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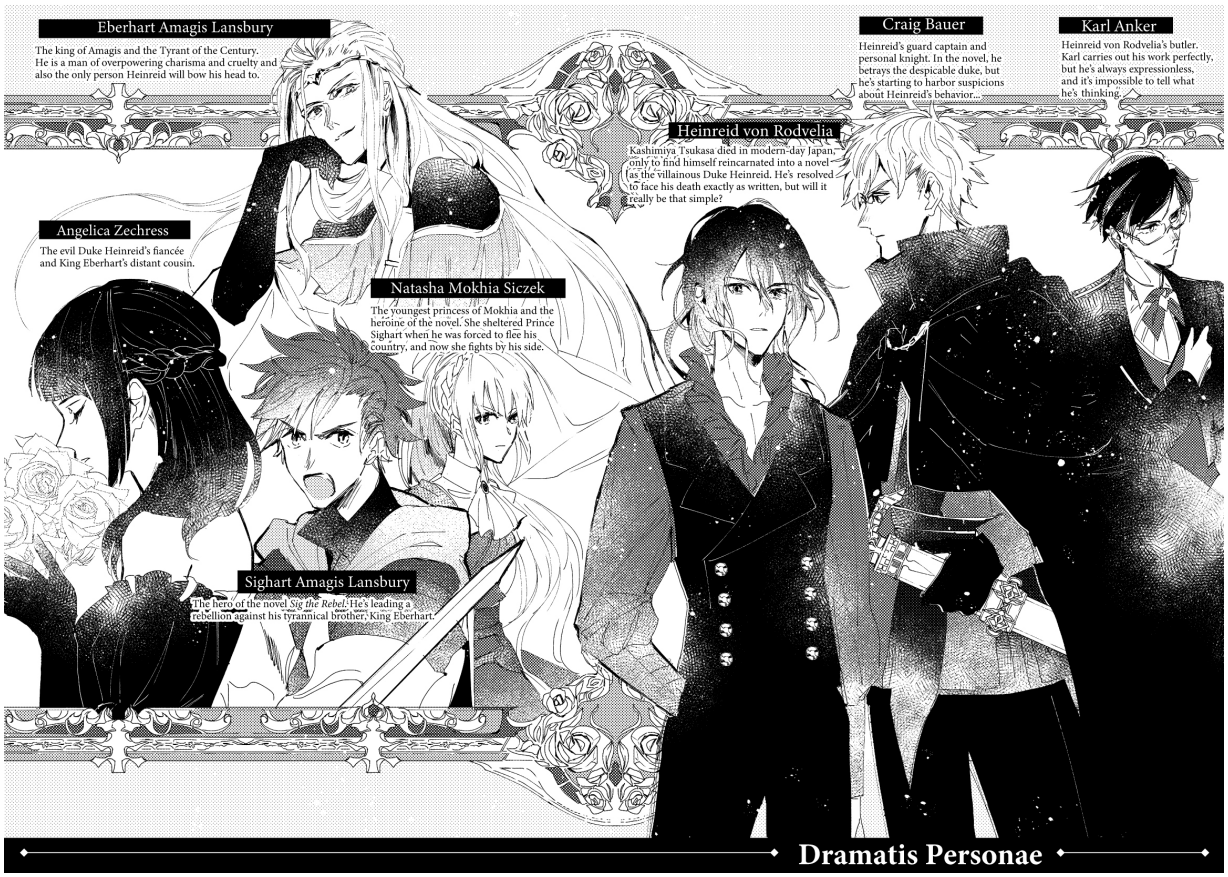
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Dramatis Personae

Chapter 1

The nighttime wind wailed fiercely over the cliffside road. My body shivered in the cold as I slowly pushed my moped uphill. Streetlights were already sparse on this dark stretch of road, but with snow and sleet hampering my vision still further, it truly felt like an environment utterly hostile to life.

The perfect spot for an accident.

Calling it a stroke of luck might have been a bit of a stretch. But it was a stroke of convenience, at least.

After all, I was about to kill myself.

I wasn't suffering from any mental illness, and I hadn't lost hope for the future—I'd simply found myself in a situation where death was the best option available.

I'd just *happened* to come from a poor family with a single mother, and my sister had just *happened* to fall gravely ill, and the treatment had just *happened* not to be covered by our health insurance. And finally, I'd just *happened* to have a life insurance policy that would pay out enough to cover my sister's medical bills. That was all there was to it.

I'd gotten a job straight out of high school and worked as hard as I could to save up money to help put my sister through college. But all of those savings were nothing compared to the money my family would get if I died. We really did live in a messed-up world.

That said, I knew that no matter how dire the situation was, I shouldn't have resorted to this—I should've searched for some other solution. I understood that. I really did. But...

"Mom... Onii-chan... I'm so sorry..."

I could still hear my sister's trembling voice as she'd lain in her sterile white hospital bed, apologizing to us. I could still hear my mother's anguished sobs as she'd crumpled to the ground on the spot.

As that scene had unfolded in front of me, before I could even start to panic, a thought had seared itself into my mind: *I need to save her, no matter what it takes.*

After that, I'd taken some time to carefully prepare—reviewing my insurance policy, scouting out good spots for a suicide, meticulously planning out every detail. I'd learned that if the insurance company found out I'd killed myself for the money, they'd almost certainly refuse to pay out. And so, I'd thought about how best to make my death look like an accident. It was just as well, really—I didn't want my sister to feel like it was her fault her brother had died.

In any case, this was the first time I had ever considered killing myself. I'd been concerned that maybe this was just an ill-conceived impulse decision—that I might end up losing my nerve as I went through the actual preparations. But in reality, nothing of the sort had happened. Everything up to this point had gone incredibly smoothly.

I wasn't a particularly great or talented man, but I was determined to be a good older brother. I would gladly take all of my sister's misfortune onto my own shoulders; I'd do it with a smile.

I reached the top of the cliff and came to a stop. By the side of the road, a sign declared, in large red letters, "SHARP CURVE AHEAD —DRIVE CAREFULLY!"

It was too dark to see farther into the distance, but just as the sign said, there was a hairpin curve on the road downhill from here. On the other side of the rusted guardrail was a sheer cliff face covered in jagged rocks. If anyone fell over the edge from that height, there'd be no saving them. It was a dangerous road, even under the best conditions; if I rode my moped down on a night like tonight, with the snow obscuring my vision, well...it wouldn't be any surprise at all if I got into an accident.

When I'd realized that this perfect cliffside was on the route between my home and my workplace, it had felt like nothing short of divine intervention. The upshot was that I could die a perfectly plausible death without needing any pretext for being out here.

All right. In this weather, barring some sort of emergency, there

shouldn't be any cars on this road until morning. Best case, the fall kills me instantly; worst case, I freeze to death. I'd rather not suffer if I can avoid it, so I really hope it's quick...

My thoughts were interrupted by the buzz of my phone in my jacket's inner pocket. I pulled it out to look at it; the name on the screen was "Mom." Probably a reply to the message I'd sent her an hour ago: "Be home soon."

I stared silently at my phone for a moment, then put it away without opening the message. I closed my eyes.

I'm sorry, mom. I won't be coming home. I'm sorry, Yurika. Get well soon, dammit. I'm sorry, boss. I twisted your arm into giving me all that overtime, but I'll be leaving you understaffed. Also...

I recalled the warm, caring doctor who'd attended my sister; the supportive teacher who'd helped me land a job; the woman who'd given me a shoulder to cry on when things had been rough; all the friends and coworkers who'd been kind and welcoming, even when I'd been withdrawn and unsociable... In the depths of my heart, I apologized to every last person I could think of. I hadn't left a note, so they'd never know, but all the same: *I'm sorry. And also, thank you. My life was a happy one because all of you were part of it.*

I slowly opened my eyes again and straddled my moped. The engine thrummed to life, echoing through the night on this desolate cliffside. All I had to do now was hit the throttle.

The gradual acceleration, the cold wind biting at my skin, the inexorably approaching cliff...

With a sharp crash and a shattering roar, the curtain fell on Kashimiya Tsukasa's life of twenty-five years.

◆◇◆

The dimly lit dungeon was filled with the scent of blood. Before me was a man covered in cuts and bruises, begging me to spare his life.

Huh...? Wait, where am I? And who's this guy?

No—I knew who he was. This utter imbecile was a citizen of ***my*** duchy, and yet he'd fallen into arrears with his taxes. What a fool

he'd been to commit such a grave transgression against the laws of our land.

So you have an ailing mother—what of it? Here in my domain, those who are unable to work are unfit to live. You failed to dispose of that useless woman yourself, and thus, you shall pay the price in her stead. Perfectly simple, is it not? Oh, but don't worry. I shall make certain to absolve you of your sins while you yet live. I'll flay away your flesh and shatter your bones to ensure you've received your proper penance before I send you off to the hereafter…

As I spoke, a small, strained noise of despair leaked from the man's throat. He lacked even the strength to scream. As I laughed at his comically pathetic figure, I raised my whip...

What the hell's going on?! This is sickening. Why am I whipping a man who's curled up on the floor? Hey, you're hurting him! Stop, dammit!

But my scream echoed uselessly in the confines of my mind. I was powerless to stop my raised arm. Through the whip, I could clearly feel the sensation of a living person breaking under my hand. Just as nausea started to overtake me—

—the scenery suddenly shifted.

Now I was in a gaudy room with a luxurious crimson rug, surrounded by expensive-looking furniture... I was in my bedroom.

"Please, Your Grace," a woman sobbed as she clung to me. I grabbed her by the hair to pull her off me and threw her to the floor. As she cowered in fear, I smiled sweetly at her and leaned down to whisper.

What's the matter? Go on. Scream for help, you pitiful wench. That is the final act of resistance I'll permit you. No one will come to your aid, of course. Oh, how wretched you are. If only your husband hadn't been so foolish as to harbor a criminal, then you and he would be spending another peaceful afternoon together even as we speak. Or if you'd at least had the good sense to report him once you learned of it, then you might have fared better. Your family were wiser than you in that regard—weren't they?

The woman shook and trembled, tears flowing ceaselessly from her eyes as she begged for my forgiveness. “Please have mercy, Your Grace”—those faint words spilled from her lips over and over.

Mercy? But of course. I always treat women with kindness and care. Your crimes may be severe, but in essence, you merely silenced yourself for the sake of your beloved—nothing more. Your punishment shan’t be any the lesser for it, but in my compassion, I have prepared a gift to comfort you. It’s in that wooden chest over there. Go on, open it… I said* open it*, wench.

Powerless to refuse, she crawled toward the chest, even as sobs wracked her body. She was weak with fear, and her movements were sluggish, but I simply watched rather than urging her to make haste. The large, sturdy chest was of solid construction, and it carried a sense of weight that drew the eye. Although it took her some time, the woman finally arrived at the chest. Her hands were damp with a cold, clammy sweat as she raised them to the lid. It opened with a creak to reveal...

In an instant, a high, ear-piercing shriek rang out, and I roared with laughter over it.

What’s wrong? Why do you wail? Merciful as I am, I was most careful to preserve his head clean and unblemished for you! Are you not delighted?!

The woman, still in a state of shock, gave no response, but I was filled with ecstatic joy. As she screamed and struggled, I kicked her over, tore away her clothes, and...

No, stop it! I don’t want to do this! Why?! Why am I...?

As I looked on in confused horror, the scene changed again. And when that new one finished, I moved on to another—a dark alley, a sketchy-looking shop, a town square, a luxurious manor...

“No!”

“Help me!”

“Thank you for your patronage.”

“You demon...”

“Monster!”

“Stop it!”

"You truly are the Venom of—"

"Someone, anyone, please..."

Occasionally, I'd find myself in shady conversations with nasty-looking people, but almost everything else was one gut-wrenching atrocity after another. Old and young, women and men, victim after victim groaned and writhed in pain. And there, at the center of it all, doling out torment while grinning ear to ear—there "I" was.

The endless procession of repulsive scenes went on and on while I helplessly watched. Just when I felt like I was genuinely about to lose my mind, my surroundings shifted once more. I was in a dungeon again, much like the one I'd seen at the start. In front of me were two figures: a corpse hunched over on the floor, and a man standing in a daze as he gripped a bloodstained sword. For a long while, they remained in that fixed tableau, but eventually, the man slowly turned to look at me.

"Hein...reid...!"

"AAAAAAUUUGGGHHHH!!! Ngh—!"

I jolted awake and sat up with a start. A sharp twinge of pain immediately shot through my head—I clutched at my temples.

Owww... Feels like someone's punching my head from the inside... Ugh, I'm all sweaty and clammy too. Well, of course I would be after an awful dream like that. It felt like I was in hell. What a...nightmare?

Hang on. Why am I awake? That could've *been hell, but if I'm awake, then it must've been a dream after all... Wait, did I screw up the suicide? No, there's no way I could've survived a fall from that height at that speed! Where even am I, anyway...?*

I suddenly realized the strangeness of my situation. If I'd somehow survived, then I should've been either at the bottom of the cliff or in a hospital. I was clearly indoors, but this didn't look like any hospital room I'd ever seen. The furniture was covered in gaudy gold trim, I could see a couple of expensive-looking vases, the sheets I was lying under were pure black, and the bed even had a canopy.

Is this some sort of VIP room? Hang on, there's gotta be some mistake! I can't afford a hospital bill, especially for a room like this!

I searched around, but I couldn't find anything resembling a nurse call button. I'd just have to go find someone myself. Clutching my aching head, I got out of the bed.

There's gotta be someone out in the hall... What's the deal with this room, though? The carpet's so soft—this feels more like a hotel than a hospital. Rich people are something else. Ugh, even this mirror is all glitzy! Are these real...gemstones...?

As I caught sight of the mirror, I froze. The reflection staring back at me looked nothing at all like my memories of my own face.

Gentle waves of thick black hair contrasted against pale white skin like a polished porcelain doll. Framed by those features were a pair of crimson eyes that I could only describe as *venomous*. The man in the mirror was filled with a monstrous beauty that even the extravagant furnishings could never hope to outshine. I stared at him, and he stared dazedly back at me.

"Wha—? Huh?"

I stood still as I tried to process what was happening.

What's up with this thing? I can see the reflection of the room I'm in, so I assumed it was a mirror, but maybe it's not? Is it a one-way mirror or something...? Wait, no, that's not how those work. But then, what the heck is this?

Just as my confusion reached its peak, I suddenly heard heavy footsteps approaching from outside the room, and the door slammed open.

"Are you all right, Your Grace?!"

"Huh?"



A tall man with a muscular build came rushing into the room, anxiety filling his rugged features. His hair was a warm blond with brown undertones, and a fierce light shone from his deep emerald-green eyes as our gazes met.

Instantly, another sharp jolt of pain shot through my skull, and I flashed back to the nightmare I'd just awoken from. Along with the headache, a torrent of information about the man in front of me flooded into my mind: *knight, guard captain, son of a count...*

The moment the headache receded, my eyes opened wide in shock. I already *knew*, even without the memories flowing into me. I'd known it all long before I'd had that dream.

This man's name was Craig Bauer. He was a character in a novel I'd read long ago, *Sig the Rebel*. The "me" reflected in the mirror was the villainous Duke Heinreid von Rodvelia...and Craig was the man who would kill him.

Chapter 2

Sig the Rebel, simply put, was a tale of good triumphing over evil. The novel was set in the despotic kingdom of Amagis, and just as that adjective suggested, the country was rotten to the core.

Eight years ago, Crown Prince Eberhart had assassinated his father, the king; that was when the kingdom's long nightmare had begun. Eberhart had taken the throne before the truth behind his father's death could come to light. Driven by his twisted egotism and his sense of absolute superiority, he'd declared that he would be the kingdom's only royal. All of his direct family—his mother, his grandparents, his siblings—had been put to death one after another. Next, he'd elevated the standings of a small set of lords and nobles he personally favored, bringing them together under his banner. Just when it had seemed like the pieces might be about to settle, he'd drastically raised taxes throughout the kingdom.

Obviously, his preposterous policy changes had sparked dissent among nobles and commoners alike. But before those who spoke out against him could begin to take action, they'd been rounded up by the royal army and publicly made examples of. The people, thoroughly accustomed to the old king's moderate governance, had been left reeling by the sudden shift. While they'd struggled to make sense of it all, Eberhart had advanced his legislative agenda, and in the blink of an eye, he'd brought the kingdom under his authoritarian rule.

As if all that weren't bad enough, there was yet another terrible evil looming over the kingdom: Duke Heinreid von Rodvelia. He was King Eberhart's right-hand man, a villainous nobleman who ran rampant as he ground the country under his heel. Heinreid was a terrifying man who took sublime joy in the torment of others; he'd even been an accomplice in the old king's assassination. People called him "the Demon of Amagis" and "the Venom of the Nation"—

and he wore those dreadful titles without a hint of shame as he carried out every inhuman atrocity imaginable.

With those two monsters at the helm and the borders closed off, Amagis was transformed into a hellish dictatorship...

But there was still hope!

Sighart, the hero of the story—Eberhart's younger brother who'd been forced to flee the kingdom eight years prior—would return and launch a rebellion to liberate the downtrodden populace and save his country. The novel I'd read told the story of that rebellion. Even when the odds were against him and all hope seemed lost, Sig fought on alongside the heroine and the comrades they'd gathered. It was a rip-roaring page-turner filled with action, friendship, and a bit of romance to boot.

When I was a kid, my family had been even poorer than we were now, and I'd only ever read the books in the school library. One day, someone had given me a copy of *Sig the Rebel*, and I'd read it over and over. The flashy illustrations and dramatic plot twists had enthralled me back then, and I still remembered the story even now.

That's right—even now, after I'd already died.

"Your Grace?"

As I stood there in a daze, the man who'd rushed into the room—Craig—addressed me once again.

Shit, okay, I've gotta say something. What's going on right now? I started screaming while I was half awake, so he got worried and came running over—something like that, right?

"I-It's fine. I just had a bad dream. Don't worry about it."

"Your Grace...?"

I did my best to shrug it off with a smile and a noncommittal answer, but he wasn't buying it at all.

C'mon, I didn't say anything weird! Please, just let it slide! And then go away for a while!

But my hopes were all for naught. Craig didn't leave. In fact, he knelt down right in front of me. Before I could stop him, he bowed his head and started monologuing.

"It is truly a relief to see you awake, Your Grace. When I received word that you had fallen down the stairs, my blood ran cold with

dread. For such a grave mischance to befall you with one of my men at your side is an utter travesty. I cannot possibly apologize enough. The fault is entirely mine for my failure to properly manage my subordinates. Henceforth, I shall exercise still greater diligence in their training to ensure that such an accident is never repeated. I shall take pains to defend you from any and all misfortune, Your Grace, and so I humbly beseech you for your mercy—"

"W-Wait, hang on! Calm down a second!"

I cut him off before he could keep on going. Honestly, *I* was the one who really wanted to calm down right now. I still didn't quite have a handle on what was happening.

Wait, did he say I fell down the stairs? Not off a cliff?

I was confused. Until I had a clearer picture, I didn't want to make any decisions or say anything that might cause trouble. All I'd done was hit the brakes on his interminable apology, but...

"My deepest apologies for speaking out of turn, Your Grace. I shall accept whatever punishment you deem fitting."

I stared down at him.

Dude, you've got "Is this it for me?" written all over your face. You're acting like I'm gonna do something horrible! Wait, no. "His Grace" has done all sorts of horrible things, haven't I?

Craig Bauer was Heinreid's sword—the knight who served as captain of his guards. Eight years ago, he'd given in to evil...on the surface. Underneath, he was a former royal knight who still remained loyal to Sig, his original master. For now, he was bending the knee to a man he despised, enduring the humiliation and biding his time as he waited for a chance to stab the villains in their backs. Even right this minute, it must've been excruciating for him to keep his head bowed.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. Just leave me alone for a bit."

"So you won't be administering any punishment, Your Grace?"

"Huh? Yup, nothing. You're off the hook. Just don't let anyone into my room for the rest of today, all right?"

Craig furrowed his brow in confusion at "my" blatantly abnormal behavior, but he wasn't about to poke the hornets' nest. He bowed his head again in a show of obedience.

"Very well, Your Grace. My deepest thanks for your magnanimous treatment. But will you not see a physician?"

"I'll see one tomorrow. Sorry, but can you let everyone else know too?"

I was practically pleading now, and Craig finally got the message that I wanted him out.

"As you wish, Your Grace."

He stood and gave another bow. I watched his retreating back as he left the room, and the moment he shut the door behind him, I flopped back onto the bed.

God, that was stressful... I kind of half-assed it, though. Are things gonna be okay? Wait, what do I even mean by "okay"? Nothing about any of this is okay! What the hell's going on?

As I lay on my back, wondering if maybe I'd woken up into yet another dream, I clutched at my head and groaned. But no matter how long I tried, I didn't wake up. I nervously pinched my cheek, but it just hurt like normal. There was no escaping it—this was all real.

Guess I've just gotta accept it. This is definitely the world of Sig the Rebel*, and I'm a character in the novel—the evil Duke Heinreid.*

Why'd I have to be him*, of all people, though?* It wasn't like I wanted to be the hero, but at this point, even some nameless Villager A would've been a way better pick. Heinreid was just *that* despicable. Like I'd witnessed in this morning's dream, he was a depraved sadist who loved the suffering of others more than anything else in the world. There wasn't even any real reason he'd ended up so twisted—he'd just fallen onto the path of evil for the sake of his own pleasure.

Even back when I'd read the novel, I'd hated his damn guts! Every single time his name had shown up, yet another sickening incident had played out on the page, and I'd waited with bated breath for someone to finally kill the bastard! At the end of the novel, Heinreid shut himself away in his manor as Craig led a revolt against him. An angry mob set the building on fire, and it burned to the ground with Heinreid inside. After seeing the actual Duke Heinreid's memories, even *that* felt like a kinder death than he

deserved.

The actual Duke Heinreid...

That was when a doubt arose in my mind.

Wait... Did I really only "become" Heinreid just now?

One way or another, Heinreid's original consciousness was completely gone. In terms of my perceptual experience, I'd gone from my accident straight into a nightmare, and when I'd woken up, I'd found myself in Heinreid's body. But on further thought, there were actually two possibilities.

Maybe, just like I'd thought, I had taken over Heinreid's body immediately after I'd died.

Or maybe...after my death, I'd been reborn as Heinreid, and I'd only just regained my memories of my past life.

The first option didn't actually improve my circumstances at all. But if I'd been reborn as the duke, then the one who'd perpetrated all those vile acts was none other than *me*. It sounded absurd; I didn't want to believe it. But as the facts stood, I still had all of this body's original memories, and while I'd been dreaming, even our emotions had gotten synchronized. If that was true...

All the atrocities from the dream flashed through my mind.

If that was true, then I had to die. I'd tormented and devoured the weak. I'd done it for no reason at all, laughing all the while. I hadn't been content to do it all with my own hands—I'd even forced friends and family to kill each other. All of those evil deeds were already done, and the countless dead would never return to life. How could a man like that be allowed to live? The thought was intolerable, even for *me*. Where would I get off living a carefree life with these memories inside me?

Maybe I wasn't in a rational state of mind. It definitely wasn't normal to make life-and-death decisions this casually, even if the life in question was my own. If someone else had been having thoughts like these, I'm pretty sure I would've told them to slow down and think things through.

But right now—or rather, "now" within my personal perception of time—I'd only just finished taking my own life. Any hesitance I had about choosing to die was already worn as thin as it could be.

"All right."

I got out of bed and stood in front of the mirror once more. The face I saw staring back was the same as before, of course. The same thick, wavy black hair, the same pale white skin, and the same deep scarlet eyes—the color of the blood that had stained every corner of my dream. I still felt an intense dissociation from this body, but it was unmistakably my own now. That thought spurred on my strange sense of duty even more as I collected my thoroughly scattered thoughts and settled on my objective.

My motive had changed substantially, but nonetheless, I knew what I had to do: My job in this world was to die once again, this time for good.

Chapter 3

The next day, my personal physician was called to my room. He examined my injury and asked a few questions about my symptoms. This world didn't have CT scans or anything, so since my mind was clear and my only visible injury was a small bump on the head, he said to just keep an eye on it, and that was that.

To be fair, even with the latest in modern medical technology, they probably wouldn't have been able to do much about me regaining memories of my possibly-past life.

I didn't have any particular plans after seeing off the doctor, so now I was holed up in my study. Craig was standing guard outside the door, and my butler had come in briefly to bring me tea. But otherwise, I was spending the day alone, sitting with some random pieces of parchment spread across my desk and pretending to work.

Why? Because I had no idea what to do!

Sure, I'd decided that my end goal was to *die for good*, but I was at a complete loss as to how to spend my time right now. This was the world of a novel I'd read, and I remembered the entire plot, but I was one of the villains. Obviously, stories were primarily told from the perspectives of the protagonists, and *Sig the Rebel* was no exception. In other words, the book didn't bother depicting Heinreid's everyday life in any detail. Besides, even if it had, he'd definitely be up to no good; I didn't think I'd be able to act the way he did in the story.

Still, I needed *some* sort of guidance. I tried going through Heinreid's memories to see how he usually spent his time, but it was all just plotting evil schemes or carrying out evil schemes. I wasn't finding anything I could work with.

Actually, maybe I should just go ahead and die as soon as possible. After all, I'm practically a living embodiment of terror. If I'm gone, everyone's gonna be thrilled. If there aren't any other issues,

then everything's nice and simple—I can go ahead and do it right now.

Except... The last time I'd killed myself, I'd made all sorts of preparations. Even Heinreid probably needed to settle his affairs somehow or other. What sorts of stuff did dukes have to deal with, anyway? I racked my brain for ideas, but I'd been a broke nobody in my past life—I had no clue how nobles in another world went about committing suicide. I tried checking Heinreid's memories, but no dice—even though he must have been thoroughly aware of just how much everyone hated him, he'd never once thought about dying.

This asshole's completely useless...

Thinking through this on my own wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I decided to seek out someone else's opinion. In fact, there was a perfect candidate right nearby.

There was a little bell on my desk, but that would just summon the butler; instead of ringing it, I walked over and opened the door. Before the man standing next to the doorway could say anything, I immediately made my request.

"Craig, I need to talk with you. Come in."

"Yes, Your Grace."

He stepped in without any fuss, and I sat back down at my desk. I would've liked to have Craig sit down too, but the only chair in this study was the one I was sitting in, so he ended up standing in front of me. As a former commoner, I felt a bit awkward about the whole setup. But, well, both of us standing while we talked would've been stressful in its own way.

This is what's natural here, right? It's fine, right?

I snuck a peek at Craig to try and gauge his expression. He looked a bit nervous and fidgety.

Huh? Is it because I called him in here all of a sudden instead of the butler? Don't worry, I'm not about to change my mind and punish you for yesterday. I just want to chat. Actually, this could be good news for you too.

Just as I remembered, Craig was on the protagonists' side. He first showed up in the novel as one of Heinreid's men—there was even a scene where he battled against the hero, Sig. But Craig was

actually a valiant, honorable man who'd helped Sig flee the palace when he was about to be killed. Craig had almost faced execution for his role in the escape, but Heinreid had already attained absolute power at that point, and Craig's life was spared on the duke's recommendation to the king.

"There are torments far crueler than death for men such as this," he'd said.

God, what a scumbag. Remembering that scene from Heinreid's perspective was absolutely infuriating.

Anyway, the upshot was that Craig had been *set up* as a villain. If Heinreid died, he'd be one of the people most directly impacted—in fact, it could easily be a matter of life or death for him as well. He was definitely the guy I needed to talk to.

Now, how to bring it up? I obviously wasn't going to jump straight to "So, I'm thinking about dying! How's that sound to you?" Heinreid had just sustained a head injury; if I started saying stuff like that now, they'd call the doctor right back in. But at the same time, if I was too roundabout, I wasn't confident I could guide the conversation where I wanted it to go.

My best bet is...

"Craig, let me ask you a question. Do you understand exactly what would happen if I were to die here and now?"

I decided to frame my question as a test. *Obviously,* I *know the answer! I'm just checking to make sure* you *know, as my employee!* It was a classic tactic bosses used occasionally in order to save face. I'd been on the receiving end of it at my old job too. The employee pretends not to know why the boss is really asking and says "Well, let's see... I think the answer is such-and-such. Is that right?" as though they're looking for confirmation. The boss gets to keep their dignity and remember the answer, and with the boss in a good mood, the employee's work goes smoothly—a perfect win-win situation.

That was what I'd imagined, anyway. But Craig looked concerned as he struggled to come up with an answer.

Maybe the question was too disturbing? He might be trying to figure out whether there's something else I'm getting at.

I was about to give him a nudge—*"What's wrong? It's just a casual question."*—but right then, Craig opened his mouth, and I swallowed my own words back down.

"You have been entrusted with this duchy by His Majesty the King, Your Grace. If the worst were to befall you, the people would be swept into chaos without your leadership. Of course, as I said yesterday, I shall guard your life to ensure that no such tragedy comes to pass."

I silently took in his answer.

Shit. He's playing it safe. There's no way that's what he really thinks. C'mon, Craig! I'm not looking for a comfortable answer! I want your actual unbiased opinion here!

But from Craig's perspective, that was probably exactly the answer he was expected to give. He definitely couldn't say "Oh, that'd be absolutely perfect! There wouldn't be any problems at all!"

It didn't matter whether I took a direct or roundabout approach—given our standings, he was going to flatter me. How could I cut through that and get the answer I actually wanted out of him?

Gentle isn't going to work.

I flinched at the sensation of a voice that wasn't my own echoing in my mind. Suddenly, countless phrases and sentences began to form inside my brain—strings of words that I would never have thought up on my own.

"Your Grace?"

As my vision swam and I clutched at my head, Craig started to step closer to me. I tried to tell him that I was fine, but *the words I ought to say* pushed that aside, filling up my head and tumbling out of my mouth before I knew it.

"Nothing is wrong. Do not approach me without my leave, you insolent cur."

"Insolent cur"? I've never said those words before in my entire life.

The unfamiliar command sent a chill through me, but I couldn't swallow back the words I'd already spoken. I was disoriented, but for better or for worse, my body remembered what to do.

Screw it! Let's hope this works!

I slowly removed my hand from my head, smoothly planted my elbows on the desk, and rested my chin on my intertwined fingers. As I glared sharply up at Craig, my gaze pierced through him. He immediately froze and returned to where he'd been standing.

"My apologies, Your Grace."

"No matter. In any case, Craig, you utterly fail to apprehend the intent of my question. Do you truly believe that transparent sycophancy is what I desire of you now? I have never placed any faith in your flimsy loyalties to begin with."

My cold voice echoed dispassionately across the large room. The words came out flat and toneless without my actual emotions behind them. I was just moving my mouth as though I were reading from a script—I almost worried that I was talking nonsense. I didn't process the meaning of my words until the moment they left my mouth; it was an utterly alien sensation.

"I shall ask you once more, and once only. If I were to die, here and now...what would happen?"

I made my meaning simple and clear: *This is your last chance. Give me my answer.*

"If I may speak frankly, Your Grace..."

Craig read between the lines and finally capitulated. With a pained expression, he began giving me a completely different answer from moments ago.

"I don't imagine there would be any great change in this duchy. Even if the worst were to befall you, His Highness would immediately appoint a new lord to fill your position. Taxes have already been raised as high as is feasible, so...there would be no change in that regard. Even your betrothal to Lady Angelica would likely be taken over by your replacement."

The sudden flow of new details caught me by surprise, and I quickly scribbled down notes on a piece of parchment in front of me. Unlike in yesterday's dream, I still had control of my body... Well, I'd puzzle that out later.

What was it again? Taxes, betrothal... Betrothal?! Was that in the novel?! It definitely wasn't! Wait, actually, looks like there's something vaguely along those lines in a corner of Heinreid's

memory... The guy pretty much forgot all about it! Was this just some background detail that never came up?

Hmm. There was a lot more I needed to take care of than I'd expected. I had thought Heinreid was a pretty influential guy, but Craig had just said my death wouldn't change much of anything. In that case, maybe it would be better if I avoided provoking the final boss unnecessarily. After all, Heinreid was the king's favorite. If he dropped dead all of a sudden, I could imagine the king going on high alert. Screwing up the plot and dooming the heroes was the last thing I wanted.

I needed a little more.

"So you *do* know the answer. Correct. While we're on the subject, if that 'worst' were to befall me...how would you feel about it, personally?"

"My feelings in the matter would be irrelevant. If I and my fellow guards failed to protect our master, we would all be hanged for our incompetence. The prisoners in the dungeons would all be disposed of as well, aside from those who *ought to be retained*. And thus...with or without your trust, I shall protect you, Your Grace."

"Hmm."

Okay, yup, good thing I asked. Immediate suicide is definitely off the table.

I got the picture now. In this country, people were expected to pay for their crimes with their lives. Craig couldn't start an insurrection right away; no matter how vulnerable I was, as long as the king still lived, he'd be punished without fail.

At any rate, if things went according to the plot of the novel, then Craig and the prisoners—or rather, the ordinary citizens who'd been locked up—would all get freed eventually. But there were plenty of people who never came up in the novel, and there weren't any guarantees that they'd survive that long. I wanted to do something about them as soon as possible. After all, for them, this was a matter of life and death.

As I was staring down at the notes I'd taken, lost in thought, Craig's voice suddenly cut in again.

"Permission to speak, Your Grace?"

"Huh? Sure, go ahead."

Before I knew it, the mental script full of menacing lines had disappeared from my brain. My response came out a bit half-assed, but Craig continued speaking anyway.

"Your Grace... Is there some reason you wished to ask me these questions that you already know the answers to?"

I'm making preparations for my death.

Obviously, I wasn't going to say that out loud. Well, to put it vaguely, I just wanted to make sure I wouldn't send things off the rails, so I needed...

"Confirmation... I suppose."

"Confirmation..."

I wasn't sure what Craig made of my answer. He just quietly repeated that word to himself, closed his eyes with a slight air of chagrin, and fell silent.

Chapter 4

All right. I felt bad about subjecting Craig to so much stress for the second day in a row, but I'd gotten what I needed to hear. It was time to start taking action. Heinreid hadn't run into the protagonists yet, but if this world was going to keep moving the way it did in the novel, then I couldn't afford to waste what free time I had.

Craig was still standing in front of me, silently awaiting orders. I didn't tell him to leave; instead, I rang the little bell that sat on a corner of my desk. The bell chimed once, and after a few moments, a voice sounded from outside the door.

