show you my love for you."

"Wh-What?!" Jeanette exclaimed.

"Love"?! That is not *a word I expected to hear today!* After all, Jeanette had visited Claus in order to cancel their engagement, yet for some reason he'd done the unthinkable and uttered a preposterous word.

While Jeanette was desperately racking her brain, Claus suddenly got to his feet and walked over to her before getting down on one knee. His angular, masculine, and long fingers softly grasped her hand.

"Baroness Jeanette Roussel," he began. "I know we're already betrothed, but please allow me to say this to you one more time: I have loved you for a very

long time. Will you marry me?”

Jeanette’s eyes grew wide at this completely unexpected appeal.

“Of course, I’m not proposing this marriage for the sake of my house,” Claus continued. “I would happily throw away my rank if it meant I could marry you. I wish for us to be wed for no other reason than because I love you.”

“I... *Whaaat*?!” Jeanette shrieked, good manners all but forgotten. This was simply such a shock to her that she couldn’t stop herself from screaming. For some reason, Sara was cheerfully grinning as she observed all this and clapped her hands.

“D-Did you just say ‘love’?! And you said it twice, didn’t you?!” Jeanette said in a strained voice, her eyes darting about in a fluster.

Claus smiled at her. “I’ll say it however many times you wish.”

“N-No, it’s fine!” she said quickly, and he chuckled. Jeanette watched him in utter disbelief. “Could it be that you’re playing a prank on me...?” she ventured.

“Of course not. I’m completely serious. In fact, I’m shocked that you haven’t noticed how I feel about you this entire time.”

“So *that’s* what you two were talking about...?!” Jeanette glanced at Sara in a panic. The maid puffed up her nostrils and offered Jeanette a thumbs up with a satisfied smile. Apparently, she’d known more than Jeanette had expected.

Jeanette was absolutely baffled.

“You’re such a kind person, Lord Claus, that I just assumed you were being nice to me out of a sense of obligation...” she explained, and Claus laughed upon hearing her interpretation.

“I do think being nice and polite to an engagement partner is the least one could do, regardless of who they might be,” he responded. “But I’d never pay a visit to my fiancée every other day if I didn’t like her. Actually, even then I was holding back—I wanted to see you every single day.”

“I *did* think you visited quite a lot, but I was convinced you were simply *that* diligent...”

“And I know I didn’t confess to you directly, but I *did* compliment your

appearance all the time, and told you how I was sure we'd build a happy family together. I believed I was conveying my feelings to you whenever I saw you, but I suppose that wasn't the case..."

"Since you're such a kind man, I thought you were just giving me lip service..." Jeanette muttered as if in a daze.

"Oh, and I always ensured our outfits would be matching from head to toe, and the reason I wanted you to wear dresses in the colors of my hair and eyes was because I wanted to send a message to other men—that you are *my* fiancée, that is."

"I... I just assumed we were supposed to match our appearances like that..."

As they talked, Claus was still smiling at her. But it wasn't his usual kindly, serene smile, and if Jeanette looked closely, she could see that it wasn't reaching his eyes.

"So... I really did fail to convey my feelings to you, didn't I?" he concluded.

"S-Sorry..." Jeanette uttered, her shoulders drooping dejectedly as if she were a little child.

Claus tilted his head. "No, don't be. It's my fault for never saying it outright. I was trying to be gentlemanly towards you so as not to frighten you, but that might've been a mistake. Though like I said before, from now on I will put in all of my energy into showing you exactly how I feel," he declared, and this time his smile was radiant as he looked at her.

His expression was so dazzling that Jeanette had to once again cover her face with her hands. *"All of his energy"? I think he's been more than kind enough to me, but he's saying he's got even more up his sleeve?!* She shuddered fearfully.

Sara, who was still standing behind Jeanette, thrust both her fists into the air to celebrate joyfully.

"Um, please be gentle with me, okay?!" Jeanette appealed to Claus. "But wait, what's supposed to happen now then...?" she wondered.

After all, she'd come here expecting for their betrothal to be canceled. She'd intended to set Claus free, build a foundation for her new life, and then search

for her father. However, all of her plans had gone out of the window, since the man she was supposed to break up with was saying he *wanted* to marry her.

Once again, Claus just smiled at her. “First of all, both of you should live here from now on. I won’t hear any objections on the matter,” he proclaimed. “We’ll need to get your things from the inn you’ve been staying at. Sara, do you mind letting me know where it is?”

“Of course! I can guide you there whenever you wish!” the maid replied gleefully. It was almost as if she’d been anticipating this development from the very beginning.

“I’d love to arrange the wedding ceremony after that, but... We must find your father first, Jeanette,” Claus went on. “If he’s in the Voltaire Empire, then my contact should be able to find a professional to track him down.”

Jeanette’s face instantly brightened at those words. She wanted to start the search for her father as soon as possible, and it seemed like Claus already had a reliable contact.

“You’ll help me find my father?” she exclaimed.

“Of course. Sir Roussel is your father, yes, but he’s also a mentor to whom I owe a lot. I want to find him as quickly as possible, especially since I still haven’t been able to repay him for everything he’s done for me,” Claus explained, his brows furrowing in deep concern.

Just by seeing his expression, Jeanette could tell he was genuinely worried about her father’s disappearance from the depths of his heart. Seeing Claus like this made her fraught with emotion. “So you really do care about him...” she said. *Mother and Ariel didn’t seem to care at all when my father went missing...* she recalled.

When Jeanette had first found out about her father’s disappearance, she’d burst into tears. The servants of the house had all seemed upset over the news as well—only Leila and Ariel hadn’t shown a shred of sorrow.

Yet Jeanette’s fiancé was sincerely saddened about the matter, believed that her father was still alive, and even wanted to help her find him.

She couldn’t tell if it was her eyes or her chest that were stinging with

emotion. But in either case, for the first time since her father had gone missing, she felt something warm stir in her heart.

Claus was looking at her fixedly. “You don’t mind staying engaged to me, do you?”

“Of course not!” she answered. “I mean, there’s no better man out there than you!”

He paused for a second. “Well... That’s not *exactly* the reply I was after, but fair enough. From here on out, I will make you truly fall in love with me.”

“Hmm...? But I already do love you, Lord Claus,” Jeanette said in confusion.

Claus laughed. “In the future, you’ll understand the meaning of those words. No, I’ll *make* you understand. And until then, I’ve no intention of letting you get away, so prepare yourself.”

“Wh-What...?!”

He was smiling, but the look in his eyes was deadly serious. Though he was usually a gentleman, Jeanette was aware that once he set his sights on a goal, he would pursue it relentlessly.

She glanced over her shoulder at the overjoyed Sara, tilted her head, and wondered out loud: “Honestly, why did things turn out like this...?”

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Around the same time in House Roussel, Ariel was pestering Leila during dinnertime. “Mother, when will you get me engaged to Lord Claus?”

Hearing her daughter’s sweet voice, the wife of the house—no, the *head* of the house, Leila Roussel, responded. “Soon, of course,” she said, her bright red lips stretched into a smile. “I already sent the letter explaining we wish to cancel his engagement to Jeanette and make you his new fiancée. I’m sure it will happen soon... He’ll *beg* for your love.”

Ariel let out a passionate sigh at those words.

Her mother chuckled to herself as she brought the wine glass closer to her mouth. *Hee hee... My husband truly did die with the perfect timing!*

Leila had been born into a comital family and raised as a countess. She'd once married a count of equal status and had a single daughter—Ariel.

However, Leila was an extravagant spender, which caused numerous issues between her husband and her in-laws. When her husband passed away from an illness, his family seized the opportunity to cast Leila out.

Unable to return home, Leila wandered the streets poor and penniless, until one day she ran into the good-natured and very drunk Baron Roussel by complete accident. She nursed him back to health, and managed to get into his family by becoming his second wife. Then, she ostensibly played the part of the perfect wife for him, while secretly entertaining herself by finding small ways to torment the daughter of his previous wife, Jeanette.

I thought I'd be able to tease her to my heart's content now that I don't have to worry about my husband seeing it, but... I suppose it's no surprise she decided to leave. And more importantly, there's the matter of assets.

Leila's eyes glinted with malice.

Humph! I have no intention of handing over the company that girl was supposed to inherit. Rather, I *must make good use of it from now on.*

The thought of House Roussel's superfluous wealth made Leila's lips curl up reflexively. Feeling in a good mood, she took a bite of the sautéd beef, then paused. "Hmm? The beef seems tougher than usual... What's going on? Summon the chef right away! I must give him a scolding for this!" Leila ordered, striking the table with her hand.

The steward of the house, a mature man named Gilbert, stepped forward. "If I may have a word, Madam?" he asked in a dispassionate manner, his expression stony. "As I already informed you a few days ago, the chef quit after explaining he had no interest in working for this house with milord and Lady Jeanette gone. As such, an apprentice cook is in charge of preparing the meals."

"Wh-What...?!" Leila spluttered, her face flushing in anger as bubbles formed at the corners of her lips. "I can't believe you're making me eat the food of some apprentice! Hire a new chef at once!"

"If I may have a word, Madam?" Gilbert repeated, his expression not changing

the slightest bit. “No matter where or to whom I advertise the position, the minute people hear milord and Lady Jeanette are gone, they all refuse. Unless you double the wages, I don’t think any competent chefs will take the job.”

“H-How could this be?!” Leila demanded, her eyes flitting about the place.

“One more thing, Madam,” Gilbert said, delivering another follow-up attack. “The merchants have informed me that up until recently, they have been giving our household favorable treatment when supplying our ingredients. However, since Lady Jeanette is gone, the merchants are asking for three times the amount we’ve been paying them to deliver the same quality of ingredients. Should we proceed?”

“*What*?! What is the meaning of this?! *Three* times...? How greedy of them!”

“The prices we’ve been paying were a discount on account of milady. Three times the amount is actually the market price.”

“Wha—?! Ugh, I’ve had enough! I’ve lost my appetite!” Leila shouted, springing to her feet in a fit of rage. *Why is all of this happening just because that girl is gone?! Goodness, they’re all slacking off!*

She left Ariel at the table and began walking down the hallway, frantically thinking everything over. *No, no, I must calm down. Anger’s terrible for the skin. At a time like this...meeting with* him *will calm me down. After all, I have plenty of money to spare!*

Leila smirked at her thoughts. The person she was thinking of was a certain jeweler she’d taken an interest in recently named Barthelemy. He was a young man still in his twenties, and had such a lovely face that it was nearly unbelievable that he was a merchant. Above all, his conduct towards women was flawless.

She had him summoned right away, and it wasn’t long before his flowery compliments graced her ears. “Oh, Madam! Your skin is softer than silk, and your eyes hold such allure... You look as beautiful as always! It’s as if I am gazing at the goddess of love Aphrodi herself! I’m a truly blessed man to have been able to meet someone like you!”

“Hee hee... You have a way with words, as usual,” Leila said, finally feeling

comforted upon hearing his flattery. *The jeweler that worked with this house until now was always some dreary old acquaintance of my husband's... And the gemstones he traded were all tiny! They weren't to my tastes at all.*

Yet the opposite was true for the precious stones this young man traded. They were all of a large size with a brilliant glimmer to them—and they were right up Leila's alley.

"Oh, this one's lovely!" she remarked. "A large, bright red ruby. Don't you think it suits me perfectly?"

"You have an eye for these things, Madam! This right here is a ruby of the highest grade, picked from my very own mine. Indeed, the price may be steep, but dare I say—its radiance is impeccably befitting of you!"

"Hee hee! That's right. Such gorgeous items are a match made in heaven with me. I'll take it!"

"Thank you kindly!" Distracted by her good humor, Leila didn't notice the way the young jeweler's countenance shifted into a wicked smirk.

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"Now then, let us go and collect milady's belongings!" proclaimed the joyful Sara as she led House Guivarch's servants along. "I'll guide you towards the inn!"

It was almost as if she was quickly trying to make Jeanette settle in the mansion before Claus could change his mind on the matter.

Watching her, Jeanette frowned in concern. "Lord Claus, I'm grateful that you're willing to lend me a room, but I can at least earn money for my own food. In fact, please allow me to cover the costs!"

Claus chuckled at her words. "I told you before, you don't have to worry about that. You are my fiancée, after all. Besides, this is nothing compared to the kind of assistance I've received from Sir Roussel."

"Still..."

"And anyway, how exactly were you planning on earning such money?" he questioned.

“I was thinking of trying to find a job at a company!” she responded promptly. “I know about the work just as much as the men do, and I get on particularly well with the merchants at Edmond Enterprise and Gautier Trading Company, so...!”

“Oh, I see... In that case, they’re going to resent me again.”

Jeanette stared at Claus in confusion, not knowing what he meant. For some reason, he chuckled again upon seeing this.

“They might stop talking to me once they realize I robbed them of the chance of winning you over into their firms,” he explained.

“Winning me over...? I mean, I *do* get along with the tradesmen there, but they’ve never offered me anything like that,” Jeanette said, tilting her head.

“That’s because Sir Roussel warned everyone not to let you enter into such business relations with them,” Claus responded with a radiant smile. “But I think they were always trying to find some way to drag you over onto their side. I even heard a few of them mention they’d want you as their son’s wife.”

“Really?! I never heard about any of that...”

Claus’s smile only grew wider at her surprised reaction. “Naturally. That’s because I crushed all such talk myself.”

“Huh? Crushed...?” Jeanette echoed, her eyes widening at the sound of such a frightening word.

Claus, however, was nonchalant about it. “They knew you were my fiancée, and yet they kept stirring up trouble. No matter how many times I thrashed them, they’d stubbornly persist and try again. I suppose that’s businessmen for you.”

“Th-Thrashed?!”

Lord Claus keeps uttering some unsettling words...! Was the person standing before Jeanette really the Claus she knew? She trembled all over, while Claus continued speaking as if he hadn’t just said anything disturbing.

“Oh, by the way. Would you mind telling me exactly how Sir Roussel went missing? I’ve yet to hear the particulars.”

Ah, now that I think about it, Lord Claus went to visit House Roussel right away upon his return from abroad. Jeanette and Claus had just missed each other at the time, and it seemed like he'd been haphazardly looking for her all over in her relatives' and friends' places. He'd never considered she might be staying at an *inn*, of all places.

After Jeanette explained the details of what had happened with her father, Claus hummed thoughtfully. "I see. So he went missing somewhere in the eastern part of the Voltaire Empire. I know someone in the empire who knows the area, so I'll try to get a hold of them."

He called a steward over right away, and informed them of what needed to be done. Then, Claus once again faced Jeanette. "I promise you that I'll find your father as soon as possible. And by the way, Jeanette... There's something I've been wondering about. When you left your house, did you get the right to your family's company?"

It was a well-known fact that Jeanette was set to inherit Roussel Corporation. As someone who frequently visited House Roussel, Claus was aware of it as well.

But before Jeanette could reply, Claus intercepted her. "Ah, no, you don't have to answer that. There's no way that woman would've handed it over to you."

Jeanette blinked in surprise. "I see you know Mother well, Lord Claus."

Mother often gives me all kinds of rewards, but in front of others, she always acts like a perfect lady. But Jeanette didn't want to stir the pot, and so she ensured the servants wouldn't disclose anything regarding her stepfamily. Hence, nobody else, including her father and Claus, should've known about how she was being treated by Leila and Ariel.

"Of course I do. I don't think there's anyone on this earth who wouldn't pay attention to how their precious person is being viewed and treated by others. And I know you wanted to hide it, but... Your father was aware of it too."

"He *was*?!" Jeanette asked in a panic. *My father's such a big-hearted man that I was certain he had no idea!*

“Sir Roussel knows you well. But I think he didn’t want to interfere as long as you were having fun with it.”

Wait, so he also knew that I was happy about the rewards?! A joyful, unshakable biological daughter, and a wife and stepdaughter who persistently pestered her. How did Jeanettte’s father feel about having such a family? She both did and didn’t want to know.

“So what do you plan to do about the company?” Claus prompted. “It’d be good to find Sir Roussel as quickly as we can, but we have to prepare for the worst case scenario. Do you plan to yield the rights to the fir—”

“Of course not!” Jeanette exclaimed resolutely. “Father promised that the company was mine to inherit, and I will get it back no matter what!” She then proceeded to explain her plan to Claus. “First, I’d start at the bottom of the ladder by working for the other merchants for a while, and eventually start up my own business!”

Their country had a minimum age limit when it came to opening up shops. For men, it was fifteen, and for women twenty. Otherwise, the state wouldn’t grant them permission to do business.

In reality, plenty of people falsified their ages and carried out businesses without official permission, but Jeanette was a member of the nobility, even if she was of a lower rank. As such, she had to uphold the law.

“After I launch my own business and save up money, I want to someday acquisition Roussel Corporation fair and square!” Jeanette announced with sparkling eyes.

“Roussel Corporation has tremendous momentum right now,” Claus responded calmly. “It’s not cheap as it is, and its value will only keep increasing. It might be so high that you wouldn’t be able to earn that amount of money even if you worked your whole life. But you still say you want to buy it back fairly?”

Claus’s eyes narrowed as he spoke. “Besides, considering they unfairly seized your rights to the firm, I don’t think it’d be unreasonable for us to use slightly coercive means to get the title deed back.”

“What do you mean by that...?”

“Well... A few things, really.” Though Claus smiled as he said so, his eyes were as cold as ice.

Wah! I get the feeling I shouldn’t pry for details on this one... Jeanette shivered slightly at his uncharacteristic words, but then continued talking resolutely. “It’s okay! I don’t mind however many years it might take. I actually think of this as the best possible reward mother could give me... No, in fact—it’s a trial!”

Rather than doing something as half-hearted as simply inheriting the firm, I’ll work to earn the money myself and then buy it out in its entirety. This is the culmination of all the nouveau riche training I received from Father! That’s what you’re after too, right, Mother?!

Jeanette was beyond excited as she thought it all over. She would’ve loved to get started with her business immediately, but unfortunately, she couldn’t break the law. However, she’d do everything in her means during the time she had.

Claus chuckled as he watched her huff and puff through her nose. “‘Trials are a reward’... You really do love those words, don’t you? I recall how you used to mutter them in the past too.”

“What? I said them out loud?!”

“Sometimes. Like back when cotton products suddenly gained prominence... Or with the seven-colored mosaic lanterns...”

“Y-You have a good memory, don’t you...?”

The former had been when the price of woolen products had suddenly crashed right when the firm had a huge stock of them in their inventory. The latter was when the opposite problem occurred, as they’d sold too many lanterns and contented with countless copycats.

Luckily, they just about managed to clear their inventory of the woolen items by exporting them to the northern countries, and they boosted the worth of the Roussel brand products by producing their own unique patterns for the lanterns.

And a certain someone recalled viewing both incidents as an exciting reward.

The memories caused Jeanette to flush. Apparently, she'd ended up unconsciously voicing her thoughts back then.

"You always seemed to be having so much fun during those times, and that gave me courage too," Claus told her.

Courage? But Ariel always said that when I'm thinking about commerce, my face is so revolting that it could wilt even a century-old love... Lord Claus is truly so kind to say that! Among the men of high society, Claus was likely the only one not to feel repulsed by Jeanette's eccentric behavior. He was such a blessing to her that she almost wanted to pray to him.

"All right, if that's how you feel, then I want to help you out as well," Claus concluded. "Now, for a change of topic—have you heard of a company called Matheson Trading?"

"Of course!"

Matheson Trading was an up-and-coming company which had become a bit of a hot topic lately. It appeared suddenly one day in the royal capital, selling a wide range of goods mostly aimed at women, such as tableware, furniture, clothes, cosmetics and so on, and launching a series of popular products in succession. As the owner never made a public appearance, there was all kinds of gossip about who they might be—perhaps the company was a way for a high class noblewoman to entertain herself, or perhaps it was some kind of a front for a wealthy merchant.

"Recently, they launched a new series of milk glass products, which became a huge craze!" Jeanette recalled, tightening her fists as her eyes blazed fiercely. "The tableware especially was so popular that you can't find it anywhere, since it's all sold out! Apparently, the sheen of the items is so beautiful that just looking at them enraptures you..."

However, Jeanette suddenly fell silent. Her eyes strayed to the table, where the smooth, milk-white candelabra was standing.

"Um... Lord Claus?"

"Yes?"

“If I recall correctly, your middle names include ‘Mattheus’, right...?”

Claus smiled meaningfully at her words. “Good memory. Yes, my full name is Claus Fortuna de los Mattheus Louis Guivarch.”

“Um... Could it be that...Matheson Trading is *your* company...?”

“That’s right,” he responded with a brilliant grin. “I launched Matheson Trading.”

“R-Really?!”

“Well done for realizing it. As you said, I always ensured not to reveal my identity after opening the store, and I didn’t think anyone would connect me to it since the series started sales while I was abroad for my studies.”

Jeanette pointed towards the table. “I mean, the sheer polish on that candelabra makes it obvious at a glance that it’s an item of Matheson’s... It’s perfectly uniform from every side, and it truly looks like it’s made out of solidified milk! Matheson Trading is the only company I’ve ever seen to make such gorgeous milk glass items!”

In addition to being smooth to the touch, people said that just gazing upon the milk glass’s unique, soft, translucent hue was enough to soothe their hearts.

Jeanette continued rambling rapidly with her fists still clenched. “The series also includes water pitchers and compote dish plates, right?! And the real trump cards were the flower vases! Those were released very early on, so they’re hard to get now. But seeing that you own an item from the series even though you were abroad during its launch made me think you might be involved in some way, Lord Claus!”

Having said it all in one breath, Jeanette suddenly stopped and gasped. Claus was staring at her with wide eyes. *Oh no! I got too worked up...*

“S-Sorry! I did it again... That was really repulsive of me, huh...?” Jeanette said dejectedly, her shoulders drooping.

From a young age, Jeanette had a bad habit of scrutinizing her surroundings too closely. Ariel had often felt sickened by the way Jeanette could correctly guess which brand of product someone was wearing from a single glance. Jeanette had been doing her utmost to train herself out of making reckless comments about it, but the way Claus always listened to what she had to say made the words slip out before she could stop them.

“P-Please forget what I just said...” she murmured, embarrassed to have analyzed his living space. But before she could apologize further, Claus burst into laughter, thoroughly amused.

“Ha ha! I should’ve known you’d figure it out, Jeanette. You’re quick on the uptake as usual, ” he said. “Most people don’t even know my company produced any flower vases at all.”

“So you really *are* the president of Matheson Trading...”

“You made running a business seem so fun that I decided I wanted to give it a try too. Besides, the more you diversify your sources of income, the better. Poverty is a miserable thing.”

Jeanette’s expression softened at his explanation. *Lord Claus suffered a lot because of his finances, after all...* With his good looks and intellect, he would’ve surely lived a magnificent life free of any trouble if it hadn’t been for his grandfather’s debt. That was why he wanted to earn money through his own efforts—a sentiment which Jeanette understood painfully well.

“If you’re running that company, then it’s no wonder how successful it’s become!” she told him.

“I owe all of my success to you, Jeanette. You gave me plenty of ideas throughout our conversations, and all I had to do was implement them into reality. And now, the profits are simply pouring in. So as a way of thanking you...” Claus paused for a moment, gazing into Jeanette’s eyes fixedly. “Jeanette, won’t you become the vice-president of Matheson Trading?”

Jeanette was astonished at his proposition.

“Things are moving a bit faster than I had planned, but I think I’ll finish my studies early and concentrate on my work as a feudal lord,” Claus continued.

“So it’d be great if you could run the company in my stead. Of course, you’re free to do as you like with it—even if you put it out of business, I promise I won’t be angry over it.”

“What...?!”

Jeanette shivered all over. *What a tempting offer! I was worried about not being able to run a business since I’m not twenty years old yet, but that won’t be necessary if I were allowed to run Matheson Trading as a vice-president!*

However, Claus seemed to have misinterpreted her delighted quivering. His beautiful violet eyes narrowed slightly in concern. “Would you still prefer to start from scratch by yourself?” he inquired.

“No!” Jeanette quickly exclaimed. “Your offer is like a dream come true—I was just shivering from the emotions! Lord Claus, please leave Matheson Trading to me!”

“Perfect,” he replied, smiling in relief. “You’re free to use all of the earnings as you see fit. Use them to acquire Roussel Corporation, or keep them as your own savings. If you’re ever lacking for anything, I’ll give you my support.”

“Thank you so, so much...! I’m going to make a fortune, and we can use it to restore House Guivarch!” Jeanette declared, tightening her fists enthusiastically.

Claus chuckled. “I look forward to seeing you in action,” he told her, and then suddenly seemed to have recalled something as he added, “Oh, by the way, are your belongings at the inn everything that you own? I seem to recall you had a lot of documents that you showed me...”

He was referring to the detailed analysis of trends and the rival companies’ merchandise which Jeanette had been keeping record of for a very long time. Jeanette had shown them to Claus every time they met, and they seemed to have stuck in his memory.

Those notes were the fruits of my labor, and I really wanted to bring them with me, but... There were just too many! She’d been diligently keeping notes of everything ever since she was young, and the amount of documents had piled up enough to fill up an entire bookshelf. Though she didn’t want to leave them

behind, she had no choice, as she'd be unable to take them with her to the inn.

"You even mentioned that you wanted to bring them all with you after we got married," Claus pointed out. "How about we go to House Roussel tomorrow and pick them up?"

"But... Um, now that I think about it, there really are *so* many of them..." Jeanette said. "I did say I wanted to bring them with me, but I've written even more since that time. I'll feel bad keeping them all in your house, Lord Claus..."

"It's not *my* house, Jeanette. It's *our* house," he corrected, gazing at her affectionately with glimmering eyes.

Whoa! Is it my imagination, or is he sparkling even more than usual?! Jeanette had to squint her eyes from the brightness of his expression.

"Let's get those notes tomorrow," Claus decided. "I've been away, so it's been a while since I've had a chance to read them. I look forward to getting my hands on the latest edition."

"So... We'll be visiting my old home?" Jeanette asked.

I know we're just going to pick up my things, but my stepfamily went through such an effort to encourage me to leave... she thought. *Won't they get angry at me if I just return like that?*

"In that case, we'll have to say hello to Mother and Ariel, won't we?" she added.

At that, Claus smiled in an incredibly eerie manner. "Indeed—I can't wait."

Chapter 3: Matheson Trading

The horse-drawn carriage rattled with every movement. Jeanette was sitting inside next to Claus, lost in her thoughts. *I wonder if Mother and Ariel are doing well? Then again, it's only been a week since I left the house.*

Following behind them was another cart, with Sara and the other servants riding it, but only Jeanette and Claus were present inside of this one. And right now, Claus was staring intently at Jeanette with a large grin.

Jeanette smiled at him in return. *I thought Lord Claus seemed angry the last time we discussed my stepmother and stepsister, but today he's smiling the same as usual! It was probably just my imagination.* She sighed in relief just as the carriage clattered to a stop. They must've arrived at their destination.

Claus stepped out first, then held his hand out to help Jeanette. As she got off the cart, she found herself standing in front of her family home for the first time in a week.

The gatekeeper rushed over to her the moment he recognized her. "Milady! Are you all right?! Everyone's been worried sick about you!"

"I'm fine, thank you!" Jeanette responded. "What about you?"

They chatted pleasantly, enjoying their reunion. A few moments later, Gilbert the family steward, whom someone must've gone to fetch, joined them with a beaming smile.

"Milady. I have missed you," he told her.

"Gilbert! It's been a little while. Is everyone doing okay? I hope Mother and Ariel are well too."

"Madam is doing as well as she can be, I suppose..." Gilbert answered evasively.

Jeanette tilted her head curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Well... It reflects poorly on myself as the steward, but many people have taken the opportunity to quit ever since you left, milady," he explained. "As a

result, things have been slightly chaotic."

"Really? But where have they gone? I hope they've been able to find other places of work..." Jeanette fretted.

"Unfortunately, most of them quit before finding another job. I provided them with letters of recommendation just in case, but..."

"Oh my goodness! That's awful!" Jeanette exclaimed, frantically turning to look at Claus.

He knew exactly what she wanted to say with that look, and he smiled warmly. "I've been meaning to hire more servants with your arrival anyway, so this works out just fine."

"Thank you so much, Lord Claus!" she cried, beaming. *Ahh, he truly is so kind... It'll be wonderful to bring everyone over to House Guivarch!* Filled with relief, Jeanette turned back to face Gilbert.

"Could you please inform everyone that House Guivarch would be happy to hire them?" she asked him. "And by the way, what about *you*, Gilbert? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The older man smiled at her words. "Your concern is more than enough for me, milady. However, I've worked for His Grace for a very long time, and my loyalties are not so easily shaken. Please leave the rest of *this* matter in my hands," he emphasized. "That aside, there have been a lot of young men frequenting the mansion recently. I thought I should let you know just in case."

"Young men...?" Jeanette echoed. "Who might they be?"

Are they extending their social circle? Or perhaps the men are interested in becoming engaged to Ariel? she pondered. Though Ariel had always been chasing after Claus, she herself was a beautiful girl of marriageable age. Jeanette wouldn't be surprised to hear her stepsister had her own suitors showing up at the mansion.

"Jeanette, we should get going," Claus spoke up, urging her on.

"Oh, right!" she said, recalling the reason they had come here in the first place. She looked at Gilbert. "Sorry, we'll have to end it here. I'm staying with

Lord Claus now, so if anything comes up, please feel free to reach out!”

“You’re staying at House Guivarch?” the butler inquired. “Ah, that’s a weight off my mind. Lord Claus, I hope you’ll look after milady,” he added, bowing deeply before the count.

Claus smiled. “You have nothing to worry about. I’ll keep Jeanette safe no matter what.”

Following this, Jeanette and Claus passed through the entrance to House Roussel. The moment they stepped inside, Leila and Ariel appeared on the second floor as though they’d been waiting for them. But when Jeanette spotted them, she tilted her head in confusion. *Huh... There’s something different about them.*

The two women were dressed the same as usual, with Leila clad in a bright red dress, and Ariel in a vibrant pink one. The only difference was that glass beads decorated every part of them, from their necks to their ears to their fingers.

I thought Mother and Ariel were only interested in gemstones, but maybe they changed their minds? I mean, lately glass products like milk glass have come into fashion, so...

While Jeanette reasoned with herself, Leila and Ariel began stepping down the stairs while pompously fluttering their large folding fans made of peacock feathers. They glared at Jeanette so sharply that it seemed as if they were mere seconds away from tearing into her.

Claus had been walking slightly behind Jeanette, but now he stepped forward as if to stand in her defense. “It’s been a while, Baroness Roussel,” he said with a sweet grin, at which Leila’s expression quickly shifted. Ariel, however, remained behind her mother, staring daggers at Jeanette and Claus in turn.

“Good day, Lord Claus,” greeted Leila. “I didn’t expect you to come together with Jeanette! O ho ho!”

“Why *are* the two of you together?!” Ariel snapped.

Claus looked at her with confusion. “What a strange thing to ask. Of course we’re together—we’re betrothed, after all.”

“Regarding that, Lord Claus,” Leila said, managing to keep her smile in place by some miracle. She continued fanning herself self-importantly as she spoke. “I believe I sent a letter to you the other day, no? In it, I requested for you to break your engagement with Jeanette, and take Ariel as your fiancée instead.”

“Ahh... Yes, I did receive such a letter.”

Ariel’s eyes gleamed at his response, while Leila smiled triumphantly. “There you have it, then. From now on, you’ll be Ariel’s fia—”

“I refuse,” Claus said flatly, as if purposefully drowning out Leila’s words.

“Huh? R-Refuse...? Wh-What did you just say?!” Leila spluttered, but Claus only smiled at her pleasantly.

“I said I refuse. I’d never break up with Jeanette—I find the very idea laughable. And to have Ariel as a fiancée instead? I’d rather die.”

“I’d rather die.”

Ariel’s face stiffened at his words.

After a few seconds, Leila recovered her wits. “Wh-*What*?!” she screeched, flushing with fury.

Claus continued nonchalantly. “Apologies for the late response. The idea was so ridiculous that I simply forgot to write back...”

Th-That’s not how you apologize, Lord Claus! Jeanette thought, watching everything anxiously.

As one might expect, Leila flew into a rage at those words. “You *forgot*?!” she shouted, spittle flying everywhere.

“And why would you say it’s ridiculous?!” Ariel joined in. “You told me before that you think I’m adorable! Were you lying to me?!”

The two of them were shrieking like a pair of toy breed dogs, but Claus simply smiled coolly at them. Jeanette had never seen him make such an expression before—his smile was as cold as ice. “I see there’s been a misunderstanding,” he said. “Lady Ariel, I may have complimented your hair accessories and dresses, but never once have I complimented your actual *looks*. I was very intentional about it.”

“That can’t be! I... Huh? Wait a minute... Could it really be...?” Ariel murmured, and as she recalled their past encounters, her face paled.

“Besides, I’m well aware of the fact that *you* were the one spreading bad rumors about Jeanette among high society,” Claus went on. “I wouldn’t marry someone of your character even on pain of death.”

Ariel’s breath hitched. She looked beyond furious with her completely ashen countenance. In contrast, Leila’s face was so red that she seemed on the verge of collapsing as she pushed her daughter behind her and stepped forward. “Lord Claus! I know you’re trying to be mindful because Jeanette is your fiancée, but you have nothing to gain by defending her now! She’s already homeless and penniless!”

“Mindful?” Claus echoed quietly, tilting his head. “Ahh, I see,” he added after a moment, nodding to himself. “I thought that was a strange thing to say, but I understand now. Sir Roussel didn’t tell you a thing, did he?”

Leila faltered at the mention of her husband. “What do you mean by that...?” she asked.

“I don’t want you to think that me and Jeanette are together only because of an arranged betrothal,” Claus said slowly, though clearly intending to press Leila. “You see, Sir Roussel tried suggesting that we change the arrangement to Ariel instead, but I always firmly refused the idea.”

At that, all three women turned to look at Claus with shock.

“Judging by your reactions, it seems like he really didn’t mention it,” Claus concluded. “Perhaps he didn’t wish to hurt Lady Ariel’s feelings. Regardless, this engagement wouldn’t work with anyone else. After all...” he paused, turning to face Jeanette.

The look on his face was so affectionate and his smile so enchanting that it almost made her blush. His slender arm wrapped around her frame and gently pulled her closer, and then he placed a loving kiss at the top of her head.

“Jeanette is the only one I’m interested in being engaged to,” Claus declared. “I know people often say I did this for money, but that’s nonsense. In fact, I’d happily hand over my title if it meant I could marry her.”

Jeanette turned red at his sudden confession. *What is going on?! I get the feeling he likes me ten times more than I thought he did!*

As they watched, Leila's and Ariel's expressions stiffened, both of them trembling with a mix of rage and hatred.

Despite this, Claus continued smiling calmly. "And that's why me breaking up with her is a ridiculous idea. Now, more importantly, do you mind if we go to her room? I'd like to bring her belongings to my mansion." He paused for a moment before adding, "Ah, and yes, Jeanette is living with me right now. I assume you have no objections on that matter?"

Though he didn't say it out loud, the look in his eyes implied, *"Since you're the ones who cast her out."*

After a beat, Leila scoffed. "Do as you please! But you are *not* permitted to touch any of *my* things!" she said bitterly, before whipping around to storm off.

Ariel watched her in a fluster. "Wait, mother! This isn't what you promised! You said Lord Claus would be *my* fiancé! M-Mother...!" she cried, chasing after the briskly retreating Leila.

"Now, let's go get your notes, Jeanette!" Claus exclaimed brightly. "Where do you keep them?"

"R-Right!" Jeanette responded. "Father often referenced them himself, so they're all in his study. Let me take you there."

With that, she led Claus, Sara, and the other servants who came along to her father's home office. While the group walked together down the hallway, Jeanette cast a quick glance at Claus. "Um... I had no idea about all the things you mentioned regarding our engagement and my father, Lord Claus," she said. "All he ever told me was that I was to be your betrothed, and nothing else..."

Claus smiled wryly. "He's not the kind of man who'd go into the details explaining such matters, Jeanette. I never felt the need to mention it either, but today I realized that voicing these things can be very important. From now on, I'll stop holding back and express myself more clearly."As he spoke, he once again wrapped his arm around Jeanette and pulled her close, holding her tightly.

A sweet fragrance of violets enveloped her, making her feel giddy. It must've been his perfume. "L-Lord Claus! We're not married yet!" she stammered.

"Hee hee. You're just so cute, I couldn't help myself." Despite his words, Claus seemed to have no intentions of letting her go.

Noticing the way Sara and the other servants giggled while walking behind them, Jeanette flushed even more. *But just* why *does he like me this much...?*

The rest of high society often disparaged Jeanette while rarely praising her. When noblemen her age saw her, they'd just laugh at her snidely. Even if some people did approach her on occasion, it was always for the sake of her money. Jeanette herself was well aware of the fact that she was far from pretty or ladylike, so why on earth did someone like Claus like her to this degree?

After some thought, her eyes widened suddenly. *Could it be that Lord Claus is just really into business?! When it comes to high society, I might be the only girl able to discuss such matters with him, after all!*

Finally believing she understood the situation, Jeanette nodded to herself vigorously.

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"All right! We got everything!"

Jeanette and Sara were presently in Jeanette's personal study located within House Guivarch's estate, checking to make sure her documents had been safely delivered. It was an absurd amount of books, enough to take up all the bookshelves lined up against the wall, but having them here gave her some peace of mind. After all, this was a collection of notes she'd been keeping for many years.

While Jeanette gazed at the books with satisfaction, Sara wiped her hands together. "Lord Claus is truly wonderful, isn't he?" the maid remarked. "To think he'd not only give you your own room, but also a private study."

"I know! I never expected to have my own office like this!" In their country, working noblewomen were perceived as lowly. Labor was seen as a mark of degradation, and if the head of the family put his wife or daughter to work, he'd be often met with scornful laughter.

However, perhaps Claus had been influenced by Jeanette's father when it came to such matters. He'd given her a private place in the mansion where she could do her work—something that would've been unthinkable in any other noble family.

"This is truly amazing! I can easily reach any of my books whenever I need them, and the desk is big enough to spread out plenty of documents. I've always wanted to have a workroom like this! I can't wait to start brainstorming about what products to launch next!" Jeanette exclaimed, pressing her cheek against the glossy ebony wood of her desk.

It was so big that even if she outstretched both her arms, she wasn't able to reach either end. It also had a plethora of drawers ready for use.

"I'm glad to see you're pleased with it."

At the sound of that pleasant voice, Jeanette quickly fixed her posture. Claus was standing in front of her, chuckling while covering his mouth. Sara rushed over to Jeanette and rearranged her messy hair.

"S-Sorry!" Jeanette squeaked. "I didn't mean for you to see that..."

"Don't worry about it. The important thing is that you're happy. We're going to be a married couple soon, so there's nothing to be embarrassed about between us."

"Is that how that works...?"

"And you know, Jeanette..." Claus said, taking a step closer to her. "I actually considered putting your desk in *my* study, but... If I did that, I'd just stare at you all day and never get any work done, so with a heavy heart I had to give up on that idea," he explained, his cheeks flushing a little for some reason.

Stare at me? Jeanette wondered. *Is he implying I'm some kind of rare creature from a circus?* After all, unlike Claus, she wasn't a person of unmatched beauty, so there was little point in gazing at someone like her.

While she pondered this, Claus looked like he suddenly remembered something. "Oh, right. Duke Pablo summoned me to his house when he heard I was back from my studies. I'll be going the day after tomorrow—how would you like to accompany me, Jeanette? I want to formally introduce you as my

fiancée.”

“You were summoned by the duke?!” she uttered.

Duke Pablo was one of the nation’s most illustrious nobles. The family had produced a number of queens, and many princesses married into the family in turn. The present duchess was a former queen herself, famed for her great beauty.

“You have some amazing connections, Lord Claus!”

“It seems that the duke has taken an interest in my thesis on economics. I believe he also wants to ask me about my experience studying abroad.”

“But would it really be appropriate for me to accompany you?” Jeanette fretted. “I heard he’s quite a stern person...”

Duke Pablo was a man in his fifties, and was most likely a conservative who honored tradition. His values were sure to be the noblest of all nobles, so he’d find the idea of a working woman utterly absurd. To top things off, he was infamous for being intimidating and hard to please, so it wouldn’t have been surprising at all if he was prejudiced against someone like Jeanette, a low-ranking noblewoman who boldly professed her business.

“I’m afraid bringing me alone would put you in a tough spot, Lord Claus...”

Claus smiled warmly at her words. “Don’t worry. The duke can be difficult at times, but he’s not the sort of person who belittles others out of prejudice. In fact, he already agreed for you to come along too. Although his wife, Christine, won’t be present, as she’s visiting her family in the royal palace,” he explained. “So, how about it? Don’t you want to visit Duke Pablo’s main residence?”

Sensing what he was trying to say, Jeanette gulped. *The duke lives in the famous Grand Velo Castle! I bet it’s a treasure trove...*

The residence was often used as an extravagant venue for soirées, as it boasted its own ballroom. Hardly anyone ever got a chance to visit it privately outside of such events. However, Jeanette had heard that the historic castle also housed a number of precious artifacts, and though she truly considered breaking away from the aristocratic world, she’d always wanted to visit Grand Velo Castle for herself, even if it took an obscene amount of money.

Lord Claus just gave me an opportunity of a lifetime! I definitely want to tour that castle so I can learn from it!

Jeanette tightened her fists as her eyes gleamed brightly. “I want to go! Please take me along, Lord Claus!”

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It took half a day of travel from the city center by horse-drawn carriage to reach Grand Velo Castle. It encompassed a massive plot of land stretching for a thousand acres, emanating a sense of historical gravitas.

“The majesty of this place is breathtaking!” Jeanette remarked excitably as she peered out from the carriage window.

Claus was watching her calmly. “That’s Grand Velo Castle for you. There’s a thousand yards between the outer gate and the inner gate, and another thousand between the inner gate and the actual entrance to the castle.”

“Just think how many shops we’d be able to open if we had that much land! I can’t even begin to imagine it!”

Through the window, she could see an expanse of verdant, neatly trimmed grass. Maintaining a lawn of this size was sure to be a laborious task in its own right.

Soon enough, the two of them were ushered inside the castle itself. Paintings of angels decorated the tall, domed ceiling, looking so grandiose that Jeanette was almost compelled to worship them. She sighed in admiration as she gazed upon the images.

“Claus! Thank you for coming.” The owner of the voice was none other than Duke Pablo, who’d come out to greet them. He had a bulky physique, rectangular face shape, and a thick beard.

The dignified duke stretched out his arm towards Claus, who grasped it with a pleasant smile. “Thank you for inviting us, Your Excellency. It’s an honor to be able to visit Grand Velo Castle. I’d like to introduce you to my fiancée, Jeanette.”

At this, Jeanette courtsied and offered the duke a greeting.

“Ah, so *this* is her...” the man said, narrowing his eyes momentarily as he looked her over. However, he didn’t have anything else to say to her. Based on his reaction, perhaps he’d heard of her reputation.

Jeanette just smiled sweetly at him. *I’m not going to worry about what he thinks of me! For now, I have to focus on conducting myself as quietly as a lamb! I’ll act reserved, and won’t interrupt their conversation. No matter what, I can’t be discourteous today!*

Duke Pablo had immense influence in the aristocratic world. Anyone who caught his eye would garner instant acknowledgement among high society. Jeanette had no false hopes about redeeming her own reputation at this point, but she was determined not to drag Claus down any further.

“Well, no sense standing around here. Let’s have a chat inside,” the duke suggested. “I wish to hear all about your time in Yafruska Kingdom, Claus.”

“I’d be happy to share.”

The three of them settled in the parlor. Jeanette listened carefully as the two men conversed, only throwing in a word or two when appropriate to indicate she was paying attention. Occasionally, she let her gaze quickly wander around the room.

The paintings lining the wall were so gorgeous that she almost drooled at the sight of them. She wished she could look at them one by one more closely, rather than from such a distance.

Ahh, that painting over there is a famous masterpiece of Kavul fine arts... And that intricate depiction is a piece from Guisnay, a rare school of art! And all these thermal tapestries are of Rubut weave, famed for its excellent quality!

While she enthusiastically glanced all around the interior, the duke suddenly turned to her as if remembering her presence. “My apologies for all this complicated talk. This must be boring for a young lady like you.”

“No, not at all! It’s all been very interesting!” Jeanette exclaimed, and she meant every word of it. She’d often have similar conversations with Claus, and she’d been looking forward to hearing his tales of Yafruska too. By now, she

would've usually swarmed Claus with questions, but today she was playing the part of a typical, docile young lady, so she kept quiet.

I have to endure it for now! I'll be able to ask Lord Claus all kinds of things once we're back home! Jeanette told herself.

Right then, a knock resounded on the door. A man who looked like a butler entered, addressing the duke. "Your Grace, the item you ordered has arrived. Shall I leave it in your chambers, or would you prefer to have it delivered here?"

The duke's face brightened instantly. He no longer looked like a composed duke—rather, his expression was that of an excited boy who'd just been brought a shining new toy. "Right here! Bring it over at once!"

"Understood."

Just what it could be? Jeanette wondered. She glanced at Claus, but he looked just as confused and curious as her.

Duke Pablo, still in high spirits, began explaining. "You see, my twentieth wedding anniversary is on the horizon. This is the item I wanted to give to my wife as a gift for the occasion."

The butler soon brought over a necklace lined with vividly glimmering blue-green jewels. Every single gemstone was so large that it almost seemed like solidified droplets from the beautiful ocean of the southern provinces. Jeanette had never seen such a dazzling blue-green glow—it screamed extravagance.

"Wait... Could these be Bairapa tourmalines?!" Jeanette cried, unable to hide her excitement. Her eyes, open wide, were glued to the shimmering jewels.

"Oh? So you recognized them at a glance," said the duke. "Seems like the rumors about you are true."

I wonder what rumors he's talking about...? Though she was curious, her eyes remained on the necklace. After all, she was gazing at a collection of incredibly rare and precious gemstones. Her merchant instincts were stirred despite herself, and words started gushing from her as if a dam had burst.

"Tourmaline is an extremely diverse type of gemstone, and it's said it comes in every color possible! However, the ones found in Bairapa Province are one of

a kind! No other jewel can outclass them in beauty, rarity, or value! It's even referred to as 'The Emperor of Tourmalines', right?!"

"Indeed, the merchant who sold me the necklace said something along those lines," Duke Pablo admitted. "But... Ahem. From a woman's perspective, would you say it's a fine gemstone? I chose it because its hue matches the color of my wife's eyes. Do you think she'll be pleased with it?" he inquired, looking somewhat restless and antsy. It seemed he wanted to hear Jeanette's opinion regarding the appropriateness of his gift.

Jeanette beamed at him. "Of course! It's a gorgeous gemstone, whether one knows its origin or not. And matching it with her eye color—how romantic! Lady Christine has excellent taste, so I'm sure she'll love it!"



“I see, I see...” The duke nodded in satisfaction.

Seeing his reaction, Jeanette couldn't stop herself from leaning forward a little. "Um... Would you mind if I took a closer look?" she asked, knowing the chances to look at such high grade gemstones up close were few and far between. From her pocket, she also took out a small magnifying glass of special make that she always kept hidden on her person. "And would you mind if I look at the gems through this?!"

The duke's eyes widened when he noticed the object in her hand, and then he burst out laughing. "Is that a magnifying glass? You're walking around with some very interesting effects, young lady. Very well, you may inspect the jewels however you wish, so long as you don't scratch them."

"Thank you so much! Tourmaline is hard enough that even a knife couldn't leave a scratch on it, so it should be okay!"

Moments later, she joyfully began inspecting the Bairapa tourmalines. Meanwhile, Duke Pablo and Claus returned to their conversation.

Ahh, what a beautiful glimmer! Its blue-green hue is so perfectly clear—it's truly the apex of all tourmalines! But... Wait... Jeanette had been enjoying herself while inspecting each gemstone one by one, yet suddenly she grew pallid.

"Jeanette?" asked Claus, noticing the sudden change in her.

She slowly raised her head to look at him. In contrast to her merry countenance from earlier, she now looked deathly pale. "Um... Lord Claus..."

Oh no... There's a counterfeit gemstone mixed in with the rest! But Jeanette couldn't bring herself to say as much out loud, only opening and closing her mouth like a gaping goldfish.

"You look unwell. What's going on?" Claus whispered, quietly enough that the duke hadn't noticed anything was amiss and continued chattering while looking down at Claus's thesis.

Jeanette awkwardly shuffled closer to Claus, and in a low voice she said, "I don't know what to do, Lord Claus... It looks like one of these is a fake jewel..."

Claus's eyes widened for a second, but he quickly smoothed out his expression as if nothing was wrong. Duke Pablo was right there after all, so

Claus was mindful not to let himself look shaken up. He kept his voice quiet as he replied. “If you think that’s the case, I believe you. Is there a way to prove it somehow?”

“There is *one*...” she confirmed, and then whispered something in his ear.

“Got it... I’ll bring it up then. Which is the fake one?”

“It’s the rightmost jewel.”

Claus nodded upon seeing the gemstone Jeanette had pointed out. He gently lifted the box containing the necklace, and carefully regarded it.

“Oh? Are you curious about it as well, Claus?” the duke prompted happily, still not noticing anything was going on.

In response, Claus hesitantly opened his mouth. “Your Excellence... With all due respect, may I inquire where you bought these gemstones? Did you get them from a jeweler you know well?”

Sensing something unusual was at play, the duke’s eyebrows twitched as his expression turned quizzical. “I ordered them from my usual jeweler, yes. Is there an issue?”

Claus sighed quietly. After a moment however, he made up his mind and looked right in Duke Pablo’s eyes. “I hate to say this, but I believe one of these gemstones is a fake.”

“What?!” The duke sprung to his feet with a clatter, his face flushing with a mixture of anger and agitation. “I got this from a very reliable merchant! It was even inspected by an appraiser! Yet you’re implying there’s a fake jewel in there?!”

Ahh, I can’t blame him for getting angry! Jeanette thought. *I mean, nobody would be happy to hear they’ve been deceived!*

“What is the meaning of this?! Explain yourself!” the duke yelled. “I may like you, Claus, but I won’t let my name be tarnished by false accusations!”

“Well—”

But just as Claus was about to clarify the situation, Jeanette quickly straightened in her seat and cried out, “I’ll explain!”

Claus glanced at her in a panic and whispered, “Jeanette, you don’t have to do this. Let me explain it instead.” He was most likely worried about her due to the duke’s menacing attitude.

Jeanette’s eyes grew damp at his benevolence. “You’re always so very kind...! But it’s okay, Lord Claus. You see...” she paused, beaming warmly at him. “I’ve been thoroughly trained in this thanks to the *rewards* my stepmother and stepsister gave me. So I can handle this, no problem!”

With that, she turned to face Duke Pablo. Just like with her stepmother and stepsister, Jeanette straightened her posture diligently and began. “Your Excellence, the tourmalines of this necklace are truly splendid. They certainly have the luster and vivacity characteristic of Bairapa tourmalines—the most brilliant shine of all! However, please allow me to say one more thing.” Jeanette pointed at the rightmost edge of the necklace. “This one single jewel is simply *too* pure.”

“Too pure? What’s that supposed to mean?” the duke objected. “It’s a gemstone of the highest grade, so of course it’s pure!” he argued, tapping the table with his finger irritably.

Jeanette gently shook her head. “Although the Bairapa tourmaline does indeed come in a rich assortment of colors, it’s also said that it is destined to come with some impurities mixed in. Those are called ‘inclusions’. Of course, the highest grade Bairapa tourmalines won’t have many of them, but... This rightmost gemstone has *zero* such inclusions.”

She then looked Duke Pablo right in the eyes as she continued. “Even if we suppose that such a pure jewel really existed, there’s no way it’d be put into the corner of a necklace like this one. Surely it’d be used as the centerpiece instead. But with this arrangement of the gemstones, it’s almost as if it’s being concealed on purpose. Why could that be?”

The duke’s eyes widened in realization. “Because...it’s a fake?!”

“Yes, that’s right. While this gem’s color resembles the shade of Bairapa tourmalines very closely, it is a fake. Most likely, this is actually apatite.”

Apatite—a truly versatile gemstone that came in many colors depending on its composition, and one which meant “deception” in the ancient Kyrian

language. Naturally, it had a long history of being confused for other kinds of precious stones.

That said, apatite is still a beautiful jewel. However, its worth is less than a tenth that of a Bairapa tourmaline...

“What?! But the appraiser confirmed them all to be Bairapa tourmalines!” Duke Pablo argued.

“Unfortunately, even appraisers can be fooled by apatite at times. Please try taking a look yourself using this magnifying glass, Your Excellency,” Jeanette suggested, handing the item over to him.

The man immediately began inspecting the necklace, and a deep frown settled on his features. “No... I can’t tell the difference in the slightest. They all look the same to me.”

“Indeed, these two gemstones are very similar to each other.”

“Then how are we supposed to differentiate them?! Looking at them doesn’t give any answers, and apparently I can’t trust the words of an appraiser either! So how can you prove that this is a fake?” the duke asked in vexation.

Jeanette nodded, her gray-green eyes flashing. “There is one way to prove it, although it’s a little crude. Could I please borrow a knife?”

“A knife? Hey, someone bring over a knife!” Duke Pablo ordered. Not long after, a servant rushed in with the requested item.

Jeanette glanced over its thin and pretty blade, and resumed her explanation. “As I’m sure you know, gemstones vary in hardness depending on their type. Tourmaline is a fairly hard stone, so a knife won’t be able to scratch it. However, apatites have the same hardness as glass, and therefore easily give way to a blade.”