"You rang, Your Grace?"

"Come in, Karl."

"Yes, Your Grace."

A tall, slim man in a tailcoat stepped quietly into the study. He wore a pair of thin wire-frame glasses, and his sleek black hair was perfectly parted to one side. This was Karl Anker, Heinreid's butler. From overseeing odd jobs across the sprawling estate to preparing and serving me tea, he handled all manner of tasks with near-superhuman prowess.

Fundamentally, the staff of this estate fell into three groups: the ones who were devoted to Heinreid, the ones who were terrified of Heinreid, and the ones like Craig who quietly harbored feelings of rebellion. Karl didn't belong to any of those, though—or rather, if he did, it was impossible to tell which. He never showed up in the novel at all. No matter what dirty work he was given, he'd carry out his orders to the letter. That suggested he might be one of the devotees, but he never showed any sign of wanting or expecting anything from Heinreid. His expression, always fixed and unmoving, never betrayed a hint of emotion—he was just that much of a perfect professional.

Seriously, Karl's too young to be this good. Going by Heinreid's memories, he's twenty-eight, right? This body—Heinreid—is twenty-five, the same age I was when I died, so Karl is three years older. Even if I'd lived another three years, I never would've been able to develop that level of cool composure.

I watched Craig—who, by the way, was twenty-three—silently move to stand in a corner of the room.

Everything you're thinking always shows up on your face, doesn't it, Craig? I noticed it earlier too. I mean, I appreciate it personally; it feels more welcoming than if you were always keeping a perfect poker face all the time. But you really don't seem great at keeping secrets. I'm kinda worried about you—not that you want to hear that from me.

Karl swapped in for Craig. He stood in front of me and offered a servile bow at a textbook-perfect angle. "How might I serve you, Your Grace?"

I got straight to the point. "I'm going to visit the dungeons. Could you have prisoner records ready for me when I get back?"

"Certainly, Your Grace. Will records for the present year alone—one volume for the First Dungeon and one for the Second Dungeon—be sufficient?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Very well, Your Grace."

Swish, stepstep, ka-chk, click. With only that tiny handful of sound effects, Karl walked right back out again.

Damn, he's fast... Talk about unfriendly service. I mean, he's putting his orders first, so I guess he's just good at what he does.

The prisoner records I'd asked Karl for were exactly what they sounded like: sheaves of pages filled with the names and crimes of all the people locked up in the dungeons below the estate. I might have had Heinreid's memories, but *I* was the one in control now. In order to put my plans into action, I needed documentation and precise numbers.

Heinreid's memories, huh?

I thought back to my conversation with Craig. My free will hadn't been overridden; I'd just been at a loss for what to say next, and the

memories left in this body had told me "This is what Heinreid would do." That was the general vibe, anyway. I couldn't really put it into words, but if I had to describe how it felt, it was like I had a new well of knowledge to draw on. It was a well full of the sorts of haughty, imperious words an evil nobleman would say—I had mixed feelings about it, but I'd probably need it more going forward. The fact was, Heinreid's menacing words had been able to extract information I couldn't have gotten out of Craig myself. Even if I wasn't going to do any actual evil deeds, there'd be plenty of situations where playing the role of a villain would make things go more smoothly. I was a little worried about overdoing it, but I'd just have to play it by ear.

"All right, Craig. Let's go."

I got up from my seat. Thinking things through forever wasn't going to get me anywhere. I was determined to get at least one thing accomplished before the day was done.

I reached out to open the door, but Craig cut in ahead of me to grab the doorknob.

C'mon, you don't need to be that frantic. I won't punish you for not opening the door for me!

◆◇◆

"Your Grace? Why are you, um, visiting the dungeons?"

As I walked quickly down the hall, Craig spoke unprompted from behind me. He sounded a bit strained and nervous for some reason. Well, to be fair, the dungeons *were* a pretty nasty place.

"Because I have business there, of course," I replied. "What of it? If they're too unpleasant for you, there's no need to push yourself. I'll go on my own."

My plans would proceed more smoothly if Craig came with me, so I would've liked to have him around, but I wasn't going to force him. I could push things through with Heinreid's authority regardless. *It's fine. You can say no.*

I'd tried to make it a casual suggestion, but it seemed like it wasn't an issue of him not wanting to go. He gave a faltering reply,

choosing his words carefully.

"It's not that they're unpleasant, Your Grace. But what on earth—I mean, um, which will you be visiting?"

He was asking about the dungeon numbers Karl had mentioned. There were two dungeons beneath this estate: the First Dungeon, where criminals were imprisoned, and the Second Dungeon, where hostages were confined. The First Dungeon was packed with ordinary citizens who'd fallen victim to Heinreid's malice, but the Second held close friends and family members of *people with influence* who might turn against the government someday. To prevent those seeds of justice from ever sprouting, Heinreid had laid down heavy paving stones in the form of their abducted loved ones, locked away in those cells.

The Second's where I'm headed now... But Craig sounds way too anxious. Something's definitely up. What if I try a little bluff?

I stopped in my tracks, then turned around to face him. My eyes locked on his to catch his every fleeting expression as I answered.

"The First Dungeon..."

For just an instant, Craig's eyes visibly widened.

Seriously, how the hell did you survive this long? You really ought to take a leaf out of Karl's book. I'm *the one in this body right now, but if you show that kind of weakness to Heinreid, he'll beat you until you cough up blood.*

In fact, my internal Heinreid Phrasebook was spewing out a steady stream of harassment, but I already felt bad for Craig; I wasn't going to torment him any further.

"—has no new prisoners. Why would I have any business there? I'm going to the Second Dungeon."

Craig paused for a moment. "I shall accompany you, Your Grace."

Great, glad to hear it. But try not to look so relieved, dammit.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. After heading down a long hallway and making a few turns, we arrived at the northernmost end of the manor, where a guard stood in front of two iron doors. He was startled by my sudden visit, but when I requested the key for a specific cell number, he handed it over with shaky hands and opened the door to the Second Dungeon.

I handed the key to Craig, and we descended the narrow stairs. At the bottom was an open space surrounded by doors. The musty, oppressive gloom of the place weighed heavily on me, but we finally reached our destination. Craig stood in front of me with the keys and knocked at the cell.

"Elmer Kisch! His Grace has come to see you. I'm opening the door."

Frantic scrambling and clattering noises came from behind the other doors.

Yeah, makes sense. A visit from Heinreid can't be good news—of course they'd panic. Why isn't there any reaction from the cell we're actually visiting, though? Did he get so scared that he passed out?

Craig's green eyes looked to me for guidance; I gave a light tilt of my head to signal for him to go ahead and unlock the cell. He turned the key and swung the door open. Inside, hunched over in a supplicating posture, was...a blanket.

Huh? Is he asleep?

"ELMER KISCH! WAKE UP!" Craig shouted urgently.

Oww! Hey, don't yell that loudly right next to me! Almost burst my damn eardrums.

But, for the pair of ears covered up by the blanket, it was the perfect volume for a wake-up call. The blanket stirred languidly, and the drowsy human inside slowly sat up.

"Ah, I'm sorry, sir..." he said with a yawn. "Is it time for...break...fast...?"

He finished rubbing blearily at his face, and his gaze met mine. His catlike eyes blinked several times, and the next instant, all color drained from his face.

"D-D-Duke H-Heinreid?!"

The blanket flew aside, and a young boy with messy tufts of chestnut-brown hair came tumbling out of the bed.

Chapter 5

House Rodvelia had controlled a vast duchy for countless generations, but they didn't run the entire thing themselves. The territory was simply too big to keep an eye on everywhere at once, so they appointed trusted overseers to manage various out-of-reach corners.

They're called vassals, right? It's like how an apartment can have a landlord and a building manager.

Elmer Kisch was one of the hostages being held to keep those vassals in line. He was twelve years old, and he'd spent the last five imprisoned here.

"I-I'm sorry for my unsightly display, Your Grace! I had no idea that you would be coming— Um, I mean..."

Right now, Elmer was frantically prostrating himself. His tufts of chestnut hair were waving all over the place, but rather than stopping to fix his bedhead, he just kept on rambling incoherently. This was what people meant by "blind panic"; he must've felt like he'd woken up to find an executioner at his door.

I started to feel guilty about not giving him any advance warning. As I reflected a little on my mistakes, I heard a faint, terrified apology come from Elmer.

"I'm truly sorry, Your Grace..."

His hunched-over body sank even farther. If he went any lower, he was going to fuse with the cell floor. I couldn't bear to watch a kid acting like that, so I tried to have him get back up.

"Please, raise your head," I said, carefully keeping my tone soft and gentle. "There's no need to apologize—I'm the one who arrived unannounced. Anyway, this won't take long."

Elmer nervously looked up at me. "What did you wish to see me about, Your Grace...?" he asked fearfully.

I didn't want to leave him in suspense, so I got straight to the

point.

"Actually, Elmer, you're being returned to House Kisch."

"Huh?"

Well, I'd only just decided that a few minutes ago. I was still waiting on the prisoner records from Karl, and in principle, I ought to have carefully read through those before taking action. But Elmer was a bit of a special case.

Most of the prisoners and hostages in these dungeons never specifically came up in *Sig the Rebel*, but the novel did mention Elmer—in fact, he showed up in the story himself. When Sig had his first confrontation with Heinreid, he wasn't strong enough to win, and he was forced to retreat temporarily. He ended up getting taken in and sheltered by House Kisch, Elmer's family. They were vassals of the duchy of Rodvelia but were secretly opposed to the tyrannical government, and they aided Sig in his rebellion. Unfortunately, their betrayal didn't go unnoticed—their household servants ratted them out. There was no way Heinreid would abide an act of treason like that.

So, what did he do to teach them the price of their treachery? He sent a *present* over to House Kisch—one of those sturdy wooden chests I'd seen a few times in my dream. Inside was a child's right arm.

That twisted, inhuman scumbag. I still remembered the shock I'd felt reading that scene at an impressionable young age. Heinreid was utterly unforgivable.

In the novel, Craig did what he could to save Elmer's life. But when Elmer showed up at the end, he was missing an arm, and his whole body was covered in scars from the torture he'd endured. I felt bad about prioritizing him over the other hostages and prisoners, but I didn't know when the plot of the novel might kick into gear. Since this kid was one of the people most likely to get hurt, I wanted to get him out of the story as soon as possible.

That was what I'd been hoping to do, at any rate.

"Has my father failed you in some way, Your Grace?" Elmer asked, his face taut with anxiety. His voice trembled as he tried to find out what I was really after.

He didn't believe for a second that I was actually just going to send him home. Did he think I was going to return him and then dispose of the entire family at once?

Craig, also worried for Elmer, chimed in to offer a defense. "Your Grace, House Kisch are among your most competent vassals. Their fief is peaceful and orderly, and they collect their taxes without fail. They've done nothing to deserve punishment—"

"I know that."

Their fief was peaceful because they contributed as much as they could out of their own pockets to cut down on the taxes they had to squeeze out of the residents. As long as Elmer was a hostage, they couldn't get away with any overt resistance, but their care for the people of their fief was deep and heartfelt. So they sold off their assets, cut back on their lifestyle, and did everything they could to scrounge up money themselves to produce the taxes they were required to pay.

From Heinreid's standpoint, they're actually totally fine, aren't they? I mean, I didn't come here to punish them anyway.

But when Elmer heard my reply, he fell right back into a panic.

"Then it's because of my own slovenliness just now, isn't it?! Your Grace, please, I don't care what becomes of me! I'll do whatever you ask—I won't sleep anymore! So please—"

"Elmer Kisch, calm yourself!" Craig shouted.

Elmer had stood up and tried to clutch at me as he begged, but Craig held him back. He'd seen people touch Heinreid without permission and die on the spot.

Elmer cowered away as Craig scolded him, but he kept his eyes locked on me. His hands were clasped together in prayer.

"Please, Your Grace, just spare my family!"

I was at a loss for words.

What the hell? This boy isn't even begging me not to kill him—he's begging for his family's safety, whatever price he has to pay for it. He's twelve*!*

I stared dazedly at him. His limbs were sickly, pale, and devoid of muscle—unfitting for a boy his age. Spending five years locked up down here had to have taken a toll on his psyche as well. But he'd

willingly sacrificed himself for the sake of his family, and he'd done his best to withstand the crushing solitude. I could only imagine how terrifying it must've been for such a young child.

I felt sick to my stomach. Heinreid's sins were staring me in the face all over again, and my heart was heavy with their weight.

I knelt in front of Elmer as he stood there on the verge of tears. Malnutrition had left him unusually short, and I made sure that my eyes were perfectly level with his.

Oh. That's right... Before I became Heinreid, back when my sister was little, I used to meet her eyes just like this to talk to her, didn't I?

"Stop your crying. Who said anything about punishment? I told you just now that I'm fully aware of House Kisch's faithful service, didn't I? Your release is, well...a *reward* for their efforts, let's say."

"A...reward?"

"That's right."

I started to reach out to stroke his hair reassuringly, but I thought better of it. These filthy hands weren't fit to touch him. I was an evil duke—a leering smile and a snide remark suited me better.

"What's the matter? Would you rather stay?"

"No! I mean... No, Your Grace. I'm grateful. Thank you for your mercy..."

"All right. Now, let's get going."

I stood up and beckoned. Elmer's mouth gaped open as if to say, *Wait, right now?*

Yup, right now. That's why I took the time to come down here in person.

But Craig put the brakes on that plan.

"Your Grace, Elmer hasn't been aboveground in several years. Exposing him to sunlight so abruptly would destroy his eyes."

Wait, does staying cooped up underground do that to people? Shit! Thank goodness I didn't come here alone—I almost blinded Elmer!

"I see... Well, even if he can't leave today, can you see to it that he's able to depart as soon as possible?"

"Very well, Your Grace. I shall make all the necessary

preparations. I'll need to dispatch a group of guards. Will that be acceptable, Your Grace?"

"Yeah, I'll leave it to you."

Yup, I'm so glad I brought him along. Everything's nice and simple. If Craig's handpicked guards are escorting Elmer, then they shouldn't run into any trouble, even on this kingdom's dangerous roads.

"Sorry, Elmer, but I'll need you to stay in here for just a little longer. Once everything's prepared, I'll send someone down to get you. Feel free to keep sleeping until then." I smiled down at him. "I won't scold you if you show up with bedhead."

Elmer flushed red at my parting joke and reached up to smooth out his hair as I turned and made my exit.

"Will you really be returning him, Your Grace?" Craig asked on our way back to my study.

Why are you even following me? Go get ready to send Elmer home!

Well, *I* was the dumbass who'd fallen down the stairs yesterday—even if it hadn't exactly been *me* at the time—so I decided not to bug him about it.

"Did you think I was lying?" I asked.

"I was wondering whether this might be some new form of *punishment*."

Damn, he doesn't trust me at all. When a delinquent does something nice for someone, they end up looking like a saint just by contrast, but I guess that doesn't apply to Heinreid. Anyway, the whole thing is *fishy—I really can't blame Craig.*

"Oh? What an interesting idea. I'll keep that in mind."

Of course, we didn't have enough mutual trust or camaraderie for a joke like that to go over properly. Craig looked genuinely shocked.

Don't freak out like that. You dug your own grave there—just saying.

"I'm kidding," I said.

I smiled wryly and gave him a light thump on the chest with my fist.

C'mon, get your act together. When all of this ends, I'm counting

on you to kill me.

Chapter 6

When I got back to my study, the items I'd asked for were waiting on top of my desk. Karl must have left them there—the guy worked fast.

There were two thick bundles of paper, each bound with string along the spine. Knowing what was written inside, I could practically feel a negative aura radiating from the pages. These were the records of Heinreid's prisoners and hostages.

I had a moment of indecision over which to read first, but the hostages had a lot less turnover, and I had clearer memories of all of them. So I started with the First Dungeon instead—the prisoner records.

If the people recorded in these pages had actually been evildoers, I would've had to tip my hat, but in this duchy, Heinreid was judge and jury. Pretty much all of the charges were basically just excuses to lock people up. Tax evasion and attempted assassination were at least actual crimes, even if Heinreid was just reaping what he'd sown with his ridiculous taxation policies and his vile deeds. However, the most common and most unreasonable charge in the records was "insolence." He'd decide that he didn't like someone's voice, or their eyes, or their name—and it was a crime for someone not to his liking to exist within his sight. And so, that ridiculous accusation was handed out based on the duke's vague and arbitrary judgments. He was even worse than those assholes who jump in front of cars to fake accidents and then demand compensation.

Most of the people charged with that stupid crime and dragged over to this estate either got executed right away or died during Heinreid's torture, but a few of them survived. After Heinreid punished someone, he lost interest and tossed them aside like a worn-out rag. If they were still alive, they got thrown into the First Dungeon—which, in itself, was basically just a slower form of

execution. Unlike the Second Dungeon, there weren't individual rooms for the prisoners, just rows of dirty cells with iron bars. Packed in there with no proper meals and no treatment for their injuries, they'd gradually weaken and die—

Hmm?

As I bitterly flipped through the pages, my hand came to a stop.

Something's wrong with these records.

Alongside each criminal's name and charges, the records had two dates: One was the date they'd been put in the dungeon, and the other was the date they'd died. Heinreid would lock up new people on a whim, and how long they were able to survive varied from person to person, so the numbers tended to swing sharply up and down. But at some point, the deaths began to steadily increase; the prisoner count might drop, but it never went too far *above* a certain fixed level.

For example, say Heinreid arrested some people, and the number of prisoners went up by two. When that happened, over the next couple of weeks, two or three people would die. There were still deaths listed in the records even when there weren't new prisoners being added, but whenever a large number of new prisoners arrived, the same number of people would die over the course of a few weeks. That pattern of rises and falls had continued, and right now, there were exactly thirty people in the dungeon.

This was obviously unnatural. In the past, there'd been times when the number of prisoners had swelled close to a hundred—Heinreid had said the jam-packed cells were unsightly, and he'd carried out mass executions. In other words, without any intervention, the number of prisoners could easily just keep on growing. But right now, the count was holding steady; there hadn't been any recent executions either.

My thoughts went to Craig. Had he been sneaking prisoners out somehow and reporting them as dead? Craig was strictly in charge of my personal guards, though—the dungeons were under Karl's jurisdiction. And for that matter, *Karl* was the one who kept these records, so he had to have realized something was off. Were Karl and Craig accomplices?

In that case, maybe the First Dungeon was already taken care of without me needing to lift a finger. If the top two guys aside from me were both in on it, then as long as I didn't lock up anyone new, the First Dungeon would wind up empty sooner or later. I just needed to focus on the hostages in the Second Dungeon...

After spotting that ray of hope, I moved to pick up the records for the Second Dungeon, but I was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"A letter has arrived for you, Your Grace."

That's Karl. A letter? Did I get invited to a ball or something? I'm way too busy for stuff like that, and besides, a ball for villains sounds like an absolute nightmare. But I guess I've got to at least write back with a polite refusal so I don't ruffle feathers... I didn't need even more hassle, but fine, I'll handle it.

"All right, bring it in."

With a stoic "Excuse me, Your Grace," Karl stepped into the study. He walked over to the desk, his movements absurdly precise and efficient, and presented me with an envelope.

"Here it is, Your Grace."

"Great, thank y—"

The moment I glanced at the envelope, my voice gave out. It was made from elegant white paper with gold embossing, and the red wax seal was stamped with the emblem of an amaryllis—the flower of our kingdom, blooming beautifully in miniature.

This is from the royal court—from His Majesty, King Eberhart. Did I just get a letter from the final boss?

I felt a faint trembling in my fingers, but I managed to take the letter from Karl.

Wait, why? Why the hell would he send me a letter right now?! No, calm down. It shouldn't be anything important. After all, I only awakened as Heinreid yesterday—there's no way he's already found out I'm settling my affairs. He's probably just asking for advice on an evil scheme or whatever. I don't want to deal with that either, though...

The party invitation I'd been dreading moments ago would've been a thousand times better than this. For now, I set the letter down on the desk.

Karl was still standing there, fixed in place. From behind his thin wire-frame glasses, his gray eyes were quietly focused on me.

Uh-huh? What gives? Aren't you gonna swish out again like earlier? Is he waiting for permission to leave? No, that's not it. He looks like he wants to say something.

"What is it?" I asked.

My hypercompetent butler didn't keep me in suspense—he immediately spoke up.

"There is something I wish to inform you of, Your Grace."

"Let's hear it."

"It concerns Craig Bauer. He has been secretly freeing criminals from the First Dungeon," Karl said, calmly dropping a massive bombshell.

Wait, what the hell? Did you just say what I think you said? Was my accomplices theory a bust?

I concealed my shock as best as I could and chose my words carefully.

"Oh? What a fascinating claim. Do you have evidence?"

"I was able to obtain concrete evidence just earlier—hence my report, Your Grace. I have been aware of Craig Bauer's suspicious behavior for some time, and thus I personally conducted an investigation in between my other duties. Now, I have finally succeeded in obtaining testimony from one of his coconspirators."

"Did you torture him?" I asked slowly.

"I shall do so if you wish, Your Grace, but that is not my specialty. The man himself is presently unaware that he has revealed any information."

Leading questions, huh? Yeah, that does seem like the sort of thing you'd be good at.

I was pretty sure he was lying about having just gotten the evidence earlier, though. He'd pulled out a plausible excuse about doing the investigation in between other work, but there was no way this perfect butler would spend so much time on something like that. He'd probably already had the evidence for a while, but Heinreid hadn't shown any interest in the prisoners, so he'd kept his mouth shut. Now that I'd started looking into the dungeons, he'd decided to

play his part as a talented butler and smoothly lay out his cards.

This guy was terrifyingly sharp. And the scariest part of all was that I still had no clue where his allegiance lay. He wasn't totally devoted to evil, but he wasn't aiding justice either. He was a wild card, but all the same, pushing him away would be a bad idea. The scars of Heinreid's evil deeds ran deep; I wouldn't be able to clean up after myself all on my own.

Use him.

I heard a whisper from the villain sleeping deep inside my mind.

"Very well," I said. "Rather than simply make an example of him, I shall crush the traitors within this estate all at once. Karl, sniff out every last rat and all the worms who serve them—however long it takes. Take no action regarding the First Dungeon until I give the order. I don't want them sensing danger and going to ground."

"As you wish, Your Grace. However, might I ask one question first?"

"What is it?"

"Is Elmer Kisch being released from the Second Dungeon in accordance with your wishes, Your Grace?"

My inner villain fell silent.

Yeah, this one isn't on you.

"He is."

"Understood. If you'll excuse me, Your Grace."

Swish, stepstep, ka-chk, click. With the exact same sparse sound effects as before, Karl stepped out of the room, as precise as clockwork. The moment the door closed, I let out a deep sigh and slumped back in my chair.

Shit... What the hell's with *that guy? He's goddamn terrifying! If he and I have to keep feeling each other out, I'm going to let something slip for sure. Dammit, that means I'm gonna have to lean more on Heinreid's memories... What a drag.*

Weirdly enough, Craig, with all his obvious tells, was starting to feel downright adorable in comparison. I mean, he was bigger than me and covered in muscles...

I can sit around with my head in the clouds all I want, but there are still things I need to do.

I glanced at the envelope on the desk.

I've gotta open it, don't I...? I'm already exhausted, but I can't get away with leaving it for tomorrow, can I...? Whatever, screw it! Don't put off the unpleasant stuff! You're a man, dammit. If you're gonna do it, then get it done!

I grabbed the envelope and pulled a paper knife out of a desk drawer to slice it open. Then I quickly unfolded the letter inside, like ripping off a band-aid.

"Gah!"

I took psychic damage the instant I opened it. The letter was completely crammed with tiny handwriting, covering the paper in black ink from corner to corner.

What the hell kind of cursed letter is this?! Stop attacking my eyes! Just use a second sheet of paper!

But the actual contents of the letter went on to deal me even more damage. It was really long, but the key points basically broke down as follows:

Concern about my fall down the stairs yesterday—ten percent.

Snide remarks about my fall down the stairs yesterday—seventy percent.

Boredom, and a request for me to write about my latest evil deeds and describe all my favorite bits—ten percent.

A declaration that he would come over soon to hang out and pay me a get-well visit—ten percent.

And finally, a demand for an immediate reply.

The lengthy mockery took a pretty big toll on me, but the other parts of the letter were what really sent my guts twisting. First off, how did he already know I'd fallen down the stairs?! Even if he had someone here surveilling me, the capital was a full day away by carriage. They would've needed to write a letter, send it out, and wait for a reply—no matter how I sliced it, the math just didn't work out.

Next, what the hell was this villain diary I was supposed to write? And I needed to tell him my favorite parts?! Sure, I still had Heinreid's memories, but I hadn't felt any of his emotions since that time we'd gotten synced up in the dream. And now I had to

remember it all and write it out myself? What kind of sick torture was this?

And finally, the get-well visit—*NO! Stay the hell away!*

Demand or no demand, I needed to write back as soon as possible. If I didn't do something, he might actually show up, and then I'd be stuck in a confrontation with the final boss. Given our positions, I probably couldn't avoid him *completely*, but I still wanted to see him as little as I could get away with.

As the light of the setting sun painted the room scarlet, I frantically picked up a fountain pen.

God dammit, why are all of the villain's friends such terrifying freaks?!

Chapter 7

After countless rounds of editing, I finally finished my reply thanking His Majesty for his letter, laughing off his snide remarks, reporting on my evil deeds, and politely declining his visit. By the time I handed it to Karl to send back, it was already late at night.

I groggily dragged my body back to my room, took a hot shower, and collapsed into bed. After that, I was out like a light. I slept deeply without any dreams, and when I woke up and checked the clock, it was already past noon.

I wished someone would've woken me up earlier, but I wasn't in any position to complain. When the old man who'd served as Heinreid's previous butler had come to wake him up as usual one morning, Heinreid had accused him of "disturbing my rest" and ordered the man's death on a half-awake whim. Karl, his replacement, was well aware of that incident. He never came to wake Heinreid up unless there was some urgent issue that required his attention, and when Heinreid overslept, Karl would diligently handle any leftover work in order to keep the estate running.

Hmmm... I should either go to sleep earlier or get some sort of alarm clock—that way, I can get to work settling my affairs bright and early. But if I go to sleep earlier, that won't actually give me any extra work time... Should I keep a rooster or something?

I drowsily got up and got myself dressed. Yesterday, I hadn't known what I would do with my day, so I'd just worn whatever Heinreid usually wore in his memories. But I was planning to spend all of today at my desk laying groundwork for releasing the hostages from the Second Dungeon, so I decided to dress light. I went with a black shirt, black trousers, and a dark-green vest on top. For some reason, Heinreid's closet had nothing but dark-colored clothes, so the full ensemble still gave off a menacing aura. I tried unbuttoning my collar a bit to go for a business-casual vibe, but it didn't help at

all.

No matter how much you try to clean yourself up on the outside, I guess you can't conceal a twisted heart...

While I let that sink in, I made my way out of the room. Craig was standing next to the door on guard duty, just the same as yesterday.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

It's not "morning" at all. I guess he's just smoothing that over, though. Actually, I've worked part-time jobs where people always said "good morning" at the start of work no matter what time it was, so maybe it's something like that.

But anyway, you're really *staring at me. What gives?*

"Good morning. What is it? If you've got something to say, then say it."

"Ah, no... I was simply observing that you're dressed quite lightly today, Your Grace."

"Yeah, I'm not planning on going out. Does it look weird?"

Hang on—is this combination of clothes actually super dorky by this world's standards? Do I not have any fashion sense? I guess a broke commoner wasn't gonna be able to figure out the fashions of the nobility... Not like I really care, but it's still a bit of a shock.

But Craig immediately told me otherwise. "Nothing of the sort, Your Grace. I'm merely concerned about such thin clothing from a defensive standpoint."

A defensive...standpoint?

Craig looked completely serious as he spoke, and I almost had to stifle a laugh.

I mean, sure, I guess that's important in this *world, but I was living a peaceful life in Japan until a couple days ago. It just feels like such a silly thing to focus on... No, don't laugh. Hold it in. Craig's paying attention to this stuff because he's good at his job—nice going, Guard Captain!*

"I'm not going outside, and in any case, I've got you here to guard me. I'll be fine. *You've* got bags under your eyes, though—did you not get enough sleep?"

Looking closely at Craig's face, I could see faint dark circles under

his eyes. He was enough of a professional to keep the exhaustion from showing on his face, but it left his expression looking a bit unpleasant.

C'mon, I just gave you a compliment (inside my head), and now I'm finding issues right away! You've gotta take care of yourself properly!

"My apologies, Your Grace. I was occupied last night with the matter of Elmer Kisch."

Oh, so it's because of my orders. Guess that's on me. You got to work on that right after you saw me back to the study, huh? I did rush you a bunch—sorry about that.

"So, when will preparations be complete?"

I'd been expecting an answer of sometime this week at the earliest, but Craig's reply completely shattered my expectations.

"He departed the estate last night, Your Grace."

Huh? Last...knight...? Last night? As in, yesterday *night? The night before this morning? Wait, hang on—did the whole thing get wrapped up while I wasn't looking? Give me details, dammit!*

"I thought you said he couldn't leave right away."

"I never said that he would be unable to depart within the day, Your Grace. Your orders were to arrange for his return as soon as possible, so I gave him a blindfold and had him set out immediately after sunset. The guards who accompanied him returned not long ago to report that their duties were completed without incident."

Oh. I guess I *was the one who said "even if he can't leave today." But Craig didn't correct me, so of course I was gonna make assumptions... Wait, did I just get played? By* Craig*?!*

"I see. And why didn't you report this earlier?"

"I came to give my report following Elmer's departure, Your Grace, but I was told that you were busy at work."

I saw that! You just glanced to the side! You've gotta improve your game!

Well, he probably *had* shown up while I was "at work" writing a reply to that cursed letter, but he'd still totally put off telling me. He absolutely could've given me a report sooner. Even if I'd been busy, he could've left a message with a servant or something. But he'd

waited to make his report until everything was completely finished, all so Heinreid couldn't change his mind and say "Actually, I'm not sending him back." It was a risky play, but Heinreid *did* tend to lose interest in people after they left his attention. Now that I'd sent Elmer home, calling him back here again would be a whole hassle—it hadn't been that bad of a gamble.

Craig, you sneaky devil. Well, you've managed to survive this long in this estate, after all—you know how to take action when it counts. I underestimated you.

"Good work. Nicely done, Guard Captain."

I was genuinely impressed, so I tried giving him a compliment, but he just stared back at me with a look of total distrust.

Hey! Insolence!

Being Heinreid's guard captain was a pretty tough job, though. He'd just pulled an all-nighter carrying out my unreasonable orders, and now he was showing up the next morning with bags under his eyes to carry out his actual job...

Hmm?

"Craig, you won't be rotating off guarding me anytime soon, right?"

"Indeed, Your Grace. I left my post last night to carry out your orders, but other than my rest periods, I will be guarding you for the time being."

Okay, awesome. That's perfect. This'll work!

"In that case, I have a request. Every morning at...let's say seven. Come wake me up at seven o'clock."

I wanted to get up even earlier, but if I lost too much sleep, that'd just make me less productive. I worked best at night, so seven seemed about right.

That was what I'd been thinking, anyway, but Craig furrowed his brow a little at my order. He didn't look thrilled, understandably enough.

"Me, Your Grace? Would that not be a job for the butler?"

Did you just casually sell out Karl? Sounds like those two don't get along. The accomplices theory is pretty much dead in the water at this point. Too bad.

Anyway, he's got a point—waking up the master is *the butler's job. I guess Karl would work just as well. But it kinda feels like a waste of effort, doesn't it? I mean, Craig's already right there in front of my room in the morning anyway. I just want him to wake me up while he's at it.*

"I've tasked Karl with other work at the moment," I said. "Don't worry—I'm the one asking for this. I'm not going to sentence you to death when you wake me up."

I pushed harder, and Craig gave in. He closed his eyes and bowed.

"As you wish, Your Grace."

That's right. Just go with it.

I'd finished my first agenda item—or rather, it had already been finished for me—so I was in a good mood as I headed to my desk.

I was kind of worried about how that would turn out, but it went way more smoothly than I expected. It's really all thanks to Craig, but maybe I can actually just keep settling things one after another. Even if I'm still scared of Karl and His Majesty the Final Boss, I just need to go ahead and get things done.

That said, I couldn't send all the hostages back right away like I'd done with Elmer yesterday. It didn't matter what reasons I came up with for freeing them, but I'd need to send out letters to lay the groundwork and find the right time to let them go—otherwise, I'd run into other issues. For instance, if I returned all the hostages at once, there wouldn't be anything holding those authority figures back, and they might all band together and revolt. That would be fine if they could win, but honestly, they didn't stand a chance. Whatever information network the king had, he'd pick up the whispers of rebellion right away and crush them before they could take action.

In the novel, Sig returned from a neighboring country and brought allies and soldiers with him. They worked together to stir up discord from inside and out, then seized their opportunity to take out the king. The forces within Amagis wouldn't be able to win on their own, so I needed to wait for the story to start. I couldn't return all the hostages until the heroes made their way into the country. I

could do it after they had their confrontation with me—or in the worst case, if I missed them somehow, I'd do it once rumors of Sig's return reached me.

Besides, the king would notice right away if I freed the hostages, and he'd start pressing me for an explanation—it sounded like he'd already found out about me sending back Elmer, even if I still had no idea how. I'd already come up with an excuse, but for now, I'd focus on writing letters for all of the hostages in the records.

All right, let's do this!

I got myself hyped up and started work, but just as I finished writing the first letter, I felt something amiss.

Why's it so noisy? I'm hearing shouts and screams. This room is supposed to be pretty well soundproofed—it's a study, after all. So what's going on that's loud enough to carry through that? Did someone spot a cockroach or something? Dammit, I was just getting into a good groove writing.

I sighed and set down my pen.

I hadn't understood, though. This was *Heinreid's* manor. If he caught sight of a single insect, every cleaning maid on duty that day would lose her head. Even if a whole swarm of pests showed up, the servants would be too scared for their lives to make any commotion. If I'd thought just a little more, I would've understood—I *should've* understood.

"What's all this racket? You're disturbing my...work..."

"Stay back, Your Grace!"

As I stepped out into the hall, I caught sight of a large sword lying on the floor, several servants watching nervously from a distance, and Craig holding a man in a full nelson.

That man was glaring right at me, his eyes shaking with hatred.

Chapter 8

The wide hallway echoed with furious shouts cursing the master of this estate. Craig held back the man, who overflowed with murderous rage directed at me and me alone.

The whole tableau should have felt utterly bizarre, but another part of ***me*** just sighed inwardly.

Ah, this again.

"*Heinreid!* Damn it, let me go, Captain! I'll kill that bastard!!!"

Craig was holding the man firmly in place, but he kept struggling and shouting. He tried to reach for his sword, which was lying on the ground a short distance away from him; it was clear he'd much rather see it buried in my chest.

From the looks of things, he'd managed to sneak in this far, but he hadn't been able to get around Craig standing guard outside my door. They'd fought, and I was looking at the aftermath. The man was solidly restrained without any visible injuries; the difference in skill between the two of them was rather blatant.

But I know this guy, don't I? I'm pretty sure I remember him...

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Carlos Bureau, Your Grace. He was the guard accompanying you when you fell down the stairs the day before yesterday. I had him placed on a temporary suspension following the incident..." Craig's voice sounded pained.

Yup, thought so. My memories immediately before and after falling down the stairs were a bit vague, either from hitting my head or from swapping personalities, but this man definitely looked familiar. Upon closer inspection, even the weapon lying on the floor was one of the swords issued to Heinreid's guards.

But why? I'd left this guard's fate entirely up to Craig's discretion. Why had he suddenly gotten desperate and charged at me without any plan?

Carlos himself immediately cleared up my confusion. "Damn it! God damn it! I knew pushing him down the stairs wouldn't be enough to finish him! I knew I was gonna die either way—I should've used my sword right from the start! I should've run him through and made sure he was dead!"

"Wh-What are you—? Be quiet!" Craig shouted frantically.

"Heinreid, I bet you don't even remember, but I do! I remember what you did two years ago to my best friend—to Thomas!"

Heedless of Craig's warning, Carlos kept on bombarding me with every ounce of hatred in his being, expelling vitriol in frenzied screams and anguished sobs.

I got the picture now. Carlos held a grudge against Heinreid, and he'd tried to kill me as revenge. Two years ago, his best friend—Thomas—had been murdered...probably. I had Heinreid's memories, but I still couldn't say for certain. Carlos wasn't quite right, though; it wasn't that I didn't remember. Or rather, that might have been part of it, but it wasn't the only reason. Heinreid killed a lot of people, and Thomas was a fairly common name in Amagis. So, as sickening as it was to admit, I couldn't remember *which* Thomas was the one Carlos was talking about.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you, you sick bastard! I'll send you straight to hell!"

You're right. That's what I deserve—and it won't be much longer now. When I die, I won't even need to face judgment. I'll fall straight down into the lowest depths.

So there'd been no need to rush. That wouldn't be any comfort to him now, though. Carlos's face was flushed with rage, but he was also clearly exhausted. I could only imagine how much stress he'd been under as he'd spent the last two days in suspension waiting for the axe to fall. I wouldn't dare say he'd reaped what he'd sown—those words were reserved for *me* when I met my end.

Anyway, he'd tried to kill me, but I had absolutely no interest in punishing him. I racked my brain for an excuse to let him go.

"Your Grace," came a quiet voice from over my shoulder.

I turned to see Karl standing behind me. His posture was as elegant and graceful as always, but he was carrying a nasty-looking

object in his hands.

"This criminal is yours to dispose of however it may please you. If you wish to administer his punishment on the spot, then by all means, make use of this."

Karl held out a whip made from countless small iron rods linked together, with thorny spikes placed at key points—Heinreid's favorite implement of torture.

No, I'm not using that thing, dammit! I was about to tell Karl to put it away, but a thought occurred to me at the last second.

Can I actually set Carlos free right now?

Letting him go would be easy enough. Heinreid was the master of this estate; if I said Carlos was free to go, nobody could disobey me. But this wasn't some ridiculous made-up crime—it was a straight-up *attempted assassination*. Carlos had carried out a blatant act of treason against His Grace the Duke, a man favored by the king himself. If he'd at least attacked me someplace with fewer people around... Well, I might not have made it out safely, but at least I could've quietly swept it under the rug. But right now, we were in the hallway of Heinreid's manor, under the gazes of not just Karl but a gaggle of regular servants as well. Even news of Heinreid's fall down the stairs had somehow reached the king overnight; it was stupidly optimistic to think I could cover up an assassination attempt.

And if word about Carlos's treason *did* reach the king, then even if I let him go unpunished, His Majesty absolutely wouldn't. Just from reading yesterday's letter, I'd gotten the sense that the king was fixated on Heinreid to a downright abnormal degree. I had no idea what it was about Heinreid that fascinated the king so much, but regardless, releasing Carlos wouldn't be enough to save him.

Dammit, what do I do? I could try to hide him, but if it's happening under my command, then it's still going to leak sooner or later. I need to put him somewhere beyond my reach and out of my sight, but there aren't any places like that in the duchy of Rodvelia—No, wait...

I turned sharply back around to stare at Carlos, who was still struggling and swearing vengeance—and at the man holding him in

place.

Craig could do it. Craig's figured out an escape route, and he's found a place for the prisoners to take shelter.

My thoughts went back to the prisoner records and Karl's report. According to Karl, the unnatural deaths in the First Dungeon were all people Craig had set free. But he couldn't just be letting them loose wherever; lots of them were gravely injured and couldn't even walk unaided. Somewhere out there, Craig had a place where he could stealthily transport people for treatment and recuperation. Karl hadn't told me anything about where that might be—and the fact that Craig was still alive must've meant that the king didn't know about it either.

I quickly assembled countless vague scraps of information into a spur-of-the-moment plan. It wasn't a surefire thing, but I couldn't come up with anything better—I'd just have to go for it. And in order to give my plan the best possible odds of success, I'd need to become a flawless villain.

I took the iron whip from Karl; it felt disturbingly comfortable in my hand. I smacked it against the ground as hard as I could. The sharp crash of metal briefly cut off Carlos's shouts, and before he could start up again, I began to speak.

"What a rousing proclamation. You've made your grievances quite clear, Carlos. But I'm afraid *you* will be the only one bound for hell."

I heard a small gulp from one of the onlookers. Every single person here was focused on me. I needed to play my part perfectly in order for Carlos to "die" without any loose ends.

As the hall fell silent, I continued speaking.

"Just as you surmise, this friend of yours escapes my memory. His name was Thomas, you said? Well, which Thomas was he, exactly? I don't even recall how many Thomases I killed two years ago... Regardless, perhaps he was once your friend, but now, not even a lump of meat remains of him. And yet you waste your time on pointless, hollow vengeance."

"Y-You...! How dare you—"

"*Silence.* Do not affront my ears with your petty invective, *dog*." I turned my gaze to the man holding him. "It's been some time since

we've had an assassination attempt, hasn't it, Craig? Two months, if memory serves? This man's treachery is *your* responsibility and *your* failure as captain of my guards. But, as it happens, I find myself rather bored of late. As a reward for providing me with a suitably entertaining diversion, I shall permit *you* to live. Am I not generous?"

As I spoke, I made my way closer, step by step. The soles of my boots rang out menacingly against the floor in the otherwise silent hallway. I stopped right in front of Carlos and slowly pushed up his chin with the handle of the iron whip, letting him feel its cold, heavy presence.

"Now then. You said earlier that you were bound for execution regardless, did you not? The truth is, I've been somewhat busy lately, and I had completely forgotten about you. And yet, utterly unaware of that, you spent these past two days waiting in abject terror, until your desperation finally drove you to hasten your own demise with this foolish act. How truly pitiful... But what sorts of entertaining faces will you show me if I give you a precise date for your encroaching doom?"

What kind of face was Heinreid—was *I* making? Carlos had the object of his vengeance right in front of him, but he'd turned a sickly green and fallen dead silent. My expression must have been absolutely revolting. I leaned in close and began to whisper in his ear.

"Rest assured, I shall carry out your punishment personally. Now, what exactly shall I do with you? Let me see..."

A torrent of villainous memories gushed forth, leaving my mind a chaotic mess. Was I even speaking actual words? I had no idea. My ears were filled with a noise like radio static, and I couldn't hear my own voice. But as my mouth moved, Carlos's face turned from green to white. Craig, still holding him in place, bit his own lip hard enough to draw blood.

Oh...

The moment I saw Craig's face, a sweet shiver ran down my spine, and my breath caught in my throat. My body gave a single involuntary tremor at the strange sensation welling up inside me.

What was that...? No, it's just my imagination. If I felt anything, then...it must just be a signal that I've hit my limit.

I sharply backed away from Carlos and Craig. I handed the whip back to Karl, telling him I wouldn't be using it today.

"Craig, throw that man in the First Dungeon. His execution shall be tomorrow morning. Until then, he can wait and savor the *true* terror of death."

A hollow whistling noise escaped Carlos's throat—so faint that it didn't even disturb the air.

After I watched Craig wordlessly drag him away, I retreated into the study again. I shut the door and then leaned back against it, slowly sliding down to the floor as I stared up at the ceiling in prayer.

Craig, I'm sorry for shoving everything onto you. But you're the only one I can trust with a human life. You don't need to trust ***me****. Betray me with every trick you've got. Save everyone you can from this evil bastard—I'm begging you.*

I took a deep breath. Leaning on the closed door for support, I slowly stood back up again, then returned to my desk.

It's all right. Craig's going to pull it off. He can get things done when he needs to—I just saw that with Elmer. I need to focus on my own work.

◆◇◆

The next morning, Craig came to my room to wake me up, just as ordered. I hadn't been able to sleep a wink last night, and dark circles bloomed beneath my eyes. But Craig's were even worse than mine—even worse than his own from yesterday—as he briefly reported that Carlos had committed suicide.

He's probably lying. He must've snuck Carlos out somehow. I have to believe he did, or...

Regardless, if I tried to investigate further, I'd have to act on what I learned in my role as Heinreid. I forcibly stifled my desperate need to know more and replied with only a bored "Oh, did he?"

As long as Carlos was still alive, I'd done all I needed to. Heinreid

lost interest in people once they'd died, and Karl wouldn't say anything unless I demanded information.

And thus, yesterday's attempted assassination ended as just one more of the deaths that occurred every day in this estate—just the simple word "Deceased" added to a row in the prisoner records, and nothing more.

Chapter 9

Three days had passed since the assassination attempt. I'd been working single-mindedly on preparations for releasing the hostages, but now I was struggling with an unexpected new development. Well, maybe less of a development and more of a condition, or a symptom... Basically, I was about to keel over from stress!

I wanted to tell myself to just suck it up and power through, but being an evil duke was a pretty rough line of work. I'd been a decent corporate drone in my old life, but the duties I'd had back then were nothing compared to the power and responsibility on my shoulders now. With just a single misplaced instruction from me, heads would literally roll. I couldn't relax for a second. My guts had started making weird gurgling noises; Karl had prepared some nice herbal tea that was supposed to be good for the stomach, but the thought of him catching on to me was also terrifying.

I put my fountain pen back in its stand and sighed deeply. I'd spent the past several days just going back and forth between the bedroom and the study. I didn't want to waste any time, but if I actually passed out, that wouldn't do anyone any good. I needed a change of pace.

I gave the bell on my desk a ring. Karl showed up right away, and I let him know my plans.

"I'm going for a walk. I won't be back for a little while, so you can put away the tea set."

"Very well, Your Grace. The weather is somewhat chilly today. I shall fetch your coat."

"Thanks."

As usual, Karl's responses were brief and succinct, and he carried out his tasks perfectly. A little *too* perfectly, maybe. When he came back with my coat, he was also holding a familiar iron whip. Heinreid always carried it with him for self-defense whenever he went out—

now that I thought of it, the whip was also his main weapon in the novel. There was no way I'd actually use it, but I needed to act natural, so I reluctantly accepted it.

With my preparations complete, Karl opened the door to the study. Craig had already been told that I was going out, and he was ready and waiting at attention outside the room.

"Where will you be going today, Your Grace?" he asked with a bow.

"Not far. I won't be heading into town. Let's see... I think I'll go for a walk in the gardens."

If I went into town, I'd be at greater risk of assassination attempts. With Craig by my side, my life wasn't in any real danger, but I wouldn't be able to keep on shielding people the way I'd done with Carlos. In order to protect others, I had to protect myself as well. There would always be risks, but the grounds of the estate were at least relatively safe.

"I shall accompany you."

"All right. See you later, Karl."

"Yes, Your Grace."

And so, Craig and I headed out to the garden. Gray clouds sprawled overhead, and just as Karl had said, it was a bit chilly. I walked slowly and aimlessly amid the trees and neatly trimmed hedges. Without direct sunlight, the garden wasn't as vibrant as it might've been, but even a former broke commoner like me could tell that it was carefully maintained down to the smallest detail. But that, too, was just a byproduct of Heinreid's evil ways. The gardeners had been tormented by fear as they'd crafted this work of art, knowing that failure would not be tolerated and that the tiniest flaw meant death. Heinreid had taken it all in with a satisfied smirk as he'd admired the beauty birthed from terror. But to me, this perfect garden felt like an accusation, and I found my spirits getting heavier—even knowing I had no right to complain.

I'd been hoping for a change of pace, but I'd only made my mood even worse. Just as I was about to call it quits and head back inside, a strong gust of wind blew past, carrying a single red petal with it. As I smoothed out my hair, I turned to glance in the direction the

wind had come from.

There—a corner of the garden was lined with rose bushes, blooming beautifully in a devilish crimson.

I slowly walked over, as though beckoned. When I reached a spot surrounded by roses on all sides, I took a deep breath, and their faint fragrance filled my lungs.

I know this scent...

It was back when I was living not as Heinreid, but as Kashimiya Tsukasa—this was years ago, right as I was hitting my mid-teens. Back then, I'd felt stressed out and trapped, just like right now...

My dad had run out on us, leaving a huge debt behind, and we were evicted from the house my sister and I had grown up in. Luckily, we were able to find an old apartment to rent right away, but our lives were far from easy. My mom worked from morning to night, so she was pretty much never at home. I had to juggle delivering newspapers for my job, handling all the household chores, and looking after my still-young sister.

That life continued day in and day out without any breaks; it was rough, but I loved my family, and I knew my problems were nothing compared to what my mom was struggling with. My stress kept on building up in the background, though. Before I knew it, my spirit had already gone well past its breaking point, and I started sneaking out of the house night after night. Or, well, I'd just say I was staying over at a friend's place and then wander around the park, so maybe "sneaking out" was a bit of an exaggeration.

Then, on one of those nights, I met her.

"Hey, there. What's a boy like you doing out this late? You'll get in trouble with the cops if you keep that up."

An adult woman called out to me. The scent of her perfume drifted over to me on the nighttime breeze. Stopped outside the park was a flashy sports car—not the sort of car I would've expected a woman to be driving.

"If you don't have anywhere to go, want to come for a drive with me?"

If I'd been in my right mind, I absolutely would've refused, but in that moment, I was helpless to resist. I let her lead me into the car,

and...

Well, that was how it went.

It had been too stupid and reckless to brush off as a mistake of my youth—too decadent and depraved to call a first love. But all the same, back when I hadn't been able to bare my heart to anyone, that little closed-off world she'd given me had been a place of salvation.

I remember now. Her perfume smelled like roses, didn't it?

Old memories flooded into my mind, and I unconsciously reached out a hand toward a rose. I felt like if I touched it, I might be able to return to that time, to that place.

But the flower rejected my fingers' embrace—it pierced me with its thorns.

"Ah..."

The thorn had gone in pretty deep. A large, red bead of blood welled up on my fingertip; in an instant, it overflowed, ran down my wrist, and dripped to the ground. Misshapen red circles formed on the paving stones, one after another. The prickling pain followed afterward, and my visions of the past dissolved like mist.

"Your Grace, are you hurt?! Please, show me your hand!"

Craig had been trailing silently behind me, but as soon as he saw blood, he sprang forward and dashed to my side. He took my injured hand and pulled a navy blue handkerchief out of a pocket to press to the wound. It all felt a bit overdramatic to me; it was just a small injury. I stared down at my fingers wrapped in the handkerchief.

"So my blood is red..."

My thoughts tumbled directly out of my mouth. Everyone called me a demon, a venom, and I'd been idly wondering whether even my blood was some other color—something more hideous and disturbing.

Craig hesitated, still caught off guard by my injury, but after a pause, he diligently responded with the obvious. "Well... Of course it is, Your Grace. You're a human being."

A human being... Ha.

A self-loathing chuckle spilled out of my mouth. The suffering of others was Heinreid's greatest joy. Was he really even human at all?

My eyes drifted back to the stains on the paving stones—they were definitely red. But those darkening splotches looked utterly filthy and vile.

"Let's go back inside, Your Grace. Your wound needs proper treatment."

"Sure..."

Craig led me by my handkerchief-wrapped hand, and we walked back toward the manor. The clouds that enveloped the sky were growing thicker and heavier; it was going to start raining soon. Once the rain came, it would wash the stones clean.

Chapter 10

The days that followed passed slowly and peacefully. The roses I'd seen on my walk had helped take my mind off things a little, so I'd had one rose placed in my bedroom and one in my study. Whenever I felt tired and worn out, I'd let their fragrance soothe me. And when I'd pushed myself too hard and the roses in my rooms weren't enough, I'd go for more walks in the garden. My living environment had expanded just a bit.

I felt bad about making Craig come along with me every time, but knowing that he was one of the good guys, I was the most comfortable and at ease when I was with him. *He* must have privately hated every minute of it, but he didn't complain, and I took advantage of that as I dragged him around.

Speaking of Craig... In between my other work, I'd occasionally been checking the First Dungeon's prisoner records, and the deaths had been increasing—slowly, bit by bit, as though gauging my reaction. Karl was continuing his investigation into the traitors, and he confirmed that the people recorded as dead had all been set free. In other words, the prison guards and the servants tasked with disposing of the corpses were all in on Craig's scheme. Obviously, Craig himself played a pivotal role, but his accomplices in charge of those duties numbered almost twenty in total.

Hah! Nobody's on Heinreid's side! Everyone's turning traitor! Serves you right, asshole! I mean, serves me right! Or something!

The days went by, and I finished writing all the letters to notify people that I was releasing hostages from the Second Dungeon.

Damn, I'm finally done. I haven't held a pen this much since high school...

Just as I was rubbing the faint calluses on my fingers and basking in the satisfaction of a job well done, a familiar knock sounded at the door.

"Your Grace, I have an urgent report."

For someone with an "urgent report," Karl didn't sound any less calm or composed than usual, but I kept that thought to myself. I gave him permission to enter, and my perfect butler walked in, holding various pieces of equipment in his hands. Heedless of their weight, he gave a precise bow at the same angle as always and passed along his news.

"A patrol by the Pieira River encountered two people behaving suspiciously. They appeared to be from out of town; the soldiers attempted to question them and bring them back to the estate, but they resisted arrest. I'm told that they are currently engaged in active combat."

My ears perked up at a familiar name in the middle of his report. The Pieira was a large river a short distance from the nearby town. It was deep and swift, and it ran right along the border of the duchy of Rodvelia. I knew that river's name—I'd known it long before I'd become a villain.

This is it. They're finally here.

With a short, amused exhalation, I stood up from my chair. "Quite a grandiose pair of suicides we have on our hands. Still, if they insist on causing a disturbance in *my* duchy, then I suppose I ought to come out to greet them personally."

Karl smoothly lifted his head and held out the things he'd been carrying.

"A horse and a guide are already waiting outside. Allow me to assist you in dressing yourself, Your Grace."

Karl came up to me and closed the opened top buttons of my shirt, then wrapped a scarf around my neck on top of that. After fastening it tightly with a tug, he looped a thick belt around my waist and attached the iron whip to it with a strap. Finally, he draped a black jacket with silver embroidery over my shoulders, and my preparations were complete. The entire routine took less than a minute. His movements were speedy but not rough in the slightest as he got me all dressed for my outing.

Seriously, is there anything this guy can't do? Is Karl *my actual final boss?*

I had no cause for complaint, though—not that I wanted to complain anyway.

Craig wasn't at his usual spot outside the door; he'd gone ahead to get the horses ready, so my escort out of the manor was Karl. The evil duke striding rapidly down the halls, his perfect butler following behind with quick and quiet steps, must have given off an incredible air of tension and suspense. Every servant we passed along the way was trembling as they bowed to me.

It feels like even just my presence is pure poison... Sorry for disturbing your work, guys.

We arrived at the front doors, and Karl's escort duties were complete. With a brief wave of my hand over my shoulder to signal that I was leaving him in charge, I made my way out.

There were six horses lined up outside; five men stood alongside them. Each of the men wore one of the black hoods issued to Heinreid's guards, except for one in a red hood—Craig, my guard captain. He slowly raised his head to look at me.

"Your Grace."

You look awful. You sound *awful. Please, don't look at me like that. I know it's hard, but right now, I can't go easy on you at all, and I can't joke around. I know I've bullied you plenty up until now, but today... Today,* ***I'm*** *going to hurt you worse than I ever have before.*

I ignored his pleading gaze and called out to one of the black-hooded guards.

"You're our guide, aren't you? Describe these intruders."

"Yes, Your Grace! One is a red-haired man; the other is a woman with long brown hair. Both are dressed in well-tailored blue clothing and carrying longswords."

"A woman? And she's fighting as well? How amusing."

As I spoke, I quickly mounted my horse. Obviously, I'd never ridden a horse in my entire life as a broke guy in Japan, but for Heinreid, it was a piece of cake. Following my lead, the assembled guards mounted their horses as well, one after another. Only one remained standing in place.

I bottled up my guilt. Staring down at Craig from atop my horse,

I kept my voice cold and harsh as I spat down a warning. "We're *leaving*, Craig. Stop standing there and get moving. Or would you rather I drag you behind me?"

His green eyes reluctantly lifted to meet my gaze.

"Right away, Your Grace."

We spurred our horses on. When we arrived at the Pieira, the intruders' battle against my soldiers was still ongoing. The two of them were starkly outnumbered, but they were clearly expert fighters. Collapsed soldiers were on the ground all around them, and the intruders—the future saviors of this kingdom—stood undaunted in their strength. The boy and the girl, both dressed in royal blue, guarded each other's backs while they fought. The girl's brown hair whipped around in the wind as she danced across the battlefield and sent soldiers scattering; the boy's red hair stood on end as he wielded his sword with mighty swings.

There they are, just as I expected—I mean, just like I read.

I narrowed my eyes at the two *heroes* before me. I wouldn't even need to draw on Heinreid's memories for my confrontation with them—I could just follow his dialogue from the book exactly as I remembered it, word for word.

I dismounted my horse and brandished the iron whip as I began reciting my lines.

"What have we here? I'd heard a couple of rats had found their way in, and yet it seems their heads are still attached to their necks. Would anyone care to explain why?"

I hadn't spoken especially loudly, but in an instant, the clamor of the battle fell deathly silent. The boy and the girl turned—two pairs of eyes fixed themselves on me.

It was finally time for the evil duke to face the beginning of the end.

Chapter 11

When I'd freed Elmer, I'd begun distantly considering the question. When I'd intimidated Carlos, I'd accepted the answer and steeled myself for it. When the story of the novel began—when I met the protagonists—how would I behave?

Exactly as written.

This encounter was a key plot point in the novel. It would lead to the heroes meeting Elmer's family, House Kisch, and forming new connections within the kingdom. If I avoided them and let them slip on by, they might still meet the Kisch family anyway. But what if the king somehow found out about them first? Simply put, they'd be crushed before they could muster up their strength. For the sake of everything that would follow, I needed to play the villain here and reproduce the events of the original novel.

I'd already put on a performance like this with Carlos, but this time, I didn't want to let things deviate from the story in the slightest. Rather than let Heinreid's memories carry me, I decided to lean on my memory of the novel itself.

It's all right. I can do this. I'm going to see it through.

"Y-Your Grace..." one of the soldiers whimpered.

So please, guys, don't give me those scared looks. I know you can't help it, but I'm about to say some pretty awful stuff. If you're already that panicked, your nerves won't hold out.

I gave a long, pointed sigh. "I see you've disgraced yourselves in battle against a pair of *children*. Do you not recall my words? In my duchy, those who cannot serve their purpose are unfit to live. Fools who fail to heed their lord's warnings have been cropping up more and more of late—how disappointing that you should be among their number..."

"W-We—! Perish the thought, Your Grace!"

"We shall always do as you command, Your Grace!"

I smacked my iron whip against the ground with a horrible clash. The effect was just as profound here as it had been with Carlos. A terrified hush immediately spread over the soldiers and their excuses, like ripples through water.

"Silence! Who granted you leave to speak? You may plead for your lives all you wish in my dungeons—and after that, you'll never speak again."

I'm lying, though.

I'd already been planning to gradually lay off all of Heinreid's guards and soldiers, and I definitely wasn't about to fill the dungeons back up. But the soldiers, utterly unaware of that, all trembled in fear at my words.

I'm sorry, guys. Really.

Amid the silence, the boy spoke up. "'Your Grace'... Are you Duke Heinreid von Rodvelia, then?"

I slowly lifted my gaze from the soldiers to him and cocked my head in thought. "For a rat to address me by name is rather an insult... However, your face is familiar to me. Go on, then. Announce yourself."

"I'm Sighart Amagis Lansbury. My brother— No, *all* of you have had your way for too long, and I'm here to take back my country!"

Framed by his wild red hair, a pair of blue eyes fixed themselves on me. The boy who'd introduced himself as Sighart was unmistakably the protagonist of *Sig the Rebel*. Despite the book's title, he was usually a kind and gentle boy with a strong sense of justice—the hero who would become this kingdom's savior.

"And I am Natasha Mokhia Siczek. I'm here as Sig's right hand."

Next to Sig was a girl with long brown hair, golden eyes, and an elegant and refined demeanor. This girl, Natasha, was the heroine of the novel. She was the youngest princess of the neighboring kingdom of Mokhia; eight years ago, when Sig had been forced to flee Amagis, she'd taken him in and given him shelter in her own country. She'd become deeply enamored of Sig's fierce resolve to take back his homeland, and in order to support him, she'd studied the blade as well. She was a highly skilled warrior, now known far and wide as "the Lion Princess of Mokhia."

"How fascinating. So, my liege's younger brother has returned—and with the Lion Princess of Mokhia in tow. I don't know how you seduced her to your aid, but indeed, I see now why common soldiers would fail to best you. However... *Your* country, you say? And you seek to *take it back*? How absurd. This kingdom was rightfully inherited by my liege, the first heir to the throne. What could *you*, a mere exile, possibly hope to reclaim?"

Ugh... If only I could've been one of the good guys. Then I wouldn't have to stand here tormenting them and myself with these horrible lines.

The two of them stood there as untarnished beacons of righteousness, and I stared at them in awe. The hero I'd once been enthralled by was glaring furiously at me.

"What on earth did my brother 'inherit'? Duke Rodvelia, I've seen the towns you govern. The fields are barren, and the people cry out as they suffer and languish in poverty. Things weren't like this when my father was alive! Don't you feel anything when you see their misery?!"

"Nothing whatsoever. Cattle live so that men may feed on their flesh and blood. Those with power stand above, reveling in their dominance. What could be more obvious? Unlike the fool who preceded him, my liege is a proud and noble man. He will never debase himself as a slave to weaklings who mistakenly believe that *they* deserve *our* protection."

I'm supposed to be smiling while I say that line. But I can't—my mouth just won't do it. What the hell is supposed to be fun about this? How can he say these awful things? Heinreid isn't human at all—he's a monster.

"Sig, don't bother." Natasha shook her head in disgust. "Your words won't reach men like him. They laugh in the face of sincerity and twist the truth with their arguments, without the slightest intention of heeding the voices of others. Don't try to reason with him—he'll only poison you."

I couldn't agree with her more. I wasn't going to listen to Sig—obviously not as Heinreid, and not as myself either. I knew these lines from the novel, and for the sake of the plot, I couldn't afford to

hear him out. Women really were good judges of character.

"But—!" Sig started.

"Hah, how curious. I had thought the Lion Princess a mere barbarian, and yet it seems she's far the wiser of the pair of you."

"Shut up," she shot back. "I just know a liar when I smell one. Stop mocking my Sig with your flimsy delusions and hollow theatrics!"

Hollow theatrics, huh? Well, she's right—my heart's not in it at all. Anyway, everything's still following the outline, so it's probably fine.

"Such a harsh critic!"

I ad-libbed a taunt, accompanied by an actually theatrical slump of my shoulders. Natasha scowled with revulsion, just as I'd been hoping.



"Times change, and nations and men change with them," I continued. "Such is the natural way of the world. If that simple truth eludes you, then perhaps a demonstration is in order... Craig, come here."

I finally called out to Craig, who was standing stock-still behind me. After a beat or two, he stepped out in front. His red hood was off. His blond hair and his features were plainly visible to Sig.

Sig's eyes widened, and his mouth gaped open in astonishment. "C-Craig? Craig, is it really you?!"

"Sig, who is this?" asked Natasha.

"I told you about him, didn't I? He's the man who helped me escape when my brother was going to kill me—I owe him my life! Oh, Craig, thank goodness you're all right! I always knew you were still alive out there!"

Sig called out joyfully, completely forgetting where we were, but my guard remained still and silent.

"Craig...?"

Sig finally realized something was off. Concern and confusion spread across his face as he stared at Craig.

I'm really sorry, Sig. Craig can't go with you right now, and I can't give him back to you either.

Craig was bound helplessly in place by the hostages, the prisoners, and even his own family. And in order to undo all of those ties, I needed him with me. I felt like a monster—like a demon—but I just focused on remembering and reciting my lines.

"What a touching reunion. Aren't you glad to see your former master alive and well, Craig? Run to him, embrace him, weep with him if you will. I won't mind at all."

Craig stayed silent. He was facing away from me; I couldn't tell what sort of expression he had on his face. And so, I just kept going.

"*However*, if you understand who your master is, here and now..."

A brief pause. I gave the order.

"*Clean up your mess.*"

Craig said nothing for a few moments. Then—

"Your Grace."

—he drew his sword and charged at Sig.

Sig had left his guard down and lowered his sword, but Natasha leaped in front of him to fend off the blow. The difference in strength between the two was just too great, though; Craig knocked away her sword, and the impact sent her sprawling on the ground.

"Natasha! Stop it, Craig! Why are you—?!"

Sig frantically brandished his sword, but Craig kept pressing the offensive. The screeching clash of metal rang out again and again.

"Because, just as His Grace said, I am the one who failed to dispose of you—*Your Former Highness*," Craig said dispassionately as they fought. He was even worse of an actor than me, but without any emotion behind his words, his voice sounded cold and heartless as it echoed over the river. "You...are no longer my master."

Sig hissed with frustration.

"Sig, look out!"

As Sig faltered, Craig's sword closed in on him.

"Gah!"

"*Sig!*"

Fresh blood sprayed through the air. As they'd fought, Sig had ended up backed right against the river's edge. Now, he fell straight into the Pieira with a splash, staining the water red as the currents swiftly carried him away. He'd been shielding Natasha, but she screamed in anguish and jumped into the river after him without a moment's hesitation.

"Gh... Ngh..." It had all happened in an instant. One of my hands flew up to cover my mouth. I felt like my stomach was about to empty itself, but I desperately kept it down.

The... The blood.

I'd given the order to Craig, and he'd wounded Sig, and the boy and girl I'd been talking to moments ago had been swallowed up by the rapids, all because of me. That was exactly how it had gone in the novel—but it was also reality, and it had just happened right before my eyes.

My heart was racing frantically. It was sickening, disgusting, awful...

That was how I *should have* felt.

My gaze was fixed on Craig. He'd just pushed Sig into the river. As he slowly turned around, tightly gripping his sword, old memories of Heinreid's came rushing back.

"Was that...to your satisfaction, Your Grace?" he gritted out.

Ohhh... Ohhh! That color tinged with hatred and shame! That beautiful, beautiful green!

My spirit was in turmoil, but my memories and my body were rejoicing. Sweet shivers raced through me, prickling up from the tips of my toes all the way to my brain. I felt unsteady on my feet, like I might collapse at any moment. As I forced myself to keep standing, a fevered sigh spilled from my lips, and I realized that I hadn't been breathing.

"I'm... I'm going back to the estate," I said.

"Your Grace?"

"Throw the survivors in the dungeon— No, I mean... Not... Not the dungeon... Just...? Attend to the injured, and then— Nnh!"

I was all mixed up. I couldn't figure out what orders I was supposed to give. Craig was still staring right at me with those eyes. The villain inside my head laughed and laughed.

Still shaky, I scrambled and crawled my way onto my horse, then called out to nobody in particular.

"You can handle the cleanup. I'm going back alone. I...don't need an escort..."

Alone. Right now, I just needed to be alone.

Chapter 12

I spurred on my horse as fast as I could, hoping the wind would cool off my feverish body. But by the time I arrived back at the estate, I'd only gotten worse. I rushed into the manor, driven by the frenzied pounding of my racing heart. My butler, waiting at the door, greeted me with a respectful bow.

"Welcome back, Your Grace. We have just—"

"Not now. I'm going to my room. I'll call for you once I'm settled. Just leave me alone until then."

I didn't have time to worry about whatever Karl was saying. I sidestepped him and hurried past, boots roughly pounding down the hallways as I raced straight toward my bedroom. Somehow, I made it there in one piece, and I quickly slipped inside like a man seeking refuge.

As I stumbled toward the bed, I threw off my jacket and let my belt with the heavy iron whip fall to the floor. I clawed at the scarf around my neck, ripped it away, then tore open the fastened-up buttons of my shirt, desperate to free myself from all the stifling layers. As I shivered at the sensation of cool air on my chest, my knees suddenly gave out, and I crumpled down to the carpet. I'd been standing right in front of the bed, and I just barely managed to cling onto the black sheets to keep my head from hitting the floor. I knelt there, heaving out short, gasping breaths, but my body refused to calm down even a little.

The spectacle I'd just witnessed kept on playing and replaying inside my head. The streak of red flying through the air. The boy and girl washed away on the currents. And turning around to face me, that glimmering, wavering, beautiful emerald green!

More shivers ran through me. Goose bumps prickled across my skin. I *didn't want this*. That scene should have felt utterly revolting. But no matter what my mind said, my body only burned hotter. My

instincts were telling me exactly what to do. If I wanted relief, if I wanted release, I needed to let the fever out.