“So you’re saying we can check whether these are real Bairapa tourmalines by testing to see if the knife can scratch them?” the duke inquired.

Jeanette nodded. It was quite a violent solution, but there was no other way to prove it in this situation. Duke Pablo must’ve been aware of that, for he breathed a heavy sigh before picking up the knife and the necklace in one hand

each. Then, he brought over the blade to one of the real tourmalines and tried to decisively cut across it.

Yet the knife simply skidded off the surface.

“It left no mark... In other words, this must be a real tourmaline,” he commented, and directed his gaze towards the rightmost edge of the necklace, at the jewel which Jeanette had claimed was a fake.

Everyone held their breaths as they watched him. Slowly, the duke pressed the knife to the jewel...and then released another deep sigh.

“Well... Just as you said, it seems this isn’t a real tourmaline...” he conceded, holding out the necklace towards Jeanette. Indeed, a single white line was cut across its surface.

I knew it! she thought, glancing up at Claus. He nodded at her in return.

Meanwhile, Duke Pablo’s head drooped dejectedly. “How could this be...? It’s already infuriating enough to be deceived like this, but to top things off, my wedding anniversary is right around the corner! There’s absolutely no way I’d give my sublime wife a fake jewel! But I’m out of time to arrange any appropriate gifts for her...” he lamented.

Goodness! He went out of his way to get such a thoughtful gift for her, and yet... Jeanette murmured inwardly. *But... I feel like I’ve seen a similar situation before.* She stared at the jewels fixedly as she pondered. *Now that I think about it, Mother tasked me with a similar reward once. She ordered me to make a brooch for her using the “miracle mineral” that was all the rage back then, and I only had three days to make it... Ahh, wait... Could this be another reward?!*

Having recalled all of that, Jeanette boldly posed her next question. “Your Excellence, would you mind telling me how long until your wedding anniversary?”

“It’s a week from now... I was going to hold a ball for the occasion, and I’ve already sent all the invitations out...”

One week. Hearing that, Jeanette raised her head. “In that case, I might be able to work something out!”

“Really?!” Duke Pablo exclaimed, once more springing to his feet. “If you can arrange something, then by all means! Money is no object!”

Jeanette smiled happily at him. “Please leave it to me, Your Excellence. I’m going to prepare the perfect gift for Lady Christine by next week!”

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Two days later, Jeanette and Claus were standing in a jewelry shop, gazing upon the rows of colorful gemstones lined up before them. They were on a search for the last Bairapa tourmaline for the necklace.

“Hmm... It really is difficult to find gems good enough for someone like Duke Pablo,” Jeanette remarked.

Claus frowned in concern. “We’ve had no success with any of the jewelers in the capital city... What about that letter you sent to the merchants abroad? Any luck?”

“I’m still waiting for the reply. If they *are* able to meet our requirements, I’d be willing to pay them any amount of money for it...” she responded, but her words faded into silence.

Noticing as much, Claus turned to look at her. “What’s wrong?”

“I just can’t stop thinking about why the jeweler who sold Duke Pablo that necklace only replaced *one* of the tourmalines with apatite...”

The duke had informed them earlier that he’d seen the initial design of the necklace along with the gemstones at a shop called Guajardo’s Jewelry, and decided to buy it on the spot. However, while initially there were supposed to be three Bairapa tourmalines, the duke had requested to increase the number to five. Jeanette knew that the owner of Guajardo wasn’t the type of person to agree to a promise he couldn’t fulfill, so he must’ve accepted the duke’s request because he was confident he could accommodate it.

Technically, it *was* possible that the owner purposefully switched the tourmaline for an apatite to profit from it, but... *No, Mr. Guajardo wouldn’t do that!* Jeanette asserted inwardly. *I heard his shop’s doing well financially, and he wouldn’t stand to gain anything by trying to scam someone.*

In fact, selling someone a false jewel would’ve led to a plethora of disadvantages. In this industry, selling even one counterfeit gemstone was sure to cause people’s trust in the store to plummet—all the more so if the seller did that on *purpose*. Under such circumstances, one not only risked having their shop be forcibly shut down, but in the worst case scenario, they could’ve even

been imprisoned on grounds of committing fraud.

When Jeanette said as much,, Claus nodded in acknowledgment. “You do have a point... Indeed, why was there only *one* counterfeit?”

“I’ve been curious about that since the start, and I’ve been thinking it over...” Jeanette responded. “Perhaps in the beginning, the seller truly didn’t want to swindle the duke, but for some reason, he felt he had no other choice...”

If my line of thinking is correct, then by visiting Guajardo’s, we might be able to get a clue about what happened to the real Bairapa tourmaline that was supposed to be put in the necklace.

Thinking the same thing as her, Claus smiled and presented his hand to her. “Sounds like the key to solving this mystery must be at Guajardo’s. Shall we pay them a visit?”

“Yes! Let’s go!” Jeanette nodded, taking his hand as the two of them began walking.

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Once they arrived at Guajardo’s Jewelry, Jeanette called out to the nearest clerk. “Hello! It’s been a while. Is Mr. Guajardo around?”

When the clerk realized who she was, he promptly guided her and Claus to Guajardo’s room. Duke Pablo had proclaimed that he’d speak with the jeweler once everything was resolved, so Guajardo was likely still unaware of the situation.

The pair was led to the VIP lounge and sat down on some chairs. Guajardo, a man in his fifties with glasses upon his face, greeted them. “Oh, Jeanette! And you’re with Count Claus, no less? Gracious, what brought on this sudden visit?” he asked with a cheerful smile.

Jeanette quickly got up and curtsied good-naturedly. “Sorry it’s been so long, Mr. Guajardo!” she exclaimed. She wasn’t as close with him as she was with Edmond or Gautier, both of whom had been her father’s friends, but she and Guajardo did speak to each other every now and then. Hence, it pained her to have to bring this up, but she knew there was no other way about it. “I’m going to get straight to the point... Why did you switch the Bairapa tourmaline for an

apatite?”

Guajardo’s expression shifted from calm to troubled in an instant. Though Jeanette hadn’t named Duke Pablo directly, Guajardo realized right away what she was referring to. He was silent for a long moment, before finally letting out a sigh. It was a deep, heavy sigh, as though he’d decided to give up on everything.

“I thought you might be here about that, really,” he admitted. “There’s no use hiding my misdeeds, hmm?”

“So it *was* on purpose... But why?!” Jeanette asked, her expression full of heartbreak. *If he really did it, his store’s reputation and everything he’s worked so hard to achieve will crumble...*

Right then, the door suddenly burst open, and a young man about Claus’s age came flying into the room. Then, he immediately groveled, pressing his head to the floor vigorously.

“I’m so sorry! Guajardo is not the one at fault here—it was all *my* doing!” the young man cried. “If only I hadn’t taken that shortcut back then, I wouldn’t have lost the gemstone...!”

Jeanette and Claus listened on in shock as the youth proceeded to reveal what had happened.

Back on that fateful day, the young man had been on his way back to the store with the extra Bairapa tourmalines they had procured. He’d been escorted by guards during the trip, and all of them were on horseback. However, they had already been behind schedule, and in his rush, the man had decided to take a shortcut through the slums, using a road which he usually wouldn’t have traversed.

“Halfway through, a beggar suddenly darted out in front of me. I tried to dodge out of the way, but my horse panicked and I ended up falling off its back... And as I did, the tourmalines which were packed inside a box spilled onto the street.”

The instant it happened, all the beggars had quickly swooped in to try and snatch the gemstones away.

“One of my escorts managed to salvage one of the tourmalines, but we lost the other one...” the youth concluded his retelling. “I’m sorry! It’s all my fault! If anyone is to be jailed, please, let it be me!” he begged, still pressing his head to the floor. Jeanette could surmise that he must’ve gotten injured during his fall from the horse, as one of his arms was bandaged up.

Guajardo stood up and walked over to the youth, bringing him up to his feet. “Accidents happen, and this wasn’t your fault. If anything, I should’ve come clean and told Duke Pablo about this incident. If I had done that, all of this could’ve been avoided... But instead, I gave in to the temptation of trying to conceal the missing tourmaline with an apatite.”

Apatite—a dreaded gemstone which could even fool appraisers. Swindling customers with it was utterly unpardonable, but seeing such an option at the time of an emergency... Jeanette tightened her fists, saying nothing.

“It was all because I gave in to temptation. I’ll take responsibility for it,” Guajardo said, letting out a heavy sigh.

Claus hesitated for a moment before slowly asking, “So... You still haven’t been able to find the lost tourmaline?”

“No,” Guajardo replied. “We’ve tried interrogating the beggars in that area, and we’ve even gone to the black market, but we haven’t managed to trace it. I was willing to pay any price to get it back, but apparently nobody had any information on it...”

High grade gemstones should be good fodder for black marketeers, Jeanette thought. *But if they really didn’t know about it, then perhaps it didn’t go for sale in the first place?*

While she was busy pondering, Guajardo looked up at her. Having admitted to and accepted his guilt, there was a note of clarity in his expression. “Could you relay a message to Duke Pablo from me? Tell him I won’t try to run or hide—I’ll accept my due punishment. All I ask for before I’m jailed is a bit of time to organize things for my employees and my family after I’m gone.”

“Very well...” said Jeanette. “I will let the duke know.”

At her words, Guajardo smiled in relief.

Once they left the jewelry store, Claus spoke up thoughtfully. “In the end, we still don’t know where the real tourmaline is. With that being the case, shall we make a brief stop at home to prepare and then head for the slums?”

Jeanette looked up at him in surprise. “What a coincidence! I was just thinking the same thing!” she said. *After all, if the black marketeers don’t know about it, then the tourmaline should still be somewhere in the slums!*

“If the black marketeers don’t know about it, then the tourmaline should still be in the slums. If that’s the case, I knew you’d want to go out there to search for it,” Claus said.

What?! Jeanette was startled to hear her exact thoughts echoed back to her, and wondered if Claus was reading her mind somehow. But when she looked up at him in a fluster, he was smiling his usual, serene smile. *I know he’s a brilliant man, but...surely he hasn’t learned how to read minds, has he?!*

With her heart pounding, Jeanette quickly made the preparations and then headed for the slums.

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The slums were lined with old, crumbling buildings, and people dressed in rags loitered in the streets. The devastation was palpable, and the air was so still it was hard to believe it was the middle of the day. Though a few people were scattered around here and there, it was nowhere near as busy as the city center, and everyone stared at Jeanette and Claus with hollow eyes.

The same was true for the birds—when Jeanette glanced up at the sound of the reverberating caws, she spotted a couple of crows nestled atop the buildings, their black pupils gawking down at them.

“The young man said he lost the tourmaline somewhere around here,” Jeanette said.

“We’re not all that far from the royal palace, yet the atmosphere around here is completely different...” Claus remarked in bewilderment. This must’ve been his first visit to the slums.

In contrast, Jeanette was completely unfazed, walking confidently onwards as though she was used to the place. “Please be careful, Lord Claus. If anyone else tries to get close to you, make sure to avoid them, and if you bump into anyone, check to make sure nothing has gone missing from your person.”

First, she went up to the people sitting around the streets. Claus thought she wanted to question them, but instead she slipped coins into their hands. Then, she entered a building so eerie that even Claus found himself shrinking back, and began conversing with the black marketeers gathered inside, who were smoking tobacco. Once their discussion was over, she began heading towards the next marketeers’ location.

“Huh,” Claus muttered with surprise. “You know these black marketeers?”

“Only some of them, but they’re actually quite kind,” Jeanette responded. “However, if you let your guard down, they’ll mercilessly rip you off for all you’re worth, so please watch out!”

“Should you really be saying that with such cheerfulness...?!”

While Claus was wracking his brain trying to comprehend this, Jeanette stepped out onto the road in order to head towards their next destination. At that exact moment, five thugs brandishing knives came darting out from the nearby alleyway.

“Oi! If you value your life, hand over all your valuables right now!” one of them growled.

“Oh! Please look, Lord Claus! Just as I said it, a bunch of ruffians appeared in front of me!”

“With how giddy you’re getting, it’s almost as if you *aren’t* being attacked by a bunch of hoodlums right now... But I suppose that’s a part of your charm,” Claus replied with a wry smile. Then, in a swift movement, he pulled out the sword he’d been carrying around his waist. Jeanette had advised him earlier that arming oneself was necessary when visiting the slums, and he’d ensured to prepare himself accordingly.

Upon seeing his action, the thugs snickered. “You think your noodle arms can do anything against us, rich boy?!”

“Ah, it’s no good to judge people based on their looks!” Claus said, laughing nonchalantly. Barely a moment later, the first thug’s knife went flying to the ground, and the man himself groaned as he was cut down too. Claus had brought him down with lightning speed.

“Your swordsmanship is as excellent as expected, Lord Claus!” Jeanette exclaimed, excited to witness Claus’s gallantry. “It may not be much, but please let me assist you as well!” She quickly fished around in her pochette, and then pulled out several egg-sized orbs. Then, aiming at one of the ruffians’ faces, she hurled them his way with all her might.

Seeing the balls heading towards him, the thug used his knives to deflect them. “Ha! That’s obviously not gonna—Gah?! What the hell?! My eyes!!!”

Indeed, the moment the blade of his knife made contact, the orbs burst open, and copious amounts of red powder whirled in the air around him. It was an extremely hot and painful chili powder, which was presently entering his eyes and mouth.

What Jeanette had just used were Safety Orbs of her own invention for use against ruffians. As a side note, she was thinking about selling them at some point in the future.

Taking advantage of the way the thug was screaming in agony, Claus swiftly cut him down as well. The remaining three thugs bellowed at the sight. “Think you’re a smartass?! Well, if that’s how it’s gonna be— Hey, where are you throwing that?!”

Jeanette had thrown one of the balls to the side of the thugs, where nobody was standing. Barely a moment later, a loud explosion resounded through the air as one of the men was slammed against the wall of a nearby building.

Even Claus was shocked by its power. “What the—Jeanette! Why are you carrying out such dangerous items?!”

In fact, even Jeanette herself was startled by what had happened. “I-It was just supposed to create a smokescreen! I may have used the wrong amount of gunpowder...” she explained. “Ah, but please don’t worry! That was the only prototype Smokescreen Ball I created!”

“Thank goodness... Well, thanks to you, another one of them’s out of the way. Leave the rest to me,” Claus said, and with a few swift movements, he easily cut down the remaining two thugs.

While the men screeched in pain, Claus grasped Jeanette’s hand and darted away. “Let’s get out of here before more of their ilk arrive!”

“Right! Then let’s go down this road!” Jeanette responded.

Though it was the beginning of autumn, the air was still warm. As the setting sun continued shining down, the two of them sprinted away with heavy breaths, their hands still joined together. The echo of the cawing crows reverberated around them the entire way.

Even as the sight of the thugs disappeared from view behind them, they continued running for a few moments, until Jeanette suddenly cried out. “Wait, Lord Claus! Look over there!”

“Huh? What is it?”

Jeanette pointed up at a scrawny tree, housing a bird’s nest.

Claus paused. “Is that...a crow’s nest?”

“Yes! I want to take a closer look!” Jeanette declared. She pulled up her skirt and began clambering her way up the tree.

“Jeanette?!” Claus uttered, taken aback. After a moment, he rushed over to her and held her up from behind.

“Wah! L-Lord Claus, what are you doing?!”

“I should be asking *you* that! Why are you so interested in some bird’s nest?!”

“I have a very good reason...! Anyway, please let go of me! I’m really heavy!”

“You’re as light as a feather. But how about you leave climbing the tree to me instead? It’s dangerous,” Claus said, and easily put Jeanette down back on the ground.

Light as a feather?! Jeanette thought. *That’s such a noble expression! Ah, well, Lord Claus is definitely a nobleman, but still... And he picked me up so easily!* She reddened at the thought of how surprisingly strong his arms had felt around

her.

Meanwhile, Claus began climbing up the tree with light movements. Once he reached the top, he peered inside the crow's nest. "There's nothing here."

"R-Really...? To be honest, I expected this might take some time. Shall we go find the next one?!" she suggested excitably.

"You mean you want to find more of these nests?"

"Yes! According to my source, that's where we can find *it*!" she explained, obviously referring to the missing tourmaline they were after.

Surely anyone else would've found her idea to search through bird nests for the missing jewel utterly ridiculous. But Claus didn't question her, merely nodding. "Then let's go right away. If we dawdle, night will fall before we know it."

"Right!"

And so the two of them spent the next three hours searching through crow's nests. Just as darkness set in around them, Claus pulled out a Bairapa tourmaline from a nest in the roof of a rundown building. Its blue-green hue shimmered under the white glow of the moon.

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"The missing tourmaline was once in the possession of someone living in the slums," Jeanette said. She and Claus were now in Duke Pablo's VIP lounge. After finding the tourmaline, Jeanette had embedded it into the necklace, which she now presented to the duke.

Duke Pablo took the necklace from her, and his face broke into a smile at the sight of its glittering gemstones. "Ah, so *that's* the real thing! Though...honestly speaking, I can't tell the difference at all. Still, why was it in a crow's nest?"

"Crows tend to like shiny things," Jeanette responded, and began explaining the events.

Originally, one of the slum-dwellers had stolen the tourmaline. But when the thieving youth had climbed a roof to admire the rare gem in his hand, its shininess had enticed a crow to swoop in and steal it from him in turn. The boy

had tried chasing after the bird, but ended up slipping and falling off the roof. Having hurt his leg in the fall, he couldn't climb back up to search for the gem. While he'd been sulking his loss, Jeanette had appeared asking about the tourmaline.

As a side note, the youth was invited to work for Matheson Trading in return for the information he provided Jeanette.

"I see. To think the tourmaline would wound up in a bird's nest of all places..." the duke remarked. "So, Claus, I take it the reason you're covered in wounds is because you'd gotten into some tussles with the crows?"

Claus, whose face and hands were indeed scratched up, smiled wryly. "Yes—I did rummage through their nests, after all. They pecked me quite aggressively."

"Your lovely face is all cut up, Lord Claus... I should've climbed the trees myself!" lamented Jeanette, her head drooping dejectedly.

Claus chuckled. "Not at all. I'm proud that I was able to protect your adorable face and hands from getting hurt," he told her. His violet eyes glimmered like amethysts as he gazed at her affectionately.

"Lord Claus..." she whispered. Last night, illuminated by moonlight, Claus's beauty had seemed almost inhuman. But the way he now smiled under the sun's rays was even more radiant. *His smile is dazzling as always!*

"Ahem..." Duke Pablo cleared his throat.

Jeanette, who'd been spellbound, quickly snapped back to her senses and fixed her posture. "Ah! P-Pardon me!"

The duke laughed in amusement. "It's lovely to see that you two get along so well. Still... I do believe I should visit Guajardo's and have a talk with him."

At the sound of that name, Claus also sat up straight. "There's no doubt about the fact that what he did was a crime. We could have him imprisoned on grounds of fraud."

Duke Pablo's expression was grave. "However, at least part of the blame lies with me for placing the order at such short notice. Fortunately, we found the missing tourmaline, and in consideration of Lady Jeanette's efforts, I don't think

we should turn the jeweler in to the guards."

Jeanette's expression brightened at his words. Guajardo might've fallen to the temptation of using an apatite, but he'd always been a hard-working and sincere man and she didn't wish to see him incarcerated.

"I think that's for the best! Maybe we should come up with some other way to punish Mr. Guajardo for his crime. For example, we could ask him to make a ring and a pair of earrings to match the necklace," she suggested.

The duke's eyes widened. "I was ready to simply acquit him, but... I see you're very thorough, Lady Jeanette!"

"Yes. After all, I *am* a businesswoman!"

Both of the men chuckled at her exclamation.

The necklace, now fully embedded with Bairapa tourmalines, emitted a brilliant light as it glittered and sparkled.

Chapter 4: Orlonde Silk

A few days had passed since the incident with the necklace. Jeanette was in her room within the Guivarch mansion, dressing herself with Sara's help.

"Um... Are you sure about this makeup, Sara? Doesn't it look strange? I mean, it's so light... My face is really plain, so I'm worried people will laugh at me..." Jeanette fretted anxiously, gazing at herself in the mirror.

In her reflection, her red hair was arranged in a trendy updo, and the corners of her eyes were marked with a thin, light line of blue. Unlike her usually strong, dark makeup, the extremely minimal dab of color seemed almost unbelievably faint to her.

"You poor thing, Jeanette... Your face is just so plain! At least let me pick some nice makeup for you." Her stepmother used to say that to her for many years, choosing strong cosmetics to cover Jeanette's face with.

For Jeanette, the idea of going out in front of other people with this light makeup was as embarrassing as if she were only in her undergarments.

But while she was protesting, Sara tightened her fists and began a fervent speech. "It's not strange at all! I've always been waiting for the day when I'd finally be able to do your makeup for you, milady! This look really brings out your beauty, splendor, and adorableness, and I think I did a great job with it! Oh, my goodness! You truly look like a goddess who has descended into high society! Just thinking of how everyone will react when they see you is making me drool!"

"R-Really...? Well, as long as you think it doesn't look weird, then fine..."

"I'm sure Lord Claus will compliment you as well. Now, you're all set! Off you go to the ball!" Sara declared cheerfully.

Jeanette still felt awkward, but at Sara's urging, she stood up. You see, she and Claus had been invited to Duke Pablo's residence to celebrate his and his wife's twentieth wedding anniversary.

Exiting her room, she headed towards the reception hall, where Claus was

waiting for her. However, when he noticed her arrival, his eyes grew wide, as if he'd just seen a ghost. "Jeanette...?!" he croaked, lost for words.

Jeanette's face paled at his reaction. *Oh no! My face is uncomely after all! Lord Claus is totally petrified!*

"I'm sorry! It *does* look weird, doesn't it?!" she cried, quickly turning on her heel. "Sara, I know you tried, but let's redo the makeup right awa—!"

"No, wait!" Claus called out, hurriedly stopping her. "Keep it as it is! Please, do *not* change your makeup!"

Jeanette timidly glanced at him as he gripped her by the arm.

"I'm sorry. I already knew you were a beauty, but you look so stunning that I couldn't get a word out," he explained, and for some reason his face flushed a little.

Me? A beauty? Perhaps Lord Claus hit his head...? Jeanette worried.

"I must confess..." Claus murmured. "I have mixed feelings on the matter. I want to be the only one who's ever gotten to see your bare face, but at the same time, I want to show off your beauty to everyone... I've never felt this way before."

It's my first time seeing him like this too! His face is red, and he's saying all manner of strange things... Ah! Could it be?! Jeanette stood on her tiptoes and pressed her hand to his forehead. "Lord Claus, did you catch a cold?! Oh no! We must call for a doctor!"

"No, that's not the case at all..." he responded, and for some reason, burst into laughter. After a moment, he gently grasped her hand, and kissed the back of it.

"Waaah?! You're acting really strange today, Lord Claus! I really think you might have a fever!"

"I don't. By the way, this dress suits you perfectly. What is it? I've never seen this fabric before," Claus said.

Embarrassment all but forgotten, Jeanette instantly brightened at his words. "Oh, this is actually a very special fabric!" she exclaimed happily, grasping the

hem of the dress and spinning around to show off its material.

The blue gown she was wearing was made with Orlonde silk. The line of the dress was simple and elegant, and the skirt was flowy in the back. At a glance, it looked like a normal blue dress, but the shade at each angle was slightly different, glimmering wonderfully like the night sky.

“It’s marvelous,” Claus said, sounding impressed. “It’s beautiful enough from afar, but it looks almost magical under the light. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s bright and shimmery without being gaudy. Just like the evening star in the night sky, I’m sure this dress will draw everyone’s eye.”

“Exactly! That’s Orlonde silk’s greatest characteristic! A merchant acquaintance from Yafruska introduced me to it...”

“Oh? And just when have you managed to make such connections?” Claus inquired. Then he seemed to have realized something, and added, “Ah, could it be you’re planning to sell this next?”

“Yes!” Jeanette nodded. “The silk is quite expensive, so I was worried I couldn’t pull it off, but... I thought the nobles of high society might be interested if they saw it!” she explained, though after a moment, she looked disheartened. “But I think I’m out of my depth in this... What now? Should I request another lady wear it instead...?”

While she fussed, Claus smiled warmly. “Not at all. You are not out of your depth, I assure you. If anything, you’re the only one who can make this gown shine to its fullest tonight. It won’t be just the ladies looking at you—I think you’ll have *everyone’s* attention on you.”

“R-Really?! Now that you said that, I feel a bit more confident...!” Jeanette responded bashfully.

Claus gently placed his arm around her waist. “The pearl accessories I gave you really complete the look. You truly look like a goddess cloaked in the night sky itself.”

“Lord Claus, that’s perfect! ‘Cloaked in the night sky’... Let’s use that as the sales pitch for this fabric!”

“Oh, right... That’s not what I meant, though... Still, as long as you’re happy,”

Claus said, pressing a hand to his forehead with mixed emotions.

Observing the two of them from behind, Sara giggled to herself.

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Jeanette and Claus were in front of the gates to Grand Velo Castle's dancehall. Claus was dressed in a tailcoat in such a dark shade of blue that it almost looked black, and he had a pearl pin to match with Jeanette. "Well, shall we go?" he asked, offering his hand to her. His lovely eyes were both cool and sweet at the same time. He had a strong nose, and a pair of thin, elegant lips. His features were the definition of handsomeness, as if he'd been hand-molded into perfection.

Here we go...! Jeanette thought, taking a deep breath to calm her pounding heart. Then, she clasped Claus's outstretched hand, and stepped forward.

Moments later, the guide called out in a loud voice: "Count Claus Guivarch, and his fiancée, Lady Jeanette Roussel!"

The view of Grand Velo Castle's gorgeous ballroom opened up before them, its ceiling covered in stunning paintings. It was decked out in all manner of decorations to mark the occasion, and the glimmering chandelier above served as the symbol of Duke Pablo's fortune and authority. All the visitors were dressed to the nines too, to match with the atmosphere of the place.

Her face nervous, Jeanette linked her arm with Claus's, and the two of them stepped inside the hall.

When the other guests noticed Jeanette's appearance, many exclaimed in shock.

"Is that...Jeanette Roussel? The upstart?!" someone cried.

"It can't be... Her face looks completely different!" another responded. "She wasn't always this pretty, was she?!"

"Still, I *do* know of the Roussels. And the man next to her is her fiancé, Claus."

"Did she change her makeup? She's so beautiful..." murmured another man.

"Excuse me?!" the lady next to him shrieked. "You're supposed to be *my* escort! Don't you dare look at some other woman!"

“Wait... What is that dress she’s wearing?” inquired another lady. “It’s lovely... I want to see it up close!”

The guests’ chattering continued on and on. Their voices were too loud to count as whispers, but Jeanette did her best not to let her embarrassment show as she kept her head held high.

I’m used to everyone laughing at me, but I don’t know what to make of everyone’s reactions today... Still, I feel like they’re sneaking glances at my dress and complimenting it...!