God damn it.

I clawed my fingers through my hair, but finally, cursing inwardly, I roughly unfastened my pants and shoved my hand inside. My skin was so hot, and when I wrapped my fingers around my length and pulled it free from my pants, I was already throbbingly, inescapably hard.

You sick fuck.

Turning my body around, I leaned my back against the side of the bed. I gripped myself and stroked—an unmistakable jolt of pleasure shot through my hips.

"Ah!"

I couldn't contain my voice as it spilled from my lips. With just one single stroke, clear, slick precum was already welling up and dripping from the tip. This was a pleasure I'd known long before I'd become a villain. I didn't need to be told what would feel good—I already knew exactly what to do next.

Ha ha... So this *is when Heinreid finally starts to feel like a human being?*

Frustrated and desperate, I smeared my fingers across the precum beading at the tip and spread it down my shaft. Once I was better lubricated, I tightened my grip and picked up the pace. Squelching noises—slippery, wet, *obscene*—filled my ears, and my brain shut down as I lost myself in the sensation.

"Ngh... Guh... Nn!"

Despite all of that, I couldn't quite manage to push myself over the edge. My body and brain were both filled to bursting with pleasure, but somewhere deep inside me, my lingering intellect wouldn't let me climax.

I knew exactly why. It was because of *what* was getting me off. This body had unmistakably gotten aroused from harming others and witnessing their suffering. I'd tormented a good and righteous man—and my libido had rejoiced in the anguish on his face and found ecstasy in his hatred. That was just how Heinreid's body was built.

But right now, the consciousness inside it was my own. However much my body was conditioned to respond this way, I couldn't shake my revulsion at the prospect of letting *that* bring me to orgasm. My instincts and my intellect were locked in conflict as I writhed in agony.

I want to cum. I don't want to fall. I want to cum. I don't want to fall...

I focused on the head, furiously tugging and squeezing, but I still couldn't crest that final wave. I was stuck on the edge, gasping and groaning.

Damn it...

If only I could get off to something else, *anything* else. But no matter how far back I went through Heinreid's memories, all I could dredge up was atrocity after atrocity... Once I started to recall it all, I couldn't get it to stop.

As I shook my head frantically, trying to push back the rushing torrent of blood-soaked visions, my eyes caught on my nightstand—on the single rose adorning it.

I...

The past came flowing back into me. I remembered that garden of sin and depravity, sealed off from the world—and the scent of roses, filling every corner.

Frantically clutching at those faint scraps of memory, I shoved one hand into my open shirt and dragged my fingers across my chest. I found what I was looking for, and I gingerly scratched at it with a fingernail.

I gasped.

"Hhhh! Ngh!"

The intense sensation shocked me, and my legs straightened with a jolt.

Oh, wow... Heinreid's never experienced this before. How's his body this *sensitive? No, this is good. This'll work.*

"Ohhh, nnn... Haaa, ah!"

I kept toying with my nipple, tracing it, then pinching it between my fingertips. I was only playing with myself, but sweet ecstasy spread through my entire body. More and more precum started

pouring out, almost as if my lower half was demanding more of my attention. I reached down, jerking myself off with frenzied strokes, and eventually my legs started to shudder and shake.

Ah, right there... I'm so...close...

I tried to lose myself in that lustrous reverie, to let it carry me over the edge. But at the last second, a villainous memory slipped back in to obscure it.

"Was that...to your satisfaction, Your Grace?"

"Nnn!"

That hatred-tinged green filled my mind once again. But even as I recoiled and shrank away from it, my trembling finger violently clawed at the head of my member, digging into the slit, while my other hand gripped my nipple tightly and *twisted*.

"Hhhhgh, aaauh!"

I was already too far gone for my intellect to hold me back. My toes curled—my body shuddered and twitched. Hot, cloudy cum gushed out in intermittent splurts, leaving my hand soiled.

Amid the overwhelming pleasure, a single teardrop rolled down my cheek.

"Hhh..."

As my shaky breathing slowed, my body slumped limply against the bed.

Well, I'm feeling calmer, at least. I mean, masturbation just tends to leave you kind of hollow when the clarity hits, but still, I've never felt this defeated before. I jerked off to my ex, and then I ended up coming to Craig*? God, I owe both of them the biggest apology of my life. I hate myself.*

As I stewed in that sinking, guilty feeling, I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped off my hand. I straightened out my disheveled clothes—and then realized that the door to my room was slightly ajar.

Wait, what? Did... Did I forget to close the door?! Hang on, you've gotta be kidding me! Sure, I was pretty messed up, but there's no way I... Shit, I can't remember what I did when I came in.

Every trace of afterglow immediately vanished, leaving me starkly sober.

No, it's fine. I told Karl to leave me alone, and the regular servants never come near my room. Craig's busy handling the cleanup at the Pieira, so he shouldn't be back yet either... Probably.

Grimacing, I softly crept over to the door. I quietly peeked out, but there was no one around. I sighed with relief and slammed the door shut. Then, at that exact moment, someone's voice rang out from the last place I would've expected—right inside the room with me.

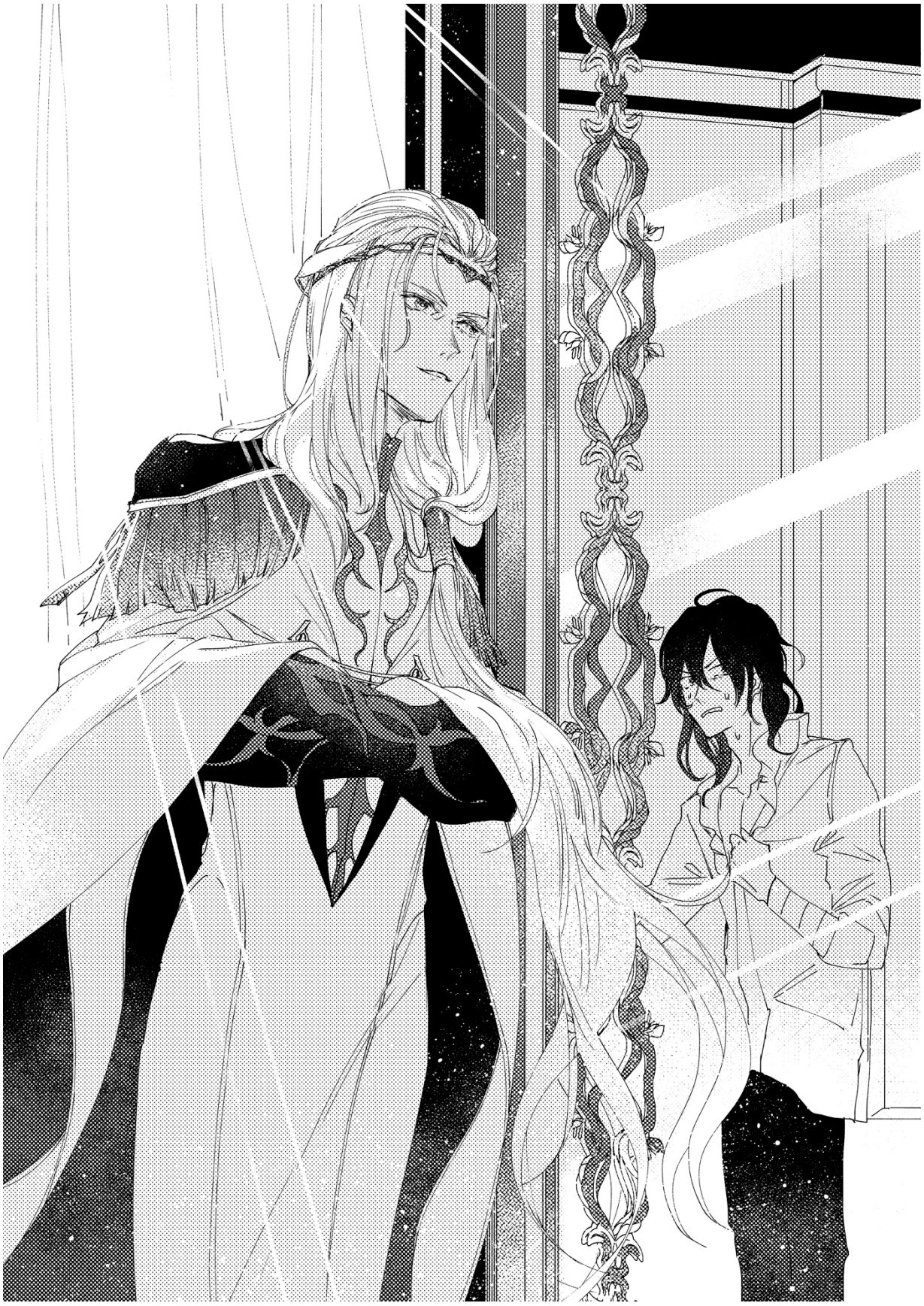
"Well, Heinreid," the voice said with a laugh. "Looks like you chased him off. Honestly, though—going at it the moment you returned? Even *I* was at something of a loss, I have to say."

With the biggest jolt yet today—no, the biggest of my entire life—my heart leaped out of my chest.

It was a deep voice, one that sent tremors running directly through your brain. I knew that voice. Heinreid's memories told me exactly who it belonged to. With awkward, creaking movements like a rusted windup toy, I slowly turned toward the speaker.

"How... How long have you been there...my liege?"

With a low, throaty chuckle, the voice's owner stepped out from the shadows behind the large mirror. His mismatched blue and gold eyes were narrowed in amusement, and a loose bundle of long, beautiful hair spilled over one of his shoulders like silver thread. This fair and elegant man with a cruel, callous smile and a nigh-overpowering presence was none other than the final boss himself—His Majesty King Eberhart, ruler of Amagis.



Interlude

The duke was acting strangely.

I'd first realized it when he'd released Elmer Kisch from the Second Dungeon. No—thinking back further, something had been different about him ever since his fall down the stairs. When one of my men had come to report that he'd fallen, I'd thought it was finally the end for me. I hadn't yet known that it had been a deliberate act, not an accident; but regardless, I'd been certain that as captain of his guards, *I* would be held responsible for failing to protect him. I'd resolved to try and land a blow on him in my final moments—maybe I could at least rob him of one of his arms before I died. But when the duke had woken, not only had he let me go unpunished, but even the guard who'd been on duty had faced no reprisal whatsoever. I'd been perplexed at the time, but I'd accepted it as just a passing whim. However, his odd behavior hadn't stopped there.

The most plainly visible change was that he'd stopped smiling. To be more precise, it wasn't that he no longer smiled at all—if anything, his usual demeanor had become less severe than before. But he'd completely stopped smiling when he carried out *evil deeds*. In the past, whenever the duke had tormented his victims, he'd always done so with loud, ecstatic laughter. The suffering of others had been his greatest joy—it had filled him with pleasure from the bottom of his heart. *That* was what had earned him his title as the Venom of the Nation.

But now, he worked his villainy without the slightest hint of enjoyment. I recalled my former subordinate, Carlos Bureau, and his suicidal attack on the duke. For the old Duke Heinreid, an assassin such as Carlos would have been a toy perfectly suited for torture and abuse. I could easily have imagined him whipping the man to death right on the spot, roaring with laughter all the while. But that day,

the duke's face had been devoid of all emotion. The words that had flowed from his lips had been unmistakably vile, but something about it had felt like a sort of *performance*... In the end, he'd never laid a finger on Carlos himself, and he'd taken in the news of the man's death expressionlessly—not that his dispassionate reaction hadn't been disturbing in and of itself.

There were other, more ill-defined changes as well. Something had shifted in the air around him. The old duke had constantly projected a sense that he was untouchable, unapproachable. He'd exuded the cold fastidiousness of a man who stood above others. But that aura had started to fade. He left himself open now; he showed vulnerability. At times, he'd seem distracted and lost in thought—not putting on a show but wrapped up in genuine contemplation. When I called out to him while his mind was elsewhere, he'd look up at me in surprise. Still, when I'd let my guard down and made blunders, he'd immediately dug into me—and come to think of it, he *had* been smiling then, albeit wryly and bitterly—so I'd dismissed his personality change as a mere trick of my own mind.

But on the day he'd taken a walk through the garden, I'd become certain that something was amiss. He'd never been the type to simply go out for walks, and I'd been terrified that he might be planning to search around for some flaw and have the gardeners put to death. But he really had just wandered aimlessly through the garden. He'd looked horribly weary, and he'd clearly had something on his mind. Even when he'd pricked his finger on a rose's thorn, he hadn't flown into a mad fury—in fact, he'd looked as though his heart had been wounded as well. As bizarre as it was to say, the duke had worn the sad, forlorn expression of a child abandoned by his mother. He'd wondered at the fact that his own blood was red, and I'd instinctively replied that of course it was—he was a human being. I still remembered the smile of bitter irony that he'd given me in response. Just what had it meant? Unable to let it go, I'd stealthily observed him on his now-habitual walks through the garden, but I had yet to arrive at an answer.

Nevertheless, he was clearly acting strangely. Even his arbitrary

executions had come to a complete halt. Had something changed inside the duke? Had his fall down the stairs caused some sealed reservoir of humanity deep within him to come spilling forth? Though I had no solid proof, that notion had begun to take root inside me.

But now...

I barked out a mocking, self-deprecating laugh. The sword in my hands was smeared with blood.

What the hell was I even expecting?

Even if the duke *had* awoken to some semblance of a conscience—even if he *had* drifted closer to humanity—the countless sins of his past would never disappear. And even now, he'd never left his evil ways behind. He'd woven his words with countless veiled threats as he'd ordered me to cut down His Highness Prince Sighart, knowing full well the pain it would cause me.

I sharply flicked away the blood and sheathed my sword. I'd held back as much as I could, but had it been enough? If the tales were to be believed, the Lion Princess of Mokhia was not only an expert fighter but a master of countless other athletic pursuits—surely she wouldn't have drowned in the Pieira's currents, would she?

All of this was the work of my own hands, ordered or not.

Remember the shame and disgrace you feel now. Remember every evil act that came before. Never forget it—any of it.

I had no right to worry for Prince Sighart or his companion. But if, by some chance, the worst had befallen them... Then this time, no matter what, I would atone with my life and bring the duke down with me.

"Looks like there aren't any dead," I said. "Tend to the wounded, and carry them to the barracks once you're done. Stay away from the estate."

"But, Captain—"

"I'll handle His Grace. Just rest and recover for now." I sighed. "Good work, all of you."

I wasn't going to blame the soldiers for not letting His Highness go. They'd simply carried out their duties for the sake of their lives and their families' safety. They, too, were people of this kingdom—

and I'd struck down His Highness to protect them as well. If I wished to claim that I was acting for the greater good, then all I could do now was abide the rage and humiliation and continue serving my role.

I gave the remaining soldiers a few brief instructions, then set off on my horse after the duke.

When I arrived back at the estate, I was greeted by an unusual sight. I narrowed my eyes at the extravagant carriage parked in a corner near the gate.

This *must be why he was in such a rush to return...* I'd been right to hurry after him. Perhaps I could get my hands on some valuable information.

I rushed over the threshold into the manor—and nearly let out a curse at the bespectacled man waiting there to meet me.

"You're late, Craig Bauer. His Grace has already returned. Are you, perhaps, in need of a new horse?"

Karl Anker was this estate's prized butler. In front of the duke, he carried out his orders dispassionately, without the slightest question or hesitation. But for some reason, he would constantly find fault with me. Maybe he'd already surmised that I planned to turn against the duke sooner or later. In any case, based on his demeanor and his actions, I'd judged him to be on the side of evil—even if he didn't seem to be one of Heinreid's devotees.

"His Grace said that he wished to return alone."

"And you simply let him? What, pray tell, did you intend to do if some mischance had befallen His Grace on his way home? His Majesty's wrath would be far too great to quell with your life alone."

He looked down his nose at me with a mocking *hmph*. Annoyed by his antagonizing attitude, I glared back at him.

"Are *you* in any position to talk?" I asked pointedly.

Ordinarily, the butler's responsibility was to wait on standby in the room next door to the duke so that he could be summoned at a moment's notice. But Karl had been waiting for me out here, and the duke was nowhere in sight. What was going on?

"You and I occupy distinct positions. *My* role is to prioritize my master's orders above all else. *Your* role is to guard your master's

person, no matter the circumstances—is it not?"

Even if he were to kill you himself for your disobedience, Karl's gray eyes coldly declared.

This was a waste of my time. I'd gain nothing by talking with him further. I just shook my head and strode on past him.

"Where are you going?"

"To His Grace's side, of course."

"His Grace is currently entertaining company. His orders are to leave him alone until we are called for."

Just as I thought. In that case, I definitely *need to go.*

I turned to meet Karl's icy glare and gave a scornful chuckle—one of the many habits I'd acquired during my service at this estate.

"You contradict yourself, Karl Anker. My job is to guard His Grace, *no matter the circumstances*."

For once, the unflappably competent butler raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Fine, then—I've given you my warning. Do as you will, and on your own head be it."

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I'd expected to find them in the drawing room, but when I arrived, it was empty. Or rather, a servant who'd prepared the room for company stood waiting in the corner, but the duke and his guest were nowhere to be seen. Where had they gone? I asked the servant. He was reluctant to answer, but when I pressed him further, insisting that I needed to know as captain of the guards, he nervously told me that they had both headed to the duke's quarters.

This just keeps getting more suspicious. Are they that *concerned about being overheard? If they've shut themselves in his room, then it'll be harder for me to eavesdrop...*

But to my surprise, when I arrived at the duke's room, the door was invitingly ajar. It felt like an obvious trap—maybe the moment I peeked in, my eye would be gouged out.

My hesitation lasted only an instant. In this kingdom, it was impossible to get anywhere without taking risks. Stifling my

presence and silencing my footfalls as best as I could, I crept closer to the door and listened carefully.

"Ah!"

Hmm?

Rather than the scheming voices of villains, I heard a strange cry. I wasn't close enough to pick up much more, though. After a moment's indecision, I moved to peek in through the crack in the door.

My eyes widened in shock at the sight that leaped out at me. There, inside, was the duke—*comforting himself*. He sat on the floor, slumped against the black sheets hanging off the side of his bed. Sweet sighs spilled from his throat as his hand worked busily between his legs. Distinctly salacious squelching noises mingled with the duke's intermittent frail moans, filling the room with an air of debauchery.

The entire scene was plainly abnormal—repulsive, even. Why? Because not half an hour ago, the duke had been issuing commands at the battle by the Pieira River. He'd commanded me to dispose of Prince Sighart, and he'd watched with his own eyes as I'd carried out his orders. Immediately afterward, a change had come over him, and he'd rushed back to the manor to do *this*—in other words, the duke had become aroused by his own despicable acts, and now he was indulging himself as he recalled it all.

I knew that I was witnessing the depraved actions of an incomprehensible monster... But for some reason, I found myself unable to pull my eyes away from the scene unfolding beyond the door.

"Ngh... Guh... Nn!"

The duke was pleasuring himself, but there was something pained in his demeanor. He groaned and struggled as though he were being held back by something—as though he were drowning. He continued writhing in frustration for some time. His gaze wandered restlessly all around him...and came to a sudden stop, fixed on a single point.

He was looking at his nightstand—and at the red flower that sat atop it. It was one of those roses that he would sometimes gaze upon with a desperate yearning in his eyes. Time seemed to stand

still briefly as he stared at it, but eventually, he tentatively slipped a hand into his open shirt. He felt around for something, and then—

"Hhhh! Ngh!"

—instantly, a sweetness filled his voice. He continued his motions, as though he were desperately clinging onto something. His main hand resumed its movement as well, and with short, quick gasps, he lost himself in the deed. He looked to be in far more pleasure than before, and he continued gradually rising to crest his peak...

Suddenly, the duke's body jerked and jolted.

"Hhhhgh, aaauh!"

His toes curled, his back arched, and he shuddered, twitched, as he reached his climax. He remained in that state for a few seconds before his head abruptly slumped back. Even from where I watched, I could plainly see that his eyes were unfocused. That scarlet hue, normally cold and muddy, was melting and wavering now... A single teardrop spilled from his eye.

I jerked away from the door with a start, then nervously scanned the hallway around me. Thankfully, no one was nearby. I ran away as fast as my legs could carry me, forgetting my original goal as I fled that bubble of twisted perversion. I raced aimlessly down the hall and frantically ducked into the first empty room I found.

My heart was pounding in my chest like a drum. I hadn't run far, but my breathing was ragged.

What the hell... What the hell was that?

I clutched at my shaky body and sank down to crouch on the floor. As I buried my head between my knees, my darkened field of vision filled with the duke as I'd just witnessed him. His pale, sweat-drenched skin—his hands working to torment and punish his own body—his fevered breaths as he writhed and suffered—and finally, running down his cheek like a plea for forgiveness, that single tear.

I'd been watching that vile, despicable monster, but in that moment, he'd been so beautiful that it had sent chills down my spine.

No, no! This isn't right! Something's wrong with me—this isn't real!

Over and over, I denied it, but no matter how much I tried, a

voice in the depths of my heart refused to be ignored.

I want *him.*

I slammed my fist into a wall with all my might. Stinging pain coursed through my knuckles, but I didn't feel even the slightest bit calmer.

After spending so long serving evil, maybe I've finally gone mad as well...

Thoughts of my true master, and of the cause I'd sworn myself to, spiraled around my filthy, soiled heart like bitter accusations. All the while, I just sat there in a daze. There was nothing else I could do.

Chapter 13

The "final boss" of *Sig the Rebel* was a man of overpowering charisma and cruelty—a ruler who ruthlessly toyed with and tormented his own kingdom. He was the only man Heinreid, the Venom of the Nation, would bow his head to: King Eberhart Amagis Lansbury, the Tyrant of the Century.

At first glance, he was just a strikingly beautiful man, but his mere presence bloomed and swirled with malice.

"Did Karl Anker not tell you of my arrival?" he replied with a picture-perfect sinister smirk. "I've been here from the *very beginning*. I'd thought I might hide and surprise you, and yet somehow, I found *myself* taken by surprise instead..."

Eberhart walked across the room, deliberately stepping on my discarded jacket and scarf as he made his way over to sit on my bed—right above where I'd just been.

There's a sofa right over here! Why the hell are you sitting there*, you sick freak?!*

Trying and failing to wipe the grimace off my face, I somehow managed to put words together. "What...brings you here, my liege?"

"I wrote in my letter that I would be paying you a visit soon, did I not? Oh, how I worried for my dear, pitiful fool of a duke after his fall down the stairs. And yet *this* is how I find you, Heinreid?"

Yeah, you wrote that. You sure did write it.

"As I explained in my reply, my liege, I'm quite all right. There's truly no need..."

"Indeed," he said, laughing. "You made that *abundantly* clear in your letter. And thus, all the more reason for me to come."

So you're just doing this to harass me?

As I stared blankly across the room at him, stunned by his total shamelessness, he tossed something over to me. I fumbled to catch it and opened my hands to find a small box.

Matches?

I looked over at Eberhart in confusion. He'd produced a cigar from somewhere, and he held it in his mouth, swishing it up and down.

"Light it."

"My liege."

Frankly, I didn't want to go anywhere near him, but I couldn't disobey his command. I reluctantly walked back to the bed and lit the cigar. He took a puff, savoring it with a relaxed air. Then he glanced over at me and blew a cloud of smoke right in my face. The thick fumes stung at my eyes and lungs. As I helplessly coughed and choked, I heard him call my name.

"Why are you still standing there? *Kneel.* You are my right hand, and yet not only do you subject me to an utterly shameful display, but now you look down on me as well? You're lucky you still have your head."

His voice was cloyingly sweet but cold as ice. I couldn't detect any anger in his tone. But even if he wasn't angry at all, even if I was in his good favor, he'd kill me without a second thought—just like Heinreid himself. I could clearly feel death in the air, and with a quiet gulp, I did as I was commanded. I took a half step back from Eberhart, got down on one knee, and bowed my head.

Immediately, something sharply thudded onto the back of my skull—Eberhart's boot. I let out a pained groan, but he just mercilessly ground his heel into my scalp, pushing my head down further.

Owwww! Stop it! You're gonna give me a bald spot!

He chuckled. "What an excellent footrest. Ah, right there—perfect. Don't move a single inch."

The pressure finally let up a little—when the carpet was right in front of my face.

Actually, this feels like the hardest *possible position for me to hold still in. Is this guy a born sadist?*

My arms quivered and shook as they supported my weight.

"Well? What is it that excited you so?" Eberhart asked.

Shit, he's digging into that? It sounds like he doesn't know

anything about Sig yet. Maybe I can fudge things and get him to come up with an answer for me...?

After a moment's thought, I responded to his question with a question.

"Surely a man such as yourself would already know, would you not, my liege?"

"Don't waste my time with your wordplay, Heinreid," he shot back. "Were this any other occasion, I'd gladly play along. But I slipped away from some urgent business to pay you a visit, and my time is short. Answer my question."

No dice. I'm not dealing with Craig here—there's no fooling the final boss. Right now, he's *the one who can throw his weight around and make threats. If I try to cover up the truth, it'll just backfire on me... Fine. He was going to find out sooner or later anyway; I'll just tell it to him straight.*

"Your brother and the Lion Princess of Mokhia were caught trespassing in my duchy."

"*Sighart...*" The foot resting on my head twitched slightly. A faint hint of discomfort began to bleed into the king's voice. "I see. My people have been busy dealing with fires near the border lately—that must be how the rats slipped their way in. And? You've disposed of them, haven't you?"

"Yes, my liege. My guard captain, Craig Bauer, eliminated both of them on my orders. The former prince was swept away in the Pieira River while gravely wounded, and the Lion Princess with him. By now, the pair will already have breathed their last."

"Craig Bauer?" Eberhart repeated the name to himself. Then, he began to roar with laughter at the top of his lungs, unable to contain his mirth. "Oh, Heinreid, you sick, twisted man! You never fail to delight! Ha! I would punish you for failing to bring me their heads, but very well! For such a magnificent work of villainy, you have earned my mercy."

"Thank you for your kind words, my liege," I said slowly.

"So *that's* why you deliberately allowed Craig to witness your indecent display," he mused. "What a toll it must have taken on him—forced to cut down his former master and then to behold his

present master's arousal at the deed! Oh, how I wish I could have seen the look on his face..."

Wait. What? That's *what he meant by "Looks like you chased him off"?! And the guy watching me was* Craig*, of all people... Oh... Shit. I didn't think he'd get back so fast, but forget that—Eberhart's totally right. Craig thinks I'm an absolute psychopath now, doesn't he? Wait, no, he already did. But oh god, this is so awkward! It's just* awkward*, for me, personally! How the hell am I even supposed to act the next time I see him?!*

My mind was in a state of total chaos, but I managed to pull myself together enough to keep playing my role as Heinreid.

"An enjoyable diversion, was it not, my liege?"

"Indeed, although it's rather canceled out by subjecting *me* to the sight of your filth as well. In any case, that's enough on that matter." Suddenly, his tone grew serious. "Heinreid."

I had a bad feeling about this. My body tensed slightly.

"I'm told that you returned Elmer Kisch to his family. Explain yourself."

My heart leaped into my throat. So that *was* what he'd come to talk about. He'd said he'd been in the middle of urgent business, after all—he definitely hadn't come just to pay me a get-well visit.

Thankfully, Eberhart couldn't see my face right now. I closed my eyes for a moment, composing myself as I mentally opened the Heinreid Phrasebook.

It's all right. I'm just saying the things I want to say in Heinreid's words, the same as usual.

"A thought has troubled me of late, my liege," I said quietly. I listened to my own voice, making sure that it wasn't shaking, and then continued. "We have already ground this country beneath our heels, completely and utterly. The people have grown inured to suffering and indignity. Whether we drag them to the torture chamber or march them to the executioner's block, there are many now who submissively accept it all. It's so...*boring*. I am *bored*, my liege. And so, a plan occurred to me. If we were to hold out a carrot alongside the stick, we might yet find new amusement."

"Oh?"

"Allow the people a faint ray of hope, and then plunge them back into the depths of despair once again. Show them a sweet-faced angel with a demon of hell lurking behind it. At present, they are exhausted in body and spirit. If even the smallest scrap of salvation is placed before them, they will cluster to it like flies. I wish to witness what becomes of them when their hope crumbles away beneath their feet."

It was all a bullshit excuse, but it just needed to *sound* plausible, here and now. I'd actually gotten the inspiration for this story from Craig, believe it or not. When I'd released Elmer from the Second Dungeon, he'd asked me whether I was really going to free him, and he'd wondered whether it was "some new form of *punishment*." I was just running with that idea and rephrasing it in Heinreid's voice, in the most vile and despicable terms I could find. Between the lines, I filled my words with the expectation that His Majesty would gladly join me in this new villainy.

"Let us do it all again, my liege. Let us hear fresh new screams of fear and agony. I promise that it shall be a pleasure beyond compare."

"Heinreid..."

The foot resting on my head finally lifted—only to immediately slip beneath my chin. He tipped my jaw up with the toe of his boot, and I helplessly raised my head to look at him. When I saw his face, I nearly let out a shriek.

"Ah, how wonderful you are... How utterly, how irreparably broken! And even that putrid mud that flows through your heart is as beautiful as a mountain spring. You, and no other, are truly the Venom of the Nation... The venom I love so dearly."

He was *enraptured*—there was no other word for the bliss in his smile. His mismatched eyes glittered and shone like polished gems. That magnificently beautiful man was smiling down at me, but I felt a cold shudder of dread race through my body. It was nothing like the arousal I'd felt at Craig's hatred—Heinreid's memories had nothing to do with it. This pure terror was all my own.

Unable to say a word, I quietly gulped. Eberhart let out a short breath and stood back up.

"Well, you've said your piece, and now I should be going. See me off."

He tossed his cigar down to the floor and ground it out with the sole of his boot.

Hey, you're burning the carpet! No, who cares about that—if he's leaving, I'm definitely not going to complain.

I was absolutely exhausted, but I managed to get my feet under me. I brushed off my knees and gave a relieved bow.

"Of course, my liege."

"What, will you not bid me stay longer? Do you not have even a parting gift for me? One of those bottles there would do quite nicely."

He pointed to a glass case filled with bottles of alcohol.

Huh? Those?

"All of those are poisoned, my liege, but I will gladly part with them if you wish."

That was Heinreid's personal collection of poisoned liquors. From wines that would kill you instantly to whiskeys that would paralyze your entire body, the duke's bar was fully stocked. It was creepy as all hell, and I'd been wanting to get rid of them—if the king would take some off my hands, that'd be just perfect.

But Eberhart didn't seem interested. He furrowed his brow and told me never mind, actually. Oh, well.

"Your love for me is pitifully lacking," he said with a sigh. "But all the same, I'll soon have you chained to me once and for all."

Huh? Is it just me, or did I hear something really menacing just now?

I must have let my confusion show on my face. Eberhart looked at me and immediately burst out laughing.

Hey, rude.

"Have you forgotten already? I speak of your marriage to my dear cousin. Ah, I recall your reluctance..." He chuckled. "But there's no escape for you. When the new year begins, you shall be truly and utterly *mine*."

Oh.

The word "marriage" made me recall something Craig had said to

me.

"Even your betrothal to Lady Angelica would likely be taken over by your replacement."

I'd been so focused on the hostages that I'd completely forgotten! Dammit!

As I lost myself in despair, Eberhart just stood there and watched me, his smirk as sinister as always.

Chapter 14

I'd somehow survived my surprise visit from the final boss, but it had taken a massive psychological toll on me. As Eberhart cheerfully stepped into his carriage with a smile and a "see you again soon," I smiled noncommittally back at him while screaming internally. I stood there watching until the carriage finally disappeared into the distance, then let my shoulders slump in utter defeat. Why were all of these mental gut punches coming one after another today?

Karl had been standing there with me to see Eberhart off. As I cracked my neck, still stiff from being used as a footrest, he spoke up from behind me.

"Well done, Your Grace."

Listen, you...

I turned to glare at him with a little hatred in my gaze, but he calmly rebuffed it with the serene expression of someone who couldn't possibly imagine why I would be upset with him.

Well, none of this was actually his fault. If my head had been even slightly clear as I'd returned to the manor, there was no way I would've missed the fancy carriage parked outside. And anyway, Karl had done his best to let me know we had company. This was all on me for blowing him off. If I tried to make that *his* problem, I'd just be a wimp, or a coward, or... I sighed in frustration as I immediately went from reflecting on my mistakes to wallowing in self-hatred.

As my spirits sank, I clutched a hand to my temple warningly, urging myself to keep moving. Eberhart's visit had left me with a new issue to worry about, but before I could start addressing any of it, I needed to get myself centered again or else I'd blow a gasket. There was only one thing for it.

I turned sharply around and let Karl know where I was headed.

"I'm going to the garden."

Karl wasn't thrown off in the slightest by the complete non

sequitur. He calmly took in my words and responded accordingly.

"Yes, Your Grace. But where might the guard captain be? I met him upon his return earlier; is he not accompanying you?"

I hadn't wanted to think about *him* at all if I could avoid it. My brand-new shameful past was already coming back to haunt me. After giving Craig those cruel orders and then letting him see *that*, I definitely didn't have the nerve to casually say "Hey, c'mon, we're going for a walk."

That said, I also couldn't explain the situation to Karl, so I just played dumb.

"Who knows? I haven't seen him."

"Shall I call for him?"

He must've been concerned about my safety. Incidents like Carlos's assassination attempt were few and far between, so I'd probably be fine. But as my butler, Karl had to at least ask.

Still, no matter how concerned *he is,* he's *sure not offering to come along instead. Not that I mind—he's staying perfectly on top of all his other jobs, and I don't really want him hanging around anyway.*

I dismissed him with a wave of my hand. "I can't be bothered to wait. No need to call another guard either. I'll be fine."

"Very well, Your Grace."

When all was said and done, he heeded my words without question, and he never disobeyed my orders. Karl was a perfect butler, as always.

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Once I reached the corner where the rosebushes grew, I drew in a deep breath. This was my ritual every time I came out here. I let the scent of roses fill my lungs, and I felt myself gradually grow calmer. Obviously, though, given the present circumstances, I wasn't *perfectly* at ease.