While Jeanette was bewildered by the situation, Claus seemed incredibly happy for some reason. “Look, Jeanette. Everyone’s taken by your beauty,” he told her, and his smile was so lovingly sweet that the other ladies let out dreamy sighs at the sight.

He’s obviously the beautiful one between the two of us! Jeanette thought with a frown.

RIght then, a voice called out to them. “Oh! Claus, Lady Jeanette! Glad to see you came!”

The hosts of today’s event, the Pablo couple, were heading towards Jeanette and Claus. The duke had a joyful, satisfied smile on his face, with his beautiful wife Christine by his side. Upon the woman’s pale, slender neck was a large, bright necklace made up of Bairapa tourmalines, glittering away flawlessly.

“Thank you for inviting us, Your Excellency,” Claus responded.

Duke Pablo patted Claus’s arm in good humor. “It’s all thanks to the two of you. I was able to give my wife the necklace after all—you really saved me back there.”

“My, did something happen?” asked Christine, apparently unaware of the events.

“Just a little something! Ha ha ha!” The duke laughed, evading the question. He probably didn’t want to admit that he’d been swindled into buying a fake jewel. When he turned back to face Jeanette, his demeanor was so jolly that it was almost as if his temper during their first meeting had been a lie. “Lady Jeanette, if you ever need my help with anything, don’t be afraid to ask! I know

you've been going through a lot all this time too. Just think of me as your second father—if I can be of use, I'll do anything for you!"

"Thank you so much, Your Excellency! I'm happy enough just being invited here!" Jeanette replied.

It had been a week since she and Claus had run around searching for the lost tourmaline. Nobody could've expected they'd have to deal with aggressive thugs or fishing through crow nests, but in the end, they managed to safely deliver the completed necklace to Duke Pablo. Ever since that incident, the man had been extremely happy, and began doting on Jeanette as if she were his own daughter.

"Goodness, I think this is the first time I've ever seen you treat a lady so kindly," Christine remarked.

The duke hurriedly turned to her. "Y-You're still my number one, Christine! Don't take it the wrong way. I was just thinking that maybe this is what it'd feel like to have a daughter of my own..."

"Hee hee... I know very well that I'm your number one, so I'm not jealous," she asserted. "But yes, our house is full of boys... Wouldn't it be nice if we could try having at least one girl?"

The duke's face flushed at his wife's audacious proposal. "Christine! Y-You mean...?!"

"Oh my, we're still in public, *darling*. Let's continue this *after* the party..."

A-Are they having some kind of adult conversation?! Jeanette turned bright red at the flirty atmosphere unfolding before her eyes.

The duchess chuckled. "Apologies for leaving you behind, Lady Jeanette. By the way, what is that dress you're wearing? It has a brilliant shine to it I've never seen before."

Jeanette's face lit up at the compliment. "Oh, this dress is made of Orlonde silk! It's a new kind of fabric that I plan to start selling soon...!"

"Selling? You?" Christine asked, raising her eyebrows.

Jeanette gasped. *Oh no! Working is seen as bad among high society, but I let*

it slip by accident! Women working in commerce were especially looked down on, to the point that even her fiancé Claus could face criticism in the light of it.

But even so... Jeanette cast her eyes down. *This may be heresy, but I don't think of working as something to be ashamed of. Lord Claus even told me before that being of use to society through your own means is a wonderful thing. If I act ashamed here, it'd be like stepping all over his feelings too!*

With that on her mind, she once again lifted her face and looked into Christine's eyes. "Yes, *I* will be selling it. The truth is...I love business."

She recalled the way Sara's eyes had sparkled when Jeanette had invented an extendable feather duster. *"Milady, this is so useful! You can easily reach every corner of the room without overstretching yourself!"*

"I've come to realize that nothing brings me more joy than seeing people smile because of the things I've worked on," she continued.

"Nothing beats the hand cream you sell!" One of her father's acquaintances had once told her. *"My wife's really pleased with it—she says her skin doesn't go dry even in the winter. Can I order some more?"*

"I'm grateful to be able to sell my products, having my clients thank me in turn, making connections with people I would've never expected otherwise... In the end, I think all of that can lead to my own happiness too." As she spoke, the faces of those who'd supported her flashed in her mind.

"My lady!"

"Jeanette!"

"Lady Jeanette!"

"That's why..." Jeanette went on, looking into Christine's eyes with a serious expression. "I'm really sorry if the idea of a working noblewoman puts you off. But I really love business, and it's something I take pride in doing!" she proclaimed, her heart pounding and her face flushed with emotion.

I said it... I finally said it!

The duke and duchess were both startled by her passionate display. A moment later, someone spoke up.

“Pfft... Did you hear that? That girl’s going on about her business as usual. What a vulgar thing for a lady to be doing. Typical nouveau riche nonsense!”

At first, Jeanette had thought it was Christine, but the one who’d spoken was in fact a young noble lady standing nearby. Yet Jeanette’s expression didn’t change, and she just tightened her fists. *I’ve heard things like this all the time until now. It doesn’t bother me at all!*

However, Christine furrowed her brows as she regarded the girl who’d laughed snidely at Jeanette. “My, is that what you think? I don’t feel that way at all.”

Lady Christine?! Jeanette exclaimed inwardly at those unexpected words. Duke Pablo and Claus seemed just as surprised as her.

While everyone watched, Christine coldly addressed the girl. “Money is very important. The reason that nobles like us—and even the royalty themselves—are able to live as we do is because of all the hard-working people in our nation. How preposterous of you to mock the idea of labor. Even I, a former member of the royal family, would never do such a thing... Do you think of yourself as some sort of god?”

At those solemn words, the young lady paled. “My apologies...! I never meant anything like that...!”

“Then hold your tongue. I won’t tolerate anyone insulting my guests.”

“O-Of course! My deepest, sincerest apologies!” The girl continued apologizing for a short while, before she and the man accompanying her quickly vacated the scene.

As Christine watched them retreat, she let out a deep sigh. “Goodness, who even was that? I see the idea that working noblewomen should be ashamed of themselves has spread all over!”

“Ahh, well, you know, it’s a trendy way of thinking nowadays...” Duke Pablo, who was supposed to be a hard conservative, smiled dryly as he said this.

The duchess turned to Jeanette and offered her a gentle smile. “I’ve always thought that noblewomen should be allowed to work if they want to. We should be allowed to shine outside of the house. Just the fact you can do

business is already wonderful enough, but I think it's fantastic that you have such conviction! I've already lost my chance, but please, let me support you in what you do!"

Jeanette could tell that Christine was speaking from the heart by the kind yet powerful shine in her pupils. *I'm so glad...! To think Lady Christine would say such a thing!* Jeanette thought, and she felt so moved that tears sprung to her eyes.

The duchess clasped both of Jeanette's hands to soothe her. "You mentioned earlier that you plan to sell dresses made of the same fabric as the one you're wearing, yes? In that case, would you sell the very first one to me? I'd love to be your first client."



This was better than anything Jeanette could've dreamed of. Her face broke

into a joyous smile. “Of course! No, in fact, please allow me to give you the dress as a present!” she requested. If someone as beautiful and highly regarded as Christine wore the dress, it was sure to become a hit practically overnight. The flood of orders for Orlonde silk gowns was as good as guaranteed at this point.

“How wonderful! I’m sure the two of us will get along splendidly!”

Jeanette and Christine chatted cheerfully for a while, until Claus noticed the line forming behind them. He went up to whisper into Jeanette's ear: "All right, we should get going. The other guests also want to bid their greetings to the hosts."

"Okay!" she replied, then turned back to Christine. "We'll be going now!"

She and Claus then headed towards the ballroom. The opulent chandelier glittered up above and music began playing right as they entered, as if the band had been waiting for their arrival.

Claus gently held out his arm towards Jeanette. "Please give me at least one dance."

"Of course!" Jeanette said happily, taking his hand.

With that, the two of them stepped into the dance hall. A lively waltz was playing, and Jeanette's dress swayed as she moved to the music. Each time her gown fluttered, the expansive night sky upon it glimmered. Its beauty drew the eye of the crowd, many of whom oohed and aahed at the sight.

"Look at her dress! It's *so* pretty!"

"I wonder where it's from? The duchess was really impressed with it too, right?"

"I've never seen that kind of fabric... It looks like stars in the sky!"

Jeanette grinned at the murmurs she could hear from around her. "Lord Claus! I get the feeling that Lady Christine's approval is already in effect!"

"She did play a part, yes, but don't forget about the fact that you look beautiful, Jeanette," Claus told her. Her eyes widened when she realized he was speaking Yafruskan.

"Huh?" she uttered, and then responded to him in Yafruskan as well. "Lord Claus, why are you speaking in Yafruskan?"

"It'll make it harder for anyone to eavesdrop on us, no?" Claus replied as he spun her around, and this time he spoke in Norvian, the official language of the Voltaire Empire.

Jeanette stepped along with his movements so as not to trip and replied in Norvian as well. “But there are plenty of people who’ve studied both of those languages,” she pointed out.

Claus chuckled at her composed argument. “True enough. Then how about the language I’m speaking now—Thoren?”

“Few would be familiar with it, I think... But wait, do you have some big secret to share?”

“No. I just don’t want to let anyone else hear the affections I’ll be whispering to you.”

“A-Affections?!” Jeanette squeaked.

In tune to the music, Claus pulled her closer against his chest and whispered into her ear. “You look truly divine tonight, Jeanette. You are my very own goddess,” he told her, and he’d once again smoothly switched languages—this time, he was speaking Digayan.

Jeanette’s ears reddened, but she managed to respond in Digayan as well. “What happened to you tonight, Lord Claus?! You’re being way too bold! You *do* have a fever, don’t you?!”

“I’m telling you that I don’t. Besides, my friend would laugh if he heard you claim the things I’ve said so far are ‘bold’.”

“Now you’re speaking Pakiran?! A-And it sounds like your friend is quite passionate!” Jeanette exclaimed.

“That’s right. I met him in Yafruska during my studies, but he was as passionate as a Pakiran,” Claus explained. “He’s always pestering me about introducing you to him, but... Honestly, I don’t want you to meet him.”

“You don’t?”

“You’re such a beauty, after all. I wouldn’t want to purposefully increase the number of my rivals, now would I?”

“Beauty? But I’m not...”

“You are, Jeanette. You’re beautiful,” he insisted in a gentle whisper. “Perhaps you’ve become convinced of a lie because of your stepmother, but

until you realize the truth, I'll repeat it as many times as it takes. You're beautiful, Jeanette."

She was startled by the serious look in his eyes. "Lord Claus...!" she cried out. Despite the fact they were dancing in a wide ballroom, the fact that the two of them were conversing in different languages than all those around them made her feel like the two of them were in a world of their own.

His audaciousness keeps embarrassing me, but for some reason, I'm having a lot of fun! Jeanette thought as her heart pounded in her chest. She'd always been the laughingstock of high society, so she'd try to conceal her own presence during balls so as not to embarrass Claus. But tonight, the scenery around her was so dazzling that even she found it hard to believe that she normally disliked such events.

I bet it's because Lady Christine stood up for me! Nobody's laughed at me since then. Thanks to that, I don't have to worry about how I'm being perceived by others, and can fully focus on dancing with Lord Claus!

Claus had always been a kind man, but tonight he was even more so. On top of that, he kept murmuring unbelievably sweet words of love to Jeanette, making her head spin. *He's treating me like I'm some princess from a fairytale!* she thought.

Once the song ended, Claus went to fetch Jeanette a drink. As he walked away, she hurriedly flicked her own cheeks. *Oh no! I'm on the verge of grinning! I have to keep a straight face!*

At that moment, Jeanette heard a familiar voice call out to her. "Just what are you frolicking around for, dear sister? How unsightly!"

Jeanette turned around and came face to face with Ariel, clad in a pink dress. Next to her was Leila, adorned in a red gown.

"Ariel! Mother! You're both here too!" Jeanette exclaimed, smiling sweetly. *Looks like they're kitted out in sparkling glass bead decorations today too... I wonder if that's some kind of new trend? I'll have to research this later!*

In contrast to her warm smile, the two women seemed to be in a terrible mood. Leila let out a long sigh before speaking up. "Goodness... Why are you

sticking out so much? Are you trying to lower our family's dignity? I mean, just what is going on with that makeup of yours tonight? I thought I already told you how plain your face is."

"Exactly!" Ariel chimed in. "And what's with that dress? It's *so* over the top—you look like a harlot!"

"A harlot...? But Duchess Christine complimented this fabric earlier..." Jeanette muttered.

At the sound of that name, Ariel flinched. She, a mere daughter of a baron, had just disparaged a gown that a duchess had praised. Upon realizing as much, she scowled deeply. "Ahem! I must've misperceived it at first. It's a very elegant and pretty dress."

"Thank you! I'm so glad to hear that!" Jeanette responded. *To think that even Ariel's complimenting it...! Lady Christine is truly incredible! Today is one good thing after another!*

As Jeanette beamed happily at Ariel, Leila took a step closer to her, apparently unable to bear it anymore. "Just *what* is going on with you?!" she hissed quietly so that nobody else would hear her. "Getting all friendly with Duke Pablo...! What kind of underhanded means did you use to get close to him?!"

"Oh, that's all thanks to you, mother! You really helped me out with that!" Jeanette answered.

"*Me*...?!" Leila asked, bewildered.

"Yes!" Jeanette said brightly. "Thanks to all the rewards you and Ariel gave me, I was able to help His Excellency with a crisis he was having!"

Leila's attitude switched completely at those words and she suddenly grew restless. She almost seemed like a flustered maiden facing a beautiful nobleman. "O-Oh? I don't really know what you mean, but if you're saying it was thanks to *me*... Did you make sure to tell the duke as much?"

"Yes! He was very inquisitive, so I made sure to tell him everything! Like how thanks to your tough love, I was able to develop a strong mentality. Or how I had to find ways to get all kinds of items for you on short notice whenever you

wanted them. Or how you cast me out of the house for some reaso—”

“Stop, stop, *stop*!!! You told him all of that too?!” Leila asked in a panic.

Jeanette beamed at her. “I did! I also mentioned how you inventively called me a sow, and the duke was really surprised by it! And when I told him how Ariel calls me a slut, he was moved to tears!”

Leila gasped—or perhaps it was Ariel? Whichever one it was, both of them had grown pale as a sheet.

“O-Oh dear... Are you two feeling all right?” Jeanette asked with concern. “You look a bit unwell...” Jeanette reached out her hand towards Leila.

“Don’t touch me!” Leila exclaimed. She slapped Jeanette’s hand away, but in her anger her hand kept going and smacked Ariel square in the face.

“Wah!” Ariel shrieked, and at the same time, the necklace she was wearing broke apart noisily. All the pink glass beads clattered to the floor and broke apart, causing Ariel to screech even louder. “No! My pink sapphires!”

Pink sapphires? Jeanette echoed inwardly, cocking her head to the side.

Meanwhile, Ariel kept screaming pitifully while staring down at the broken beads. “How cruel, Jeanette! No matter how much you hate me, I can’t believe you’d do something like this!” she cried. Though it was Leila who’d hit her, apparently in Ariel’s mind, Jeanette was to blame.

It was at that moment that Claus returned with a drink for Jeantte in his hand. “What’s going on?” he asked her.

“Well... Ariel’s necklace fell and broke apart when mother hit her,” Jeanette explained, while the other two women kept making a racket next to her.

“This is all *your* fault, sister!”

“Th-That’s right! I was just shaken up because of the bizarre things you were saying!” Leila claimed.

Their shrill voices began drawing the attention of the rest of the guests. *Oh no!* Jeanette thought anxiously. *This is supposed to be a ball for the duke and duchess’s wedding anniversary! I don’t want to cause a disturbance!* She was already used to having false accusations thrown her way, so that was of no

concern to her. She just didn't want to hinder what was supposed to be a happy celebration.

With that on her mind, Jeanette stepped forward. "I will compensate you for the necklace, so please tell me: which workshop are those glass beads from?"

"Huh? Glass?" Ariel repeated, staring at Jeanette in disbelief. "What are you talking about? These are all specially selected pink sapphires."

"What? But..." Jeanette was baffled. This wasn't a matter of different regions of origin or the number of carats—glass was glass, no matter what. Not to mention, if those beads had been actual sapphires, they wouldn't have shattered upon impacting the floor.

"Jeanette!" Leila shouted at the perplexed girl. "Stop making false accusations! These are real gemstones I bought from a trustworthy merchant! They're definitely not glass!"

"Mother... Do you recall the name of that merchant? Or the name of their company?"

"Indeed, he's a lovely gentleman... Ahem! I mean to say, he's a merchant with backbone! And his name is Barthelemy," proclaimed Leila, her cheeks reddening slightly as she spoke.

Jeanette clasped her hand over her mouth. *Barthelemy?! He's an infamous swindler around these parts!* He was a man who put on a sweet façade and used his conversation skills to entice noblewomen into buying counterfeit jewelry. Once, he'd tried to do the same to Jeanette, but naturally she recognized his gemstones as fakes and asked him to take them back. Realizing she wouldn't be an easy target, he should've stayed away from her house, and yet...

"What's the matter?" asked Claus with knitted brows.

Jeanette leaned in to whisper into his ear. "It seems like mother and Ariel were swindled into buying glass made to look like gemstones..."

"I see," he responded in understanding, surveying their surroundings. "Leave this to me." Following this, Claus whispered something into Leila's ear in turn.

The woman grew pale. “Is that really true...?!”

“Yes. If you don’t believe me, I can introduce you to an appraiser I know. Though, it may be more embarrassing for *you* if you make a fuss about this situation... I mean, everyone will find out about how you were fooled into buying glass.”

Leila’s breath hitched at his words. Still looking pallid, she roughly grabbed Ariel by the arm. “I... I feel unwell today! We’re going home, Ariel!”

“Huh? But mother, the ball has only just started...” Ariel complained.

Jeanette watched the two women nervously. Up until now, she and her father acted as a barrier blocking any strange people from getting to the family. But the second she left the house, a swindler like Barthelemy quickly sniffed out the opportunity.

Oh no, is mother going to be okay? Jeanette fretted. *Aside from her lavish spending, if father were to find out that she was swindled like that, I bet he’d be really sad!*

House Roussel were a family of upstarts who deviated from some of the norms among high society. However, they also upheld their own virtue: *“Spend money generously, but never buy forgeries.”* These were Jeanette’s father’s words, but they might as well have been their family motto. Thinking of that, she vowed to herself that she’d send a letter to the family butler, Gilbert, reminding him to stay alert.

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“Milady, more additional letters have arrived for you! Gilbert’s also forwarded some which had arrived at House Roussel but were addressed to you,” said Sara.

“Thank you! Could you please add them to that pile of letters over there?” Jeanette requested.

It was the evening after the ball at Grand Velo Castle. Jeanette had received a flood of inquiries about the Orlonde silk, both from women interested in commissioning her for a gown for their personal use, as well as gentlemen who wanted to order a gift for their beloveds. Presently, she and Claus were opening

the letters one by one in her room.

It seemed that even after their conversation was over, the duke and duchess continued bringing up the Orlonde silk throughout the party. Thanks to that, the topic of Jeanette and the special fabric had spread among the people in a single day.

“Duke and Duchess Pablo are something else! I don’t usually get invited to balls, so I can’t even remember the last time I’ve had this many letters!” Jeanette exclaimed.

Shortly after her engagement to Claus, Ariel began spreading unpleasant rumors about Jeanette, so most of the other noblewomen had no interest in befriending her. But now, she even recognized many of the senders’ names, most of whom she hadn’t heard from in quite a while.

“At this rate, my current supply of silk might run out very fast! I’ll have to start negotiations to see if I can increase my supply...!” Jeanette said, racking her brain on how to handle the situation.

Meanwhile Claus, who was next to her, was looking over the various senders of the letters. “Lady Dorothea, Lady Caroline, Lady Colette... So many of these are from the very same women who always disparaged you. Look how quickly they changed their tune the moment Duke Pablo took a liking to you... We could learn from them,” he remarked. Though he spoke with a smile, his eyes were like ice.

Jeanette’s eyes widened at the sudden chill in the air. “Lord Claus... You have a good memory, don’t you?! By now, disparaging me has become so common in the aristocratic world that I can hardly tell those who do it apart from the rest...”

“I can tell. Despite appearances, I’m actually the kind of man who holds a grudge. I haven’t forgotten a single person who’s said bad things about you.” Claus’s smile was terrifyingly beautiful.

Waaah! I feel like I’ve seen this kind of smile from Lord Claus a lot lately... Is he angry...? Jeanette wondered, trembling in fear.

Claus kept smiling as though nothing was wrong. “Do you plan to sell the silk

to these women?”

“Of course! They’re my clients now!” she responded. All that mattered to her was whether they’d become customers who purchased products from her.

Claus, however, had different feelings on the matter. “In that case,” he said, still with that disturbing smile. “How about you double the price for those ladies I mentioned earlier, as well as every person I name from now on?”

“Huh? Is it really fine for us to just increase the price for certain people...?”

“It is,” Claus insisted. “They’ll have to oblige so long as we say that our stock is running short and supply is scarce. Besides...I’m sure they’re well aware of what they did.”

Jeanette nodded. “All right. If that’s your suggestion, Lord Claus, then so be it! In any case, we really *are* going to run out of stock if things keep going like this...”

With Claus’s help, Jeanette hurriedly made a list of people who had been speaking ill of her. Most people might’ve become discouraged upon doing something like that, but Jeanette was perfectly fine. In fact, she was quite energized.

“Wait, I got it!” she gasped. “Maybe all of these people were deliberately disparaging me as a pretext for today?!”

“No, I really don’t think that’s the case,” Claus said, smiling at Jeanette’s completely off-the-mark interpretation.

Sara, who was nearby, giggled quietly.

Once Jeanette finished writing all the replies, she and Claus went to visit Matheson Trading’s main store. Claus had set it up in the perfect location, right in the heart of the best district in the city. When they entered, he promptly introduced Jeanette to all the employees.

“From now on, my fiancée Jeanette will be Matheson’s vice-president. Her words are my words,” he told them.

Jeanette took an anxious step forward. “Nice to meet you, everyone! My

name's Jeanette Roussel. I may be a greenhorn, but I promise to give this everything I've got! I hope we can get along!"

A murmur rippled through the employees, all of whom were wearing matching aprons. *Huh? Have I seen these aprons somewhere before...?* Jeanette pondered. *Maybe it's just my imagination.*

The employees stared at her in excitement, and one of them called out: "So you're Lady Jeanette? As in, *that* Jeanette Roussel?!"

"The very same one who creates hit products, one after the other?!" someone else asked.

"For such a person to be in this store... What an honor!"

Jeanette blinked in surprise at the way they all gazed at her with sparkling eyes. *This is a much warmer reception than I expected... How do they even know of me?*

Sensing her confusion, Claus spoke up. "They're all fans of the multipurpose apron that you worked on."

"Ah!" Jeanette nodded in understanding.

"Exactly!" said one of the female employees as she stepped forward. "Actually, I liked that apron so much that I requested for Lord Claus to incorporate it as part of our official uniform!"

"I thought it looked familiar! So it really *is* the apron I worked on," Jeanette responded. "Thank you for wearing it!" she exclaimed, happily clasping the other girl's hand.

Indeed, Jeanette had made a multipurpose apron designed for working women. It had a built-in function to prevent pickpockets and petty thieves, as well as plenty of pockets that could hold anything from purses to mallets. The apron was so useful that some even called it a toolbox, and though it had been primarily aimed at women, it ended up being very popular with men as well.

Back when they were selling it, they used *"The invention of Jeanette, House Roussel's daughter!"* as the marketing slogan, so that must've been why the employees knew her name.

“I’ve always been a fan of yours!” exclaimed the girl whose hands Jeanette was holding, her cheeks tinted pink. “I’m so glad we’ll get to work together!”

“Me too!” chimed in one of the men. “Let’s make sure we sell plenty of that Orlonde silk too!”

“We’ll do everything we can to support you, Lady Jeanette!” added the first girl.

“Goodness...! This is wonderful! Thank you all so much!” cried Jeanette. Among nobility, she’d always been the target of malicious gossip, with people calling her vulgar and a nouveau riche. Hence, to hear such nice words from the employees was enough to make Jeanette tear up from joy.

“What do you think, Jeanette? The workers here are great, aren’t they?” Claus prompted, gazing tenderly at the emotional Jeanette.

“Yes! Everyone is so kind... It’s no wonder, since you’re the one who chose them, Lord Claus!” she said, speaking highly of him from the bottom of her heart.

He chuckled. “Truth is, during the interview process, I assigned the applicants a small task. I had them write a short essay expressing their opinion of Baroness Jeanette Roussel.”

“Huh?” Jeanette murmured. *He had them write an essay about* me*? What on earth?!* she thought, dubious to hear about this unexpected development.

Seeing her bewilderment, Claus laughed lightly again as his face reddened. “Everyone was singing your praises in hopes of getting employed, but I could tell at a glance when they weren’t being sincere. But *these* guys were the real deal,” he said, referring to his current employees. “They were aware of your excellence and the superiority of your merchandise. I’ve really enjoyed working with them myself.”

“‘Th-The real deal’...”

“Of course, all that said, *I’m* still the president of The Jeanette Association,” Claus added.

“‘The Jeanette Association’...” Jeanette’s eyes darted about in a daze as she

heard one strange term after another.

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One month had passed since the disgrace Leila and Ariel had faced during the ball at Grand Velo Castle.

“Mother, listen... I really want that shiny material that Jeanette’s been selling. Couldn’t you try ordering some for me?” Ariel asked, pestering her mother in her usual sweet tone of voice.

However, Leila was biting her nails in irritation. “Stop it! I don’t need *you* talking about that girl too!”

“But all the other noblewomen are wearing gowns made with that fabric! It’s so pretty, and I don’t want to be the only one behind on the fashion!” Ariel whined.

Indeed, shortly after the ball, Jeanette sent the duchess a gown made of Orlonde silk as a token of gratitude. The duchess was enamored with it, and constantly recommended it during any salons she attended. As a result, Orlonde silk skyrocketed to popularity among the aristocrats, becoming known as “Duchess Pablo’s favorite item”. Everyone waited with anticipation, and so soon as Matheson Trading opened sales for Orlonde silk, they were flooded with orders.

At this stage, acquiring the silk itself had become incredibly difficult, no matter how much money one could cough up.

“You’re being stingy! You should just tell Jeanette to bring it to us, like always!” Ariel asserted, pursing her lips.

Leila breathed out a heavy sigh. *Gracious! Everyone just keeps going on and on about her. Jeanette this, Jeanette that...* I’m *the head of this family! And yet the servants keep quitting... Just what is going on?!*

Their meals were still being prepared by an apprentice cook, and because the workers kept leaving, the mansion was constantly dusty. But what infuriated Leila most of all was the fact that all the servants who left her house went to where Jeanette was instead—the Guivarch estate.

Claus is just as bad! I can't believe he'd just ignore all the favors I've done for him until now and choose Jeanette... I was going to support him because he's good-looking, but what a maddening brat he turned out to be!

In reality, the one who'd been supporting Claus was Baron Roussel. However, in Leila's mind, that counted as her own distinguished deed too.

I was hoping Jeanette would disappear from high society, but instead she had her comeback because of the duchess! Ugh... I'm furious! Isn't there something I can do to make that Jeanette into a fool?!

While Leila stewed in her anger, Ariel, who'd been looking out the window, spoke up. "Oh? Mother, look. That man they're turning away from the gates—isn't that your favorite merchant? Barthelemy, was it?"

"Favorite merchant?! That man sold us counterfeit jewels! Did you already forget the humiliation we faced as a result?!" Leila shrieked. Just remembering how all the gems he sold her were actually glass beads made her face burn with shame. *I don't care how handsome he is—what he did is unforgivable!!!* she thought with resentment.

"Oh my," Ariel spoke up again. "Look at what he's carrying... Isn't that the fabric Jeanette is selling?! It's so sparkly and pretty! I want to go see it!"

"Wait, Ariel! Stop!" Leila shouted, but her daughter had already dashed away.

A few minutes later, the young swindler was standing before Leila, smiling sweetly as he gripped the shimmering fabric in his hands. "Madam! What an honor to meet with you again! I'm so sorry that my lack of critical eye caused you such shame! It's been a while since I've seen you, but now I'm convinced—though everyone's been singing the praises of Duchess Pablo lately, in my opinion, *you* should be the belle of high society, Lady Leila!"

Despite her irritation, Leila attentively listened to Barthelemy's flowery words. *Humph! What a con man... Still, at the very least he understands. Everyone's making a fuss about the duchess since she's former royalty, but if the circumstances of my birth had been different, I'm sure* I'd *be standing in her place right now.*

All that said, she still hadn't forgiven him for selling her counterfeit goods. She

turned away from him with a huff.

Barthelemy continued speaking to her in a wheedling voice. “My apologies for what you had to go through because of my error. As a way of apology, I’ve brought something that I’ll be offering to you and you alone, Lady Leila.”

“You say that, but you’re just trying to swindle me again, aren’t you? I won’t play into your hands. You should leave,” Leila responded bluntly.

“Ah, but according to my information...” Barthelemy began, smiling meaningfully. “You have some reservations when it comes to your stepdaughter, Lady Jeanette, no?”

“Wha—?! Who told you that?!” Leila spluttered. “That has nothing to do with you!”

“Oh, but it does. You see, what I have here with me is a fabric that could take away Lady Jeanette’s fame in the blink of an eye.”

At this, Leila turned to the merchant with shock. “What do you mean by that? Explain yourself.”

“As you wish,” he replied, as if he’d been waiting for her to say that. Then, he spread out the cloth he was holding, the same one which Ariel had said sparkled like the fabric Jeanette was selling.

Barthelemy laid it out on the table, and its radiance was unmistakably the very same as the one Leila had seen during the ball. “Now see here—this material is just like the Orlonde silk which has been taking high society by the storm lately...” he said. “Please try touching it. To the untrained eye, it looks just like the real thing, no?”

“You’re right! It looks exactly like what Jeanette was wearing during the party...” Ariel said, joining the conversation. “But is it something else?” she inquired, tilting her head.

Barthelemy smiled. “Indeed. Despite how closely it resembles Orlonde silk, it’s actually a different material. I don’t usually stock up on it due to its high price, but with your investment, Lady Leila, it’s a whole other story. Given there’s so much demand, the more we can stock up on this, the more we’ll be able to sell. Of course, I’d return the profits from your investment to you.”

“What exactly are you proposing here?” Leila asked. She was the daughter of an average count, and she didn’t have a full grasp of business.

The merchant patiently gave a simple explanation, his smile never ceasing. “Lady Leila, if you give me the money, I’ll sell this fabric. We will then both share the profits of the sales. That way, not only can we both earn money, but we’ll be able to steal Lady Jeanette’s market... Doing as much will certainly cause her grief.”

Leila’s shoulders twitched with interest. *Steal her market and cause her grief? What a perfect plan! Still...* She narrowed her eyes, high on her guard. “But if I hand you over my money, you could just run away with it. Don’t take me for some fool who’d fall for the bait.”

“No, no, of course—I don’t see you that way at all. I actually thought you might say that, and as such, I’d like to suggest we take it step by step. To start with, you can provide me with a small sum of money, and until I’ve won over your trust, we won’t be making any major deals. How does that sound, Lady Leila?”

“Hmm...” She considered his words. *If it’s just a small sum of money, then even in the worst case scenario where he runs away with it, at least it won’t be a huge loss for me. I can also have the goods delivered directly to my house, so there’s no way he could abscond. And if I can harass Jeanette this way...*

Leila took some time to carefully consider everything. Then, the corners of her red lips lifted upwards, and in a majestic movement the likes of a queen, she held her hand out to Barthelemy. “Very well. I’m in.”

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“Lady Jeanette! Hardly anything’s left from today’s stock!”

“Then let’s set up tomorrow’s allotment as well! More supplies should be arriving soon as well.”

Inside Matheson Trading’s main store based in the imperial capital, Jeanette was running around busily with the members of The Jeanette Association—or rather, the shop’s employees.

Thanks to Duchess Pablo putting in a good word, the Orlonde silk had been

selling like hot cakes ever since they first opened sales. Though over a month had passed since they began selling the fabric, it'd still sell out the minute new stock arrived.

Ever since I gifted Lady Christine that dress, there's been so much demand that I've seized Yafruska's entire Orlonde silk market, and it's still not enough...! Jeanette thought. *This momentum is more than I ever expected!*

She was busy directly serving the customers along with the other employees, when Claus came in from the staff entrance, carrying something. He walked over to Jeanette without even taking off his coat, looking like he was at his wit's end. "Jeanette, I've got bad news."

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"An imitation of Orlonde silk has appeared on the market."

Jeanette gasped, while Claus held out the parcel in his hands, which contained the fabric that looked identical to Orlonde silk.

Sara, who'd been helping out the employees too, noticed something strange was going on and rushed over. "Lord Claus, what on earth is that...?!"

"It's been on the market for a few days now," he said. "To make matters worse, its price is cheaper than our silk, so a lot of people are choosing to buy it instead."

"Oh!" Jeanette exclaimed, recalling something. "That must be why Ayagon Emporium and Balje's Boutique have requested to cease business dealings with us the other day!"

"What?" Claus flinched with surprise.

Indeed, on top of selling Orlonde silk directly to the customers themselves, they also sold them wholesale to clothing stores and similar places. Ayagon and Balje used to be their trading partners, but a few days ago the two shops suddenly decided to stop the partnerships.

"I thought it was because they lost their patience with waiting for the new stock, but... If they found a new supply, I suppose that's that," Jeanette said nonchalantly.

Claus frowned at her indifference. “Is this really fine with you, Jeanette...? We lost two trade partners.”

“That’s okay! These things happen a lot when it comes to business. What I’m actually concerned about is what this new material is, and where they procured it from? I should have all the official trade routes from Yafruska secured...” Jeanette pointed out, picking up the fake Orlonde silk Claus had brought with him.

After a while of scrutinizing it, she suddenly smiled. “Ah, I see! There’s no need to worry. If they’re selling *this* fabric, then our customers are sure to return to us in due time.”

Claus frowned at her words. To him, this material was just like the real Orlonde silk, both in its feel and its shine. He would’ve never been able to guess it was an imitation if he hadn’t been told. “But why...? Ah, nevermind. I’m sure I’ll see exactly what you mean in a few day’s time.”

Jeanette smiled at how quickly Claus grasped the situation. “Yes! It should take about three weeks... No, maybe even two. Most importantly, this fabric poses no risk to health. But everyone who ends up buying it will be in for a surprise...”

“All right,” Claus said. “Shall we put out warnings about the imitations, then?”

“Yes, let’s put up a sign by the storefront. We should make sure our clients are informed on the matter!” Jeanette decided, and then started promptly handing out instructions to the employees. At times like these, she was always quick to take action. “Given the situation, let’s wholesale our current stock to our partner stores. I’m sure everyone will be pleased, since we’ve only been able to sell the minimum amount to each shop until now. I’m going to bring the fabric to them personally so I can warn them about the fake goods.”

“Then I’ll go with you,” said Claus. “We can make the rounds with our regular clients—call it a date. No, wait... Perhaps calling this a date is actually unsexy...?” he murmured.

While he troubled himself over the idea, Jeanette clasped her hand over her mouth as her eyes glittered with joy. *We can make the rounds with our clients and date at the same time...?! That’s so efficient! How exciting!*

For her, things like tasty sweets or pretty gemstones were the subjects of market research. Of course, she'd still enjoy a normal date which involved such things, but she knew that Claus was the only nobleman who'd ever go along with the idea of a date that consisted of visiting business partners.

Ah, he truly is so considerate...! That he knows my preferences so well... His kindness knows no bounds!

"Yes! Let's go visit our customers together!" Jeanette exclaimed with a wide grin.

"Oh, by the way," Claus added. "After we're done with that, would you be willing to meet that Pakiran friend of mine I mentioned back at the ball? He keeps insisting that he wants to meet my fiancée... He said he won't let up until I introduce you two."

"Of course, I don't mind!" Jeanette answered. "But is that really a good idea...? He might be disappointed after meeting me..."

Jeanette was used to everyone laughing at her snidely while saying, *"*This *girl is Lord Claus's fiancée?"* She was used to it, but she didn't want to disappoint Claus's friend.

"Don't worry, Jeanette. I can vouch for your brilliance," Claus told her with a tender, affectionate look in his eyes, making her blush. "Besides, if he can't recognize your greatness, that'll say more about him than you," he declared with a smile.

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Jeanette and Claus were at Duke Pablo's townhouse located in the imperial capital.

"My, so someone's selling an imitation of the fabric?" inquired Christine with a worried frown.

"Yes," Jeanette confirmed with a nod. "At a glance, it looks exactly like the real thing, so unless someone's an expert, it's difficult to tell the difference."

Claus followed up on her words. "The imitations should be exposed in about a month, but until then, please be careful not to accidentally purchase them."

“Very well,” Christine replied. “I’ll warn everyone at my next salon.”

Jeanette smiled with relief. “Thank you! I’m sure they’ll appreciate it,” she said, and then held out a small pennant with a coat of arms on it. “We’re only giving this flag to places where we wholesale the genuine products. So if you wish to purchase any Orlonde silk, please check first if it has this flag, and let that inform your decision.”

“All right. May I borrow this for a bit?” Christine asked. “I’d like to show it to everyone.”

“Of course!” Jeanette answered, handing the pennant over.

Christine inspected it carefully, and then said in admiration, “My, you really are capable. It’s already impressive enough that you got your hands on this lovely material, but the fact that you can immediately recognize a false article, and even come up with a thorough countermeasure...”

“Ever since I was a child, I’ve always stuck close to my father and learned from his business dealings...” Jeanette explained.

“I did hear some rumors about you in the past, but they’ve always been dreadful,” Christine went on. “But having actually met you, I was shocked to see that you were a lovely young lady down to your very core. On top of that, you’re also smart and skillful. I had no idea you were hiding away such talent,” she said with an amused chuckle.

Jeanette reddened. “I wasn’t hiding it... In fact, the more I spoke about trade, the stranger looks I got from everyone...”

At that, Christine frowned. “There it is! This idea that working noblewomen are vulgar!”

Claus, who’d been listening to them converse, smiled brightly. “They’re only saying such frivolous things because they’ve never experienced poverty for themselves.”

There’s an odd weight to his words...! Jeanette thought. The calmer his expression, the heavier his words seemed to be, and there was no trace of a smile in his eyes.

“I was raised as a princess, so sometimes I can’t comprehend the value system of the nobility,” Christine said. “Even my husband has softened up a lot over the years, you know? When we first got married, he was so obstinate that you could drive a nail through his head.”

Jeanette and Claus both laughed at the duchess’s phrasing. All their interactions had been pleasant, and she was a very good-humored person. She was kind even to Jeanette, and treated everyone without any pretensions. There was no doubt about the fact that this was part of the reason why the rest of high society idolized her.

With a smile, Christine continued. “Lady Jeanette, how about you come along to my next salon? I want to learn more about you.”

Jeanette’s breath hitched. The salons hosted by Christine were known to have highly notable guests. Any young noble girl dreamed of being invited to such an event at least once in her life.

“Are you sure I should come...?” Jeanette asked, trembling with fear.

“Of course,” the duchess replied, still smiling. “They can’t say it publicly, but in reality there’s plenty of noblewomen who are very interested in trade. Besides, everyone’s secretly wondering what kinds of goods you’re planning to sell next, you know? Nobody wants to fall behind on the trends.”

Jeanette beamed. “All right! Then I’ll be sure to bring my new product with me when you invite me!”

“Perfect. I look forward to working with you, Lady Jeanette,” Christine said, holding out her hand.

“Thank you! I do as well!” Jeanette exclaimed, happily grasping Christine’s hand in hers.

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Before long, the end of autumn drew near and the cold winter winds approached. Jeanette was in her study, Claus standing next to her as they read through Matheson Trading's ledgers.

"Looking it over again, it's truly incredible..." Claus remarked, impressed. "I can hardly believe Matheson hit over a year's worth of sales in the past month alone."

"I'm surprised too... I guess everyone in the nobility really *is* rich!" Jeanette responded.

Up until now, Jeanette had only dealt with goods marketed towards the common people. She hadn't been interested in high society in the past, but she was shocked to see how the proceeds could change to such a drastic degree just from doing business with nobles.

"And it's all thanks to Lady Christine!" Jeanette continued. "I'll have to get her a thank-you gift!"

Perhaps I should get matching items for her and Duke Pablo? Jeanette pondered, racking her brain for ideas.

Observing her, Claus laughed softly, before gently wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "Lady Christine has a lot of influence, but all of this happened because of your own efforts, Jeanette," he whispered into her ear. "You're the one who stirred her heart, and you're the one who saved Duke Pablo during his predicament."

Jeanette's heart pounded from their sudden proximity. *Waaah! I can feel his breath in my ear! We may be engaged, but this is way too close! Is this what Lord Claus meant by saying he'd go all out...?!*

"W-Well, if *you* hadn't caught the duke's interest and gotten invited to his residence, I would've never had this opportunity!" she answered in a fluster. "So you played your part too, Lord Claus...!"

"Then I suppose this success is something you and I both achieved together."

Together...? Jeanette echoed inwardly. *Like a first joint task?!*

She had heard there was a new craze in the town recently where the bride and groom cut a large cake together at the wedding as their first joint task. Claus's words reminded her of that just now.

Now that I think about it, in our country, a wedding cake usually consists of tree-shaped decorative sweets. But apparently in the west, they have gorgeous multi-tiered cakes made with fresh cream. If I were to introduce that technique and start selling it via Matheson, I bet it'd be a great hit! First things first, we'll have to send someone over to learn the methods, and then...

"...nette. Jeanette, are you listening to me?"

Jeanette had been completely absorbed in her thoughts, but at the sound of her name she finally snapped back to reality. She quickly looked up at Claus to find him chuckling at her.

"Ah! I'm sorry! Goodness, I was totally spacing out!"

"Ha ha... If I know you, I bet you were thinking up some new business idea. Am I right?"

"W-Was it that obvious...?!" Jeanette squeaked, her cheeks flushing.

Right then, there was a knock on the door, and Sara peered into the room. However, her expression was slightly grim.

"What's wrong, Sara?" asked Jeanette.

"Milady... Lady Leila and Lady Ariel have come to see you. What do you think? Shall I send them away?" Sara suggested, her dislike for the two women as obvious as ever.

"They have?"

What could've possibly happened to make them come all the way to the Guivarch estate? Jeanette wondered. She cocked her head to the side, trying to think of some reason the two women would've come here. But nothing came to mind.

Claus's expression was cautious as he spoke up. "Jeanette, if you don't want to meet them, there's no need to force yourself. Let's send them away, like Sara said."

“No, I don’t mind seeing them at all! I just wonder what happened?” Jeanette replied. *For them to come visit me... Could it be that they want me to give them some Orlonde silk?*

She and Claus made their way to the parlor. A fuming Leila and a dejected Ariel were sitting in the room.

“Mother, Ariel. Is something wrong?”

“Wrong?! Tell me, *what* on *earth* is *that*?!” screeched Leila, violently tossing something onto the table.

It was Orlonde silk—or rather, the counterfeit version. The fabric was covered in holes, tattered and falling apart in every way. It looked utterly pathetic. The state of it was so poor that it couldn’t even pass as a scarf, let alone a dress.

Glancing it over, Jeanette answered. “Ah, this is one of the fake Orlonde silks that’s been on the market lately. But it’s already been two weeks since then!”

“So it’s just like you said. The counterfeit material took about two weeks to be revealed...” Claus murmured with surprise, picking up and scrutinizing the fabric.

Jeanette nodded. “Yes. The truth is, this material is basically Orlonde silk. However, there’s one big difference between them: whether they’ve been mothproofed or not.”

“Mothproofed...?” Leila repeated, frowning in confusion.

Jeanette started explaining. “You see, Orlonde silk is made from the thread of a special silkworm called Orlonde. However, other insects love eating its thread. That’s why legally made Orlonde silk must first be treated for three days and three nights to make it mothproof... Sara, could you bring over some of the authentic silk?”

As if the maid had been waiting for Jeanette’s word, she came over carrying the real Orlonde silk. Jeanette took it and showed it to her stepmother.

“Here, take a look for yourself. The genuine article is just a little bit more shiny, see?”

Leila and Ariel leaned in, staring intently at the silk. After a moment, they

both quietly muttered, “I can’t tell...”

“Now that you said it, maybe one is a *little* bit shinier... I *suppose*,” Leila added.

“This luster is actually the proof that the material’s been mothproofed,” Jeanette said. Such treatment took time, and required expert craftsmanship. The total cost of the silk’s manufacture depended greatly on whether the treatment was applied or not, and in the case that it was neglected, the result was this phony version.

“I see... So that’s why you said it was fine to just leave the imitations alone,” Claus commented. “You knew they’d suffer damage from the insects.”

Jeanette nodded, and turned to the other two women curiously. “By the way, where did you get this? I think most of those in high society have already been informed about looking out for the fakes...”

Leila’s shoulders stiffened. “Th-That shouldn’t matter! Anyway, is it not possible to fix this?!”

“Not from what I’ve heard...”

Unless one had access to magic, fixing silk eaten by bugs was simply impossible. Now, if this were the *real* article, Jeanette might’ve felt some motivation to find a way to do it. But just like her father, she was the type who had no interest in counterfeit goods.

“Grrr... Whatever! This is all because you’re totally useless, just as always!” Leila hissed.

“Sorry I couldn’t be of any help, but if you want to obtain the real silk, feel free to let me know anytime!” Jeanette responded with a sweet smile, entirely unshaken by her stepmother’s words.

“Ariel! We’re leaving!” Leila declared, furiously stomping away.

Ariel hurriedly got to her feet. But instead of following after her mother, she instead waited until the woman was out of sight before whispering into Jeanette’s ear. “L-Listen, dear sister...can you really spare some of the true silk?”

“Of course. But the silk is Matheson Trading’s product, so this time you’ll have to pay for it...”

“Can’t you let me off the hook? Please! We have no money left at all because of that fake silk!” Ariel said, clinging to Jeanette with desperation.

Jeanette’s eyes grew wide. “What? No money? Because of the *fake silk*...?”

But before she could pry any further, Leila’s angry scream resounded. “Ariel! What are you waiting for?! Come already!”

“Y-Yes, mother!”

Watching her stepsister rush away, Jeanette blinked several times. *They have no money...? Just what has happened to them...?*

Last Chapter: The Title Deed to Roussel Corporation

“What do you *mean*, we have no money left?!” Leila’s screech echoed inside of the butler’s room. In a brutish and utterly unladylike manner, she pounded her fist against the table.

“May I have a word, Madam?” In contrast to her sudden shout, Gilbert sounded perfectly indifferent as he responded. “I mean exactly that. You have used up all of the funds milord’s assigned for your use, so I hope you will refrain from wasting money for a while. We just had an incident the other day, after all.”

As he spoke, the usually aloof Gilbert shot Leila a sharp glare. Seeing open anger from someone like him was so rare that Leila’s shoulders jolted. “Th-That wasn’t my fault! I couldn’t have known I’d be deceived in such a way...!”

“Deceived? No, Madam, that’s not what happened. You took that deal *despite being aware* that the goods were false. On top of that, you knew your actions would hinder milady. Am I wrong?”

“Ugh...!” Leila bit her lip in response to Gilbert’s relentless pressing.

A while back, the swindling merchant Barthelemy had wheedled her into accepting a deal...

At first, Leila only handed over a small amount of money and they sold small amounts of the counterfeit Orlonde silk. However, the material sold out instantly, and upon receiving the profits, they started selling even more of the fake silk. That sold out too, and once again the same pattern repeated.

The successful sales accumulated many times over, and by the end, Leila was smiling smugly. *I bet you thought you could make me lower my guard with a small success, then make a large purchase and make off with it all, Barthelemy! How naive!*

Obviously, Leila was cautious of being swindled from the very beginning.

Conscious of the possibility of him running away with her money, she ensured to only give him small amounts at a time, and didn't pay him any more until he came back with the goods.

Plus, to prevent him from making off with the purchases, all of the fake silk was stored in House Roussel. Gilbert and the other servants made sour faces at this fact, but with Leila's husband gone, none of them felt like they could say a word against her.

"Ha! This whole business thing is *easy*! At this rate, I'll completely crush Jeanette's entire market!" Leila cackled as she watched the proceeds pour in day by day. *I'll take advantage of Orlonde silk's popularity, and sell the fake silk over and over! That way, I'll get to see Jeanette suffer!*

However, all of Leila's ambitions crumbled overnight under the hunger of the insects.

"Madam! All of the silk in the storage room is in a terrible state...!" a servant cried out in a panic one day.

Leila rushed over. "What...?! Huh? What is this?!"

All of the cloth she'd been storing up was brimming with holes.

"Waaah!!!" she shrieked. "My fabric...! What happened?!"

While the servants raced around trying to get rid of the bugs, Leila furiously awaited Barthelemy's arrival. The handsome swindler always came flying into the estate first thing in the morning, yet on that particular day, he never showed up. To make matters worse, the room he'd been renting in an inn was already completely empty, too.

In reality, Barthelemy had already noticed the holes starting to form in the silk the previous evening. As such, he quickly packed up his bags and made off into the night. Of course, he took all of the proceeds he hadn't yet given to Leila with him...

That lying cheater played me!!! Just remembering had Leila chewing on her nails from the frustration.

Gilbert shook his head with exasperation. "Goodness... We all tried so hard to

stop you. Not to mention, exterminating the insects was very costly."

"Keep your snark to yourself!" Leila shouted. "And you already know that I gave that con man all of the accumulated proceeds to buy even more of the goods! I have practically no money left now! At this rate, I won't be able to afford buying a dress I can wear in front of the other nobles!"

"Then don't buy it. Or sell your jewels. All of the money milord's left for you is depleted, and you must accept that fact," Gilbert advised bluntly.

"Wha—?!" Leila grit her teeth. "You think you can talk to me like that?! Don't forget that *I'm* the head of this house! I can fire you anytime I please!"

"Unfortunately, you have no such authority. The head of the house is still milord, after all."

"What are you talking about...? Do you seriously think he's still alive?! Two months have already passed since he's gone missing!" Leila yelled in agitation.

"It's very simple," the butler responded dispassionately. "A disappearance only gets recognized as a death after one year has passed. In other words, on paper, milord is still the head of the house."

Leila's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish at that nonchalant statement. "Wha... I... But waiting for that long is a burden for any remaining family!"

"For once you have said something sensible, Madam. I agree with you on that front, but the law is the law."

"'For once'?! How dare you say that to me?!" Leila shrieked. Ever since she first arrived at this house, she'd always found Gilbert detestable, but lately he'd been utterly relentless.

Enraged, she bit her nails again. In fact, she wanted to fire him right then and there. Regrettably however, there were still many things that only Gilbert knew how to get done, so for now she couldn't do that.

But don't think I'm going to take this lying down!

"Humph! Fine! If we're out of money, then I'm going to make it myself!" Leila smiled boldly. Then, from the inside of her clothes, she pulled out a single sheet of paper.

“What is this...?” asked Gilbert dubiously, narrowing his eyes.

Leila fluttered the document smugly. “Hee hee... This right here is the title deed to Roussel Corporation.”

“What?! Where did you get that?!”

In this country, in order to do trade, one was required to obtain a bill of rights from the state. Without it, any sales they make would be illicit. In other words, what Leila was holding was like Roussel Corporation’s very heart.

“Why do you have such an important document in the first place? This should’ve been in our safe...!” Gilbert said, shaken.

Leila laughed through her nose. “That man told me the location of the safe when he was very drunk. Of course, he also told me where to find the key.

Gilbert groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Milord...! I warned you not to drink too much alcohol...!”

“I know that if I were to sell this off, the firm would be handed over to someone else. If you want to prevent that, then open the vault!” Leila demanded, approaching Gilbert with the document in hand.

Yet contrary to her expectations, the steward didn’t give in. “I cannot do that.”

“What? So you don’t care if I sell off the company?!”

“I can’t do it because of a promise I have with milord.”

“What are you talking about?!”

However, no matter how much Leila tried to use the certificate as a threat, Gilbert just kept saying, “I have a promise to keep,” over and over.

“What a stubborn butler you are... Fine! If your promise is so important, then I’ll sell the corporation off for dirt cheap! It’ll be too late for your tears once you lose this precious firm!” she proclaimed, pointing a finger at him. She then whipped around and marched out of the room.

Just you wait! I know the company is Jeanette’s obsession! If she were to find out I sold it off somewhere... I bet it’d break her heart!

Jeanette was always so easygoing that it drove Leila mad with hatred. The thought of the girl's face twisting with despair made Leila cackle to herself once more.

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"Achoo!" Jeanette, who was presently in her study doing accounts, quickly covered her mouth. *That was close! I almost got snot all over the ledgers!*

As she checked to make sure the books were clean, Claus, who should've been working at the other desk, rushed over to her with a shawl in hands.

"Are you okay? This place gets cold quickly. I should warm up the room so you don't catch a cold. It's a bit early, but let's get some wood for the fireplace," Claus suggested, briskly handing out instructions to the servants.

"N-No need!" Jeanette responded in a panic. "I'm okay. I bet it's just because someone's spreading gossip about me... Anyway, Lord Claus...?"

"Yes?" Claus looked over at her with sparkling eyes and a smile as sweet as honey.

Jeanette's voice grew faint at the sight. "Um... I've been meaning to ask for a while, but why is your work desk in my study?"