As I gazed intently at the roses, I thought back to Eberhart's unnerving words as he'd left my room—not the disturbing, obsessive remarks about *chaining me to him* with *no escape*, but the

underlying situation he'd been referring to. I was engaged to Eberhart's cousin.

"When the new year begins, you'll be mine*."*

Even I had to wonder how the hell I'd managed to forget about something that major. When Craig had first mentioned my engagement, it had been a pretty big shock. The most likely explanation I could think of was that Heinreid himself just hadn't held any interest in it at all. The memory was definitely there, tucked away in some tiny corner, but I hadn't had any cause to call upon it. When I was playing the part of Heinreid, the memories I drew on were ninety percent just evil deeds, so maybe the engagement had gotten buried under those...?

Was this guy seriously just planning to treat a relative of the king *as a trophy wife? Damn.*

On top of that, when I'd started settling my affairs, I'd had the engagement pretty low on my list of priorities. Eberhart had said the wedding would happen *when the new year began*, but if the plot of the novel kept proceeding smoothly as written, he and I would both be dead by then. The rebellion would have concluded, Sig would have triumphed, and the story would already have ended happily. So rather than sticking my head into that whole mess, just leaving it alone would probably be simplest for both me and my fiancée. That had been my train of thought at the time.

Now that I was revisiting the idea, leaving well enough alone still felt like a reasonable option. But honestly, for the next while, I didn't have much else to do. I'd finished writing all the letters that would lay the groundwork for freeing the hostages, and I'd had my confrontation with Sig. However, it would still take a little while for Sig to reach out and rally the various vassals to his cause. He wouldn't even be able to get started on that until he'd finished recovering from his injuries under the care of House Kisch, so I'd need to wait a little longer before releasing the hostages.

Fixing the duchy's unreasonable taxation policies right this second wasn't really doable either. The taxes collected from the duchy's citizens didn't all go straight into Heinreid's pocket. They were passed on to the king as well, so I couldn't lower my tax rates

without him finding out. I'd managed to smooth things over earlier, but freeing Elmer had still sown distrust between me and Eberhart. If I immediately started pulling even more suspicious stunts, I'd just be asking for another surprise visit. He'd say I was giving the people too much of the carrot, and not only would *I* end up getting the stick, but Eberhart might decide to torment the duchy's residents himself.

So, as long as I didn't have anything else on my plate, it wouldn't hurt to start gathering info on some of the lower-priority issues. Heinreid's memories were too vague to be of much use, so I'd need to ask Karl to bring me whatever documents he could get his hands on regarding my fiancée.

Anyway, engagement... Marriage, huh?

In my old life, I'd never even considered it. That was partly because I'd been too busy with work, but I also just hadn't been especially interested. Sure, there'd been a few women my age at my old workplace, but I'd never thought of any of them that way. And without any normal romantic experiences back in school, I'd ended up with some strange fetishes...or unusual tastes, I guess? The few women I'd felt some interest in had all been older than me, and all the sort of people who weren't interested in marriage in the slightest—they'd been independent and free-spirited, living life as they pleased.

I guess first times really do matter a lot... Not that there's any point thinking about that now.

As I was getting mired deeper in old memories, I heard footsteps approaching.

Is it one of the gardeners? No, they shouldn't be working right now. This area isn't specifically off-limits or anything, but it's still the evil duke's garden—nobody comes out here unless they have to, so it can't be one of the regular servants. Is it a guard on patrol? Shit, if he suddenly bumps into me, I'm definitely going to freak him out...

As it turned out, my speculation wasn't far off the mark. But as soon as I recognized the approaching guard, it wasn't him but *me* who got freaked out.

"Craig..."

Out from between the hedges stepped the familiar figure of my guard captain, who always accompanied me on my walks out here.

Wait, why*?! I told Karl not to call him, didn't I?*

I couldn't imagine Karl going against Heinreid's orders. Craig must have come out here himself looking for me. He was the last person I wanted to see right now, and I'd assumed the feeling was mutual. I didn't have the guts to look him in the eye, so I awkwardly turned away to stare at the roses again.

"So this is where you've been, Your Grace? I was told you were with company."

It took me a moment to find my voice. "He just left."

I got the picture now. He'd seen the carriage parked outside, assumed Eberhart and Heinreid were having a secret meeting, and...well, to put it bluntly, he'd tried to eavesdrop on us. But instead, he'd ended up having to see *that*.

You really can't catch a break, huh, Craig? When you finally kill me, go ahead and make it as painful as you want—I've got no right to complain.

"Did you come out here looking for me?" I asked. "I didn't call for you. You're free to leave if you wish."

Eberhart was gone, so there hadn't been any point in Craig coming over. If he didn't have any business here, then he didn't need to force himself to stick around.

But Craig made no move to leave.

"My role is *to guard my master no matter the circumstances*, Your Grace."

The irony was so thick I could've cut it with a knife. At face value, those were the words of a loyal subordinate, but Craig's true master was Sig—the boy *I'd* forced him to hurt. The resentment packed into Craig's voice was blatantly obvious. It was a natural reaction, really. His accusatory tone stabbed deep into my conscience, but if I apologized to him now, it would just sound like a mocking insult. As guilty as I felt about it, I couldn't do anything except stand there and accept his blame.

"So be it. Do as you please, then," I replied, still unable to look Craig in the eye.

A long silence passed between the two of us.

Okay, the conversation's over... But I can feel *him staring at me! I mean, I* did *tell him to do as he pleased, and I* do *deserve to be glared at, but, uh... It's pretty uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of. All he's doing is looking at me. I really ought to just shut up and take it. But I already humiliated myself in front of him earlier—I* do *have a sense of shame too, y'know...*

Anyway, how long is he going to keep this up? I guess I'm just standing here waiting until he gets tired of it, but how much longer is that going to be?

There weren't any clocks out here, so I had no sense of how quickly time was passing. It was just us and the roses. But with Craig staring a hole in the back of my head, I was too preoccupied to process the scent at all. I'd completely missed my moment to make a clean exit and head back to the manor. Cold sweat beaded on my forehead.

This is so awkward! Someone, anyone, just please do something!

I couldn't really say if my prayer had been answered or not, but in that moment of frozen time, a fierce gust of wind suddenly blew through the garden. It was even stronger than the wind I'd felt the first time I'd come here as Heinreid. No matter how carefully the garden was maintained, there'd always be small bits of sand and dust around—some flew into my eyes, and I shut them against the stinging pain.

The wind soon died down, and as I was blinking the dust out of my eyes, Craig broke the silence.

"Your Grace, there's a petal in your hair."

"Huh?"

It must've gotten blown off by the wind and stuck to my head. I frantically reached up to grab it, but as soon as my fingers touched it, it slid away. I didn't see it fall to the ground, though. As I was trying to find where it had ended up, a shadow suddenly fell over me.

"Excuse me, Your Grace."

Craig was taller than me, and he was standing right in front of my face. He reached around behind me; I twitched slightly as his large

hand lightly brushed the back of my neck. But the next moment, the red petal was in his hand.



I slowly lifted my gaze up to meet his. “Th-Thanks...”

When I finally looked at him, his eyes weren’t radiating hatred as they had when we’d stood by the Pieira. Instead, he was wearing an expression I couldn’t read at all. His green eyes gazed at me as though searching for something.

“Craig?”

“No... It’s nothing, Your Grace.”

If it was *nothing*, then why was he still staring at me? And why wasn’t he backing off?

Unable to come up with anything to say to fill the strange silence, I found myself stuck there just like that, frozen in place, until Craig finally stepped away.

Chapter 15

When I asked Karl for records on my fiancée, he surprised me by asking whether I would be willing to wait until tomorrow. He said he could get them right away if it was urgent, of course, but I wasn't in any hurry, so I told him it was fine.

That's not like him, though. I guess nobody's touched those records in ages... Did they end up buried way in the back or something? Anyway, it's no big deal. The real issue is—

"...ce. ...Grace. Your Grace?"

My consciousness suddenly floated back to the surface as I flickered awake. When my eyes opened, they met a deep emerald gaze shining with the sunlight streaming in through the window.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"Morning..."

Why's he standing so close? He's not right up in my face, but he's totally in my personal space.

We exchanged what had become our usual morning greeting, while Craig stood there staring at me from a not-at-all-usual distance. I pushed him aside and got up from the bed.

Craig had been acting weird ever since we'd returned from the garden yesterday. Well, he'd been acting weird *in* the garden too, but anyway, he just wouldn't stop staring a hole through me. After everything that had happened, I would've understood him glaring at me, but what confused me was the lack of any anger in his expression. If he were just putting on a front, then he wouldn't have been giving me those impolite stares at all.

Normally, if you're dealing with someone you hate, you'll either be hostile to them or ignore them completely, right? Is Craig not like that? Wait—he isn't becoming self-destructive after wounding Sig, is he?

Frankly, his behavior was setting my nerves on edge, and I really

wanted him to cut it out. But after everything I'd already subjected him to, I couldn't bring myself to be too harsh with him.

I had to do *something*, though.

"Craig?"

"Your Grace?"

Don't "Your Grace?" me, dammit.

"Um, I'm already up."

"I am aware."

"If you're *aware*, then could you get out? I need to change."

Normally, the moment I got up, Craig would consider his duties complete and leave the room right away. But for some reason, today he was just standing right there. I mean, we were both guys, so it didn't really matter if he saw me undressed, but he was staring *really* hard at me right now. Getting changed while pinned beneath that gaze was obviously going to be a little—no, *more* than a little uncomfortable. That was why I'd asked him to leave. But not only did he ignore my orders, he immediately dropped a bombshell.

"Allow me to assist you, Your Grace."

"Huh?"

What the hell is he saying? Did he hit his head and switch personalities or something? Wait, no, that was me. But how else do you explain this?

"There's nothing unusual about it. Servants helping their masters dress is perfectly normal among the nobility. In fact, you often have your butler do the same, do you not, Your Grace?"

I could feel my face locked in a grimace, but Craig was completely unfazed.

Sure, Karl helped fix up my clothes sometimes when I was about to go out—but that was it. In my past life, I'd been in kindergarten the last time I'd had anyone help me change out of my pajamas and into my daily wear, and I wasn't about to start again now.

Something was wrong here. There was no way Craig would offer to do that normally, and there was *absolutely* no way he'd get so insistent about it that he'd talk back to Heinreid.

Have I been getting too relaxed because I know he's one of the good guys? I definitely don't want us letting our guard down too

much around each other. Guess I can't just coast on all my past evil deeds—I've gotta crack the whip now and then. Dammit, I'd been hoping I wouldn't have to do this for a while...

"Did I request any such thing of you? I do not recall granting you permission to act without orders or to make proposals of your own."

I reluctantly hit Craig with some of Heinreid's heartless words and fixed him with an icy glare. But...

"Is that so? Very well, Your Grace. Please call for me if you require anything." He turned and stepped out of the room.

He... He's not fazed at all. At least he's gone, but what the hell was that reaction? He acted like a parent brushing off a kid's tantrum! Why—? Why's he so full of himself?!

Still frustrated, I began dressing myself in my finally empty room.

◆◇◆

"Here is your fiancée's personal history, as you requested yesterday, Your Grace."

With his ramrod-straight posture, his perfectly parted hair, his thin wire-frame glasses, and his unchanging poker face, Karl held out a few sheaves of paper.

I can never tell what that guy's thinking... It's only ever made me anxious before, but now that Craig's acting all weird, I'm actually starting to appreciate how stable and consistent Karl is. I mean, I haven't dragged Karl around with me nearly as much as Craig, and I guess we're both just more guarded with each other.

I nodded to Karl and took the papers from him. Then, he held out a large, thick envelope.

"I have prepared this for you as well."

"What is it?"

"The results of my *investigation*, Your Grace. I finished compiling my report just yesterday, and so I have brought it along with the other documents you requested."

He's finally done, huh? I guess he couldn't get me the documents yesterday because he was busy putting the finishing touches on this.

But while Craig and I would both routinely cut into our sleep time

to get things wrapped up, Karl didn't show any sign of having pulled an all-nighter—there wasn't the slightest hint of a bag underneath his eyes. He really did have his act together.

Marveling once again at Karl's hypercompetence, I took the envelope as well, and he bowed and left the study.

All right, which do I start with? Let's go with the personal history. I'll probably only need to give it a quick once-over, so I'll just get it out of the way.

That was what I thought as I started reading from the first page. But as I progressed through it, I quickly discovered that reality was far harsher than I'd imagined.

First off, my fiancée's name was Angelica Zechress, age seventeen. She was the firstborn daughter of a marquis, and her family consisted of her, her father, and her little brother. Her mother had passed away from an illness. Angelica was Eberhart's assassinated father's executed sister's executed husband's brother's daughter—the heiress to a house that had just barely been spared from Eberhart and Heinreid as they'd gone around killing every member of the royal family one by one. They weren't related by blood at all, but she was still technically considered his cousin.

The fresh reminder of Heinreid's history of blood-soaked villainy was sickening, and seventeen was way too young by my standards, but those things could wait. What caught my attention was her family name: Zechress. That name had shown up in *Sig the Rebel*—it was the name of one of the enemies Sig defeated. The guy who showed up was her father, though, not her.

Huh. I didn't know he had a daughter...

And Eberhart had used that daughter to tie the man not just to him, but to Heinreid as well. I could only imagine how agonizing it must have been. Now I understood why Marquis Zechress was so abnormally terrified in the novel—come to think of it, he *did* mention that his brother had been killed too... Considering his position, there were plenty of extenuating circumstances to account for his actions. But in the novel, the marquis rejected Sig's appeals to the very end, and he died in battle against the heroes. He said he'd rather die then and there than make enemies of both the Tyrant of the Century and

the Venom of the Nation.

Why the hell did I put this off for so long?! There's literally a life on the line here!

I clutched my head in my hands as I stared down at the documents.

But how am I supposed to save him? Heinreid and Angelica aren't actually married yet, so the only one who can give direct orders to Marquis Zechress is Eberhart. He'll definitely keep putting pressure on the marquis to fight Sig, and I can't do anything to stop him. There's got to be some way I can free the marquis from that terror... Free him?

An idea came to me in a flash. I picked up the other item Karl had brought me, tore open the sturdy envelope, and pulled out all the papers inside. All of the traitors I'd ordered him to sniff out, along with all of their accomplices, were listed one after another in Karl's elegant handwriting. I flipped through a few pages, tracing my finger down the list until I came to a stop at a certain entry. As I read the additional notes neatly jotted down beside the name, I let out a sigh of amazement.

Karl, you really do incredible work.

Thanks to these documents, I'd figured out an angle. Now, I needed to notify Craig. After all, for a job to go smoothly, clear communication is always a must.

I walked over to the door of the study and poked my head out. "Come in, Craig. I've got orders for you."

"Of course, Your Grace." He didn't seem startled at all by my sudden appearance.

In hindsight, maybe this was the wrong attitude to take with him. I was being too casual—I felt like I wasn't projecting enough authority. I'd have to be more careful about that next time. I pointedly cleared my throat to brush over my slipup, and once Craig had closed the door, I told him my business.

"I'm going to be visiting the estate of Marquis Zechress five days from now. I'll need a carriage... No, that's Karl's job. Your orders are to inform the guards about the trip."

"What business do you have with House Zechress, Your Grace?"

Craig asked, sounding puzzled.

I mean, Heinreid did *forget about them all this time, so yeah, why would I bother visiting them now? But c'mon, don't butt into that stuff.*

"Is there any need for you to know that?" I asked pointedly.

Normally, that would've been enough to get Craig to back off—but not today, apparently. He just stood there silently staring at me, his inscrutable gaze piercing right through me. For several moments, I tried to stubbornly give him the silent treatment right back...but I was the one who folded first.

I sighed. "I'm simply paying a visit to my fiancée. My liege brought her up in conversation yesterday. Call it a passing whim."

"Is that really all?"

"You're *really* getting on my nerves. Cut it out already!"

Quit hounding me over every little thing, dammit! What the hell is your deal?! I'm not giving you any more than that, got it?!

I glared back at Craig, and he finally closed his eyes and stepped away.

"My apologies, Your Grace. I shall begin assembling a team of guards."

"Good. Do that."

Craig was getting a little—no, *more than* a little hard to handle. I had a bad feeling about him, but in any case, I needed to get moving. I had new affairs to settle and five days to prepare.

Chapter 16

When I sent House Zechress a letter telling them I'd like to pay them a visit in five days, I got a reply back almost immediately. It was an incredibly fast turnaround, especially considering I'd contacted them completely out of the blue. I'd tried to pick the earliest date that would allow them enough time to prepare, but if they were giving me the okay this quickly, maybe I could've scheduled my visit a little sooner.

Since I'd ended up with some spare time on my hands, I spent a few days randomly finding fault with servants and guards and firing them from their posts. I was especially focused on the guards who'd fought Sig and Natasha—with the Carlos incident still fresh in my mind, I knew that letting them go unpunished for their failure might just push them closer to the brink, so I'd been wanting to take care of them as soon as possible.

Karl asked whether he should hire new people to fill the vacancies, but that'd defeat the entire purpose—I'd just be swapping in a new set of victims. I told him no without giving any clear reason, and he didn't push any further. Craig, on the other hand, was constantly on my case. I'd been hoping he'd just accept it as another fortunate whim from His Grace, but he kept pestering me about how *the security for such-and-such will be shorthanded*, and *that maid is so-and-so's daughter*, and *is that truly all right, Your Grace?* He was obviously trying to figure out what I was really up to, and he asked me about it point-blank over and over. At first, I'd wondered whether some of those people were allies who Craig didn't want to lose, but that didn't seem to be the case—when I tried to casually feel things out, he backed down right away. I was increasingly at a loss for what the hell to do with this guy. But when it came down to it, he'd still obey the orders I gave him, so I decided to put off that issue until later.

One thing led to another, and the day of my visit arrived. I boarded the carriage Karl had prepared, and with Craig's guards leading the way, we set out on our ride to the marquessate of Zechress. The trip would've taken no time at all by car or train, but with a horse-drawn carriage, we'd be traveling for a little while.

Damn, I should've brought a book or something...

As I stifled a bored yawn, the scenery around us began to change. A town came into view in the distance, and with it, deliberately planted flowers and greenery started to appear by the side of the road. The foliage grew more and more vibrant as we went, and by the time we arrived at the Zechress estate, we were surrounded by countless flowers in endless hues.

"It's incredible..." I muttered as I stepped out of the carriage. My feelings just slipped right out of my mouth.

It really was incredible, though. The perfectly trimmed hedges and trees at Heinreid's estate were beautiful in their own way, but this garden—these bright, vivid fields—were absolutely breathtaking. Flowers of every kind were blooming together, all filled with life and warmth. The manor standing in the middle of it all was imposing, but it also had an adorable charm, like a house out of a fairy tale.

"This flower garden has been kept by House Zechress for generations," Craig said. "I believe Lady Angelica tends to it currently."

"Wow..."

I couldn't help but wonder why he was making small talk with me, but I didn't want to get into another argument with him out here, so I kept that thought to myself.

While I was captivated by the fantastical scenery, my guards had gone ahead to the manor to let them know of my arrival. Now, they returned with three people in tow. The oldest, a thin, bony man with salt-and-pepper hair, gave a polite bow.

"You have my deepest gratitude for coming all this way to visit us, Your Grace. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Ralf Zechress, head of this estate."

That's right—we've never met before. Neither Heinreid nor House Zechress actually wanted this marriage in the first place. Eberhart

just set the whole thing up himself to tie Heinreid to him. Heinreid accepted it on paper, but it was just a political thing, so he never went to meet his fiancée even once, and he never had her over to meet him either. This whole thing is ridiculous.

The next one to speak was my fiancée herself. "I am Angelica Zechress, daughter of House Zechress," she said, lifting up the hem of her dress and curtsying lightly. "It is truly an honor to meet you at last, Your Grace."

Her long black hair followed the curve of her face and curled inward; her neat bangs were trimmed straight across her forehead. Her dress was black as well, and it had a subdued cut. I wasn't in much of a position to critique anyone's fashion, but her black-clad figure looked a little out of place among the vibrant flowers. It wasn't that the style didn't suit her, but it felt slightly at odds with the lingering girlishness in her demeanor.

"And lastly, my brother, Vim." She turned to the little boy standing beside her. "Go on, Vim. Introduce yourself to His Grace the Duke."

"I... I'm Vim Zechress." As he spoke, he fidgeted with his hands, clasping and unclasping them. "Thank you for coming to visit us, Your Grace."

He was even younger than Elmer, the hostage I'd released from my dungeon, but he still offered me a polite greeting. As he finished, he turned away, looking a little embarrassed.

The Zechress family had all finished their introductions, so now it was my turn.

"How well-mannered. And as you know, I am Heinreid von Rodvelia. Thank you for accommodating my sudden visit. You've done well."

I'm really nailing the imperious tone lately, if I say so myself. Force of habit is scary.

That said, it was all ingrained into this body, so it didn't take any real effort. Moments like this made me more aware than ever that I *was* Heinreid now.

"Perish the thought, Your Grace. If anything, it ought to have been our duty to come visit you... But in any case, you must be tired from your long journey. We have prepared tea and refreshments.

Please, come right this way."

The marquis, for his part, didn't show any hint of discomfort at a younger man talking down to him. With a polite smile, he led me toward the manor and over to a terrace, where the four of us sat around a table and drank tea. I gazed out at the wide-open field of flowers beneath the soft light of the afternoon, and I found myself comparing it to my own estate. A calm, gentle, relaxing moment like this could never have happened there—the air was always dead and stagnant.

After we'd enjoyed the tea for a while, the marquis spoke up. "Your Grace...you said as much in your letter, but have you come all this way simply to meet my daughter?"

Yeah, after I've ignored her completely all this time, of course you wouldn't expect me to suddenly pay her a visit now*. Hmm... I'd love to just get straight to the point, but Angelica and Vim are right here, and* Craig's *on guard behind me too. I really can't let him overhear this... I'll try and bring it up in a roundabout way and then wait for a moment when the marquis and I are alone.*

"Indeed. As it happens, my liege—that is, His Majesty, King Eberhart—chided me about our betrothal not long ago. 'The day of your wedding is fast approaching, and yet you seem to have forgotten your fiancée entirely,' he told me. 'What is the meaning of this? My patience is wearing thin.' I realized, to my shame, that I'd been so preoccupied with my work that I'd neglected to find the time to even meet her, so I rushed here as quickly as I could."

Well, that's not really *how it went. The truth is, Eberhart couldn't have cared less whether I remembered the marriage or not.*

Anyway, now that I'd brought up Eberhart, my plan had been to segue from there to my actual business. But before the marquis could react, Angelica put a hand to her mouth with an "Oh, my" and a graceful smile.

"How wonderful that the two men who stand at the head of our kingdom should have me in their thoughts so! Why, I must be the luckiest girl in all of Amagis!"

As I watched her beam at me, I found myself at a total loss.

What? No, it's the exact opposite! Sure, they've got more power

than anyone, but if those two *are thinking about you, that's already a ticking bomb! Staying completely out of sight and out of mind from the two of them is definitely better for your well-being and your life expectancy.*

But I genuinely couldn't see any fear on Angelica's face. No normal girl would be able to smile and talk like that if she'd heard even a hint of the rumors about Heinreid.

Is she just incredibly sheltered or something?

"I... I see... His— His Majesty... And so..."

In stark contrast to Angelica's warm smile, the marquis was looking ill. He'd been pale to begin with, so it was hard to tell, but even more of the color seemed to have drained from his face as soon as I'd mentioned Eberhart's name.

Shit, I shouldn't have brought up the Tyrant of the Century so suddenly. The guy's basically a living avatar of terror...

While I was trying to figure out how to salvage things, a voice came from an unexpected direction.

"Duke Heinreid! Duke Heinreid!" Angelica's brother, Vim, called out my name a few times.

"Hmm?" I turned toward him.

"Are you going to be my sister's husband, Duke Heinreid?" he asked nervously.

"Indeed, I will be—when the new year begins."

Right, a kid his age wouldn't really understand how engagement works. I'm absolutely never going to be her husband, but I should nod along anyway.

Vim gazed up at me excitedly. His eyes were sparkling for some reason.

"Then that means you're going to be my brother, right?"

B-Brother? I mean, you're not wrong... But seriously, did the marquis keep his kids totally cut off from society?

I stared down at Vim in a daze, but he kept chattering without a care, his eyes shining even brighter.

"My sister told me that whoever becomes her husband is going to be my brother! I like my sister, but I've always wanted a brother too, so I—"

"VIM!"

The boy's excited voice was cut off by a furious shout slicing through the air. Startled, I turned to the marquis—his sunken eyes were wide as he glared angrily at his son.

"How can you be so discourteous?! Who do you think this man is?! We would normally never be permitted to so much as exchange words with a man of His Grace's station, and yet you call him 'brother'?! I warned you time and time again to *keep quiet*! Why can't you do as I say?!"

This wasn't the voice of a parent scolding their child for a mistake. The marquis's hysterical shouts were filled with terror—he'd completely lost his grip on himself. The calm, relaxed mood fled in an instant, and Vim visibly withered as his father yelled at him.

"I-I... I'm sorry..." Vim stammered, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Father." Angelica's gentle voice rang out across the terrace an instant before the first teardrop could spill down Vim's cheek. "Please, you mustn't raise your voice like that in front of His Grace the Duke. And Vim, you mustn't cry either. You're a boy, so be strong for me, all right? Just go back to your room for now."

She spoke calmly and tenderly, as though untangling a knotted thread, and her carefully chosen words settled over the table to ease the commotion. At his sister's urging, Vim gulped as though swallowing down a sob, then pressed his sleeve to his eyes to dry them.

"I... I'm very sorry, Your Grace..." he said, bowing to me and then leaving the table.

The marquis had also recovered a bit of his composure thanks to Angelica's soothing demeanor. His face had gone past green and straight to white, but he stammered out an apology as well.

As I nodded vaguely at him, I glanced at Angelica out of the corner of my eye. She was as serene and relaxed as ever, but she was unmistakably the one who'd brought the marquis back to his senses and soothed her teary-eyed brother.

What's going on? Is she really *just a sheltered heiress?*

She noticed my confused gaze, and her eyes met mine.

"I'm terribly sorry for that shameful display, Your Grace. If you'd

be willing, might I suggest a change of scenery? By way of an apology, I can give you a tour of our estate's prized flower garden."

I definitely wasn't going to be able to have a proper conversation with the marquis until he'd had time to calm down a bit more. I had a feeling Angelica's train of thought was exactly the same. I was getting curious about her as well, so I took her up on her invitation.

"By all means, then. Lead the way."

"Of course, Your Grace. Would you join us as well, Sir Knight?" she asked, deliberately meeting eyes only with Craig.

The reduced security was fine by me—as far as I was concerned, the fewer people around, the better, and this marquessate seemed more peaceful than the duchy of Rodvelia. Honestly, it would've been even better if we could've had someone other than Craig accompanying us, but it'd look unnatural to push back on that, so I just went with it. I instructed the other guards to remain here, then followed after Angelica.

Chapter 17

Angelica led me away from the terrace, and as soon as we got far enough that the marquis was out of sight, she immediately turned around and bowed to me.

"Please allow me to apologize again for my father's and brother's disrespectful behavior, Your Grace. I'm sure they must have offended you terribly... However, if I may, I would ask that you reprimand me in their place."

Her voice was calm and resolute, without the slightest tremor.

"No, it's fine... I was a little surprised, but I'm not going to scold anyone."

I insisted that there was no need to apologize, and Angelica slowly raised her head.

"You have my deepest thanks for your leniency, Your Grace. My father isn't usually like that, but he hasn't been getting much sleep lately, and I'm afraid he's been a little on edge. I expect he'll be calmer by the time we return. You should be able to speak with him then."

She smiled sweetly at me, then continued walking through the garden—it looked like the offer of a tour had been genuine. I followed after her, gazing at her from behind. Her slender frame and warm smile were definitely those of a teenage girl, but all of her words and actions for the past while had felt strategically chosen. I could sense a keen awareness and a deliberate intent underneath it all.

"So, you're not just an ignorant heiress, are you?" I asked as we walked.

She looked over her shoulder at me and blinked in surprise. "Ignorant of what?"

"Of... Of me. Of all the rumors. At first, your smile seemed completely unguarded, so I assumed you must have been

thoroughly sheltered."

"Of course not," she said, letting out a soft chuckle of amusement. She sounded as though she were just chatting with a friend—her voice was perfectly relaxed, and I still couldn't detect any fear in it. "I *am* the daughter of a marquis, after all. I attend society events to form the connections I'm expected to, and one can't avoid hearing rumors at such places. Though, to be fair, my brother's words *were* from genuine ignorance."

"You haven't told him anything?"

So Vim really is a sheltered son. This world's a mess, and I understand wanting to protect a kid from all of it, but still...

"I do intend to tell him eventually—no, soon, before you and I are wed. He's still young, and I don't know how much I'll be able to convey to him in the time I have... But I suppose he'll learn the rest over the course of his life as heir to the marquessate, one way or another."

"Why didn't you tell him everything from the start? From the looks of things, you're his teacher as well, aren't you?"

She wouldn't be able to hide the truth forever. Vim was the marquis's eldest son, and given Angelica's betrothal, he was definitely going to inherit the title. Wasn't keeping him in the dark cruel in its own way? It wasn't quite the same as the excuse I'd fed Eberhart, but it really would be like plunging the boy from heaven straight into hell.

But Angelica just gave a small shake of her head. "There are going to be plenty of painful experiences waiting for him, no matter what. So I need to teach him that a kind and gentle world exists as well, or else he might never be able to smile again."

I stared back at her. "Knowing of a kinder, gentler world might drive him to despair when he's faced with reality."

"Nevertheless, I can't let him be without a single happy memory. All of us must comprehend both good and evil—to fail to do so is a sin. Even if the dreams and ideals he once believed in come to hurt him someday, that is simply the fate shared equally by all those who stand above others. Cruel though it may be, it would be wrong of me to try to shield him from it." As we reached the rear of the

manor, Angelica stopped in her tracks. “We’ve arrived. Please, look around.”

At her encouragement, I turned my gaze away from her to take in the flower garden. The scenery that leaped out at me was so captivating that my breath caught in my throat.

The fields were flush with bright, vivid flowers, all the way out past the horizon. They were clearly maintained by human hands, but the way they flourished made it look as though every single one were growing wild and free. If anyplace in this world was fit to be called *paradise*, it was right here in this garden. That was what I thought as I took it all in.

“Beautiful...”

I was so overwhelmed by the sight that I could only utter that single word of admiration. Angelica smiled cheerfully at me.

“I’m glad you like them. In fact, His Majesty once praised these flowers as well.”

“Eb— King Eberhart visited here?”

I was so enthralled that I almost forgot my etiquette, but I managed to catch myself at the last second.

Huh. So even that tyrant can get captivated by beautiful scenery...

“He did. I imagine you’re already aware, but...my father was originally slated for execution as one of those in line to the throne.”

Wait, what? I didn’t know that. Hang on, so he didn’t get let off the hook because he was a distant enough relative? And anyway, what does that have to do with this garden?

“These flowers are what stayed His Majesty’s hand,” Angelica continued. “He came to visit—to deliver my father’s death sentence personally—and I gave him a tour of this garden. He praised it then, just as you did. And then he told me that he wanted to watch this beautiful scenery wither and die... He said that if I was prepared to drink down venom, then he would allow my father to live.”

I stared back at her in silence. My buoyed spirits instantly sank right back down. Evil would always be evil, in the end—tormenting anything lovable, defiling anything beautiful. Those were the twisted ideals that both Eberhart and Heinreid held. I’d been a fool to expect

any humanity out of him.

And this girl was preparing herself to be sacrificed to one of those horrific monsters.

How? How could she speak of it all so calmly?

I had to ask her.

"Aren't you afraid? Whatever rumors you've heard, I'm sure they're all true without the slightest exaggeration. If anything, the truth is probably worse."

I was the subject of all that fear—it wasn't a question I should have been asking. But I was desperate to understand what was going through Angelica's mind.

She gave an awkward hum and raised her hand to her mouth in contemplation.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't. I feel anxious and sad as well. Once I depart, this garden my family has passed down will grow desolate. And no matter how firm my resolve may be, I'm a mere girl who has lived a life knowing nothing of true pain."

"Then—"

"But..." She interrupted my follow-up question, gazing straight into my eyes.

All this while, her eyes had been narrowed with her smile. But now, for the first time, I saw that her irises were a deep, clear purple.

"My father wept," she said. "When my betrothal was announced, and when he learned that he had been saved by it, he wept and apologized to me again and again. When I saw him in that state...I knew that I couldn't let myself cry."

I'd heard this before. I'd *felt* this before. As I took in her words, an overwhelming empathy flooded through me. My mind went back to my mother and my sister, weeping over white hospital sheets. I remembered seeing my family trapped in a hopeless situation, powerless to do anything but cry and apologize... And I remembered what I'd thought—what I'd resolved to do.

Shit. This girl is the same as me. If I leave her be, she's going to end up choosing the same path I did...

I couldn't let her do that.

"I've said too much, haven't I?" she asked. "My apologies. I'm glad I had the chance to meet you, though. Despite what the rumors say, you really are far—"

"Craig."

Before I could hear what she said next, I called back over my shoulder. Craig had been keeping his mouth shut like a proper servant, but all this time, he'd been sticking right behind us on guard duty.

"Your Grace," he replied.

"Leave us."

I gestured at him to go, like I was shooing away a dog.

Craig furrowed his brows sullenly and tried to argue back. "But Your Grace, my duty is to guard—"

"We're in a wide-open field. What do you think is going to leap out at us? If anything, you'll have an easier time reacting to a threat if you're a little farther away. Now shut up and do as I tell you."

I issued my orders in a suitably haughty tone, and he gave up on pushing back.

"Do be careful not to engage in any indecent conduct, Your Grace," he said instead, giving me a nagging warning before stepping away.

What are you, my mom?

He stepped away, but naturally, he didn't actually move out of sight. He was *probably* out of earshot... It was kind of an awkward distance, though. Better to be on the safe side.

"Duke Heinreid...?" Angelica looked at me, clearly confused about why I'd sent my guard away.

"Just bear with me for a moment."

I took her hand and pulled her in close. Her petite body came along without much resistance, and she landed against my chest with a soft thump. She stared up at me, trying to make sense of what was happening, and her face gradually flushed red as her eyes met mine at point-blank range.

"Wh-What are you—?"