After all, Claus had his own separate study too. As far as Jeanette could remember, he had mentioned in the past that he decided not to put her desk in his study because he wouldn't be able to focus and just stare at her all the time. And yet...

Claus seemed unruffled by her question. "You often go out these days on business for Matheson Trading, right? I have no problem with that, but I wanted to at least increase the amount of time we spend together at home."

"Is that so...? I just hope I'm not bothering you..."

"Ridiculous! Just seeing how hard you work every day is healing for me," he said cheerfully.

Jeanette blinked. *Healing...? When he puts it like that, does that mean he sees me as some kind of a dog or cat...?!*

While she pondered this, Claus smiled at her. "More importantly, how are you

doing? Have you had a change of heart yet?”

“Change of heart? What do you mean...?” she asked, puzzled.

Claus took a step closer to her, and his pretty, slender fingers gripped her chin.

Jeanette flushed at seeing his face, as beautiful as though pulled straight from a painting, draw near. “L-Lord Claus...? Is something the matter?”

Watching her from up close, Claus narrowed his eyes. “Hmm... You *do* seem to be aware of the fact that I’m a man, but...”

“Huh? Of course I know that...”

“But you see... What I really want is something that’s a little further down the road from here...”

“Further down the road...?” Jeanette echoed in confusion. *What does he mean by that?*

Suddenly, Claus leaned even closer. Then, his soft lips pressed a kiss upon her cheek.

“L-L-Lord Claus?! We’re not married yet!” she exclaimed, her face bright red as she leaned away from him.

Claus chuckled. “I can kiss your cheek even before marriage, you know. I was starting to feel a little lonely because I thought nothing was changing for you. But seeing this, I’m satisfied for today. Let’s continue this some other time.”

“There’s more?!” Jeanette squeaked. *R-Right... I guess after marriage, most people do even more amazing things than this, huh...?!* Her face reddened even further as she imagined it. “P-Please don’t tease me too much...!” she implored.

“Saying that instead of telling me to stop is very you, really.”

“Is it...?” she murmured. *After we’re married, kisses on the cheek are no big deal. We’re also going to do this and that, aren’t we...?!* Just picturing it made her face burn with embarrassment. However... *As long as my partner’s Lord Claus... It’s still embarrassing, but I don’t think I would dislike it at all...*

She couldn’t imagine it with any other man—in fact, she *definitely* didn’t want

to imagine it with other men. But in that moment, she *did* realize the fact that the idea of doing it with Claus didn't put her off.

"Anyway, today I'm receiving a report about how the search for your father is going. My contact should be here soon... Do you want to be there too?" Claus inquired.

At that, Jeanette quickly snapped back to reality and steeled her focus. "Yes, I do!"



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The investigator was a man of a calm and subdued appearance. From his bag, he pulled out the investigation report and placed it politely on the desk. “Sir Roussel’s whereabouts are still unconfirmed,” he began. “However, no human bones have been found after I searched the scene of the accident. There’s a river close to the site though, so that’s where I’m looking for leads.”

“I see. Thank you,” said Claus. “Please continue the search.”

The investigator rose to his feet and vacated the room. Claus, who was sitting on the sofa next to Jeanette, squeezed her hand tightly.

“Are you all right, Jeanette? Should I do this by myself next time?”

His words made Jeanette realize her face was all stiff. “N-No, it’s okay! I believe that my father is safe and sound!” she assured him.

I did feel a little rattled to hear the term “human bones,” but... It’s fine. Father may be weak to women and alcohol, but he always boasted about how he had the luck of a devil! If I don’t believe in him, who will?! Jeanette tightened her fists and cheered herself up. Meanwhile, Claus reached his long arms towards her, and...

“Waaah?!” ...before she knew it, she found herself in his embrace. Her mind instantly went blank at the way his warmth and the sweet scent of his perfume enveloped her.

“L-Lord Claus...?!”

“Sorry, Jeanette. I know you must be anxious. I hope we can find Sir Roussel as soon as possible.”

“No, I’m fine!” she insisted. “I’m able to work, and just knowing we have the investigation going is enough for me! And I’m absolutely sure that my father is alive! Maybe he’s even starting a business in some new world as we speak...”

Now that I said that, I’m starting to believe it myself! Jeanette’s father was the person responsible for educating her on how to be an upstart. Even against adversity, he was sure to take everything into account and enjoy it.

Claus laughed quietly, picturing the same thing as Jeanette. “You’re right. Someone like Sir Roussel would make light work of it. Still... If you ever feel

anxious, just let me know," he said, softly brushing her hair aside. "I know that you're a woman who could make a living by herself. Even so... I want to become the only man who can wipe away your tears."

Claus was very close, gazing at Jeanette so passionately that her heart almost gave out. *H-He's been acting like this for a while, but today Lord Claus is on another level! I think this is the first time I couldn't say a word because of how hard my heart is beating... Ahh, I have to think of some kind of response...!*

Jeanette's mind was spinning as she tried to come up with something to say. Right then, there was a knock on the door and Sara peered in, carrying a tray. "Mila—Ah! I'm so sorry! I just interrupted something, didn't I?!" the maid cried.

Jeanette hurriedly pulled away from Claus. "N-N-No, not at all!"

"Your voice and face tell a different story, milady! I can't believe myself... Ugh! Death is the only acceptable form of apology!"

"Ack! Sara! Wait!!!" Jeanette raised her voice, rushing to put a stop to Sara's extreme methods. Both of them breathed heavily for a few seconds, before Jeanette finally managed to ask, "S-So... What's going on? Did something happen to make you come in here?"

"Oh, right!" Sara replied, holding out the tray in her hands. A few letters were laid out across it.

"Letters...? And the senders... Ah, they're from the storekeepers who said they wouldn't need our Orlonde silk anymore," Jeanette said.

"Oh? Ayagon and Balje? Can I take a look too?" Claus inquired. He took a moment to skim through the contents. "I see... They're sending their deepest apologies and requesting we wholesale Orlonde silk to them again."

"I would be fine with it, but what about you?" Jeanette prompted. Though Claus had said he'd leave Matheson Trading for her to run, *he* was still the chairman.

The corners of his lips quirked up into a cool smile. "I'm not so small-minded as to say I can't pardon them for this. Instead, I'll have them owe us a debt for this."

Ahh... Lord Claus is making that evil smile again! Jeanette fretted.

Claus turned his gaze to the last letter remaining on the tray. “And what’s this?” he remarked.

“Oh? That’s from Gilbert!”

“Gilbert?”

“He’s House Roussel’s steward. I asked him to inform me if anything happened at home,” Jeanette explained, hurriedly opening the envelope and reading through the letter. A moment later, her eyes widened. “Oh no!”

“What’s wrong?”

“It seems that mother is trying to sell off the title deed to Roussel Corporation in order to harass me!”

Claus was horrified. “*What*?!”

Sara leaned forward as well. “Are you serious, milady?!”

“Sell off... But to whom?” wondered Claus. “Is she planning to hand over the firm to somebody else?”

“According to Gilbert’s letter, yes. It seems she wants to sell the deed at a private auction...” Jeanette said.

“What?! That woman... Does she even realize what she’s doing?!” Claus pressed his hand to his forehead.

However, Jeanette’s eyes lit up vividly. “Lord Claus, could it be...?!” She tightened her fists, then exclaimed, “Finally, another reward from mother! Right?!”

With heavy voices, both Claus and Sara replied in turn:

“No, I don’t think so.”

“No, I don’t think so, milady.”

Gazing at the excited Jeanette, Claus spoke up again. “Calm down a little and let’s talk this over again. Your mother’s trying to sell Roussel Corporation’s title deed at an auction, yes?”

“That’s right.” Jeanette nodded. “Gilbert mentioned they will hold the auction at House Roussel so that mother can run it herself.”

“I see. That means she’ll definitely be there in person. I doubt they’d even let us in if we tried to attend...”

“It seems that she’s mostly acting out of desperation,” Jeanette continued. “She thought that all of House Roussel’s funds belonged to her, but in reality, she’s only used this year’s budget.”

That said, Jeanette’s father wasn’t stingy. He’d given both Leila and Ariel so much spending money that even the other nobles were surprised.

To think she’s already run out of that money... Just what did she spend it on?

Gilbert had decided not to inform Jeanette that Leila had gotten her hands on fake silk to try and get in Jeanette’s way, and then once again fell into a swindler’s trap. He had believed that even uninformed, Jeanette would deal a crushing defeat to a plot as trivial as some fake silk. And indeed, exactly that had occurred.

While Jeanette was lost in thought, Claus spoke up. “Right. It takes more time for things like peerage and assets to be inherited after the head of the family goes missing.”

“Apparently, she wants to sell the company off no matter what, even if it means cutting the price. Gilbert said in the letter that he thinks she’s doing this to harass me, but...” Jeanette trailed off. *How’s this harassment? If anything, it’s a reward, no?*

Fingers still pressed to his forehead, Claus sighed. “What a tiresome woman your stepmother is... It sounds like she doesn’t understand that firm’s worth in the *slightest*. That she wants to sell it off just for some pocket money and to harass you...”

“But Lord Claus...” Jeanette couldn’t hide her excitement, clenching her fists again. “If mother wants to sell the company, then... *We* could just buy it, right?! And instead of doing it the normal way, mother’s trying to give us a bargain!”

“I very much doubt that your stepmother would be willing to sell it to us...” Claus pointed out with a frown.

Jeanette grinned. “No, not to *us*. But...how about to someone *else*?”

“Someone else?”

“Yes!” Jeanette affirmed, beaming. “For example, I mentioned before that Edmond and Gautier got along well with my father. They’re both good people with a strong sense of morality. If we provide them with the funds to buy Roussel Corporation, they could then hand the title deed over to us!”

“You’re saying that we should employ someone else to buy the firm for us?” Claus inquired.

“That’s exactly right!”

Claus pondered over Jeanette’s idea. “Hmm... They might have a sense of morality, but they’re still businessmen. I’m not sure if things will go as well as you say...”

“True, that might not be out of line for them... But first things first, I’d like to speak with them! I’ll write the letters right away!” Jeanette exclaimed, springing to her feet.

Watching her hurry off, Claus remained where he was, deep in thought.

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A few days later, Jeanette and Claus were sitting on the sofa inside House Guivarch’s parlor. Across them were the chairman of Edmond Enterprise, the chairman of Gautier Trading Company, and Duke Pablo.

Jeanette leaned forward, looking between each of the visitors. “Thank you all so much for coming today. As I mentioned in the letters, my mother is planning to sell off Roussel Corporation, and I’d like to hinder her somehow...!”

Edmond, a man of large stature and with the first stages of baldness showing at the top of his head, spoke up. “Very well. For you, Jeanette, I’d even set sail to the edge of the ocean itself.”

“Indeed,” agreed Gautier, whose chestnut-colored hair was parted in the middle. “Sir Roussel still hasn’t been found, right? In his absence, we ought to team up and fight against that evil wife of his.”

The two men had always been great rivals as well as good friends of

Jeanette's father. At their words, her eyes welled up with tears. "Lord Edmond, Lord Gautier...!"

After a moment however, she quickly blinked away her tears. In an instant, her expression changed to that of a merchant facing negotiations. "How would the two of you like to be compensated?"

"Huh?" Claus turned to her with a look of surprise.

In contrast, the two businessmen chuckled with a twinkle in their eye as they watched the smiling Jeanette.

"Right down to business as usual, eh, Jeanette? Very good." Edmond nodded.

"I've been looking forward to discussing this!" remarked Gautier.

"W-Wait a second!" Claus interrupted, unable to bear it. "Compensation?! I thought this was a moving scene where the moral merchants band together to take back a company...or something like that."

At those words, everyone except for Duke Pablo looked startled.

Jeanette responded first. "You're right about that, Lord Claus!"

"Indeed. I'm saying that I'll help you to buy Roussel Corporation so long as I'm compensated for it. I think it's a small price to pay, all things considered," said Edmond.

"Yes, yes," Gautier added. "Under usual circumstances, neither of us would hesitate to jump at this opportunity to take Roussel Corporation for ourselves..."

Claus was dumbstruck at their unconcerned answers.

Meanwhile, Duke Pablo, who'd been watching everything unfold, chuckled. "Pfft... Ha ha ha! Looks like *you're* the one who's wet behind the ears after all, Claus!" he exclaimed, amused. "You know that Miss Jeanette had invited me here to serve as the witness for the oath, yes?"

As realization finally dawned on him, Claus pressed his hand to his forehead and sank down in his seat. "Right... It seems I was out of the loop on that one..."

It was Claus himself who had said, *"They might have a sense of morality, but*

they're still businessmen." However, in the end, it was *Jeanette* who fully understood what that meant when she had summoned everyone here. She'd have the two businessmen bid in the auction for the title deed in her place, and then compensate them for it. And to ensure the deal would be upheld, she also invited a powerful figure like Duke Pablo to be her backer.

The business dealings couldn't have been any more perfect or more safe.

"L-Lord Claus, are you okay? Did I say something wrong...?!" Jeanette fretted.

With a smile, Claus slowly shook his head. "No, I just realized how much of a rookie I am. Don't mind me; feel free to continue the conversation."

"R-Right!" Regrouping her feelings, Jeanette turned back to the merchants. "As for your compensation... How about this: once you return Roussel Corporation to me, I'll give you the full distribution rights to Orlonde silk."

Orlonde silk had by now become Matheson Trading's feature product. Though the initial explosive boom had calmed, there was still a high demand for it as it entered the market of the common people in the form of small articles and accessories.

"Hmm... Orlonde silk..." Edmond murmured, stroking his beard. Then, his expression brightened as he suddenly tilted his head. "Instead of that, how about you become my eldest son's wife, Jeanette?!"

She was shocked at this sudden proposal. "What?!"

Witnessing this, Gautier hurriedly leaned forward as well. "Hey now! Don't try to get the jump on me! I also want Jeanette as my daughter-in-law!"

"No, no! The early bird gets the worm!" Edmond argued. "I was the first one to say it, so I have the right to it before you!"

"H-Hold on, you two—!" Jeanette cried, trying to break up what she thought was about to become a quarrel. But before she could move, someone else sprung to their feet.

"Absolutely not." Claus's eyes were blazing as he spoke. "Jeanette...is *my*...fiancée." The way he bit out such short phrases was entirely unlike his usual self. Though he was typically friendly towards other people, right now he

was radiating an aura of unmistakable wrath.

Both of the merchants and even Jeanette let out a small shriek at the sight.

“I will *not* let her marry either of your sons,” he continued. “Did you hear me? I’ll say it one more time. Jeanette...is *my...*fiancée. Besides, stop treating her like she’s some kind of commodity!”

“Oh, how scary indeed. So you can make *that* kind of face too, huh, Claus...?” muttered Duke Pablo, a note of intrigue in his expression.

The businessmen looked resentful. Edmond responded with, “But...this is the only way I could ever get Jeanette as my daughter-in-law. In fact, I came here with that intent in the first place.”

“Yes, yes,” Gautier joined in. “Jeanette is a hen that lays golden eggs... Er, no, I mean—she’s a wonderful young lady! Is there really something that could be worth as much as her...?”

“How about the deed to Matheson Trading?” Claus suggested resolutely, staring at the reluctant merchants.

“What?”

“I won’t let Jeanette go no matter what. Instead of her, I’ll give you the title deed to Matheson Trading, which has the distribution rights to Orlonde silk.”

“*Oh*...?”

The look in the two men’s eyes changed immediately. Both of them began murmuring things like, “The market cap...!” and “The main store’s land price...!”

In the meantime, Claus turned to Jeanette. “Sorry, Jeanette... Are you all right with me handing over the company that I said I’d let you run?”

“It belongs to you in the first place, so I don’t mind at all!” she replied. “Though I do think it’s a shame I’ll have to say goodbye to all the lovely employees I’ve befriended...”

“Don’t worry,” Claus reassured her. “Once you have Roussel Corporation back, you can employ all of them in your firm and open up a new shop.”

“My! That sounds wonderful!” Jeanette exclaimed joyously, clasping her

hands together.

During that time, the two merchants had finished their appraisal. Their cheeks flushed from excitement, they both spoke up in good humor.

“Matheson Trading is a huge catch! I’m in!” Edmond confirmed.

“So, whichever one of us successfully obtains the deed to Roussel Corporation will get Matheson Trading in compensation, yes?” Gautier asked.

“That’s right.”

“Then that ends the negotiations. We’ll commit to this and bid for Roussel Corporation.”

As the two men nodded, the witness, Duke Pablo, presented them with the written oath. “The one who obtains the title deed to Roussel Corporation will give it to Jeanette Roussel in exchange for Matheson Trading’s title deed. If you agree with these terms, then sign here.”

“I pledge it under Edmond Enterprise.”

“And I under Gautier Trading Company.”

Jeanette watched as both of them signed the document. *All right! Now the plan is in motion!* She exchanged a look with Claus, and they both nodded at each other with determination.

The compensation had evolved beyond what they’d originally envisioned—they’d have to relinquish Matheson Trading. However, they managed to successfully wrap up the talks.

Now it’s up to those two...!

Yet at that time, Jeanette wasn’t aware that her plans would be thwarted by her stepmother, Leila.

“What? Mr. Edmond, Mr. Gautier... You *can’t* participate in the auction?”

A few days had passed since the merchants signed the written oath. They had come to visit House Guivarch’s estate, looking dispirited. Presently, they were in the parlor, explaining the situation to Jeanette, who listened, bewildered

“Mmm... You see, the other day, I sent a letter to Madam Roussel to let her know I wished to participate in the auction. However, she replied saying she knew that I was on good terms with you, Jeanette. She refused me,” Edmond said dejectedly, hanging his head down.

“The same thing happened with me,” Gautier added. “In fact, I heard she’s rejecting a lot of people. It seems that anyone who has a connection or good relationship with you is being kept from participating in the auction.”

“I wouldn’t have expected her to do her research to that degree,” Claus murmured.

Jeanette paused thoughtfully, looking conflicted. “This is a difficult situation... If it’s not just you two being denied, but everyone I know...”

“My apologies, Jeanette,” Edmond told her. “Gautier and I want to help, but it seems like all of our contacts are also useless.”

“No, it’s not your fault...” Jeanette paused, musing for a moment. “Anyway, I’m curious about something. Mother only wants to sell to people who have no connections to me, right? But that in itself limits the number of buyers substantially...”

At a first glance, the realm of trade might’ve seemed vast, but in fact it was a small world full of lateral ties. Leila, cautious of Jeanette, was even shutting out Jeanette’s legitimate rivals from participating in the auction. As a result, the only potential buyers left were shady, fraudulent companies, and those with connections to the underworld.

Gautier looked apprehensive, and then his expression clouded over. “I don’t care if Roussel Corporation ends up owned by a rival—though we’re *all* rivals—but I refuse to let it fall into the jaws of the underworld. I’m going to try and think of a way for us to help.”

“But Madam Roussel will also be in trouble,” Edmond pointed out. “It would be a huge blow to the industry if anything were to happen to Roussel Corporation. This is exactly why aristocratic women who’ve never worked before are—”

“Ah, hold on now.” Claus was quick to gently interrupt the man’s grumbling. “Chairman Edmond, that’s quite enough. Madam Roussel might be making a mistake, but that doesn’t mean we ought to lump all aristocratic women together with her. It’s possible that despite the fact many of these women *want* to work, they aren’t *allowed* to.”

“Y-You’re right. I apologize for what I said,” Edmond conceded.

While the men discussed such matters, Jeanette was sitting in silence, lost in thought. Eventually, she slowly lifted her head. “So...if people who get along with me aren’t an option, what about the opposite?”

“Opposite...? You mean your enemies?” Claus inquired.

Gautier hummed thoughtfully. “But is there even a big company out there that you’re enemies with...? I mean, all of us merchants like you quite a lot, Jeanette.”

“Indeed. You’re idolized among our circles.”

Jeanette blushed at the merchants’ open compliments. “W-Well, I feel really thankful to all of you, since you’ve always doted on me… Ever since I was a child!”

The two chairmen smiled as they commended her.

“You see, my own daughters never even had an *inkling* of interest in trade, and then there was you—a little girl listening to everything we said with twinkling eyes!” Gautier reminisced. “Of course it made us happy.”

“Plus, the opinions you shared with us often had merit to them and gave us many new ideas. And it wasn’t just one or two people who got inspiration from you, either. Everyone had their eyes on you, you know?”

Jeanette’s cheeks reddened even more at their words. “Um... I didn’t mean to ask for all this praise...!” she mumbled in disorientation.

Claus decided to lend her a helping hand, though for some reason he looked incredibly satisfied. “From the bottom of my heart, I agree with everything they said. But, Jeanette... What did you mean earlier when you said ‘the opposite’?”

“Well, you see...” Jeanette looked more focused now that they were back to discussing the main topic. “If I don’t have any enemies, I can just make some. Remember how Mother was so angry about that fake Orlonde silk? That made me recall how I’ve seen people around me get swept up in the fake silk thing too...”

“Ah, you mean Ayagon Emporium and Balje’s Boutique?” asked Claus.

Jeanette nodded. “Yes. Mother shouldn’t know yet that we’ve reestablished business with those two stores, nor should anyone else. So...I’d like to ask them to put up an act. We can have them claim that they’re furious with Matheson Trading for not doing anything to assist when they became victims of the fake silk. Mother’s a kind person at her core, so she’s sure to want to help them!”

“Kind...?”

“In what world...?”

Said the two men in unison, after Jeanette’s explanation.

Claus, who knew of Leila quite well, smiled wryly. “Considering how resentful she is, that might be very appealing to her...” he whispered.

Of course, Jeanette didn’t hear what he said, and cheerfully continued. “What do you think?! I believe we’ll be able to get it done this way!”

“You’re right. And they do owe us with regards to the Orlonde silk... Let’s reach out to them,” said Claus with a sweet smile, and Jeanette nodded vigorously.

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“Madam, the auction is set to begin shortly, but are you *truly* sure about this?” asked Gilbert, glaring at Leila.

She looked back at him with annoyance. “I told you plenty of times that I’m sure! I already made up my mind!”

Indeed, a very special auction would be held today. The location was the

Roussel mansion, and a number of merchants had already started gathering, creating an even more stuffy atmosphere than usual. Everyone had set their minds on getting a hold of the deed to Roussel Corporation for themselves.

Ariel looked fearful as she walked over to Leila. “M-Mother... I feel like everyone looks really off-putting somehow...” She was referring to the guests. Of course, they were excited about the auction, but the air was strangely heavy.

“It has to be this way,” Leila said, sounding fed up. “I refused anyone who’s associated with *her*, and if I didn’t let in some of the more shady-looking people, the numbers would be too small.”

“Couldn’t we have just allowed those associated with her to come? They would’ve been able to bid a lot of money,” Ariel insisted stubbornly.

“Quiet, you! You’re a child, so don’t question an adult’s decision!” Leila scolded, before turning to survey the gathered guests. Her eyes lit up when she noticed a specific person. “Hee hee... Look, Ariel. I think I picked the participants very well.”

The person she was looking at was a young, dark-skinned man who stood taller than everyone in the room. Although he was dressed in a similar fashion to the other guests and his hair was styled like theirs, his almond-shaped eyes and the jet black shade of his hair gave him an intense look that overwhelmed the other guests.

Ariel, who had an eye for beautiful men, quickly leaned over to whisper into Leila’s ear. “Mother! Who is that?! He looks so handsome and exotic...!”

Leila, now also in good humor, whispered back. “Just listen to this... He’s a prince, studying abroad in our country incognito! He’s been thinking of starting up a business here, and Roussel Corporation caught his interest!”

“A prince?! Mother, that’s amazing! I wonder if he’s in the market for a bride...” Ariel said with a gulp.

Leila nodded. “I already looked into it, of course. He’s looking like the favorite to win, so when he wins the auction, I’ll introduce you two. Until then, be sure to show yourself off!”

“R-Right! I’ll go to fix my makeup!” Ariel exclaimed, running off to the

bathroom with excitement.

Leila chuckled to herself as she watched her daughter rush away, then turned her gaze to the corner of the room. There, she saw the two merchants whom she knew Jeanette had sent.

So she managed to get Ay and Balje... Humph! How naive they all are. Did they really think I wouldn't find out? Well, for now I'll feign ignorance, but I look forward to what comes next!

Leila could only imagine the kind of face Jeanette would make when her allies' bids would be deemed invalid and they notified her they couldn't get the deed. Just thinking about it made Leila giggle, even though the auction hadn't begun yet.

Gilbert was once again glaring at her as he addressed her. "Madam... Why on earth do you bear such enmity towards milady? She has never defied you, and always listened to you."

"That's *exactly* why, Gilbert!" Leila said, huffing out a snide laugh through her nose. "I'm her stepmother, aren't I? She should both honor and fear me. And yet, that girl is always so frivolous... Anything I say just makes her eyes light up! I bet she looks down on me because I don't know about trade! That just rubs me the wrong way!"

Gilbert sighed as he listened to her air her grievances. "Milady has always treated you with sincerity, Madam... But it looks like no matter what I say, it won't get through to you."

"Humph! Why should I listen to the words of some butler like you? Anyway... It's about time to begin. With the ace up my sleeve, this is going to be a wonderful show...!"

Leila fixed up her hair, then gallantly walked up to stand in front of the merchants. Her conduct was dignified, as though she truly were the head of the house.

***

"You weren't able to win the bid for the deed...?!" Jeanette asked, pressing both hands to her lips. The two merchants who'd attended her stepmother's

auction had just given her the news.

Claus put his hand on her back to support her. “Who won it, then?” he asked Ayagon and Balje.

“I don’t really know who he is, but he was a young, dark-skinned man with jet black hair,” one of the men explained.

“Right. And there was something really off about him...” the other agreed.

“Off?” Claus repeated with furrowed brows.

The two businessmen exchanged a look with each other, before one of them began recounting the events. “Even though he didn’t offer the highest sum of money by a long shot, the minute he raised his hand to bid, Madam Roussel immediately ended the auction. It was as if she’d just been *waiting* for him to make a bid.”

This time, Claus and Jeanette exchanged a look with each other. “I imagine there was an uproar about it...? I mean, something like that is no longer an auction...” said Claus.

“Of course, people were furious and demanded an explanation. But one man —the family butler, I think—as well as the successful bidder both skillfully pacified everyone.”

“Madam Roussel seemed very pleased with the winner... I have a feeling she’d been planning to let him win from the very beginning.”

The merchants, still looking rattled, then turned to Jeanette. “Lady Jeanette, my deepest apologies,” said one. “You put your faith in me, and yet I wasn’t able to help... But also, um...”

“I hate to bring this up now, but... Since we failed, does that mean we won’t be receiving the Orlonde silk shipments too...?”

Seeing their apprehension, Jeanette quickly waved her hands. “Ah, no! Please don’t worry about that. As you didn’t win, I won’t be able to give you all the Orlonde silk channels, but we did already agree on reopening the sales of the fabric itself to you before all this.”