"Shhh. Keep quiet. I have something to tell you, but it needs to stay secret. Please, just listen."

Originally, I'd been planning to talk to the marquis. But over the course of the tea party and this conversation, I'd picked up on Angelica's undeniable brilliance. The marquis was clearly lacking in composure—I wasn't sure whether he'd always been that way or whether it was a result of his brush with death at Eberhart's hands. Either way, I needed someone I could trust to make the right call when the time came, and Angelica felt like the better option.

"Not long from now," I whispered, "a rebellion against the king is going to break out all across Amagis. That includes right here in this marquessate. Obviously, King Eberhart is going to order House Zechress to fight the rebels—but don't listen to him. Just take your family and run."

I spoke softly, keeping my voice audible only to Angelica while acting as though we were just having an ordinary private talk. She looked thrown off by my absurd claims, but she picked up on the seriousness in my tone. Rather than disputing the premise, her first question was about the ethics of the actions I was urging.

"We can't simply abandon our people—"

"The leader of the rebel army is a compassionate man of conscience and character, fighting to save the people of this kingdom. No one's lives will be in any danger unless they absolutely refuse to yield. I'm sure there's no love lost for the king or for me among the people of this marquessate—they'll surrender right away unless the marquis is forcing them to fight."

Sig was going to march his forces straight into the marquessate and win over the people. The ideal outcome would be for House Zechress to listen to his appeals and join the rebellion, but I doubted the marquis had the courage for that.

Angelica quietly contemplated my words. "But where will we go?" she asked.

"There's an old church on the outskirts of the duchy of Rodvelia. It's long abandoned, but in the room at the back right corner, if you slide the bookcase aside, you'll find a small hole. Speak into it, and tell them Craig Bauer sent you. After that, just go along with the people there." I pressed a small scrap of paper into her hand with a map drawn on it.

Karl was the one who'd tracked down the church. This was the hidden shelter where Carlos, along with all the other prisoners who'd escaped the First Dungeon, had taken refuge. Craig's fortress was a lingering vestige of one of the religions Eberhart had outlawed following his coronation.

I still couldn't tell whose side Karl was on. If he'd found the place, then there was a nonzero risk that the information could leak—but I'd figured out a thing or two myself as I'd observed Karl at work. If my hunch was right, Eberhart was never going to find out about the church.

Angelica carefully examined the map for a few moments, then tucked it away into one of her sleeves and gave me a nod. Relief washed over me, and I found myself gently stroking her hair the way I'd used to do for my sister—but as I did, I noticed a different color at the roots of the black hair near her temples.

"Red...?" I muttered.

Angelica immediately clapped her hands over her ears. She frantically smoothed her hair back into place, then nervously started trying to stammer out something or other.

"Um, well— You see, I—!"

It was hard to believe she'd worn the peaceful, composed smile of a goddess only minutes ago. But I got the picture, more or less. Red was the color of the late King Albert's hair, and Sighart's as well. She obviously knew that Eberhart and Heinreid had assassinated the old king, and she'd dyed her own hair black to avoid any risk of angering them.

She was brave and noble—but she could never let her guard down. Even that gentle smile of hers must have been a shield she held up to defend herself.

Angelica was still having trouble coming up with a good excuse. I gave her a little smile of my own, doing my best to calm her down.

"When this is all over, there's going to come a day when you can live life just as you are. I'm sure this flower garden is going to make it through too. So, please... Hold on to hope."

Angelica stared at me with a look of open-mouthed shock—nothing like the face of a noble heiress. She blinked in surprise.

"Who...? Just who are y—"

Angelica started to say something, but she was interrupted once again as a hand grabbed me by the shoulder and yanked me backward. I stumbled, but the hand kept on pulling, forcibly dragging me away from Angelica.

"What the hell are you doing?" I griped at the man who'd pulled me away, shoving his rough hand off my shoulder. "I could've tripped!"

I looked up at Craig as he insolently glared down at his own master.

"I believe I warned you not to engage in any indecent conduct, Your Grace."

"What did I even do? And whose guard are you supposed to be anyway, Craig? You haven't forgotten, have you?" I stubbornly glared right back at him.

Sparks flew between us as we stared daggers at each other like a pair of delinquents facing off. Finally, having regained her composure, Angelica gently spoke up to intercede.

"Um... Sir Knight, I don't feel that Duke Heinreid has done anything indecent to me. He is my husband-to-be, after all. I'm grateful for your concern, but please, there's no need to get so heated."

Her wide, soft smile drained all the poison out of the air.

Yeah, I really can't stay mad when she looks at me like that. She's seriously got a gift for this—Angelica the Mediator.

Faced with that smile, Craig cooled off a little as well. He collected himself and adopted a knightly demeanor once again as he gave her a bow.

"You have my sincerest apologies for my rash behavior, my lady."

Hey, why are you apologizing to her*?! I swear I'm gonna get you back for this, dammit.*

◆◇◆

Before we headed back to the terrace, I told Angelica that I had an important matter to discuss with the marquis. Quick on the

uptake as always, she stayed behind in the garden, saying she'd check on the flowers before returning.

I'd saddled that young girl with a critical role in my plan, and now I needed to do everything I could to back her up. Only...I didn't really want her seeing *how* I did that.

"Your Grace!" the marquis said. "I must apologize for our insolent behavior earlier—"

"Indeed, you must. It seemed as though you'd forgotten my presence entirely as you carried on with that disorderly display. It *was* comical, I admit, but *insolent* truly is the word for it."

I cocked my head in thought, pointedly stroking my hand along the iron whip at my side. The marquis was visibly shaking; I felt bad for him, but I was doing all of this for a reason. I just needed him to hang in there.

"In any case... It's about time we got to the point."

The marquis tensed, his eyes filled with fear. I kept on speaking, ignoring his plight.

"As you're aware, my liege is exceedingly fond of me. Do you know why? It's because he is starved for entertainment. My role is to provide new diversions for His Majesty—and I would like you to serve as a pawn to that end."

"Wh-What does that—?"

"It means that you must prioritize *my* orders above those of my liege."

The marquis's eyes widened at my ridiculous command. I was definitely being unreasonable—but I was a villain unbound by common sense, and that meant I could get away with a lot at times like this. Even if I was spouting faulty logic that no one would normally go along with, Heinreid could push it through.

"But, Your Grace—"

"Did you not hear me? Your comprehension is pitifully lacking, Ralf Zechress. All that I do is in service of my liege. Therefore, obeying *my* words will result in my liege's happiness. If you would prefer to form your own conclusions and set out toward your own destruction, then I shan't stop you. But right now, I am offering you a more *merciful* option."

The marquis couldn't turn against Eberhart because he was bound in place by the terror the king had carved into him. And I wouldn't be able to break those chains—even Sig couldn't do it, and a villain like Heinreid would only have a harder time. So, what to do? My only option was to wrap him in chains of my own and pull him in a different direction.

"Wh... What is it you would have me do?"

"For the time being, nothing in particular. However, I have just instilled a *lesson* into your daughter—a seed that will take root and blossom when the time is right. When that time comes... Simply heed the whispers of that flower, and all shall be well." I placed my hands on the marquis's shoulders and stared right into his eyes, tightening my grip to make it clear that he was not permitted to look away. "I *trust* that you are not a foolish man."

I'd threatened him, backed him into a corner, and overwritten his terror. I'd used his fear of Eberhart to heighten the effects of Heinreid's venom. As that venom infiltrated his mind and dulled his thoughts, I could only hope that it would help Angelica's voice get through to him.

I watched his throat bob up and down as he gulped anxiously. Then, I bid him farewell and turned away.

Chapter 18

I'd finished my visit to my fiancée—along with the business I'd *actually* been there to take care of—and returned to my estate. Now, it was finally time to start releasing the hostages for real. It had been a while since my confrontation with Sig, and I knew he and his allies would make their move soon. This calm before the storm would be the decisive moment for me. After all, it'd be *harder* for me to take action once the rebellion was in full swing.

I sent out all the letters I'd prepared, and I went through Karl's list of traitors to select escorts for the hostages. I did my best to assign escorts whose hometowns were near those of the hostages they'd be accompanying. Maybe it wouldn't make any difference, but I was hoping they'd be able to help share information during the upcoming nationwide rebellion.

In the meantime, the prisoners in the First Dungeon were also dwindling. Slowly but surely, the estate was emptying out.

Now I've gotta figure out what to do about the guys on "my" side. They're all so devoted to Heinreid that I can't come up with good excuses to fire them... Well, even if they're not as bad as Heinreid, they're still all scumbags, so if worse comes to worst, they'll just have to share my fate. But, wait, I also don't want them fighting to the bitter end and hurting civilians... Hmm.

As I looked through documents and puzzled things over, there was a knock at the door to my study.

"Who is it?"

"Craig Bauer, Your Grace."

"Don't come in."

"Please excuse me."

With a *ka-chak*, Craig opened the door and walked right in anyway.

What the actual hell, man?! If you were gonna come in no matter

what, then why'd you even bother knocking?! This asshole isn't taking me seriously at all!

"What do you want? I'm busy."

"Busy releasing hostages, Your Grace?" he asked, his voice firm and unyielding.

Even from across the room, I could tell there was something different about Craig—something in his demeanor had shifted. Still sitting at my desk, I slowly raised my head to look at him. Our eyes locked, and a silence hung between us for a while.

Eventually, Craig opened his mouth. "You aren't the duke, are you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to deny it."

It wasn't a *question*—it was a *statement of fact*, spoken with total conviction. His green eyes were utterly unwavering. I looked him over carefully, then placed my elbows on my desk and rested my chin on my interlaced hands.

"And what basis do you have for that conclusion?"

"I became certain of it after our return from the Pieira River—in the garden, when you allowed me to approach you."

The garden. From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the freshly replaced rose on my desk, blooming in the same vivid scarlet as always.

"Though His Grace might sometimes approach and touch others, he would never permit anyone to do the same to him," Craig continued. "Least of all, to touch his *neck*—if anyone were to reach a hand toward such a vulnerable point, His Grace's whip would lash out in a heartbeat. And yet, you allowed me to do so without the slightest resistance. In the days that followed, no matter how much disrespect I displayed, you still administered no punishment whatsoever—even your verbal barbs felt like little more than jests. After all that I have done, it is absurd that I should be standing here alive and well with all of my limbs intact."

Craig spoke matter-of-factly, and I quietly listened without interrupting. I didn't have a counterargument. If Craig was saying that the old Heinreid would've acted that way, then he was probably

right, and I expected I'd find much the same if I looked through Heinreid's memories.

"Not only have you completely stopped torturing or executing the people of your duchy, but now you have begun freeing all of your hostages, just as you did Elmer Kisch. At this point, I can only conclude that even you yourself no longer have any intention of hiding the truth."

Well, he's got a point there.

There was plenty of circumstantial evidence on his side. I'd figured there was no way I could keep things under wraps, so I *had* gotten pretty bold—I'd give him that.

"I will ask once more. You *aren't* His Grace the Duke... Are you?"

He repeated it with the same absolute certainty.

Excellent work... Or, no—it didn't take any work at all, did it?

Craig was right—I'd been acting unnaturally in all sorts of ways. I'd imitated the words and behaviors of a villain at every opportunity, but upon closer examination, I clearly wasn't following through with my actions. So Craig had closely examined me, and he'd concluded that I *wasn't Heinreid*.

Well, sure. Maybe strictly speaking*, Heinreid and I aren't the exact same person.*

I spoke slowly. "You really are—"

But...

"—so entertainingly predictable."

So what? What difference does it make?

"What?" he asked, caught off guard. His brow furrowed.

"It's an *experiment*, Craig."

I stared up at him, narrowing my eyes. I just needed to look as much as possible like I was mocking him. For some reason, the corners of my mouth refused to lift into a smile—but I put everything I could into all the other muscles of my face and the tone of my voice.

"You find it odd that you stand here alive and well? You ought to have learned better eight years ago. I have never administered your punishments to you directly, have I? Instead, I've had you watch others—those you care for and those you know not at all—suffer and

break. *That* has always been your punishment."

As I wove the cruelest words I could find, I kept on thinking.

Maybe... Maybe if I'd awoken before Heinreid started doing his evil deeds. Or maybe if I hadn't kept any of Heinreid's memories at all—maybe then things would have been different. Maybe then I would have felt differently. I wouldn't have been tied down by any sense of duty, and I would've raged against my fate—why should I have to die? Maybe then, I would have been able to tell Craig that he was right and cling to his words for salvation.

But that's not what happened, is it?

"So, you suspect that I am not His Grace the Duke—that I am someone else entirely? Well, unfortunately for you, the answer is *no*. I, and no other, am Heinreid von Rodvelia. I am no double or impostor, but the very man himself."

After all this time I'd spent settling my affairs, I was certain of it. Even if I wasn't purely Heinreid—even if there was something else mixed in there now—I was still undeniably *him*.

Well, Craig? Maybe if I'd been someone else, even if I'd had the same face, you would've been able to bury your grudges. But no matter how merciful you are...you'll never find it in your heart to forgive Heinreid himself*, will you?*

"N-No..." he stammered. "Then, why—?"

"If you don't believe me, then shall I prove it to you?"

I opened the floodgates of villainy inside me. Like a geyser erupting, countless sickening memories rushed up to fill my mind.

That's right... I remember it all.

"What might I say to convince you? Should I recount the occasion I kicked an unkempt child to death for daring to cross my sight? Or perhaps the night I set fire to a tavern on the outskirts of town and sliced open the innkeeper's stomach as she tried to flee? Or maybe... Shall we recall that man in my dungeons whose limbs I tore off and then had *you* deliver the killing blow?"

"Stop it..."

"Now that I think of it, that was the first act of villainy I ordered of you, wasn't it? The man was already certain to die, but even then, oh, the look on your face when you brought down your sword—!"

The chair I'd been sitting in toppled over backward with a loud clatter. Craig had grabbed my collar to yank me forward. The tips of my toes were just barely scraping the floor, and I let out a small groan as one of my legs smashed hard against the desk. I grimaced slightly in pain, just for an instant—and then, the next moment, none of it mattered at all.

"I said *stop*!" Craig shouted in my face.

Ohh...

A shiver ran through me.

See? There it is. This body gets aroused by your hatred. No matter how guilty "I" feel, the pleasure blots it all out. How the hell can a man like me be allowed to live?

The blood in my veins was rushing with ecstasy, and I lost myself in Craig's gaze.

"It's those eyes, Craig. I wanted to see that look in your eyes again—so I performed an *experiment*."

Just as I said to my liege, it's important to have rises and falls. Lately, you've grown thoroughly accustomed to the motions of obedience. It bored *me, Craig.*

Something like that spilled out of my mouth on its own. Meanwhile, I reached out an arm to grab Craig's head and pull him in close... Then, I said what I needed him to hear.

"Never avert your eyes from the truth, Craig Bauer. Never avert them from evil." My gaze was locked with his. "I. Am. Your. *Enemy.*"

Silence fell over the room.

Craig looked like he was ready to kill me right this second...but eventually, he shoved me away and stormed out of the study. The door slammed shut with a bang, loud enough that the room shook.

I just stood there, watching the closed door in a daze. But the sound of stomping footsteps didn't continue away down the hall. Even after everything I'd said, Craig was still on guard duty right outside the door. He was out there right now, biting his lip while directionless rage wracked his body.

The villain inside me was cheering with joy. Inwardly, I yelled at him to *shut up*, and I wished with all my might for Craig to be free of me soon.

Chapter 19

My relationship with Craig had completely reset. No more searching gazes. No more overfamiliar attitude. All interactions kept to a bare minimum, no matter the circumstances.

Now that I'd gotten some proper distance, I reflected anew on just how reckless he'd been. He'd very literally put his life on the line acting like that around Heinreid, and he must have decided to take the risk anyway because he'd been trying to save me. Even if I hadn't known about his ties to the heroes, it was obvious what an earnest, good-hearted guy he was. That was exactly why I'd gotten so weirdly relaxed around him—why I'd let too much slip out. I'd known my past sins would never go away, so I'd gotten complacent and slacked off on being a villain. Even if I wasn't following through with my actions, I should've kept playing the part constantly. If I'd stuck to my role properly, then Craig wouldn't have gotten himself in that pointless bind, wavering between his hatred and his sense of justice.

I'd learned my lesson now. Half measures would just end up hurting people more. I needed to stop coddling myself and play the villain perfectly.

I put an end to the wake-up calls I'd ordered from Craig. He accepted the new command with just a "Very well, Your Grace"—no pushback. I also had Karl stop bringing in new roses for my rooms. The final roses wilted after a few days, and now the vase on my desk was gone. I stopped going for walks in the garden as well; I did my best to avoid even looking at it out my window. Cutting out my relaxation periods left me more stressed out, but it also meant I was sleeping lighter—maybe you could call it a stroke of luck, in a way. Honestly, my body was starting to scream at me, but I ignored it. Things had reached the point where it didn't matter anymore if I pushed myself too hard—Sig's rebellion was finally underway.

According to Karl, a minor noble who'd cozied up to the king eight years ago had fallen to a surprise invasion by a mysterious group of attackers. I'd also gotten a report that members of House Kisch were among the rebel army, but I'd just shrugged it off with a bluff —"Well then, it seems I'll have to *discipline* them"—and left them alone entirely.

In the novel, this was when Heinreid sent Elmer's arm to House Kisch and threw them into turmoil, but I'd long since released Elmer from the Second Dungeon. I wouldn't have done anything even if he'd been there, but I was still glad I'd taken every possible precaution.

Once I'd received word of the rebellion, I'd braced myself for some kind of contact from Eberhart. But surprisingly, I hadn't received so much as a letter, let alone a visit. I wasn't sure whether he was waiting and watching to see how Heinreid handled things or whether he had plans of his own. Either way, the silence was unnerving. Still, if he wasn't reaching out, that made my life easier. I just deployed my ultimate millennial technique: Nobody Told Me to Do Anything About It.

The first ones to react to the rebellion were Heinreid's devotees within the estate. They'd gotten tired of waiting while I did nothing whatsoever to quell the uprisings throughout the kingdom, and eventually, one of the soldiers came in to speak to me directly on the group's behalf.

What is the matter, Your Grace? You need only give the command, and we shall purge these filthy traitors at once. We are all prepared for battle, Your Grace. What are your orders?

He begged me over and over to send them out, so I asked him: Who exactly are these "we" prepared for battle? He assumed that I was finally about to order them to go out and start killing, and he eagerly gave me a list of names. I mentally confirmed that they matched the list of devotees in my memory, then had them all rounded up and thrown in the First Dungeon before the day was out.

I had a passable bullshit charge now: They were *impudent fools who dared to address their master unbidden*. When I had Craig

arrest them, they were all desperately shouting something or other, but I didn't care what they had to say. They'd committed no shortage of actual crimes, after all. For the first time ever, I'd finally put genuine evildoers in that dungeon. All the other prisoners had been cleared out completely, and if I'd let those guys be, they might've started taking action on their own. It was perfect timing, really.

After all, I genuinely had no intention of doing anything about the rebellion. When Sig and Natasha had first arrived in my duchy, I'd deliberately made contact with them and played the villain because that was a key event in the story. But aside from that, the less Heinreid did, the more peaceful things would be. All of Heinreid's other violent acts in the rest of the novel just meaninglessly churned out more victims. None of his villainy helped Sig awaken some new power or discover Eberhart's secret weakness or anything like that—this story didn't have any magic spells or holy swords or angels or demons in the first place. Eberhart's secret weakness? Carotid artery.

Without a major antagonist like Heinreid getting in the way, the rebellion steadily picked up speed. New reports were coming in by the day: Viscount So-and-so had turned traitor, the barony of Such-and-such had fallen, and so on. Releasing all the hostages ahead of the fighting had also paid off—House Kisch weren't the only vassals of Duke Rodvelia making suspicious moves.

Karl was the one matter-of-factly delivering most of those reports, but for some reason, it was Craig who came to notify me that Marquis Zechress and his family had disappeared.

This is the first time he's spoken to me in a while, huh?

I felt a little wistful, but mostly I was just relieved to know that Angelica had gotten everyone out safely. I didn't look all that closely at Craig's face as he broke the news.

Before long, various local vassals who'd been quietly opposed to me had stopped paying their taxes, and revolts were finally starting to break out on the edges of the duchy of Rodvelia. That was when Karl came in with a letter for me. It was in a familiar gold-embossed white envelope, with a bright red amaryllis stamped into the sealing wax.

Here it was. I didn’t know whether he’d been waiting for the right moment or whether he’d finally lost patience, but my orders had arrived. I silently cut open the seal and took out the letter. Unlike the last letter he’d sent me, this one was short and straight to the point, with plenty of blank space left on the page. I read it over and closed my eyes. Karl remained standing in the study, awaiting my response.

“Karl.”

“Your Grace.”

“I’m departing for the palace tomorrow. Have the estate cleaned up by the time I return.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

The end was in sight.

Chapter 20

My earlier trip to Angelica's estate had taken a decent while, but the capital was even farther away. I hadn't gotten much sleep over the past several days, and I figured I'd nod off at least once during the long, boring carriage ride. To my surprise, though, I was uncomfortably alert the entire way there. After a day and a half sleeplessly rocked by the carriage, I finally arrived at the capital.

The guards at the gate let me through pretty much on sight, and I gazed aimlessly out the window as we rode through the streets toward the palace. This city was under the direct rule of the Tyrant of the Century, but the people here were surprisingly lively, all in all. Obviously, anyone who went against Eberhart's will was ruthlessly executed, but the capital was primarily home to wealthy nobles and merchants. The privileged classes got to live in relative peace—it was a twisted prosperity built on the backs of countless victims, but I could even see smiling faces here and there.

As I stared out, not really sure how to feel about it all, I caught a glimpse of a blue robe peeking out of an alleyway. It immediately retreated into the shadows and disappeared, but that must have been...

While I pondered, the scenery gradually shifted. We left the bustling streets, proceeded along a wide uphill road, and passed through the palace gates at the top. Royal guards were there to meet us, and my carriage pulled to a halt. I only brought Craig in with me, leaving the coachman and my other guards on standby outside. Guided along by a functionary, we walked through the palace in silence, but when we hit a particular fork in the path, I came to a stop.

To the right was the throne room...but to the left were the provisional quarters for nobles who worked within the palace. If I remembered right, Craig's family lived there as well. On paper, they

were here because they had court positions. But in reality, they were implicitly hostages used to keep Craig in line. Craig was powerless to disobey me because his family was held here, and they couldn't move freely because Craig was effectively being held hostage against them as well. Nobody was physically bound in place, but their actions were constrained all the same.

He hasn't seen them in a long while, has he?

As I thought more about it, I couldn't help but feel bad for Craig. Finally, I addressed him—though I was careful to keep any hint of kindness out of my voice.

"Your poor family, languishing here at my liege's mercy... How terribly weak and weary they must be. Why not go pay them a visit?"

If I'd been able to smile, it would've been perfect. But I still couldn't manage that, no matter how hard I tried. Regardless, the words themselves were still blatantly callous coming from me, so it was probably fine.

However, Craig flatly declined my invitation. "No... I have no right to show my face before them."

He must be feeling guilty about serving Heinreid. You really don't have to feel bad about it, though. All of this is my fault—every last bit.

I was considering giving him another push, but our guide cleared his throat pointedly, and our conversation was over. I turned sharply and proceeded to the right.

Finally, we reached the innermost door before the throne room. The palace chancellor was waiting for us outside.

"You shall remain here, Craig Bauer."

The chancellor commanded him to halt, but Craig wasn't having it.

"I am His Grace the Duke's personal guard. I cannot obey that request even from you, Your Excellency."

"You ought rather to consider my words as equivalent to those of His Majesty. Or do you mean to say that you shall obey His Grace's orders above even those? What an *admirable* display of loyalty. You've done quite well to tame this rebellious whelp so thoroughly,

haven't you, Duke Rodvelia?" the chancellor asked, stroking his long beard.

It was a backhanded compliment—his real meaning was that I ought to have disciplined Craig better so he wouldn't speak out of turn. Even if the chancellor had genuinely meant it, though, I still wouldn't have appreciated the praise. Unruly and disobedient was exactly how Craig ought to be toward us.

That said, I couldn't defend him here, so I gave him orders of my own as his master.

"Enough of your self-centered tantrums, Craig."

"But—"

"Wait here."

He'd probably been hoping to listen in on my conversation with the king and pick up some useful information, but just as the chancellor had said, the command for me to enter alone must have come straight from Eberhart. Nobody could go against it.

Don't worry, I'll let all the details slip once this is over—assuming I make it out alive, that is.

Craig looked reluctant, but he understood that there was nothing he could do. He placed his right hand on his chest and gave a knightly bow. "Please call for me should you require me—shout if you must, Your Grace."

Now there's *some incredible acting. See? You can do it if you try.*

A pair of guards stationed at the sides of the doorway opened the huge double doors, and I stepped inside. The wide-open space was unexpectedly dead silent, empty except for the palace's master. I stared ahead as I heard the doors swing shut behind me, and the man on the throne narrowed his gold and blue eyes with a sinister smile.

"It's been a while, Heinreid. What's wrong? Why do you stand so far away? Approach."

I did as I was told, walking closer to the throne. I wondered if I ought to kneel again, but Eberhart didn't say anything this time, so I just stood at the bottom of the steps looking up at him.

"You understand why I've called you here, don't you?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not. As always, far too many possibilities spring to

mind.”

My words were impudent, but Eberhart didn’t seem particularly annoyed.

“I suppose that’s true,” he said with a chuckle. “But I have always been merciful and lenient with you, haven’t I? Hmm?”

My memories solidly shook their heads *no*. I felt a twinge from the remnants of old pains carved into my body, and my fingers clenched anxiously into fists. He hadn’t let me get away with absolutely *everything* unconditionally.

“Have you now, Your Majesty? I seem to recall losing a few fingernails on past occasions...”

“Oh, do let bygones be bygones. In any case, compared to the disrespect you showed me then, that punishment was a mere trifle.”

Well, sure. It would’ve been the least I deserved—under a government that wasn’t *twisted all to hell.*

I must have let my frustration show on my face. Eberhart gazed at me with amusement as he provoked my inner villain.

“Remind me—was that the punishment I gave you when you tried to kill *me* as well as my father and mother?”

“No, my offense at that time was far lesser. It was when I set fire to fields on the verge of harvest and despoiled an entire fiefdom.”

“Ah, yes, so you did. Oh, what a mess that was—entertaining, certainly, but it took a great deal of work to clean up, and I was rather irritated at the time. Do forgive me.”

“There were other incidents as well...”

Like a sinner giving confession before god, I began reciting all the countless evil acts I’d perpetrated with my own hands. But although the man listening was easily beautiful enough to be a god, on the inside he was the same as Heinreid—the same as me. Just a filthy partner in crime. He wasn’t going to pass down the judgment I deserved for my sins. He just took it all in as I delivered my confession—sometimes losing himself in nostalgia, sometimes laughing like a little kid.

“I imagined we had exhausted every possible villainy over these eight years,” he said, chuckling softly. “Yet memories never lose their luster, do they? My heart leaps at the mere recollection of it all...” He

stared down at me. "*You* don't seem amused in the slightest, however."

Those last words set something pounding inside my chest. Hidden underneath all of Heinreid's evil, my own heart was swollen to bursting.

"Yeah, because it *isn't fucking funny*."

By the time my thoughts caught up and rang warning bells, the dam had already broken. I didn't stop. I *couldn't* stop.

What'd you say? I don't seem amused*? Why the hell would I be?!*

"What's fun about this, huh? You torment people weaker than you, you trample over their lives, you listen to their screams—how the hell can you and Heinreid laugh and smile at it all?!"

"*Heinreid.*"

Eberhart got up from the throne. He was slowly approaching me, but I didn't have room left in me to care.

"You *know* what you're doing is wrong, don't you? So why can't you think it through and stop yourself? Look at this damn country! Your government's about to collapse! You're not an idiot, are you? You should've known things would end up this way sooner or later, so why—?!"

There was a loud *thwack*—heat spread through my right cheek. Eberhart had swung his arm in a fierce backhand slap. As I stumbled from the blow, he kicked my feet out from under me, and I toppled to the ground. Before I could stand back up, a foot came thudding down to grind my head into the floor.

"Enough of this pathetic display. You disgrace yourself."

His voice was colder and more colorless than I'd ever heard before. An aura of absolute dominance weighed down on me, robbing me of my words.

Above my head, I heard a single sigh.

"I received a ludicrous report claiming that you were *no longer Heinreid*, and when I went to see for myself, I *did* feel something amiss. But nevertheless, if even a fraction of his evil remained within you, I would love it all the same, and still it would bring me joy—or so I hoped."

The pressure on my head grew. The pain was so intense that it

felt like he was about to drive his boot straight through my skull. A groan trickled from my mouth.

"'Why?' you ask. 'How?' How obnoxious. What could I possibly know of Heinreid's mind? The nature of his venom was utterly beyond my comprehension—*that* is precisely why he enthralled me so. I wished to witness where his path would lead, even if everything I hold should fall to ruin. Need I any *reason* for such intoxication? Though I still know nothing of how he became the man he was..."

Eberhart sighed again.

"Whose lips drank away the venom I loved so dearly...?" he muttered to himself.

I heard a hint of something sad and lonely in his voice. It didn't resonate with me at all, though. Was that voice reaching the Heinreid inside me? My cells weren't rejoicing the way they did when I committed evil acts, so I didn't know. I didn't *want* to know.

"Three days," Eberhart declared. "That is the time I shall grant you. Spend the remainder of your life as you please."

The boot pressing down on my head finally lifted, and I slowly sat up. Before I got to my feet, I raised my face to see those mismatched eyes staring coldly down at me.

"May I return to my estate in the meantime?"

"Very well. Do as you will. I shall send an escort to collect you when your time comes. You're welcome to flee if you wish, but if you do, I shall visit unimaginable torment upon your duchy in your place."

Did suicide also count as "fleeing"? Not that it really mattered. Eberhart had said those three days were *the remainder of my life*—my destination was the same either way.

I stood up, turned my back on the tyrant, and departed the throne room. When I pushed open the doors myself and stepped out into the hall, Craig was waiting there to meet me. As he saw me, his eyes widened in shock.

Oh, right—Eberhart hit me pretty hard. It might've left a bruise already.

"Your Grace...what *happened* in there?"

I ignored Craig's question and strode straight past him. Eberhart and I hadn't talked about anything important anyway... Or, no, maybe we had? Heinreid was about to disappear—from a nationwide perspective, that was absolutely fantastic news.

I headed straight out of the palace with Craig at my heels. Outside, I gave my orders to the coachman and the guards.

"I don't need the carriage—it'll take too long. I'll return on horseback. All of you, go wherever you please."

"Your Grace—"

"I don't need any guards either. You're all a nuisance. I *will* require a horse, though... I'll take Craig's, I suppose."

"*Your Grace*!"

I waved away the confused guards, but as I tried to mount the horse, a firm hand gripped my arm.

"What's going on, Your Grace? Please explain! What happened between you and His Majesty?"

"Craig Bauer..."

Here we go. Time for me to settle my last bit of unfinished business.

Mustering all the wrath in my body, I glared up at the insolent guard who'd dared to touch his master. Craig flinched for an instant, and I took the opening to shake off his hand.

"I've had quite enough of your disrespect. Today, as of this moment...you are dismissed from your duty."

"What?"

"Well, as long as Count Bauer remains in my liege's custody, I suppose you aren't exactly free to go. Still, *I'm* quite relieved to be rid of you."

I'd delivered the firing out of nowhere, and I hadn't given any clear reason. As pink slips went, it was pretty ridiculous. But this was far from the first time I'd charged innocent people with bullshit offenses in my life as Heinreid. Consistency really was important—acting on irrational whims was perfectly normal for me, so it didn't come across as unnatural at all.

But even though I'd just handed Craig a golden opportunity to be free of Heinreid, he clearly wasn't on board.

Look, it's not like I'm scheming anything, okay? Oh, actually...

This would be our last time seeing each other, so I decided to give Craig a tip-off he absolutely couldn't ignore.

"Here's your final order," I whispered to him. "Go to the bar at the end of Sixth Avenue, right this minute."

Sixth Avenue was where I'd caught a glimpse of a figure in a blue robe. And not far from where they'd disappeared, there was a little hole-in-the-wall bar tucked away down an alley.

Craig's eyes widened a little at my quiet directions.

Shit. If I say any more, I'm going to screw something up.

"I'm leaving now. I forbid you to follow me—is that clear?"

With those words, I mounted the horse and put the palace behind me. I rode away, pretending not to hear the man calling out after me as he came back to his senses.

Chapter 21

I'd spent a day and a half traveling by carriage to the palace, but my immediate return trip took less than half a day. I'd definitely pushed myself too hard, though. The moment I reached the estate, an exhaustion I hadn't noticed until now suddenly overtook me. I half slid, half fell off the horse and sank to the ground on the spot. As I sat curled up there, waiting for my heart rate to go down and my breathing to steady, I felt something nudge against my back. I turned around to see Craig's horse; it had put up with my reckless haste as I'd ridden home, and now it pressed its nose against me with an air of concern.

Aw... Are you worried about me? That's sweet of you.

I softly stroked its forehead as I found my feet, then took off the reins and saddle. Finally, I gave it a couple of gentle claps on its long neck, thanking it for a job well done. It seemed to pick up my meaning, and it whinnied cheerfully. That friendly moment with a pure, innocent creature soothed my spirit and renewed my strength just a little.

I dragged my heavy body into the manor. Normally, Karl and a group of other servants would've been in the entryway bowing their heads to me in unison, but today, I was greeted by nothing but silence. Before I'd left, I'd instructed Karl to have the estate cleaned up by the time I returned, and he'd faithfully carried out my orders. He never did anything without being told to, but if I asked him for an inch, he'd give me a yard. As usual, he'd delivered exactly what I'd requested.

I trudged slowly through the empty halls, one step at a time. My body was almost at its breaking point, but somehow, my mind was as calm and still as a windless sea. I'd long since lost any fear of death. I'd been working toward it all along as I'd settled my affairs, and besides, it wouldn't even be my first time. On top of that, there

was no one who'd mourn my passing this time around, so I didn't have any lingering attachments or regrets—if anything, my spirits felt a little bit lighter than before, at least in that regard.