“And just sneaking into that auction was good enough, so consider your debts

repaid," Claus added.

The businessmen looked relieved. One might argue they should've gotten their just deserts for their past actions, but Jeanette had heard that they both suffered great losses as a result of the fake silk. It was clear they wanted to redeem themselves by selling authentic goods, regardless of profits.

After Jeanette and Claus bid the merchants farewell, Jeanette placed her hand on her chin and murmured, "Still, since neither of them won the auction..."

"Yeah. Things might get a little troublesome from here..." said Claus ambiguously.

For the next while, the two of them stood in the parlor with solemn expressions.

***

Around the same time, Leila was roaring with laughter over her sale of the title deed. "Oho ho ho! Ahh, how good it felt to actually do it! How I'd love to see her face right now!"

Gilbert let out an exasperated sigh. Meanwhile, Ariel still looked enamored, her cheeks flushed.

"Mother... He was so wonderful! And his name was...Lord Kyuriakris, wasn't it? That exotic name suits him so well...!"

Ariel had been present back when they exchanged the money for the title deed. Leila had introduced the two of them, and Kyuriakris had kissed the back of Ariel's hand. She'd been in this state ever since.

"If he bought a company here, that means he intends to stick around, right?" the girl mused. "I wonder if I could meet him again if I went to the store? I hope so! I really wanted to see him off as he left..." she lamented, clinging to the window wistfully.

It had only been minutes since the deal had been completed and the man had left House Roussel's mansion. Leila had scolded Ariel earlier, demanding she not cling to Kyuriakris, as it was improper, so the girl had reluctantly given up. But in

reality, she'd wanted to stick closely to his side all the way back to his carriage.

Leila sighed. "Ariel, I've already told you so many times: you can't let men think you're overly interested in them at first. It was the same thing with Lord Claus—if you'd just been better at keeping your distance from him, things might've turned out well for you."

"I don't know how to do difficult things like that. I don't have your wiles... Ah! Lord Kyuriakris is still here! He's about to get into a carriage!" Ariel squealed, staring at the beautiful man.

"Goodness..." Leila grumbled at her daughter's antics. She was about to lecture her, when Ariel spoke up again.

"Huh? The carriage that arrived for him... Is that Lord Claus?"

"What?" Leila quickly turned to look at her.

"Actually... Isn't that Jeanette?" Ariel continued, still looking out the window in puzzlement. "But why?"

"What did you say?!" Leila screamed, getting to her feet and stomping over to the window to take a look for herself.

There was one horse-drawn carriage by the gates of the estate. Walking towards it was none other than Kyuriakris, from whom Leila had just received a heap of gold in exchange for the title deed. And in front of it were indeed Claus and a smiling Jeanette.

"W-W-Wait a moment!!! What is the meaning of this?! Why are they here?!" Leila shrieked, racing out of the room.

"M-Mother, wait! Don't steal my catch from me! I'm coming too!"

Leila ignored Ariel's cries, gasping for breath as she ran towards the carriage. *Why is that girl here?! I'm sure I eliminated anyone who had connections with her! Just...what is going on?!"*

Leila burst through the front door with a bang. "Hold it right there!!!"

***

Jeanette, Claus, and Kyuriakris were standing by the gates of House Roussel,

in the middle of a conversation. But suddenly Leila flew out from the entrance, yelling out to them.

“Jeanette! Why are you here?!”

“Oh, mother!” Jeanette called out cheerfully. “Sorry I haven’t contacted you in a while. I hope the damage from the moths hasn’t been too bad? I actually came over to bring the Orlonde silk Ariel mentioned she wante—”

“I don’t care about that!!!” Leila shouted, rushing to stand right in front of Jeanette. Her shouting hurt Jeanette’s ears, and it seemed she wasn’t the only one.

Claus smiled dryly while covering his ears, and Kyuriakris looked openly detestful. “Good grief, what a noisy woman! You have my sympathy for having her as your stepmother,” the latter said in Pakiran, his voice smooth and velvety.

Jeanette smiled, a little troubled. “She’s usually very ladylike...but I guess she’s feeling shocked today,” she responded, also in Pakiran.

Claus chuckled, joining in. “Yeah, she’s really *‘shocked’* today. After all, she couldn’t have expected the auction’s favorite to win was connected to us.”

Kyuriakris smirked at those words. Indeed, the one whom Leila had sold the title deed to was the first prince of the Pakira Empire—Kyuriakris Bathlys Elysion. Just as she had believed, he was traveling incognito as an exchange student in their nation. He hadn’t lied about his rank. However...

“Looks like the reason she lost was because she failed to do her research on *who* encouraged me to come to this country in the first place,” Kyuriakris said, looking at Claus.

Leila grit her teeth. “Hey! Stop talking in some foreign language right in front of me!”

“Pardon, madam,” Kyuriakris said, switching languages. “I default to using my native tongue when speaking with my friend,” he explained, politely kissing the back of Leila’s hand while his intense eyes bore into her.

He was graceful, yet had a sense of wildness about him at the same time. His

allure instantly caused Leila's cheeks to flush.

"Mother! No fair!" Ariel cried upon seeing this, finally having caught up.

"B-But what did you mean when you said 'friend' just now?" Leila asked Kyuriakris.

"Ah, did I not mention? Truth is, Claus and I became friends when we both studied in Yafruska together. He's also the one who got me into trade, for what it's worth."

"*What*?! So you're telling me you've secretly had connections with him this entire time?! How dastardly! To think you'd try to get close to me while hiding something like that...!" Leila raged.

"Dastardly? Why's that?" Claus asked, stepping forth towards her. "You've shut out anyone you didn't like from the auction, right? But you deemed him an appropriate participant, and he lawfully completed the winning transaction with you. Now that he's got the title deed, it's none of your business who he decides to sell it to."

"But... I... This is sophistry! I want to cancel the deal! I'll give you back your money, so return the deed to me!" Leila shrieked.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Kyuriakris said with a shrug. "You see, I already sold the deed to my friend's fiancée, Jeanette." His eyes moved over to Jeanette, who was carefully clutching the deed in her hands.

Leila's gaze snapped sharply to Jeanette. With a terrifying look on her face, the woman briskly approached the girl. "Jeanette! Hand me over that deed right this second!"

"W-Wah! I know you want it, but that's the one thing I can't do!" Jeanette responded, dodging out of the way of Leila's grasping hands.

Claus stepped in between them, blocking the way. "Please calm yourself," he told Leila coolly. "There's people watching."

There was the carriage's coachman, as well as House Roussel's gatekeeper. At some point, Gilbert had also joined, standing next to Ariel. In no time at all, a group of people had surrounded them.

“Grrr! Why you...! I don’t care! Get out of my way! If you don’t give me that deed back...!”

“Besides...” Claus spoke up again, narrowing his eyes. Then, he whispered something into Leila’s ear, quietly enough that nobody else could hear.

Instantly, her face paled. “Wh-Why do you know about that...?!”

“Didn’t I tell you already? Sir Roussel and I got along very well. He told me about it himself. You wouldn’t want other people finding out about this, now would you?” he asked coldly. “It’s such a shameful thing, after all. It’d hurt your pride terribly, no?”

“Ugh...!”

“If you don’t want me to tell everyone, don’t pursue this matter any further. You sold the deed at a much cheaper price than it’s worth, but nonetheless, you’ve gotten some gold out of it. I recommend that you and Ariel live modestly from now on.”

At Claus’s words, Leila suddenly crumpled down on the spot, as if having lost all hope.

Gilbert sighed as he looked at her, exasperated. “That’s why I asked you if you were *truly* sure about doing this, Madam.”

However, Leila seemed unable to answer him.

“Lord Claus, just what did you say to her...?” Jeanette inquired.

Claus quietly responded to her. “Oh, just a little thing about how she met your father.”

“Huh...?” Jeanette murmured. *Did something dramatic happen during their first meeting?* she pondered.

“Anyway, it’s getting late. Shall we go back home?” Claus proposed.

“Ah, yes! But please wait just a moment...” Jeanette rummaged inside of the carriage. After a while, she pulled out a bundle, which she carried over to Ariel. “Here you go. You said you wanted this, right?”

Inside the bundle was genuine Orlonde silk.

“What?! Dear sister, did you really get this for me?”

“Hmm? Of course.” Jeanette nodded. “I mean, you said you wanted it. Plus... I do feel bad that you got caught up in the whole fake silk situation. Mother even tried to sell the company after that... I hope you can forgive me for being so slow to notice what was going on. This is all I can do to make it up to you, so consider it a gift from me.”

“Jeanette...” Ariel muttered, at a loss for words as she accepted the bundle of cloth.

“All right, it’s time for me to get going! Mother, Ariel, take care!” Jeanette exclaimed, waving her hand in farewell before climbing into the carriage in high spirits along with Claus.

“W-Wait! Jeanette!” Ariel cried.

Jeanette peeked out of the carriage. “What’s wrong?”

“Well... Um...” Ariel seemed to be desperately searching for the words. She bit her lip, and finally whispered in a very quiet voice. “Thank you for the Orlonde silk...”

Jeanette smiled sweetly. “You’re welcome!”

***

“Yay!!! This is the title deed, isn’t it?! So Roussel Corporation now belongs to you! Right, milady?!” Sara squealed, rushing over to Jeanette as she hopped out of the carriage at the Guivarch estate with the document in hand.

“Yes! I thought getting it would take me years, or that I wouldn’t get it until my father returned and gave it to me... I never imagined I’d get it this quickly!” Jeanette exclaimed. “It kind of happened in a roundabout way, but on the upside, we got it for an amazing price! This really was a reward from Mother! She’s so very kind!”

Two calm voices quickly responded.

“That’s not true, Jeanette,” said Claus.

“That’s impossible, milady. Please open your eyes,” said Sara.

Jeanette looked troubled by their words, until she remembered there was another man in the room. “Ah!” she gasped. “I’m so sorry, Lord Kyuriakris! I’ve been acting immodestly, even though you’re here...”

He smiled at her panicked reaction. “It’s fine. Your smile’s as sweet as a flower. There’s no need to hesitate—I want you to show me all of your adorableness,” he said, his smile so seductive that even Sara blushed, which was quite unusual.

Wow! A prince really is something else... To think he even made Sara flush! Jeanette thought, blinking repeatedly.

“Heh... You’re very cute when you’re confused, too. It’s making me want to whisper even more extreme things to you, just to see you get all embarrassed.”

“Kyuri, would you mind not teasing my fiancée this much? And anyway, aren’t you way too close to her? You weren’t saying things like that to her when you first met her,” Claus argued, stepping forward defensively.

Kyuriakris smirked. “I see you’ve got your guard up around me as always, Claus. But I guess I understand now why you never budged when so many girls flirted with you back in Yafruska. Nobody could afford looking elsewhere when they have such a cute fiancée already,” he said, giving Jeanette a sugary smile. “She looks as lovely as a jasmine flower, yet on the inside, she’s clever and tough. I never thought she’d pull off a double scheme like that and bring down Madam Roussel.”

Just like he’d said, Jeanette had prepared a double scheme. First, she sent the two merchants into the auction as a distraction, while pretending that Kyuriakris, the favorite to win, didn’t have any connections to her. If one of the merchants had actually won the deed, that would’ve worked out just fine. And if not, she’d ensured Kyuriakris was ready to swoop in and close the deal.

“This is all thanks to you, Lord Kyuriakris! Thank you so much for cooperating with us!” Jeanette said, lowering her head deeply.

Once again, the man smiled smugly. He swiftly stepped around Claus, and grabbed Jeanette’s hand to place a kiss upon it.

“Kyuriakris!” Claus scolded.

But the other man didn't listen, continuing to gaze at Jeanette while giving her an exceptionally handsome smile. "How about this, Miss Jeanette? Rather than becoming the wife of some count, wouldn't you like to become the empress of Pakira? I know you're already aware, but despite everything, I *am* the crown prince."

Claus quickly broke them apart. "Stop it! I won't tolerate these kinds of jokes, even from you. It's not funny in the slightest."

"Jokes? Not at all. I'm completely serious."

Claus groaned. "I knew this would happen. This is *exactly* why I didn't want to ask you for help! Listen, Kyuri... I'll say it as many times as it takes: Jeanette is *my* fiancée. So stop it already!" he said, displaying uncharacteristic hostility.

Kyuriakris smirked arrogantly in response.

Sensing the invisible sparks starting to blaze between them, Jeanette hurriedly rushed over. "Um...! Thank you for the offer, but I refuse," she declared, gazing at Kyuriakris without a hint of hesitation or embarrassment.

His eyes widened in shock. "Why? We might have some cultural differences, but you speak Pakiran perfectly. Besides, this is your chance to become an *empress*, you know?"

However, Jeanette shook her head, not letting his words sway her. "I'm not qualified for such a role. Also...I'm Lord Claus's fiancée!"

"Are you just doing this out of a sense of duty for him? I think it's great you're so virtuous, but..."

"It's nothing like that," Jeanette insisted firmly. Then, she cast her eyes down bashfully.

Of course, there's the fact I don't want to betray my fiancé, who's cherished me so much until now. But that's not the main reason. I'm not trying to be virtuous by refusing Lord Kyuriakris. Rather...

Tightening her fists, Jeanette lifted her head and once again met Kyuriakris's eyes. Her lips trembled as she tried to form the words, and her heart was pounding. Yet she knew she had to say this, and so opened her mouth and

said,“I want to be Lord Claus’s wife, and nobody else’s. And I don’t want any other man as my husband but him.”

“Jeanette...?!” Claus turned to look at her in surprise.

Her cheeks were bright red. “S-S-Sorry! I know this might be presumptuous of me to say, but, well... I don’t really get it myself, but I’d *hate* to be with anyone other than you! But I can’t really put the reason into words...!” she stammered, trying her best to explain herself in a fluster.

Claus smiled at her. “It’s okay, Jeanette... You don’t need to put it into words for now,” he said, standing next to her with a gentle expression. His pretty hand enveloped Jeanette’s. “Let’s take it slow and discover just what this feeling is together. I mean, we *are* engaged, after all. Isn’t that right?” he asked with a smile sweet enough to melt her heart.

His narrowed, violet eyes were damp with unshed tears. Yet at the same time, they were passionate, and surprisingly erotic.

Jeanette felt her face get even redder, but she somehow managed to scrape together a reply. “Y-Yes...! Even though I’m a deplorable fiancée who only ever causes you trouble...”

“Don’t worry, Jeanette. I love you *exactly* the way you are. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Lord Claus...!” she exclaimed. *Ahh, he’s always so very kind...! I can’t believe I’ve been blessed with a fiancé like him...!*

Claus had unbridled beauty, which had earned him the title of an archangel. His eyes were so full of tenderness and sweetness that Jeanette’s heart just couldn’t calm down.

Right at that moment, they heard someone clap their hands.

“All right, that’s quite enough of staring at each other in front of other people,” Kyuriakris said.

With a gasp of realization, Jeanette quickly stepped away from Claus, who cast his eyes down with disappointment.

Kyuriakris shook his head in exasperation as he watched them. “You two are

so cruel. There's no need to show off like that *right* after I got rejected."

"Look who's talking. *You're* the one who broke your word to me," Claus pointed out, sounding fed up.

The prince smirked, and then his eyes glinted as he began to say the unthinkable. "Hmm... And what would you do if I said that I feel so very hurt after Miss Jeanette rejected me that I want that title deed back, after all?"

"Kyuri!"

"Of course, if Miss Jeanette agrees to become my bride, I'll let you keep the deed."

Claus took a step closer to Kyuriakris. "Kyuri, I promised that I'd give Matheson Trading over to you, so stop saying things like that. You seriously need to watch your—!" But before he could finish, Jeanette stepped forward.

She glanced at Claus, signaling with her eyes, to which he nodded. Then, she looked back at the prince. "Lord Kyuriakris, I'm sure you already know that saying such things is meaningless. Right?"

"Oh?" he drawled in amusement, his smile never ceasing.

"If you buy the company, its rights and market would become yours," Jeanette continued. "But the real treasure of Roussel Corporation is its employees, who are all quirky in their own way. These people have sworn loyalty to my father. Even if you get the company for yourself, I doubt they'd actually listen to you..."

Claus's Matheson Trading had The Jeanette Association. On the other hand, it wouldn't be far from the truth to say that the company her father made, Roussel Corporation, had The Baron Roussel Association. The number of people who adored her father only increased the higher up you went in the firm's hierarchy. Especially considering her father had named her as the company's heir, the employees were unlikely to just meekly obey Kyuriakris, even if he *was* royalty.

"Lord Kyuriakris, you came to this country because Lord Claus's economics thesis got you interested in it, right? That must mean you already had a vested interest in economics from the start, and I'm sure you have intelligence

operatives working for you. Which means...you already know everything I've said so far, don't you?"

Kyuriakris didn't answer her, only continued smiling at her.

"Not to mention, there's no way someone like you would risk losing a friend over a single girl," Jeanette went on. "I've heard tales about you—they say that although His Highness Kyuriakris acts like a womanizer, he's a reliable man who takes his friendships and education seriously. In fact, you've turned out many invitations from beautiful ladies and secluded yourself at your academy. Isn't that right?" Jeanette asked, delivering the finishing blow.

Kyuriakris blinked in surprise. Then, his shoulders began shaking, and soon enough he was roaring with laughter. "Well, well! Looks like you've seen right through me. I thought you didn't know about my conduct back in my motherland, but it seems like I let my guard down. You even figured out that me being a womanizer is a pretense... How did you do it? Even most citizens of Pakira don't know about that."

"I'm friends with a few merchants in Pakira. I got my information from them," Jeanette explained with a radiant smile.

"I see. I guess I should've seen this coming," said Kyuriakris, sounding amused. "But you are wrong about one thing. It's true that I'm not a womanizer, but on the other hand, when I find someone I'm *really* interested in, I *refuse* to be discouraged or give up. I'm going to bring you back with me as my empress," he told her with a confident grin.

Faced with such capricious whims of an arrogant prince, Claus let out a sigh. "Goodness... This is exactly why I didn't want to introduce you to Jeanette."

"Too bad for you. Still, you guys were lucky I was studying here incognito," Kyuriakris replied with a laugh.

Claus thought something over for a moment. "Actually...I was going to invite you to come here, anyway. To get the title deed for Roussel Corporation, of course."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" The prince frowned in confusion. "I thought you guys had no choice but to turn to me for help after Miss Jeanette's stepmother

went out of line?”

“Well... The truth is...” Jeanette spoke up timidly. “My father had already made preparations for me if there was a worst case scenario.”

Jeanette’s biological mother had passed away at a young age from a sudden illness. Taking that experience into account, Jeanette’s father gave her training so that she’d be all right even if something happened to him. That had been the reason he’d started educating her on how to be an upstart.

“Father had an inkling that if he were to suddenly pass away, mother would try to sell off the title deed... That’s why he told me where he kept it,” said Jeanette.

“Is that so?” Kyuriakris asked, glancing around the room. Sara also seemed aware of the situation, for she nodded in response.

“I was skeptical when Jeanette first confided in me about that,” Claus spoke up. “But it really turned out to be the case. I was shocked when Gilbert first informed us of what her stepmother was doing.”

“I’m sure Gilbert would’ve been able to fool her if she hadn’t found out the location herself. Father even told me that Gilbert is an excellent actor,” Jeanette said. She could picture the scene in her mind—the butler pretending to pacify her stepmother while secretly sending Jeanette a wink.

Claus chuckled, perhaps imagining the same thing as her. “He truly is a reliable man. But I doubt your stepmother will give up just yet. I bet she’ll try to meddle again, so we’d better hurry up and find your father.”

“Yes! Now that I’ve got the company back, all that’s left is to find him!” Jeanette proclaimed.

She sincerely believed that her father was safe and sound. However, there must’ve been some kind of reason for why they still hadn’t found him yet. Perhaps he’d gotten wrapped up in some kind of an incident, or even lost his memories...

I’ve got to find him as soon as possible! Jeanette thought with determination, taking a step closer to Claus, who gazed at her affectionately.

Extra Chapter: Claus's Friend

Shortly after Jeanette and Claus warned everyone about the fake silk incident, he introduced her to his friend.

"I am the first prince of the Pakira Empire, Kyuriakris Bathlys Elysion. Good to meet you," Kyuriakris said.

He was a young man of slender build who stood even taller than Claus, and he smiled elegantly at Jeanette as he greeted her. He had dark skin, and his hair was even blacker than the night sky itself. His obsidian pupils shone with a glint of intelligence, and he had an air of majesty about him that made it clear at a glance that he was no ordinary person.

I never expected Lord Claus's friend to be the prince of Pakira...! Jeanette thought with amazement.

"It's lovely to meet you, Your Highness. My name's Jeanette Roussel, and I am Lord Claus's fiancée," she said, and then nervously leaned down to touch Kyuriakris's right foot.

His eyes grew wide. "Oh? So you know the greeting tradition of my country?"

Indeed, Jeanette's action was the way one greeted their superior in the Pakira Empire. "I've only seen it in a book before, so my apologies if I did it incorrectly," she said.

"Even if you had, I admire your willingness to give it a try."

"Thank you, Your Highness!"

The prince smiled at her formal reply. "Miss Jeanette, you may simply refer to me by my name. After all, I'm hiding my status while I'm in this nation."

Jeanette sighed in relief. She'd also been worried about giving away his identity if she kept calling him by his title. Still, aware of his status, she wasn't sure if she could only refer to him by his name, and decided to use the title of "Lord" to acknowledge him.

"In that case, I'll refer to you as Lord Kyuriakris from now on."

Kyuriakris was presently visiting them at the House Guivarch estate. The passionate Pakiran friend Claus had mentioned before was in fact the prince of the Empire.

Leave it to Lord Claus to befriend the prince of a foreign nation! Jeanette thought, inwardly clapping her hands.

The two men had met in Yafruska. Just like Duke Pablo, Kyuriakris had been enticed by Claus's thesis. They engaged in heated discussions together during their studies abroad, and forged a friendship that overcame national borders.

"I was really surprised when you contacted me," Claus told Kyuriakris. "And the fact you were already in this country when I got your letter... As usual, you have unparalleled initiative," he said with a troubled chuckle.

Kyuriakris shrugged, seeming a little aggravated. "Well, you're the one who suddenly raced off back to your home country."

"I do regret not being able to say a proper goodbye. However, Jeanette's father had just gone missing, so I had to go back," Claus said.

The prince hummed thoughtfully. "Fair enough. I agree that you couldn't have left your fiancée to deal with such a thing on her own... And by the way, why did you decide to finally let me meet her? You were always so insistent on hiding her from me."

Is that really the case...? Jeanette pondered with surprise.

"Of course I did, Kyuri," Claus replied nonchalantly. "I couldn't let her fall into your clutches, even by accident. In reality, I never planned on letting the two of you meet at all."

His words might've been taken as offensive against a member of the royalty, but Kyuriakris simply laughed loudly in response. "I may be popular, pushy, and stubborn, but aren't you being a bit too cautious? I wouldn't lay a hand on just any random woman."

"I know that," Claus said, "but Jeanette is special."

"Oh? Are you saying she's so very special that even I, a royal, would fall for her at first sight?" Kyuriakris asked, suddenly speaking in fast-paced Pakiran.

Claus was completely unshaken by the switch and responded with the same level of fluency. “That’s right. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have tried to hide her from you.”

Kyuriakris turned to look at Jeanette. He smiled warmly at her, yet his eyes were clearly appraising her worth.

Jeanette felt like she was being stared down by a predator. *I-I-Isn’t Lord Claus exaggerating way too much?!* she thought fearfully. *There’s no way I can take this kind of scrutiny from a royal! Even among high society, I’m a laughingstock!*

“I do admit that she’s beautiful,” Kyuriakris said, still in Pakiran. However, the meaning in his words was clear: *“She’s beautiful, but that’s it.”*

Claus must’ve picked up on that, but he still smiled happily. “That’s fine. I don’t need anyone else to know her merits but me.”

Kyuriakris raised his eyebrows. “Oh? So you’re saying that someone like me cannot understand her merits?”

“That’s not it, Kyuri. Anyway, you should be careful. If I hear any slander about her, I’ll solve the issue with my fists, no matter who is saying it.”

“What?! Would you even know how to do that? Hmm... That just makes me want to see it for myself. If me slandering her will get you so riled up, how about I give it a go?” Kyuriakris taunted.

Sensing the conversation was heading in a dangerous direction, Jeanette quickly spoke up. “Ah, Lord Kyuriakris! I hope you haven’t found living here too inconvenient? I know our country is a lot colder than Pakira.”

Kyuriakris turned to look at her with surprise, not having expected her to speak Pakiran. “Well, aren’t you fluent? Pardon me, I thought you wouldn’t understand our discussion.”

“When I was little, we often hosted a Pakiran merchant at our house. He taught me how to speak it,” she explained.

Jeanette’s father hadn’t been able to speak any foreign languages, but he was exceptional at making friends just through using gestures. Jeanette learned how to speak foreign languages in his place, and often acted as his interpreter.

“I see,” Kyuriakris said. “I’m really surprised at your lack of accent. You must’ve had a great tutor.”

“Yes, he was wonderful! He also introduced me to chai, and even nowadays I still drink it sometimes when it’s cold out. I love its spicy aroma...! I’d really like to try the authentic version in Pakira someday.”

Chai was the name of a tea that originated in Pakira. Kyuriakris clearly didn’t think she’d bring something like that up, and his initial look of surprise soon turned into a wide smile. “Chai, eh? I enjoy it as well. I always bring the spices with me wherever I go. What do you put in yours?”

“The merchant taught me to use cinnamon, cardamom, and three cloves!” she said. The cinnamon’s sweet fragrance tickled the nose, and cardamom had a refreshing aroma. To top it off, three stimulating cloves were added. Just the memory of the deep, rich flavor created by mixing those three ingredients caused Jeanette to close her eyes ecstatically.

“Those are some great choices,” the prince acknowledged. “Personally, I also like to add black pepper. I’ll let you try our imperial recipe some time.”

“Really!? Thank you so much!” Jeanette exclaimed. *Getting to taste an imperial recipe in its place of origin?! I already can’t wait!*

Kyuriakris watched with amusement as her eyes lit up. In contrast, Claus was frowning. “Kyuri, aren’t you smirking a bit too much? I doubt it’s just because you’re smitten with the idea of some tea. Don’t get any strange ideas—Jeanette is *my* fiancée. I’ll repeat it over and over, so don’t you forget about it.”

Kyuriakris burst into laughter upon hearing Claus’s insistences. “I was just impressed, that’s all. I didn’t expect for your fiancée to be this fluent in Pakiran, or for her to have deep knowledge of my country. Still, it’s not like I’ll fall for her just from that, so don’t worry.”

“I sure hope so...” Claus murmured, unconvinced.

The prince laughed once more. “Come on, Claus. I’m not going to steal away my friend’s fiancée in some illicit love affair.”