I took my time wandering through the manor, making sure that it was really empty. But my perfect butler didn't disappoint—there wasn't a single insect or a speck of dust, let alone a person.

Didn't even need to bother checking, did I?

I opened the door to the one place I hadn't visited yet: my bedroom. Obviously, there wasn't anyone there either. My gaze skimmed across the room. This was where my consciousness had first awoken in Heinreid's body. Even this room was stained by countless blood-soaked memories, and I'd never been able to sleep all that well here. But it had a bed, and right now, that was all I could ask for. I sat down heavily on the black sheets—they'd been perfectly made up, without a single wrinkle. The iron whip, still attached to my belt, gave a harsh jangle. It was obnoxious, but even taking it off was too much of a bother, so I did my best to drive it from my thoughts.

I'm tired... I'm so, so tired.

I'd taken a direct hit from that evil tyrant's menacing aura on not enough sleep, and I'd screwed up and lost my cool. Of course he'd already noticed there was *something else* mixed into Heinreid—I'd known he was going to pick up on it. Still, I should've kept myself together just a little longer and tried to feel things out. I'd been hoping maybe I could pull some useful information out of him if I got lucky.

Damn, now I understand why Marquis Zechress was panicking so much during my visit. When your mind's already pushed to the brink, nothing's gonna go the way you want it to.

Well, for better or for worse, Eberhart's slap had reminded me exactly where I stood. And thanks to that, I'd been able to fire Craig without a hitch, so I'd call the whole thing a wash, more or less. Besides, there was no point trying to reflect on my mistakes and do better next time—I didn't have any *next times* left.

I'd let go of as much as I could, and I hadn't pulled anyone else in with me. It hadn't been nearly as long as it had felt, but I'd done

pretty well with the time I'd had.

In the end, the villain wasn't going to face judgment at the hands of the heroes—I was just going to get wiped out by an even bigger evil. It felt a little unsatisfying, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Besides, it was all my fault for slipping up and provoking that tyrant.

Ugh... He's definitely not gonna let me die peacefully, is he? It'll be exactly the kind of ending Heinreid deserves for his sins, but still... I just need to make sure I don't lose control again—guess I should rest until they come to pick me up.

Now that I was finally alone, I could feel the threads of tension in my mind loosening, and a sweet drowsiness beckoned me. I didn't try to resist it. I just slumped back onto the bed and closed my eyes.

All that awaited me was a deep, quiet darkness, devoid even of dreams. I sank into it like a stone.

◆◇◆

I heard a voice calling me. *Wake up*, it said. *Come out this instant*.

The voice gradually grew louder, and along with it, a single ray of light pierced the darkness—soft yet strong. But I was drowning in the warm, welcoming depths of that bottomless swamp, and the light was much too bright for me.

No... I want to stay here. I need *to stay here. That light's too beautiful for me to touch.*

Stubbornly resisting the light, I tried to sink myself deep, deep down once again. But in those murky depths that should have been empty except for me, I suddenly felt a sensation like someone grabbing me and yanking me up by force.

"...ce. ...Grace. Your Grace."

My consciousness suddenly floated back to the surface as I flickered awake. When my eyes opened...they met a strange emerald gaze, mingled with the crimson twilight streaming in through the window.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

No, wait.

What the hell are you doing here?

I tried to speak up, but my voice couldn't escape my throat. Right before my eyes, towering over me with a glare that was all but ready to shoot me dead, was my guard captain—Craig Bauer.

Chapter 22

Craig and I were alone in my bedroom. Not long ago, this had been our regular morning routine. But it wasn't morning now—it was early dusk. On top of that, *I* was supposed to be the master of this house...but as Craig glared down at me with one hand on his hip, he gave off the impression that *he* was the one in charge.

"I'm glad to see you awake," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

I finally managed to get out a question of my own. "Wh... Why are you here?"

Having a conversation while I was lying down felt awkward, so I slowly sat myself up on the side of the bed.

"I am delivering your wake-up call, just as you requested of me."

"I canceled that ages ago! You're going against my orders!"

"I suppose you did. However, I have already been dismissed from your employ. I no longer have any obligation to obey your orders, do I?"

Now you're contradicting yourself! He's not going to give me a straight answer, is he? But, well... Given the situation, it's not that hard to guess why he's here. Am I getting an ending more like the novel after all?

"Did you meet your true master?"

Since I had the chance to ask, I at least wanted a bit of good news to tide me over on my way to the afterlife.

I'd caught a glimpse of a blue robe in the shadows of an alleyway in the capital—one of the robes Sig and Natasha wore. The robed figure had immediately retreated down the alley, so I hadn't seen which of them it was. But there was no way the two of them would've split up, so they must have already infiltrated the capital together. That said, I hadn't actually been able to check for myself, so I'd been a little worried. Had Craig managed to meet up with the rebels at their hideout?

Still staring down at me, Craig raised an eyebrow slightly as he answered. “I have no idea how you knew that His Highness would be there at that time, but yes, I did—thanks to you. We were also able to secure shelter for my family.”

“Damn, good for you. Guess you’re finally a free man, once and for all.”

“Indeed, I am. And so I have returned to this manor—to you.”

As he finished speaking, he gave my chest a light shove. Unresisting, I fell back onto the black sheets once again, and Craig was immediately on top of me. The iron whip gave a harsh jangle as it got in his way; he tore it from my belt and tossed it onto the floor. He’d taken away my weapon, but just to be safe, he grabbed both of my hands and pinned them on either side of my head. I accepted it all calmly, without complaint.

My captor furrowed his brow with a strange expression. “You look rather unconcerned. Are you still half asleep, perhaps?”

“Nah, not really. Oh, word of advice—after you kill me, head straight back to the capital and finish the job. Once I die, my liege will definitely take action. With troops moving under His Majesty’s direct command, the casualties are going to be unfathomable.”

I thought he’d run me through with his sword, but is he going to strangle me instead? Or beat me to death, maybe? Anyway, just hurry up and do it. I want to get this over with already.

“Do you intend to die without a fight?”

“Yup. Perfect outcome, isn’t it?”

For me, and also for you. This is what you’ve wanted all along, right?

So I’d hoped, but Craig’s response was the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear.

“I suppose it would be—*if* you were truly His Grace the Duke.”

Oh, come on. You still *don’t believe me?*

I let out a sigh and put on an annoyed tone. “This again? You really don’t know when to let go, do you?”

“You didn’t convince me when we last discussed this either.”

“Bullshit. *You’re* the one who dragged me up by the collar!”

I’d provoked him, and he’d flown into a rage. The whole thing

should've been fresh in his memory. There was no damn way he'd forgotten. Once I reminded him of it, he seemed to realize I had a point, and he got an awkward look on his face.

"Well, I can't say I was *completely* unconvinced. However, all of my doubts still stand, and you have provided no satisfactory explanation whatsoever."

"Hey, I explained it all, didn't I?"

"You were performing an experiment to amuse yourself with my reactions—was that it? Even if that were the case, once you had exposed the trick, there would be no reason not to return to your old ways. You played the part more thoroughly with your demeanor, but your actual behavior remained just as reserved as before. And furthermore," Craig continued, not giving me a moment to speak up, "the disappearance of Marquis Zechress and his family served as incontrovertible proof. *You* are the one who told them—or Lady Angelica, rather—where to flee, aren't you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"If you wish to feign ignorance, then there's no need for you to answer—I already have corroborating testimony. You tracked down the operating base of a group of traitors, and yet not only did you take no action, but you even made use of our shelter yourself. I imagine coming up with a plausible excuse would be quite taxing for you."

Wait, did he say he had testimony? Did Angelica blab about me giving her directions? I guess I didn't actually *tell her to keep quiet, but I went to all that trouble to make sure Craig wouldn't overhear us—with her brains, I thought she'd take the hint on her own...*

I couldn't tell where any of this was headed, but I didn't like it. The fact was, everything Craig had said was perfectly on the mark. I'd just provoked him to anger and used that as a smoke screen to cover everything up. Once he'd calmed down, it'd been easy for him to see that my position was kind of shaky. He must've already figured out my strategy, so I wasn't going to be able to pull the same trick again.

But that didn't matter.

"I'm still Heinreid, all the same."

The sins I'd committed would never disappear. The one who'd perpetrated all those irredeemable acts of evil was undeniably me, no one else. They were too heavy a weight to toss aside, and they were carved too deep to just forget. If I'd ever had any intention of taking that path, I wouldn't have begun settling my affairs in the first place.

"I suppose you are. For my part, I no longer believe that you are a different person entirely."

"Then—"

"*However,*" Craig cut me off, refusing to let me speak. "Duke Heinreid. You will never perpetrate another act of villainy, will you."

He wasn't asking. His voice had a ring of definitive certainty.

"In that case, you are indeed no longer the same man as the duke I once served."

My mouth hung open in dumbfounded shock as I took in his words.

What the hell is he even saying? That doesn't make any sense—it's pure wishful thinking! Is that seriously supposed to convince anyone? Did you even manage to convince yourself *with that argument?*

Faced with his utterly ridiculous leaps of logic, I absolutely couldn't stay quiet. I had circumstantial evidence of my own to lean on. It wasn't like I hadn't committed *any* evil acts since I'd awoken.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! Have you forgotten how I made you draw your sword against Sig by the Pieira River?"

"Of course not—how could I ever? But I am also aware that word of all your actions travels to His Majesty. In order to operate while evading the king's gaze, you needed to play the role of the duke to a certain extent. Having received the report of intruders, you were unable to ignore it. And so, you issued your commands to me, knowing that I would soften my blows as much as I was able—do I have the gist of it? That you sent no pursuers after them is clear evidence in itself."

I mean, it's not even about you softening your blows or whatever—it's that I knew for a fact they'd be fine... But, no, who cares about that right now?

"This is sophistry. You're just twisting the evidence to support your own perspective!"

But, wait—why would he even need to twist it in the first place?

As question marks floated through my mind, Craig stared down at me with a look of deep exasperation.

"We can continue this back-and-forth for as long as we wish and get nowhere. If you still insist on denying the truth, then I shall prove it to you right this second."

Prove it?

"What are you—?"

Before I could finish my question, Craig made his move. With his body still weighing heavy on me, he pressed his face in closer...and the next thing I knew, his lips were on top of mine.

"Mmph—nh?!"

For a brief moment, my mouth parted slightly in dazed shock, and his tongue immediately dove straight in. It slid between my lips without the slightest hesitation—tracing along my teeth, tickling my palate, and dragging my tongue to draw it out. As sticky, slick slurping noises filled my ears, my mind finally caught up to what was happening. I tried to push him away, but my pinned-down arms wouldn't budge an inch.

He's too damn strong!

Because he was on top of me, his saliva was flowing into my mouth. Most of it dribbled messily from the corners of my lips, but some ran down my throat—I wasn't about to swallow it, so it caught in my windpipe. I made an unpleasant gagging noise, and Craig finally pulled back.

The moment his lips released mine, I started coughing violently. Globs of spit spattered onto the black sheets, leaving even darker stains.

"Khh— Haagh—! Craig, what...?"

Once my coughing fit had subsided, I stared up at Craig. The man who'd just manhandled me looked utterly nonchalant, without the slightest hint of shame.

"What's the matter, Your Grace? If anyone were to do such a thing to the old duke, he would waste not a second before biting out

their tongue and killing them."

"Nobody would ever do anything like that in the first place! *You're* the one who caught me by surprise—"

"Understood. Then so long as I provide advance notice, there should be no issue."

No, you don't understand at all! Stop twisting my words around, dammit!

But before I could argue back, Craig pulled my hands toward him and forcefully wrapped them around his throat. I flinched involuntarily as my thumbs touched his Adam's apple.

"I am now going to kiss you, Your Grace. If you object, you may kill me and flee."

"Wait! Hold o— Mn, mmnph!"

My demands rang out uselessly as his lips crashed against mine. His tongue invaded my mouth, pressing inside, toying with me as it pleased. My own moans mingled with the wet, obscene sounds in the air, filling me with an overwhelming sense of humiliation.

Craig wasn't restraining me at all. In fact, my hands were around his throat. Just as he'd said, the old Heinreid would have strangled him or bitten off his tongue without the slightest hesitation. Even the old *me*—before I'd become Heinreid, before I'd killed myself—probably would've resisted more. If anything like this had happened in my past life, I would've been able to fight back with all my might.

But not anymore. Heinreid's memories of murder and brutality had a reverse effect, and the thought of those sorts of violent acts now repulsed me. Maybe it was a form of trauma. What if I fought back and Craig got hurt? What if I made him bleed? *No more*, my mind screamed at me—I never wanted to see those revolting sights ever again. My strength left me. My will to refuse crumbled away.

"Nff— Aauh!"

As my lips surrendered to him, as I let him do as he pleased without any real resistance, a new sensation suddenly shot through me. Releasing his hold on me had freed up Craig's hands as well. His fingers traced along the side of my head, from behind my ear to beneath my jaw. While I was shivering at the delicate stimulation, he unfastened my collar, followed by the buttons below, before his

large, slightly calloused hand forced its way into my shirt. His fingers played across my chest, stroking, feeling, until he finally discovered the sensitive spot he was looking for. Without a moment's hesitation, he pinched my nipple and *squeezed*.

I moaned wordlessly, and my body jolted. My eyes widened to see Craig looking down at me. He'd nimbly pulled back the instant before I'd flinched, preventing our teeth from clacking together. His eyes were narrowed in smug satisfaction, like he'd gotten one over on me.

A hot flush spread across my face—I wasn't sure whether it was embarrassment or anger.

Don't get so damn cocky, you little shit!

I moved my hands from Craig's neck up to his head and immediately yanked him back down to me, taking him deeper into my mouth. He froze, caught by surprise, and this time, I seized the initiative. I curled my tongue around his, caught it between my lips, and finally licked slowly along the underside from base to tip.

Craig wasn't having it. Realizing that he was starting to lose control of the situation, he sprang back up with a grunt. I seized the opportunity to pull my shirt closed with one hand and cover my mouth with the other.

"I certainly wasn't expecting that," he said. "Well played."

"You— Get off me, dammit!"

I definitely couldn't move either of my hands, so my orders came out muffled with my mouth still covered.

But Craig's lips finally arced into a smile, and the words that spilled from them sent a shiver down my back.

"Oh? But is that truly what you want? It seems to me that you've gotten into the mood as well..."

"Sh-Shut the hell up! Don't you dare try anything more, or else..."

"Or else?"

He made to lean in closer once again—I stuck out my elbows to fend him off while I racked my brain for ideas, but I didn't have anything left I could use for a bluff. Eberhart had already forsaken me, and I'd freed every last hostage I'd had against Craig. At this point, the only thing I had left was...

"I... I'll kill myself! Right here! I'll bite out my tongue and bleed to death!"

Craig froze instantly.

It had been an all-or-nothing gamble, but it had paid off perfectly. As he stood stock-still right above me, I retreated farther up onto the bed, slipping out of the cage his arms had formed around me. I started fixing up my disheveled clothes, determined to keep him from making any more moves on me.

He stared at me, then sighed deeply and spoke in a voice tinged with resentment. "You may not be a villain, but you certainly are a despicable man. You're utterly ruthless in exploiting others' weaknesses."

"You must be the only guy who'd be moved by holding *me* as a hostage, now or ever. What's with you?"

I was totally confused. If he'd just been trying to test my character, there were plenty of other approaches he could've taken, but he'd gone out of his way to do what he did... It had to be *that* sort of thing, right?

Had there ever been *anything* that could've brought this on?

"Well..." he said. "Frankly, it's a rather unexpected development for me as well. We'll simply have to take our time talking things through."

What the hell does that mean?

I didn't even have the energy to properly snipe back at the incomprehensible younger man in front of me, and my voice came out as a weary, exasperated groan.

Chapter 23

I finished refastening my clothes, made the war criminal crouching on my bed take about five steps back, and sat myself down on the edge of the mattress. The atmosphere was still a little awkward, but I did my best to ignore it as I put a question to Craig.

"So? What are you going to do now?"

I had a whole heaping pile of concerns on my mind, but that was what I wanted to know first. There was no way Craig had just barged in here without any plan at all, right?

"To begin with, I'll have you accompany me back to His Highness Prince Sighart. Once we have regrouped, we'll be taking you into protective custody, at least for the time being."

"Protective custody? Your master's seriously on board with that?"

I mean, I'm pretty sure I gave him the absolute worst first impression.

"His Highness was hesitant, I admit. The Lion Princess— Her Highness Princess Natasha and the others were vehemently opposed."

"They've got good instincts."

Of course Sig had hesitated. In the novel, he was a kind and compassionate guy, but that was exactly why he never let true wickedness go unpunished. That was how he had to be, or else it wouldn't be a tale of good triumphing over evil.

"However, following the battle by the Pieira, His Highness spent some time in the care of House Kisch. He acknowledged that he had been puzzled as to why you had unconditionally released Elmer Kisch and returned him to his family unharmed, and why you had taken no action whatsoever to quell the rebellion. And so, he consented to my proposal for the time being, on the condition that I return with only you and no others. He will make a final decision once he has had the opportunity to speak with you directly."

"Huh..."

Getting to join the heroes of my favorite novel should've been an exciting prospect, but the thought of being surrounded by enemies on all sides made my spirits sink. I was basically a walking pile of pure evil; marching right into the middle of the good guys' stronghold would be anxiety-inducing in a different way from my confrontation with Eberhart. That didn't matter, though—I'd just be reaping what I'd sown.

But there was another issue I was concerned about.

"Mm... I know it must've taken a lot of work to win everyone over, but sorry. I can't go along with that plan."

Craig seemed confused, like it had never occurred to him that I might reject his proposal.

"Why not?"

"Eberhart's going to be sending someone here soon. Uh... Actually, how long was I asleep for, anyway?"

"I don't know the answer to that, but you and I parted ways yesterday."

"Tomorrow, then. When his people show up, I absolutely need to be here to meet them, no matter what. Basically, Eberhart also found out that I'm...uh, not the real Heinreid? So right now, he's giving me a final few days of freedom out of the goodness of his heart. I don't know how many guys are going to come get me, but if I'm not there when they arrive, he's going to take it all out on the people of this duchy."

My conversation with Eberhart had happened only yesterday, and the two of us had been all alone in the throne room, so obviously Craig wouldn't have known about it. He clearly had a mental image of what "taking it out" might look like, and his brow furrowed grimly.

"You're certain of that?"

"He told me so himself. Do *you* think he'd just say it as a joke?"

Craig had no rebuttal for that.

Yeah, Eberhart's definitely going to follow through on his threats.

After a few seconds of silence, I made a counterproposal. "Here's my suggestion: You head back to Sig on your own right now, and while Eberhart's distracted dealing with me, all of you storm the

palace. I think that's your best option."

"Absolutely not." He shot me down instantly. "Once you're taken to the palace, the odds of your survival are unacceptably low."

Seriously?

"Look, maybe things aren't quite black-and-white, but I'm a dark gray *at best*. If I end up getting sacrificed for the greater good, nobody's going to fault you for that, okay?"

"I can't accept that."

Damn hard-ass... Yeah, this isn't working. If I keep trying to argue my point, he's just going to drag me straight to Sig whether I like it or not. I definitely can't let that happen.

I sighed with resignation.

"All right. In that case, we've only got one option—when they come for me tomorrow, we'll let them into the manor and then lock them all up. After that, we'll take horses and ride out as fast as we can to meet up with Sig and his crew."

Craig still wasn't on board, though. "Why do we need to wait for them to arrive here? We can fight them on the spot when we run into them."

"No, that won't work. If we slip past each other somehow, there'll be hell to pay. Besides, like I said, I don't know how many guys Eberhart's sending. Instead of getting into a fight on the open road where they'll see us coming at the same time we spot them, it'll be safer to lie in wait here on our own turf."

"However many they are and wherever we meet them, I shall protect you—no matter what."

Damn, that's one hell of a promise. I know how strong he is, though. I mean, I've only seen him in action once since I awoke in this body, when I made him fight Sig. But he's definitely got both power and skill.

That wasn't the issue, though.

"I... Unless I absolutely have to, I don't want to order you to kill anyone."

Even *I* had to wonder where the hell I got off saying crap like that. Coming out of this mouth, it just sounded like total hypocrisy.

But, Craig, you're *the one who thinks I'm not Heinreid, right? So*

you'll have to listen to this. You definitely won't be able to blow it off.

"Your survival is more important to me than theirs, so I won't insist you keep things nonlethal no matter what," I added. "But I don't want to sacrifice any more innocent people from this duchy. Please..."

I wasn't going to back down any further on this. *I'm making a compromise, so now it's your turn, dammit.* I stared straight into his eyes, silently conveying my resolve with my gaze and attitude as I gauged his reaction.

Craig wore an uncomfortable expression, but as he looked back at me, he closed his eyes in resignation.

"Very well."

I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank goodness. Now there won't be any more victims.

Now that I could breathe a bit easier, I decided to give another order while Craig was in a listening mood.

"Great, sounds like a plan. I'm going back to bed until morning. Good night, sleep tight, get out of my room."

I sharply gestured to the door. Craig stared back at me like a pigeon hit with a peashooter.

"What? You're going to sleep?"

"Sure am," I replied casually. "I was resting because I completely exhausted myself yesterday, but someone woke me up partway through, so I'm still tired. Anyway, you haven't slept either, have you? We've got time, so why not at least take a nap or something?"

Craig slumped his shoulders in exasperation. "You really aren't nervous in the slightest, are you?"

"Compared to facing off with Eberhart, this is pretty much nothing. Plus, I've got you by my side now."

He gazed at me silently for a moment. "Are you trying to tempt me?"

"Why's *that* where you're taking this?" I groaned. "Anyway, if you're sure you'll be fine tomorrow, then you don't need to sleep. But either way, get out of here. I'm not gonna be able to sleep a wink with a guy who says stuff like *that* hanging out in the same

room."

I pointed at the door once again, like I was ordering a dog to go back to its house.

Frustrated looks aren't going to get you anywhere. If you wanna blame someone, look in a damn mirror.

I glared up at him, and he gave a slow, rueful shake of his head.

"Very well. *However*, let me be clear that you are absolutely *not* to consider fleeing. If you leave this room or try to escape through a window, I *will* discover it immediately. And if such a thing were to happen..."

The moment he said those words, he grabbed the arm I was pointing with and tugged it forward. I yelped as I nearly lost my balance, then fell against Craig's chest. His other hand snaked around behind my head and lifted my hair. I felt a sudden, sharp pain—his teeth sank into the nape of my neck, *hard.*

"*Oww!*"

I cried out in pain as I heard the unpleasant sound of skin tearing.

The man who'd just bit the (former) (fake) hand that fed him pulled his lips away and whispered right behind my ear.

"I'll do far worse than that."

You sound like an absolute villain! What the hell's going on? How'd one of the good guys get so utterly twisted? Shit, this is definitely my fault for bullying him so much, isn't it? After everything I put him through, his rebellious urges must've awakened some weird fetishes or something...

I felt a strange sense of guilt, but for the moment, all I could do was frantically nod my head back at him.

Chapter 24

I'd thought maybe I could sneak out of my room without getting caught, but those naive hopes had been well and truly dashed, and now I was stuck holed up in here until morning. I didn't have a choice—I might not have valued my life, but I still cared about my chastity.

That said, I didn't actually plan on sleeping, so I killed time by counting the stars in the night sky. I'd be in deep shit if I opened the window and Craig immediately charged in, though, so I just stuck to the little slice of sky I could see from inside the room. Even then, there were far too many stars to finish counting in just one night—I hadn't even gotten halfway before the sky started to lighten. Just as the last faint twinkle disappeared, I heard a soft creak coming from the door.

At least pretend *you care enough to knock, dammit!*

Craig slipped stealthily into the room, then blinked in surprise as he saw my look of exasperation.

"Good morning," he said slowly. "You're up rather early today."

"Morning. Same to you."

"I am always awake at this hour."

Damn, knights have it rough, huh?

I gave some vague response or other as I stepped over to a glass case by the wall and searched around inside. I quickly found what I was looking for and pulled it out, along with two small glasses. Setting them down briefly on a nearby table, I grabbed a corkscrew and twisted the cork out of the liquor bottle I'd retrieved. I poured the amber liquid into both glasses until each was half full, then held one out to Craig, still standing there watching me.

"Just a pick-me-up—it'll take the drowsiness off. Here, have some."

You said you're fine, but you definitely didn't get any sleep either.

You must've been on high alert all night making sure I didn't run off. And besides, given the circumstances, you'd want to be prepared in case anything else went wrong.

"No, I—"

"It's fine—it won't get you drunk," I said, lightly sloshing the glass around as Craig hesitated. "The flavor might be a bit strong for a little baby like you, though."

My mockery got a sullen, huffy response out of him.

"I am an adult. I'm only two years younger than you."

"Sure, physically. But *mentally*..." I smugly tapped a finger to the side of my head. "Well, if you don't want any, I'll just drink it myself."

I raised the glass to my lips, and Craig immediately grabbed it away from me. I watched as he downed it in one gulp.

Yeah, if an older guy—especially one you're trying to look cool in front of—provokes you like that, of course you'll get worked up. I get it. I used to be the same way, back in the day.

Once he'd drained the glass, Craig made a face and wiped his mouth with his hand.

"It's so bitter..."

"Mm-hmm. It's sorta like medicine, basically."

I picked up my own glass and gulped down the lukewarm, bitter liquid without pausing to taste it. As I finished the last drop and set the glass down on the table with a thud, an overwhelming feeling I couldn't put into words welled up within me.

Suddenly—more than anything—I wanted to see those red roses again.

"I want to go to the garden."

The fervent wish spilled straight out of my mouth as soon as it formed in my mind.

"But—"

"We've still got time," I insisted. "C'mon, please..."

I fully understood that there were more important things to be doing right now. Craig's reluctance was only natural. This was just a meaningless, selfish personal whim.

A brief silence flowed between us, but Craig didn't refuse my request.

"I shall accompany you."

Out in the garden, the early morning air was clean and crisp. I savored it, breathing deeply. It was gearing up to be a bright, sunny day. Beneath the pale blue sky, the roses on the dewy hedges glittered and sparkled like sugar glass.

"I guess this'll be my last time seeing these."

As I spoke, I thought about reaching out to touch them. But somehow, I had a feeling I'd get stabbed by a thorn again, so I decided against it. I stilled my hand and just gazed at the roses without disturbing them.

"So long as you survive, you'll be able to see them again," Craig said.

"I don't know about that. Even after this is all over, I don't think I'll get to come back here."

I definitely wouldn't be allowed to stay on as the master of this estate or the lord of this duchy. Nobody would ever stand for that, and I didn't want it either. Craig must have understood that as well—he briefly fell silent, then changed the topic a little abruptly.

"You're quite fond of roses, aren't you?"

"Yeah... Well, it's really the scent more than anything. It brings back a lot of old memories."

The truth was, I wouldn't have made it this far here—in this world, this estate, this body—if not for the power of these roses. They let me reconnect, ever so slightly, with the past I'd thrown away. They let me entertain that delusion.

As I lost myself in nostalgia, I heard Craig's voice behind me. It was faltering—searching for the best words to say.

"Just...who are you, really?"

Who am I?

I already told you, didn't I?

I looked away from the roses and turned to face him. I locked my gaze onto that deep emerald green.

And I spoke the simple truth.

"Heinreid von Rodvelia. I'm the same man you've served all these years—a wicked and despicable duke."

I couldn't say which happened first—me finishing my sentence or

Craig falling to his knees. I was too distracted as my own body went limp and toppled backward into the bushes.

Craig grunted in shock, but I just chuckled.

"Looks like it's kicking in."

I slid down to the ground with a rustling and a cracking as my body tore through the foliage. Countless little branches snapped under my weight, and the red roses scattered their petals like tears.

"What...did you...?"

"You've gotta be more careful, Craig... You can't go around accepting drinks from...guys like me..."

I thought I heard Craig's breath catch in his throat.

"Did you...poison it?"

"It's just...a light muscle relaxant. It'll be out of your system in half a day or so..."

If I'd wanted to kill Craig, there were plenty of deadlier options in my poisoned liquor cabinet, but I'd just needed to incapacitate him. The one I'd used was nonlethal and didn't have any lingering aftereffects—it just robbed you of your ability to fight back. Pretty mild, as poisons went. I'd never imagined I'd actually end up using it, but I guess it never hurt to have a collection handy.

"Why would you—?"

He tried to press me for answers, but his voice cut off partway through.

From across the garden that should have been empty except for the two of us, the stamping of several pairs of boots and the rattling of metal rang out. The sounds steadily drew closer, as though they knew exactly where we'd be. We didn't have to wait long before the new arrivals revealed themselves.

"We have come to collect you, Your Grace."

"Good work," I said feebly.

Through the hedges stepped a familiar tailcoat, a perfectly straight back, a pair of wire-frame glasses, and the unreadable gray eyes behind them. The soldiers standing at his rear were Heinreid's devotees who I'd thrown into the First Dungeon a while back. Now, they were glaring at me with pure rage.

Yeah, this is more or less what I expected. But even his timing is

absolutely flawless—he really is the perfect butler.

"Karl...Anker?!"

Craig called his name, and Karl turned to glance at him. Craig couldn't move to block his way, but he immediately gritted out a warning.

"Don't you dare lay...a finger on him. If you do...I'll—"

But before Craig could finish, Karl impassively looked away from him and turned to face me.

"As you are well aware, His Majesty's request was for you alone. Please rest assured—*so long as we are able to bring you back alive*, we have been instructed that we need not concern ourselves with any others."

"How merciful of His Majesty..."

I was a little concerned about why Eberhart would've gone to the trouble of telling them they could leave everyone else alone, but for the time being, I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I told him he could do as he pleased with me, and two of the soldiers came stomping over to me at Karl's command.

"W...ait!" Craig shouted.

"Sorry, Craig."

As the soldiers roughly yanked me up by the arms, I somehow managed to get my limp, uncooperative neck to turn to look back at Craig. Throughout my time playing the villain, the corners of my mouth had always stubbornly refused to budge, but now, they finally lifted into a smile.

"I'm an evil man."

Two sharp, clear discs of emerald stared back at me. His eyes had been dazed and confused, but now they glimmered with a fierce, blazing anger.

Ahh... That hue really is the most beautiful of all...

My head filled with my true, undisguised feelings.

See? No matter how much I try to ignore it or brush over it, that's *what I really am in the end.*

"*Hein...reid...!*"

A familiar cry, trembling with rage, stabbed at my back as the soldiers dragged me out of the garden.



Chapter 25

The carriage they'd shoved me into shuddered and shook violently. With each jolt, I bumped my head hard, and stars danced on the insides of my eyelids. The roads from my estate to the palace weren't all that bad, but the soldier serving as the coachman—I was pretty sure he was the man who'd come to speak with me on behalf of Heinreid's devotees—was driving the horses as fast as he could. With the poison still in my system, I was stuck sliding back and forth as the carriage buffeted my body.

Karl, on the other hand, wore a calm, undisturbed expression as he sat on the other side with his legs crossed.

"I bet it'd be a way more comfortable ride if you were the one driving."

I assumed he'd ignore me, so I was just muttering to myself, but to my surprise, Karl actually responded.

"If that were the case, then the current coachman would be sitting here in my place. Even among your former devotees, he bears you an especially strong resentment, and I imagine that you would simply find yourself bruised by fists rather than inanimate objects."

"You really say the nastiest stuff with a straight face..."

Well, betraying people who'd trusted you would always come back to bite you one way or another, I supposed. Not that I had any real sympathy as I recalled exactly what those guys and Heinreid had used to do together.

"By the way, how long have you been one of Eberhart's people anyway?"

As long as Karl was actually talking to me, I tried asking about one of the things I'd been wondering. Even as fast as we were going, we still had a long ride ahead of us.

"Were you not already aware?"

"No—I wasn't totally sure until yesterday."

I'd never thought that Karl was totally loyal to Heinreid, but I'd only figured out that he was fully working for the king once I'd returned from the palace, as I'd dragged my body around the manor. He'd carried out my order to *have the estate cleaned up* a little too perfectly. Even setting aside the fact that he'd emptied out the First Dungeon, the soldiers I'd thrown in there absolutely hated my guts—it didn't make any sense that I'd returned home without running into an ambush. There was always the possibility that he'd just killed them all... But in the end, the answer had been pretty much what I'd expected. Karl had offered them a chance for revenge, neatly gathered them under his command, and made them his pawns.

This butler's poker face was just too perfect, and I'd genuinely had no clue who he was working for until right before he'd revealed it himself. The things I'd realized earlier on about Karl had all been more...well, obvious, normal stuff.

"It would be difficult to say precisely how long, but I was tasked by His Majesty with your surveillance following my predecessor's passing—once I had officially taken over his position. Until that point, I was genuinely a perfectly ordinary household servant, nothing more."

"Really?"

"Indeed. I imagine that my predecessor served in the same capacity prior to me. When I took up residence in his quarters, I discovered *this* in the bottom of a securely locked drawer. I am authorized to use it freely as the situation requires."

Karl stuck a finger into his collar and pulled out a ring on a thin chain.

Wait, is that... Shit, it's a signet ring?! And it's even got an amaryllis on it! So that means...

"*You* wrote that damn letter?!"

"For the record, I do not believe I was able to perfectly reproduce His Majesty's handwriting."

"How the hell was I supposed to check the handwriting on all those tiny, crammed-together words?"

After I'd released Elmer from the Second Dungeon, Karl had

brought over that cursed letter from Eberhart. The entire page had been covered in black ink, and I hadn't had the will to read back over it again. I'd definitely clocked that it had shown up too quickly—but Karl had ghostwritten it, huh?

Normally, forging a letter from the king would be just about as treasonous as you could possibly get, but Eberhart must've personally given Karl permission. Originally, it had probably been meant as an emergency restraint mechanism in case Heinreid started getting too out of control... But even then, what the hell? Something was seriously wrong with Eberhart's head.

"Nevertheless, my primary role was still to serve His Grace the Duke. His Majesty merely wished me to report to him periodically on the duke's activities and demeanor, not to fully place myself under his service. However..."

The ring twirled around in his dexterous fingers, then vanished back into his collar.

"Following the sudden disappearance of the master I actually served, the frequency and content of my reports did change to a degree."

Karl spoke matter-of-factly as he fussily smoothed out a slight rumple near his collar.

"So, when did you actually notice that 'disappearance,' exactly?"