“Exactly, Lord Claus!” Jeanette piped up. “There’s no way someone like Lord Kyuriakris would fall for me, so please rest assured!”

At the time, the two of them didn’t realize that Claus’s seemingly unfounded fears would later turn out to be true.

Extra Chapter: Princess Christine's Engagement

"Christine, that's enough! Do you even understand the fact that you're a princess?!"

Christine, who'd been in the middle of trying to climb over the royal palace's wall, turned around at the sound of the angry shout. Her long, platinum blond hair swayed with the movement, shimmering like sunlight. Her blue-green eyes were blazing with a powerful will as the furious-looking Layton glared at her.

"Ugh, why did the noisiest one of them all have to find me today?" she lamented.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Layton demanded huffily, drawing near. He was a short, stout man with the build of a bear, and he'd turned twenty-five this year. "Just so you know, it was your lady attendant who asked me to do this! She said I'm the only one who can stop you! Now get off!" he yelled, his eyebrows—the same shade of brown as his hair—furrowed as his large hands reached for her.

Christine breathed a sigh of resignation. Now that he'd found her, her escape would be impossible. Reluctantly, she took Layton's outstretched hand, and smoothly hopped off the wall. Layton easily caught her in his arms—he was unexpectedly strong.

"Honestly, what is the matter with you?! Exposing your legs in front of the public is already outrageously shameful, but to think you'd try climbing over the palace walls to escape?! Why don't you try acting like the other ladies for once?! Women shouldn't be too loud, but rather smile modestly and—"

On and on it went, ad nauseam. There was no stopping his preaching once he got started. "And there it is," Christine said, fed up. "Your idealism on how women should behave. Among all of my brother's friends, you're the *only one* with such outdated ideals. Your head's so hard, I bet I could even put a nail through it."

Layton—also known as the future duke of the Pablo ducal family—was one of the most outspoken and nagging counselors of the crown prince. Some of the other noblemen let Christine get away with her escapes, but Layton was the exception. Whenever he found her, he always brought her back, and each time, it was accompanied by an exceedingly long lecture.

“My head’s not hard. You’re just too wild! Good grief... You may not be in this country for much longer, but at least try not to cause trouble for Their Majesties! If something happened to you, it could even turn into an international affair, you know?!”

As the country’s first princess, Christine was due to be married off six months after her seventeenth birthday. She’d be marrying into their neighboring nation of The Pakira Empire. It was a political marriage for the sake of strengthening the two countries’ bonds. As such, if something happened to Christine and she couldn’t be wedded, then the relationship between the countries could deteriorate.

“I know that. And that’s *exactly* why I want to do these things while I still can,” Christine responded, glancing aside sulkily.

Her usually lively blue-green eyes shone with a note of loneliness, and Layton looked at her with surprise.

“You’re aware of it too, aren’t you?” she continued. “Pakira doesn’t have monogamous marriages like our country. I’ll get thrown into a place called a harem with a bunch of other consorts, and I’ll never be allowed to step outside again!”

Since she was being wedded for the sake of international friendship, even if she didn’t become the favorite bride, she still wouldn’t be treated roughly in the harem. She knew she was already blessed just to have that assurance.

But I just don’t want to get locked up!

Christine loved seeing the world outside of the palace. Sometimes, she escaped into the city to blend in with the common folk, as she liked to observe them get on with their daily lives. There were the cooks, using tools she’d never seen before. There were the craftsmen, creating wonderful items in ways she didn’t understand. And then there were the merchants, who beautifully lined

up their products in their shops and sold them using their skillful words.

Everything in the city was entirely new to her, and she yearned after it all.

As she was born as the nation's first princess, all she had to do was ask, and she'd be presented with countless items of clothing and food. However, she didn't know how fruit could turn into delicious cake, or how vegetables could change into a tasty stew.

She didn't know, and that's why she was so eager to learn.

Yet suddenly, she was expected to marry the emperor of Pakira. She knew that it was the fate of a princess to be put in a marriage of convenience rather than marry someone she loved, and had been prepared for it. But she'd never expected that she'd be put in a *harem*.

"So can't you just look the other way and let me go? Please? I want to see as much as I can of my own country before the marriage," Christine implored, putting both of her hands together as though in prayer as she looked up at Layton with teary eyes.

However...

"No. It's too dangerous."

...the sour-faced Layton promptly rejected her.

Christine plopped down to the ground with a thud. "Ugh! You're such a clueless, stupid miser!" she complained. "It's not like I'm trying to run away from the marriage, so can't I just make some last memories while I have the chance?! Unlike *you* guys, I can't go out all the time, but once I'm in the harem, I...I won't ever be allowed outside again..." As she spoke, she couldn't stop herself from shedding genuine tears.

Christine quickly grit her teeth. *I'm such an idiot. I already told myself I wouldn't cry over this!* No amount of lamenting would lead to the marriage being canceled. All it would do is cause her parents and brother pointless worry. That was why she'd decided to spend the last of her days here smiling brightly. The noblemen who turned a blind eye to her escape attempts must've sympathized with her feelings.

Layton must've noticed that she wasn't putting on an act. Hearing his gasp, Christine smiled at him. Then, in an attempt to cover up her embarrassment, she started talking away flippantly.

"What? Did you actually get fooled by that? I didn't really mean it, so don't tell my family, okay? They're all such worrywarts. The public calls me a tomboy, but despite what everyone might think, I know how to act properly. I never asked for anyone's concer-"

"All right. Let's go make your last memories."

"What...?" Christine's eyes widened at this sudden proclamation. Layton had always been mulish in denying her. Yet now he'd said something completely unexpected.

"But in exchange, let's go about this properly, instead of you running away like that. Let's get your family's permission, and I'll accompany you as your escort. I can sort out the permissions right away, so in the meantime, write down everything you want to do and—"

"W-W-Wait a second! This is too sudden!" she protested in bewilderment.

Layton, however, was quick to take decisive action. Though there were those who assumed him stupid due to his stout figure, he was a very intelligent man. After Christine cut him off, Layton gazed at her intently with his hazel eyes. "So you don't want to do it?"

"Of course I do!" she responded, leaning forward. The conversation had flowed so quickly she could barely keep up, but this was the perfect chance.

"Very well. Then I'll speak to Their Majesties."

Just like that, Christine's memory-making had begun.

***

"So, did you note down everything you want to do?"

Christine was in one of the chambers of the palace, and she looked up to see Layton standing by the door with his arms crossed. "Of course!" she replied. "First off, I—"

"Wait! Where did you get that paper?" he interrupted, looking panicked for

some reason.

“What?” Christine’s eyes widened. “From here...” she said, pointing to where her ample cleavage peeked out from her neckline. Her dress didn’t have pockets, so the place made for useful storage.

“P-P-People like you are just...!!!” Layton exclaimed, his face instantly turning red.

Christine giggled. “No way... You’re already twenty-five and you still didn’t know? Ladies often put things away here.” She paused. “Have you never seen it...?”

“A-A-A gentleman like me obviously wouldn’t stare at such places!” he responded, pulling out a handkerchief which he spread out to cover her chest. “Anyway, ladies shouldn’t wear dresses which show their ch-chests this much!”

“There it is. You’re the only one saying such things among high society.” Indeed, only Layton would fuss with her about every little thing like that. “Now, can we get to the main topic? I have so many things I’ve always wanted to do! With your help, I should be able to realize my dreams.”

With that, Christine cheerfully spread open a paper titled “Things I Want To Do.”

***

A few hours had passed.

“Ugh... It’s not coming out at all...” Christine complained. She was dressed in an ordinary town girl’s clothing, both of her hands struggling to grapple with a cow’s udders. The entire farm was filled with the sluggish cries of cows.

“Here’s how you milk a cow: tightly grip the upper part of the udders, then join your thumb and index finger to form a ring around them. Then squeeze with your middle, ring, and pinky fingers, in that order,” Layton instructed, vigorously milking the cow in front of him.

It was quite the odd scene, causing Christine to look at him with surprise. “You know how to do this kind of thing?”

“It’s very simple,” he replied, his expression never shifting as he

dispassionately continued milking the cow.

The two of them were in the midst of making Christine's last memories. On her list, she'd included that one of her dreams was to try to milk a cow. Apparently, Layton was friends with the owner of a farm located within the Pablo Duchy, and when he told the owner about Christine's wish, they were allowed to arrange a hands-on experience in no time at all.

After much struggle, all Christine managed to obtain in the end was a single bowl of milk. She did get to try some of the fresh milk though, and it was the tastiest milk she'd ever drank.

***

It was the second day.

This time, Christine was visiting an apple farm of the Pablo Duchy, as she'd written that she wanted to pluck fruit from a tree. That said, this wasn't the ideal harvest time, so all she could experience was something called apple fruit thinning—in other words, removing superfluous fruit from the trees.

"I always thought apples grew spaced apart one by one on the trees, but I see that isn't the case," Christine remarked in surprise, looking at a bunch of small fruit bundled together, which would eventually grow into apples. At least in the picture books she had seen, the apples weren't depicted bunched up like this.

Not far off, the aloof Layton was nimbly plucking the fruit one by one with his plump fingers. "What you're talking about is a result of the people's hard work. If left alone, apple flowers actually bloom in huge bunches. That's why we have to thin them. You can pluck one or two of the smaller ones right here."

"Okay!"

Following Layton's instructions, Christine plucked the excess fruit. Unlike milking the cow, this was a task simple enough for someone with no experience, and she was in high spirits the entire time.

***

It was the third day.

"They're...actually...really heavy, aren't they?!" Christine exclaimed,

enthusiastically lifting a hoe over her head. It was a sunny day, and she was wearing a farmer's outfit while plowing the fields, another item on her wishlist..

Watching her unsteady actions, the owner of the farm worriedly cried out, "A-Are you sure about this...? To make the royal princess do such a thing...!"

"It's fine! I'll take full responsibility. Nobody will blame you, so don't worry... Whoa!" Christine lost her balance while talking, stumbling about.

The landlady who'd been watching her let out a shriek. "Ahh! Princess Christine, I implore you, please be careful! It'd be awful if you got hurt!"

"Sorry to worry you. But it's okay! Just a little longer, and I'm sure I'll get used to it... Huh?" Christine looked up with a gasp upon noticing something.

Right in front of her, Layton, who was also clad in a farming outfit, was swiftly plowing the fields with terrific speed. His movements were completely different to that of the novice Christine—they were deft and gratifying, as if he were an expert.

"Layton, have you done this before?" Christine asked him in shock.

He nodded, as if the answer were obvious. "As a man, I have to do at least this much."

"'As a man', huh...? You know, there's something I've been wondering about for these past few days," she said with a frown. "Why do you know how to do things like milking the cows, thinning the fruit, and plowing the fields? I know I'm one to talk, but you're the heir of a ducal family, no?"

Dukes were second in power right after the royalty. The reason Layton could refer to Christine without using any titles and get away with it was because he was the eldest son of a ducal family, and had grown up as childhood friends with her and her older brother, the crown prince.

Naturally, the prime job of major aristocrats like him was to manage their lands, and provide counsel to the royalty. Farm work had nothing to do with Layton, and yet he was very efficient with it.

As she made her inquiry, Christine set the hoe aside and made her way over to him. Then, she grabbed his hand and looked at his palm, before letting out a

gasp. Unlike the delicate hands of a nobleman, Layton's palm was thick and tough. As Christine stared at it in surprise, he calmly began answering her.

"I've always told you, haven't I? Women ought to be virtuous. They should be gentle, well-mannered, and always smile."

"I know you think that, but... What's that got to do with anything?"

"Plenty. Because in order for women to be gentle, well-mannered, and always smiling, men have to work hard," Layton proclaimed, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Christine stared at him blankly. "Um... What do you mean?"

"Listen. It takes money for women to be beautiful and elegant. And in order to keep a house clean and one's appearance well-groomed, servants need to be hired, which also takes money. I want to believe that I'll never lack for money as the next duke, but you never know how things will change with time. In the worst case scenario where our country goes to war and is defeated, I'd lose my house and status in an instant. But so long as I know how to farm, at least I won't starve, right?"

Christine listened with wide eyes as Layton gravely explained his thoughts with a serious expression. "So what you mean is..." she began, "you've learned about agriculture and farming to avoid putting women through hardship?"

"That's right." Layton nodded without any hesitation.

Unable to bear it anymore, Christine burst into laughter. "Pfft... Ha ha ha!"

"Wha—?! What's so funny?!"

"I just never realized you thought like that, Layton! Though I did know you have that 'women should be modest' doctrine..." Christine said, pressing her hand to her mouth as she giggled.

Layton frowned sullenly. "I don't think it's funny... I'm sure other men feel the same way that I do... Probably."

"Do they? On top of not wishing to make women worry about money, I think you're the *only* one who'd actually take up farm work if anything went wrong."

"Really?!" he exclaimed in shock.

Christine giggled again. When Layton pressed his hand to his forehead with a groan, she reached out to pat his shoulder. “But I genuinely think it’s amazing,” she told him. “I’m sure you’ll be able to make your wife very happy... Huh? Now that I think about it, you’re not married yet, right?”

That was when Christine remembered that Layton had turned twenty-five this year. Though some noblemen did enjoy leisurely lives as bachelors, Layton was at a marriageable age.

However, at her question, the light went out of Layton’s eyes as quick as a snuffed candle. “I’m not getting married.”

“Why not?” she prompted. “It’s true that you look like a bear, but even *I* know that you’re very popular, you know? If you have your eye on a particular lady, I can put in a good word for you. You’re always looking after me, so—”

“I don’t want to talk about this! Not even with you,” Layton declared coolly.

Christine realized she’d crossed a line as she watched him angrily stomping away. “I’m sorry, Layton!” she cried in a panic. “I was thoughtless, and pried into your personal matters. I apologize for what I said, so please forgive me. I won’t ask you about it again!”

Although Layton was typically huffy and puffy, once he truly got angry, he radiated an immense force that caused even the crown prince to shrink back. Worse yet, once he’d been angered, it was always bothersome to deal with. The last time Christine rode a horse without permission and nearly fell off, Layton had been so furious with her that he refused to speak with her for months.

In the end, Christine had to go out of her way and apologize profusely many times before she finally managed to dispel Layton’s anger.

I still have so many things I want to do, so I’m glad I managed to avoid Layton shunning me this time!

Christine had written an extensive list of things she wanted to do, but she only had a month in order to make her last memories. Right now wasn’t the time for her and Layton to be fighting.

And so Christine pulled Layton along with her, and with his occasional help, she was steadily getting through the list.

She spent one day running through the pastures with the sheep, and the next struggling with the loom. She had to learn to attach a worm to a hook for fishing, and she had to rush out first thing in the morning to collect freshly laid chicken eggs. In the city, she enjoyed eating street food, and she even put on some different clothes and tried advertising a store. She also got the reluctant Layton to bring her along to a cabaret while she was crossdressing as a man, which became a fun memory for her.

Christine had all kinds of exciting experiences, and each time one of her wishes came true, she forgot all about her manners and burst into loud laughter. Layton always reprimanded her for it, but it seemed like even he was having a good time. Every single day glittered like jewels.

“That month passed in the blink of an eye. I wish it’d gone a bit slower,” Christine said glumly, peering out from the cathedral clock tower at the sun sinking over the horizon. Her vivid, blue-green eyes resembled the waters of the southern sea, yet right now they were narrowed in sorrow, her pupils shaking like the surface of the ocean at sunset.

Layton was standing next to her, supporting her to ensure she wouldn’t fall. “The last day of our agreement is about to come to an end. Are you sure you want to spend it here watching the sunset?” he asked. “I feel like it’s a waste of time...”

“Humph! You’re so emotionless, Layton. Getting through my list is important, yes, but this is the very last day, you know? Let me be a bit sentimental.”

“S-Sorry,” he said quickly.

Christine chuckled. “I suppose that’s very you, though. You’re always quick to make decisions and focus on reality. Thanks to your initiative and determination, I was able to make lots of wonderful memories. I’d be lying if I said I don’t have any regrets, but... I was able to set my mind straight.”

I’m going to be married off into the Pakira Empire, be put in a harem, and stay there for the rest of my life. That’s my duty as a princess. Christine lifted her head, gazing at the distant horizon. Somewhere over the clouds, the scorching sun blazed down upon the lands of Pakira.

“Christine, you...” Layton called out to her.

She turned to look at him. “Hmm?”

But his hazel pupils only wavered for an instant, before he glanced aside. “No, it’s nothing.”

“What is it? I’m curious now. Finish your thought,” Christine insisted, drawing closer to him.

Layton frowned. “Sorry. It’s nothing, so just forget about it.”

“Oh, you’re trying to pretend like it wasn’t anything important, huh? I won’t let you!” she exclaimed, and suddenly leapt at him.

“Wha—?!”

Christine gripped his clothes, pulled him closer, and pressed her lips against his.

“Ch-Ch-Christine?!” Layton shouted, bending backwards. His face had turned bright red.

“Hee hee... I finally did it. My wishlist included a kiss, and now I got it!”

“What?! How could you?! As the princess—no, as a woman, you shouldn’t do such—!”

Just as she’d expected, the flushed Layton was furious with her. Christine stepped away from him with a laugh, and then began racing down the stairs to escape from him. “Don’t be so uptight!” she called over her shoulder. “It was just one kiss! Ah, wait! Could it have been your first one?! Sorry! I guess I stole your first kiss, then!”

“Christine!!!”

Hearing his angry shouts behind her, Christine giggled to herself as she stepped down the stairs. She hadn’t written it down, but the very last thing on her list of things she wanted to do was, *“Kiss the one I love.”*

It was decided that Christine would be married off to Pakira when she was thirteen years old, so she’d always kept her feelings for her clumsy childhood friend a secret. But in the very end, she’d given herself that one allowance—to kiss him.

I'm sure the Pakira Empire will forgive me for such a small thing, right?

The entire ride home in the horse-drawn carriage, Layton was completely silent. There was a deep frown creasing his brow, so this time Christine might've truly angered him.

That's unavoidable. Layton hates when women act immodestly. He might even hold me in disdain... Christine had been prepared for this to happen, but she still wanted to do it. After all, from now on, she'd have to live in the harem for years, even decades. She'd wanted a small memory like that for herself.

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However, it seemed that Layton's fury had been even deeper than she imagined.

After their last day out together, Layton had completely stopped showing up at the palace. Moreover, Christine didn't even see him during any high society events. She tried asking her father and brother if they knew what was going on, but they just awkwardly shook their heads.

And so a month had passed since Layton had gone missing, then two, then three...

Before Christine knew it, the day of her wedding had arrived.

The lady attendants were helping her into her wedding gown inside one of the palace rooms, but her heart was full of gloom. *The day is finally here... Perhaps I shouldn't have done anything, after all? Maybe if I hadn't, we could've at least spent these last few months talking as usual...*

If nothing else, Christine had wanted to see Layton's face one last time.

She cast her head down, swallowing her unspoken feelings. Right then, she heard the sound of footsteps outside, and a panicked lady attendant flew into the room.

"Princess! Please wrap up your arrangements as quickly as you can! The emperor of Pakira has come here in person!"

"The emperor?"

That word caused an uproar inside of the room. With her preparations quickly

finished, Christine hurried to the audience chamber, where she'd been summoned by the king—her father.

But why did the emperor come here himself? I've never heard of anyone coming over to pick up the bride.

Usually, the bridal procession was carried out in a solemn manner. It was unheard of for an emperor to visit his bride's homeland to collect her. Christine hadn't even met the emperor before, so it was unlikely that the man had arrived because he just couldn't wait any longer.

Christine was full of questions as she arrived in the audience chamber. Inside were her parents, the king and queen, her brother, and a man adorned in a luxurious outfit she'd never seen in their country before—the emperor of Pakira.

"Ah, so this is Princess Christine. She's a true beauty," said the emperor. He had black hair and suntanned skin. His dark eyes were as sharp and forceful as those of a hawk, and unlike her father, he was a beautiful man who exuded a sense of intimidation. He looked to be about ten years older than Layton.

Christine remained silent, giving him an elegant, ladylike bow.

The emperor hummed thoughtfully as he watched her. "I may have rushed things a bit. If I'd known she was this beautiful, I probably wouldn't have listened to what that man had to say, and brought her straight into my harem..."

That man? Christine wondered, just barely managing to keep up with the emperor's rapid Pakiran. Her eyes narrowed in confusion right when a familiar voice resounded from behind her.

"Your Majesty, please don't forget our promise!" Layton called out, swooping into the chamber.

Layton?! But...something about him seems different...

Indeed, he'd transformed greatly since Christine had last seen him. His once round face and body had grown sharper, and there was a sense of fierceness about him. Despite the fact he was wearing full body armor, his powerful muscles asserted their presence from beneath it, and his now lean face had the

dauntless, intimidating expression of a warrior.

The emperor scowled at Layton's swift interruption. "I know, Layton. You filled your half of the agreement, so now it is my turn to grant your wish."

The perplexed Christine was at a loss, until her brother explained the situation to her. Apparently, the day after they'd last seen each other, Layton left a letter behind and then traveled to the Pakira Empire with a private army. There, he had told the emperor, *"I will conquer the southern tribe which has been causing your empire problems for years. In exchange, I want Princess Christine as my wife."*

"I was truly shocked," the emperor revealed. "Suddenly some flabby white man showed up in my nation saying all manner of strange things. I didn't really understand, but I found it entertaining, so I told him to give it a go. And then, in nought but a few months, he truly did drag in the tribal chief before me by the scruff of his neck."

As he spoke, the emperor gazed at Christine. There was an amused twinkle in his eye. "You see, the southern tribe has been a thorn in our side for many years, and we've been struggling in our battles against them. I've always been wondering how to deal with them, and then this man showed up... You'd never have thought it was a good idea, considering how he looked, huh? I would've applauded him just for reducing their forces with some traps and the like, but that Layton went on a total rampage."

The emperor laughed, thoroughly amused. "He didn't fight with a sword, but instead swung a huge hammer, bringing down enemies left and right. Apparently, it was an exhilarating sight. The enemy forces supposedly referred to him as 'a muscle daruma from hell'."

M-Muscle daruma? Christine tilted her head at the unfamiliar word.

"Ah, you don't know about daruma in this country?" the emperor asked, noticing her confusion. "Pardon me. Perhaps I should've said, 'a demon god from hell'."

D-Demon god?! I heard that Layton did well in the chivalric order, but I had no idea he had such abilities... Christine thought, casting a glance at Layton. He was frowning, seemingly uncomfortable. Layton was the type of person who didn't

enjoy being praised.

“Your Majesty, that’s enough about me. Let’s move onto the main topic...” he proposed.

“You’re right. I deeply regret letting such a beauty slip away from me, but...as the emperor, I must uphold my promises.” The emperor turned to look at Christine’s father.

The king nodded. It seemed like he must’ve already been aware of everything, as his expression was serene.

The Pakiran emperor looked back at Christine. “Princess Christine, I am canceling my engagement with you. You are now free. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it, Layton?”

Layton nodded emphatically, his eyes shining in a way Christine had never seen before.

The emperor let out an exasperated sigh. “Good grief, you look like a kid who’s just won a prize. You’re like a completely different man when compared to your battlefield savagery. Well...I’ve set the stage for you.”

At those words, Layton approached Christine. His expression was unusually nervous, and he wouldn’t look her in the eyes. He took in a few deep breaths, and then suddenly dropped to one knee in front of her.

“Princess Christine...” For a moment, Layton’s voice cracked. Behind him, the emperor was doing his utmost to stop himself from bursting into laughter. “I...I’ve always been in love with you. I’m...not a good-looking person, we’re years apart in age, and you’ve been engaged for a long time, so I thought I should just give up. But...I just couldn’t do that. That’s why I went to Pakira to get you back.”

Layton’s blush had spread even to his ears as he spoke. “Princess Christine, despite who I am...won’t you please marry me?!” he exclaimed.

“Layton...” Christine whispered with wide eyes. Then, she suddenly jumped into his arms.

“Ow! That’s dangerous, Christine!” Layton said in surprise, hurriedly getting to

his feet while holding Christine.

Even as she felt her feet lift off the ground, Christine clung tightly to Layton, her arms wrapped around his thick neck. “I’m so happy, Layton! I’m going to become your wife, right? That means I get to go on more dates with you, and have my wedding with you, and celebrate our marriage anniversary every single year! We can do all that, right?!” she asked, lifting her face to look at him.

Layton smiled at her. “Of course. Let’s complete as much of your wishlist as possible together.”

Christine was beaming. “In that case, I want to have lots of children! Three boys and three girls at the very least! So let’s hurry up and start making—”

“W-Wait, Christine! Don’t say anything else!” Layton shouted, pressing his large hand against her mouth. His whole face was once again bright red.

“Mmph! Mmm!” Christine mumbled, noticing the way her parents and brother covered their faces awkwardly. It was her attempt at saying *“I’m sorry.”*

Then, she smiled softly, and while everyone watched, she pressed her lips against Layton’s.



Afterword

Hello to my first time readers, and hello again to those who've read my works before! My name is Miyako Miyano.

Thank you for picking up a copy of my novel, "*Jeanette the Genius: Defying My Evil Stepmother by Starting a Business with My Ride-or-Die Fiancé!*"

Those of you who've read my previous works might already know this, but for some reason, a character saying, "I will *not* cancel my engagement with you!" is one of my absolute favorite themes. I wrote this novel aiming for that kind of plot, and before I knew it, the super dense and super optimistic heroine Jeanette was born!

This story's protagonist, Jeanette, is the type of girl who'd truly spread her wings and go as far as possible through her own means (under the right conditions, she'd even fly right over the national borders). If not for Claus's Matheson Trading and her meeting with Duke Pablo, I don't think Jeanette would've stayed put as she did now (at the end of volume 1).

If Matheson Trading didn't exist, Jeanette would've been itching for something to do even while living in House Guivarch's estate, and I have no doubt that she would've ended up racing off to pursue business. Then, one big-wig after another would've taken a liking to her, and she might've ended up ensnaring the heart of some noble son or prince... I can easily picture that kind of story for her.

Claus left Matheson Trading in Jeanette's hands and brought her along to meet Duke Pablo because he wanted to make her happy, but his own actions ended up saving himself from losing her. I'm sure he's more relieved about that than anyone else... LOL

The reason that the story of the powerful Jeanette and world-wise Claus saw the light of day is wholly thanks to the great enthusiasm of my manager, who approached me about it. Thank you so much.

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to the following: Lord Claus, whose jealousy was so flaming hot that even the readers felt the need to keep in him check; Jyun Hayase, who drew the vivacious Jeanette so adorably that you could stare at her forever; my proofreader, who helped me out tremendously with the honorific language, which is my weakness; the designer, who produced a wonderfully emotional cover; and anyone else involved with the making of this book.

I truly hope that anyone who got this novel has found at least a little bit of enjoyment in reading it.

All that said...Jeanette still doesn't know her father's whereabouts, so I'd love it if you stuck around for a little longer.

Miyako Miyano