"Immediately upon your awakening after your fall, when you refrained from executing Carlos Bureau."

Well, that tracks—he brought over that letter the very next day, so he had to have noticed early. But that's practically right from the beginning! Didn't he jump to that conclusion a little too fast?

"However, I only obtained irrefutable proof following your release of Elmer Kisch from the Second Dungeon. If you'll recall, I asked you at the time whether his release was in accordance with your wishes, and you answered that it was."

"That's all it took?"

"The content of your answer was certainly strange, but your mistake was in answering my question at all. You had tasked me solely with investigation into the First Dungeon. If I were to inquire into matters unrelated to my orders, His Grace would say—"

"'Who brought up the Second Dungeon? Enough of your frivolous prying, Karl. To death with you.' Would that have been about right?" I cut him off with words pulled straight from my Heinreid Phrasebook.

"So you *do* understand," he replied without any emotion in his voice. "For those such as Craig Bauer, whose punishment is to be kept alive, matters might have been different. However, for all others, His Grace's standard response would have been execution. Even if he had judged me useful to him so long as I carried out my duties flawlessly, the moment I made even the slightest mistake...he would have killed me without any hesitation."

"Wait, that means if I'd been the old me, you would've died!"

"I already possessed sufficient confidence that such was not the case; as I said a moment ago, that question was merely for the sake of obtaining proof. If you were not, in fact, His Grace, then His Majesty would kill you without fail. I did not wish to become collateral damage, and so it was necessary that I promptly acquire incriminating words that could serve as corroborating evidence when His Majesty judged you to be an impostor."

Still, it had definitely been a gamble. The facts were, Eberhart *had* been suspicious of that implausible report, and even if he'd felt something off about me, it had taken a long while before he'd actually given up on me. But, well—it had all worked out this way in the end.

"I give up," I said. "You've beaten me completely."

My hands were finally starting to be able to move again, and I raised them loosely in a pose of surrender. Right at that moment, the carriage tilted as it hit a sharp curve, and in accordance with inertia, my body slid over to the other side. As I lay plastered against the door, I turned to look at Karl. He was perfectly composed, sitting in exactly the same spot he'd been this whole time.

Is his sense of balance so good that he can just ignore the laws of physics? Damn.

"You're actually pretty talkative, huh? Early on, I thought you were basically a machine," I said.

"I served in a workplace where a single ill-considered remark

would result in death. I could never be as foolish as Craig Bauer."

"Huh? Oh, actually, that reminds me—I got the feeling you two really didn't get along. Why was that?"

Each of them had been ready to sell out the other without any hesitation. What sort of baggage did those two have?

Karl's face muscles normally never budged at all, but for once, they twisted into an irritated scowl.

"*I* would face death if I did not make my decisions optimally at all times, while *he* was permitted to live no matter how recklessly he conducted himself," Karl spat. "I also found his readiness to sacrifice his own life rather irksome."

The frustration in his voice was directed at Craig. But at the same time, I felt his words prickle at my chest too. That absurd world, where even the slightest mistake led to instant death, had been the work of ***my*** own past self. Karl had definitely been competent to begin with...but *I* was the one who'd forced him into an unnatural perfection. He was just like the estate's flawlessly kept garden—the people looking at it might marvel, but the people maintaining it spent their days in sheer terror.

I'd already realized it, on some level. Karl hadn't seemed like he took any particular pride in his work—but he'd always carried out every job I gave him to perfection. He'd never disobeyed his master's orders—but he'd never involved himself in anything beyond what was instructed. All of those things were habits Karl had picked up for the sake of his own survival.

He was a hard guy to read, but those principles of his had helped me out a lot too. Eberhart wasn't interested in anything other than Heinreid, so I'd predicted that Karl wouldn't report on Craig quietly releasing prisoners behind the scenes. Obviously, that tyrant was a depraved villain just like Heinreid—if Karl had given him a report he hadn't requested, his response easily could've been "Did I order you to report on anything other than Heinreid? How dare you bring me this unimportant drivel? To death with you."

I'd placed my unasked-for faith in Karl, and he hadn't let me down. Not a single "unimportant" report had reached the king—even if it was actually incredibly important information. Karl had found a

place for Angelica to flee to, and he hadn't leaked it to anyone else. All of that had been motivated by self-preservation, of course, but I was still nothing but grateful.

I felt like maybe I ought to thank him. I tried to come up with the right words to say, but before I could open my mouth, Karl dropped in another remark.

"Well... Even setting aside any of those reasons, the man annoys me fundamentally. He's simply not my type."

I stared at him in shock. Those utterly casual feelings coming from this perfect butler caught me totally off guard, but I gradually felt amusement welling up inside me until a laugh burst out.

"I take it all back," I said. "You can be pretty human after all, Karl."

"Indeed. I *am* one."

He looked down his nose at me with disdain, as though to say, *Did you seriously not know that?*

Wait, when I take the time to read his face, he's actually pretty expressive too, isn't he?

I was starting to see a new side of my former butler, and I wanted to talk with him a little more. But unfortunately, before I could bring up another topic, the carriage pulled to a stop and a soldier opened the door from outside. I obeyed his gruff command to *get out*—now that my body was finally moving again, I was able to step down from the carriage myself. As I left, I turned to look inside just for a moment.

"So long, Karl. Stay alive out there."

"I intend to. Take care, my former master."

Chapter 26

I'd been positive a grisly death would be waiting for me the moment I arrived at the palace. But contrary to my expectations, the guards tied my arms together, tossed me to the floor of a dungeon cell, and just left me there. This dungeon was larger than the ones underneath my estate, and there were prisoners in some of the other cells as well. Now and then, from one direction or another, an agonized groan would break the silence.

I couldn't say how long I remained there, down in the oppressive gloom without food or water. But eventually, Eberhart himself showed up, with a group of guards trailing behind him. He had them wait outside while he stepped alone into the cell, empty except for the two of us.

"How are you feeling, *impostor*?"

"Do I *look* like I'm feeling good?"

I figured I didn't need to bother playing the villain anymore, even with him, but it seemed my reply wasn't to his liking. The tip of his boot slammed into my unguarded stomach. My throat spasmed with strangled retching and gagging noises, but before I could even curl in on myself, Eberhart crouched down to grab me by the hair and yank me up. I was forced to meet his blue and gold eyes as they stared at me with disgust.

"Hmph. You're the very image of Heinreid, but the moment the lie is revealed, the differences become impossible to ignore. Tormenting you no longer stirs anything within me whatsoever."

"Then do me a favor and kill me already. You don't feel like waiting for me to weaken and starve either, right?"

"That *had* been my intention... But circumstances have changed."

What's that mean?

I furrowed my brow in concern over my postponed demise. I had nothing but bad feelings about this, but Eberhart seemed to have no

interest in explaining further. He just looked down at me wordlessly. He maintained his silence for a while, but then his head cocked in thought and he ran his fingers along the nape of my neck. When he spotted the bite mark that must've been visible there, he chuckled deep in his throat.

"Is this Craig Bauer's handiwork? What a fool indeed, to allow *you* of all people to seduce him. Not that you're much better, surrendering your body to a man—even if only for the sake of manipulating him."

"I haven't surrendered anything, dammit."

Don't get the wrong idea, okay? I mean, obviously the bite mark on my neck would give anyone *a weird impression, but I'd never do anything to defile him.*

"Oh? I'm told that you charmed him quite utterly..."

Who the hell told you that? Was it Karl? I guess that is *related to me, just barely. But what kind of misleading report did you give this guy? Eberhart's making it sound like I deliberately led Craig on or something! Well, maybe I did a little, but whatever.*

"That's all just a misunderstanding."

It's like the suspension bridge effect—that sort of thing. Craig was in a high-stakes situation, and he got overly sensitive to little changes. Just a temporary fever that'll cool once he's calmer.

That was why I hadn't heeded his voice. There was no way I could ever take his hand.

"Hmm. I see."

Eberhart briefly closed his eyes, satisfied with my explanation. And then—when he opened them once again—the Tyrant of the Century gazed at me with a gentle beauty unbecoming of his nickname, smiling softly like a holy mother.

"So, Nobody from Nowhere. It seems you wish to die in order to make amends for Heinreid's villainy... How utterly conceited."

Ugh, this again?

My eyes narrowed. I'd assumed it'd be easier to get Eberhart to kill me if he thought I was someone else, so I hadn't denied it. But at this point, he wasn't going to change his mind about me no matter what I said, so I decided to speak the truth, plain and simple.

"No matter what you think, no matter what you decide, *I* know for a fact that I'm Heinreid."

No matter who says otherwise, I'll always know the truth. There's nothing anyone can do to change it. Go ahead and deny it if you want. But no matter what anyone says to me, I'm never letting go of Heinreid's sins. I swear it.

I'd wondered if he'd get angry at my words, but Eberhart just kept on smiling calmly. "So you intend to atone for your sins with your life? Then why did you never turn on me, knowing my sins are just as heavy as your own? You had pawns you could have sent against me, did you not?"

"What, and command them to kill the king? Of course I couldn't have done that—I would've been ordering them to die!"

"Then you could simply have killed me yourself. That would have been the more certain method. And when I still believed you were Heinreid, I allowed myself to be rather unguarded with you, didn't I? In fact, if you had served me that poison wine of yours, I would readily have drained my glass."

That's ridiculous—

I was about to say those words, but they died in my throat. Thinking back, it was true that I'd only ever faced him one-on-one—when he'd first visited me, and when he'd summoned me to the palace too. If I'd wanted to...I could've poisoned him that first time, or I could've done a suicide attack in the throne room...?

The people who'd driven this country into terror were Heinreid and Eberhart. There were other villains as well, but if the two men at the helm had both disappeared at once, the whole thing would've fallen apart. Then I wouldn't have had to do all this roundabout stuff just to set up my own death...

I felt a cold sweat run down my back.

"But I... I couldn't just murder someone..."

"And yet you intended to have Craig Bauer kill *you*?"

Panic started to well up inside me. I felt like I was being steadily pushed closer to the edge of a cliff.

No. I don't want to hear any more. I can't let *myself hear any more...*

But the merciless tyrant, without a care for his prey's terror, unfalteringly pushed me off the cliff and down to the rocks below.

"What a cruel man you are," he said with a chuckle. "You thoroughly beguile your poor guard, steal his heart, declare it all a misunderstanding, and shirk your own responsibility. You would force those left alive to clean up your mess, while you alone make your getaway?"

Eberhart stared into my eyes.

"*You wretched coward.*"

He spoke those final words in the calm, relaxed tones of someone telling a child an old tale, but they dug up the soft, defenseless depths of my heart and tore into it ruthlessly.

I'd convinced myself that this was right. I'd believed without question that *this* was the role I needed to play. But everything I'd done up until now was being rejected. All the walls I'd leaned on for support were crumbling away.

He hadn't beaten, kicked, or trampled me, but in all my time as Heinreid—no, in this life and my past life combined—I'd never once been wounded this deeply.

I... No... That's not what I...

The seeping, throbbing pain in my heart grew stronger and stronger. I was having trouble breathing, and I couldn't tell whether my body was trembling from asphyxia or from anguish.

As I knelt there, dazed and filled with despair, the tyrant just smiled softly and sweetly.

"Your Majesty," one of the guards called from outside.

"Very well."

Eberhart gave a casual gesture as he stood back up, and guards stomped into the room to drag my slumped-over body to its feet.

"Let's go, impostor. Don't worry—unlike that guard of yours, I am neither gentle nor naive. You have dared to impersonate Heinreid...and I shall make certain that you pay in full for your sins."

Eberhart turned his back to me and left the cell, and the guards shoved my limp body along after him, making me follow on unsteady feet.

Chapter 27

They brought me up to the throne room. The last time I'd been summoned here, it had been empty except for me and Eberhart, but now the walls were lined with guards and ministers all around. Eberhart didn't move to his throne—he stopped right in front of it and had the guards sit me on the floor at his side.

He seemed to be waiting for something. He stared straight at the doors, occasionally tugging or stroking my hair idly, as though to kill time. I sat there in a haze, just letting it all happen. I didn't know what was right anymore. What should I say? What should I do? Even if I arrived at an answer, I couldn't trust myself anymore.

My stupor was finally interrupted by the sound of the door opening and a guard quickly stepping inside.

"We've brought him, Your Majesty."

I was distantly aware of a group of people walking into the room at Eberhart's command. I lifted my gaze to them, my eyes bleary and aimless...and my breath caught in my throat.

"Lord Heinreid... It's a relief to see you."

"Craig...?"

Two guards marched in the man who I'd poisoned and abandoned at the estate. They stopped near the entrance, holding a pair of crossed swords at his throat. The sword he always wore at his hip was gone.

Utterly confused, I looked up at Eberhart in search of answers. He noticed my gaze and gave a little smile back.

"Honestly, Heinreid. I warned you that he'd originally been Sighart's dog and that you needed to train him thoroughly, did I not? The fool stormed into the palace all alone, demanding your release... Ah, no, that's right—you aren't Heinreid. You'd have no way of knowing what warning I gave him."

I *was* Heinreid, dammit—but that didn't matter at all anymore. My

mind was filled with recollections of the final battle scene from the novel. Sig and Natasha were the ones to storm into the throne room, and Craig's role was to hold off the other enemies downstairs.

Craig never came in here. He *couldn't* be here...

"Why...?" I asked.

"Whichever of you I kill first, I'm certain that letting you die before each other's eyes will prove most entertaining."

My unthinking question was met with an utterly inhuman reply.

No... No way. I betrayed Craig that ruthlessly, and he still *came to save me? And he let the guards capture him because Eberhart had me in here? Then, this is all my...*

"S... Stop! Please, don't! *I'm* the one you hate, aren't I?! So just __"

"*Silence.*"

My desperate, pleading cries died in the face of that single word and the sword pressed to my neck. Eberhart had drawn his blade with a swift, practiced motion, and now he spoke coldly and mercilessly.

"I warned you to cease such pathetic displays. Keep it up, and my hand may *slip*. Let me be clear: Even if I choose to kill you first, I have no intention whatsoever of releasing that man. This room shall be the site of your executions—both yours and his. Now, which shall I start with?"

His voice was utterly casual, and he glanced back and forth between me and Craig as though he were having trouble deciding which snack to eat from a platter. I finally realized that there was nothing I could do anymore—I lost the strength even to speak.

But another voice rang out, cutting through the heavy silence.

"Your Majesty," said the man who was literally trying to share in my fate right now. "Why do you wish to kill His Grace? You were...quite deeply invested in him, were you not?"

Craig's voice was quiet and strangely tranquil, completely at odds with the situation.

What do you mean, "why"? I told you back at the estate, didn't I? So what's... Is he buying time?

"You know the reason as well as I, don't you?" Eberhart replied.

"This man is not Heinreid, not by any means—merely an impostor, alike only in appearance."

"You have brought him here, you've had him kneel at your feet, and you still believe so—is that correct, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. Heinreid was not—could never be—a disgraceful, suicidal wretch such as this forgery."

For some reason, Eberhart was playing along with Craig's questions. Even I could tell that Craig was up to something—there was no way Eberhart hadn't noticed too.

"He did not live merely for life's sake, let alone for death's," Eberhart continued. "He was a man who understood the natural order of things, death following at the end of life. He would *never*, under any circumstances, perpetrate such an *idiotic* act as to throw his own life away."

Oh... I get it now.

The spear of his words stabbed through my heart once again, and I finally understood.

This guy genuinely, utterly loathes me, doesn't he? That's why he wants to kill me. Just ruining my body isn't enough for him anymore—he won't be satisfied until he's torn me to shreds on the inside too.

God... Maybe it would've been better if I'd just stayed the villain. Then things wouldn't have ended up like this, would they? If Craig had killed Heinreid without any hesitation, just like in the novel, then we wouldn't be facing this hollow, meaningless ending...

Countless emotions were pressing down to crush me. I couldn't even raise my head anymore.

"If you are so certain of that, then you have no further use for that man, do you, Your Majesty?"

But...as I sat, head hung, some absolutely ridiculous words reached my ears. Question marks floated through my mind.

"If that is indeed the case, then surely you should have no objection to me taking him. You may no longer have need of him, but he is precisely what I want."

Wait, hang on. What the hell are you saying? That's not what this is— Huh?

Is *that what this is about?*

While I sat there, lost and confused, Craig pushed on through and issued his demand.

"If you would cast him aside yourself, then matters are quite simple. Give him to me."

A strange stillness took hold of the room. The silence was deafening. Even Eberhart was taken aback for a few moments. But before long, he burst into laughter.

"Ha ha ha! You would demand a boon from *me*? And *this man*, of all things? Oh, what a delightful farce! I see now why Heinreid found you worth keeping!"

He laughed long and loud. Then, finally, he let out a sigh and lifted his sword away from my throat.

"But you misconstrue my character, Craig Bauer. I am a man of many terrible habits. I may discard something of my own will, but the moment another should seek to pick it up, I begin to covet it jealously." He turned back to me. "And so, my mind is set."

The moment the words left his lips, I heard a sick piercing noise, and a jolt of heat raced through my foot.

My mind couldn't keep up with what was happening. When I turned toward the source of the heat, I saw the polished blade of a sword stuck straight into my foot and finally realized that Eberhart had stabbed me.

"H...hgh—!"

An intense pain followed soon after, and a strained grunt spilled from my mouth as I barely held back my scream. The blade slowly withdrew, and blood gushed out, staining the marble floor.

That definitely wouldn't be enough for him. I shut my eyes tight, trying to brace myself for the second blow, wherever it would come. But the pain I prepared myself for never arrived. Instead, the scraping clash of metal against metal rang out over my head. The ministers assembled around the wide throne room began kicking up a stir, and a shout of "Your Majesty!" sent my eyes snapping back open. Instinctively turning toward the clash of metal, I saw Eberhart blocking a swing of Craig's sword.

Wait, he was unarmed... So how did he...?

I glanced over at the entrance—the two guards who'd been

holding swords to Craig's throat moments ago were both crumpled on the floor. Looking closer, one of the pair was missing his weapon.

Did... Did Craig just knock out two of the king's personal guards, steal a sword, and make it all the way over here, all in that one instant? Holy shit...

Amid the tense atmosphere, I sat there feeling a little bit terrified of my former guard captain's unreal strength. Eberhart was having trouble holding him back, but with a sharp exhale, he let up the pressure and parried Craig's sword off to the side. He let his longsword slip from his grip and pulled a hidden dagger from somewhere. As Craig's stance fell apart, Eberhart lunged for his throat.

But Craig dodged at the last second, and as he retreated, he grabbed me by the collar and yanked me away with incredible force. As he pulled me away from Eberhart, all I could do was go where he dragged me, leaving a trail of blood in my wake.

"Now this is a surprise," Eberhart said slowly. "I knew that you were quite skilled, but you have truly come a long way from the powerless brat you once were."

"My master was a strict and fearsome man. His Grace decreed that my punishment was to be kept alive—but nevertheless, he cared little for my life, and I was sent into battle all alone on more than one occasion."

"And so you make use of that experience now?" Eberhart chuckled. "But all you've done is seize a momentary opening with a surprise attack. The guards of this palace are no mere common rabble."

"I suppose not. However, as it happens...*I am not alone.*"

Eberhart cocked his head at Craig's pointed declaration. Just then, the doors to the throne room swung open with a loud *BANG*, and one of the palace guards came rushing in.

"Your Majesty!" he shouted, his voice strained with panic. "The rebels are attacking! They've already taken over the lower— Gaah!"

His report turned into a scream midway through, and he slumped forward and sank to the floor. Behind him stood a boy—no, a *rebel*—with blazing red hair and eyes as blue as the sky.

"Brother! I've come to take this country back!"

As he shouted, a crew of blue-clad comrades came charging in alongside him. I stared over at them, and a clichéd phrase floated into my head from the reaches of distant memory.

The hero always arrives in the nick of time.

Chapter 28

Eberhart wore the disappointed expression of someone whose fun had been interrupted, and he spoke with an utter listless boredom.

"How boorish of you, Sighart. Can't you see we're in the middle of our entertainment?"

"This nightmare has gone on long enough! Your *fun* ends here and now! En garde!"

In stark contrast to Sig's burning resolve, Eberhart picked up his longsword with a put-upon air—utterly casual, devoid of any tension whatsoever. Not bothering to wipe off the blood, he gestured to the entrance with his swordpoint.

"Off with these insolent traitors' heads. Once we nail their bodies up in the square, the people will awaken from their foolish dreams of salvation."

Eberhart's assembled guards all roared with murderous rage. While their attention was briefly focused on Sig, Craig dragged me over to the wall, wrapping an arm around my middle to hold me close at his side. He dropped me to the ground a little roughly—I let out a small cry as the impact shot pain through my injured foot. Craig froze at the sound. Behind him, I could see one of Eberhart's guards raising his sword.

"Craig!"

But my shout of warning was drowned out by the far higher angry yell of a girl. The Lion Princess—Natasha—leaped over, her long brown hair fluttering around her, and carried through her momentum to knock back the enemy's sword and kick him in the stomach. Without even turning around, she tossed over her blue cloak. Craig caught it and unfalteringly sliced into it with his sword, cutting out a strip of cloth to wrap around my foot. That left his back to the fight; enemies came charging in at him, but Natasha fended

them off.

"C-Craig... Don't...worry about me—"

He cut me off angrily. "Be quiet. I'm not listening to anything you have to say anymore. You've taught me that trusting you only makes things worse." He finished wrapping the bandage and tied it off tight. "There are countless things I want to say to you, and more still I *need* to say—and I've said none of them yet. I will *not* let you die."

His lecturing voice and his intense stare were both overflowing with boiling rage; I could feel it on my skin.

But even though I'm the one you're angry at, you're still trying to protect me, huh...?

Yeah... After all this, I couldn't tell him I wasn't worth it. There was no way I could insult him like that.

"Hey, if you're done giving him first aid, can you defend yourself now?! I need to get back to Sig!"

Craig raised his head at Natasha's urgent voice. "Understood, my lady." He turned to me. "Lord Heinreid. You are not to move from this spot."

He stood in front of me, neatly stepping into Natasha's place. A group of enemies rushed at him all at once, but he fended them off, cut them down, and forced them back.

The battle was an absolute free-for-all. I couldn't join in the fight, so I just sat there and watched in a daze. The clamor and chaos only grew as time went on. But somehow, at odds with it all, I felt incredibly sleepy. Maybe it was because I couldn't move. Maybe I'd lost too much blood. I had a feeling that if I closed my eyes, I'd never open them again.

Wait... That was what I wanted all along...wasn't it? Then...maybe it's fine if I go to sleep...

I started to relax, to give myself over to the drowsiness. But then, the wound that had just been carved into my heart gave a sharp twinge.

You wretched coward.

Just as I flashed back to that low, deep voice that had reverberated straight through my brain, the fierce clashing of swords fell silent. The victor had been decided—the hush spreading across

the room like ripples through water was a testament to that.

The rebel's sword was stabbed through the breast of the man who stood at the top of this kingdom.

Ah—

The instant I saw it, I felt my heart jolt out of my chest.

"Hmph." Eberhart sighed. "A trite and boring ending indeed. I suppose this was simply the most I could do on my own..."

He gave a wet, hacking cough, adding more blood to the stains at his feet.

"Brother..." Sig said. "Here at the end, won't you tell me why? Why did you end up like *this*? You were the one who taught me that a ruler's place was alongside their people, preserving peace for all time. What changed you?"

"If I tell you why, and my reason satisfies you, do you mean to forgive me? How ridiculous... You truly are a fool, just like our father."

Even all the way over here, I could hear that low chuckle in Eberhart's throat, the same as always. He was facing Sig, so I couldn't see his expression.

"I have nothing to say to you, Sighart. If you would kill me and become king...do not seek to *understand* me. Not if you wish to preserve this country from the hands of evil."

Taking in those words of admonition, the rebel stared straight back at the tyrant.

"I tasted defeat and humiliation when you forced me to flee the kingdom. When I finally returned, I saw the people wounded and suffering, and my rage at those who'd plunged them into that hell grew all the more. And *you're* the one at the root of it all. You don't need to tell me twice—I *don't* understand you, and I'll *never* forgive you for what you've done."

"Very good."

As though declaring the conversation over, Eberhart gripped the blade of the sword skewering his own chest and yanked it out. Blood spewed and spattered from the open wound—plainly more than a person could survive losing.

"You there."

His balance was shaky, but he still managed to stay standing. He turned his head in my direction and smiled at me. Those beautiful mismatched eyes shimmered with loneliness.

"If Heinreid yet lives...give him a message from me. Tell him...I'll be wait...ing in...hell..."

Those were his final words. Eberhart crumpled to the floor. His silver hair trailed down after him, slowly dyed red by the blood pouring from his body. His beauty was still flawless, even in death, and I felt something squeeze tight in my chest. My villainous memories had been quiet for the past while, but now they were screaming inside me. The fierceness of their cries sent my old mind, my old emotions, clanking back into place.

No. No... How? Why? Are you leaving on your own? But... But we were accomplices, you and I. I would have been content all by myself—I would gladly have spent all my life alone. But you sank yourself down into evil to join me. You accepted me. You loved me. I was so happy, so joyful... I believed without a doubt that when the end came, we would meet it together—no, I dreamed *of it. But now, you depart—only you... It's not fair. This isn't fair! Don't... Don't leave me!*

"M...y...liege..."

I stretched out my hand to those silver strands lying in the pooling blood. But I was too far to reach.

I needed to get closer—I needed to be with him.

But as I started crawling across the floor, trying to make my way to Eberhart, something moved in front of me to block my vision—a man's body. As I writhed like a worm, he grabbed me by the shoulders and shouted in my face.

"I told you not to move! You'll worsen your wound!"

I stared up at him. "Craig..."

That loud voice stabbing at my eardrums suddenly brought me back to my senses.

Craig... It's Craig.

I'd already fired him as my guard, but he'd still fought to protect me. He had wounds of his own, and he was covered in streaks of blood—he looked like hell. I owed him an apology.

No, not just for this. There are so many other things I need to apologize to you for.

"*Lord Heinreid!*"

But before I could produce the words, my vision gradually darkened, and I let consciousness slip from my grasp.

Chapter 29

I thought I'd been falling into darkness, but before I knew it, I was in a bright white space. Or, well, maybe *I* wasn't anywhere at all anymore. Everything was vague and hazy, and all that existed here was my mind. I could tell that I didn't have a body. It was a strange sensation, like something out of a dream.

Is this the afterlife? Did I exhaust myself back there and finally die?

Something felt off, though. My perspective was fixed in place—I couldn't turn to look at my surroundings. I didn't even have any sense of what it would mean to *close my eyes* here. I just stayed like that for a while. Then, background scenery and human figures began to float into view amid the blank space. It was still all white...but this white was *familiar*.

White walls. White bedsheets. The hospital.

And sitting in the bed, crying with her face in her hands, was my sister—Yurika. Next to her, slumped over and sobbing, was my mom. I remembered all of this; it was the same thing I'd seen that day when my sister had passed out all of a sudden, after she'd gotten her diagnosis.

Is this that thing where your life flashes before your eyes? Do people get those after they die?

I wanted to avert my gaze from this painful memory. But when I listened closer to the voices, they weren't quite the same as I remembered.

—Idiot. You idiot. Onii-chan, you idiot!

That was weird. Back then, Yurika had just apologized over and over, her voice shaking as she'd tried to stifle her feelings. She hadn't been yelling at me like this.

—No... I should have paid more attention... Tsukasa! Tsukasaaa!

What was going on? My mom had been calling out my sister's

name back then, not mine. Yurika was the one who'd gotten sick. There... There wasn't any reason she'd be calling for me...

While I watched, puzzled by the differences from my memories, their insults and wails changed to different words.

—I'm sorry...

—I'm so, so sorry...

—If I hadn't ended up like this...

—If I'd taken better care of you both...

—Onii-chan...

—Tsukasa...

—I'm so sorry...

—It's my fault you died...

—I'm sorry!

A shock ran through my mind.

Wait, no... Is this Yurika and mom after I died? Why...? Why are they apologizing? There's no way they'd know I killed myself, so why?

I didn't get any answers to my questions. The two of them—my mother and sister, my only family—were crying so hard that I was worried their bodies would wither.

But there was nothing I could do.

I didn't have any legs to run to them.

Of course I didn't—I was dead.

I didn't have any arms to reach out and stroke their hair.

Of course I didn't—I was dead.

I didn't even have a voice to give them excuses or words of comfort.

Of course I didn't.

I was *dead*.

I hadn't felt the slightest regret about ending my past life. I'd been carrying a sort of pride, holding it close. But now, I felt a shadow loom over it.

—You would force those left alive to clean up your mess, while you alone make your getaway?

As the shadow spread to cover everything, a voice came from inside it. Those words had been condemning me for pretending to

be an evil duke and manipulating a good and honest knight—but they applied to my past self too.

—Don't... Don't leave me!

Even that villain had screamed out in anguish from inside me—that was how painful it was to be left behind. But I'd just closed my eyes to every inconvenient detail. I hadn't thought it through. I hadn't understood at all. Without ever understanding, I'd decided all on my own that this was what I needed to do, that I didn't have any choice. People had loved me, had cared about me, but I'd treated that *me* like it was worthless. I'd thrown it away.

I'm the one who needs to apologize. Mom... Yurika...

Right before I'd killed myself, I'd inwardly muttered an apology, but that shallow, meaningless contrition didn't even compare to the guilt and remorse flooding my heart now. I still couldn't give voice to any of it, though, and the people I wanted to share my feelings with faded back away into the whiteness.

I... I'll never reach them.

A sadness filled me as I was pulled away from the people I loved.

The world went white once again, and a final set of words rang out.

—I will not *let you die.*

◆◇◆

I woke up to an unfamiliar ceiling above me. It wasn't the hospital room from that dream, it wasn't the run-down apartment from my distant memories, and it wasn't the now-familiar manor either.

Where the heck am I? I didn't think I'd be waking up in a bed at all, honestly.

"Good morning, Lord Heinreid."

A voice came from next to me, and I twitched in response. I reflexively tried to reply, but my throat was weirdly dry and stuck together, and I couldn't get a sound out right away. I gave a single dry cough. After I closed my lips for a little while, saliva began to well up and moisten my throat again.

As my thoughts got clearer, sensation gradually returned to my body. I hurt. I couldn't even tell where—my entire body felt achy, sluggish, and sore.

Wait, but... If I can still feel things, then...

"I'm alive."

"I said that I would not let you die, didn't I?"

The voice gave an earnest, straitlaced response. I knew who it was without even looking—but I forced my creaking body into motion, managing to turn just my head to face him.

My former guard, Craig, was sitting in a chair and gazing at me expressionlessly.

"Where...am I?"

"This is one of the suites issued to nobles residing within the palace. I've temporarily borrowed my family's former quarters."

Damn, he really got me a fancy room... Is this, like, a last bit of kindness for me while I'm on death row? No—if they'd left me down in the dungeons again, I would've died right there anyway, so they're probably just looking after me until they can properly carry out my execution.

Anyway, having a conversation while I'm lying down is kinda awkward...

I tried to sit up, but the moment I twisted around, an even sharper pain ran through my foot, and I let out a pathetic scream.

"Stay still!" Craig shouted. "You nearly died from blood loss due to your injury. You need complete bed rest."

"Oh. So that's why I don't feel so good..."

Faced with Craig's harsh scolding, I had no choice but to lie back down. As I waited for the throbbing pain to subside a little, I remembered something important.

"Craig—thanks for coming to save me."

That's right. I've absolutely got to say this before I die, no matter what.

"Honestly," I continued, "when you showed up there, I thought you were a total idiot. But if you hadn't gone that far for me...I don't know if I would've managed to properly regret dying. Eberhart told me off about it too. I realized just how much of a coward I've been."

Even after Eberhart had pointed out my mistakes—even after I'd felt Heinreid's sorrow—if there hadn't been anyone here who'd miss me, I still would've ended up throwing away my life without a care.

"Lord Heinreid..."

"I do feel bad that I'll still be dying on my own anyway, but, well... I'll make sure to suffer plenty for however long I've got left, so I can properly get what I deserve. I just wanted to give you an apolohiiih?"

I'd been all ready to deliver a heartfelt apology, but Craig physically obstructed me. He hooked a finger into the corner of my mouth and tugged on it. It didn't hurt—he was just keeping me from speaking. I had no idea what he was after.

"Whuh?" I asked sharply.

"You truly are a terrible listener. As I said—*I will not let you die*."

Craig took his finger out of my mouth and moved his hand to rest against my cheek. I could see flames of anger starting to blaze in his eyes. I nearly lost myself once again in that deepening emerald hue, but my instincts whispered to me that I'd be in trouble if I didn't control myself right now, so I lightly closed my eyes to get away.

"Wait, no," I protested. "There's no way they'll just let me off the hook!"

I'd taken way too many lives to live on and make amends. No matter what excuses I gave, nobody would ever be on board with that. The fact that I couldn't even will myself to keep on living was just another part of my punishment.

But Craig immediately dropped a bombshell, blowing my resolve to smithereens.

"There's no hook to let you off. Officially, you're innocent of any wrongdoing."

The hell?

"Just how many of His Highness's comrades do you think were in that room? The people who will be running this country from now on, and even the princess of a neighboring nation we plan to ally with, were all there to hear Eberhart's dying words. He was known far and wide as the man who loved the Venom of the Nation more than anything—and he himself implied that you *weren't Heinreid*."

"You there. If Heinreid yet lives...give him a message from me."

Memories of the tyrant's death flashed through my mind. I felt my heart pound in my chest, but ignoring that and thinking carefully...that *was* what it had sounded like, I guess...?

"The palace guards we captured were spouting furious invective regarding the *impostor duke* as well—completely unaware that those words would save your life. In addition, we had witnesses take the stand to testify in your defense—myself, of course, but also Elmer Kisch, Lady Angelica Zechress...and Karl Anker."

I couldn't help but be startled by that final name. "Karl? How'd he even get involved?"

Craig had a bitter, dissatisfied look on his face, but he reluctantly explained.

"He weaseled his way into becoming a *distinguished member of the rebellion*. The moment he'd finished abducting you, he immediately defected to our side. He was the one who let His Highness and the other rebels into the palace through an entrance where security was understaffed while the king was focused on you."

"Wow..."

I mean... Sure, I did *tell him to stay alive out there when I said goodbye. But isn't that a bit* too *smooth of him? That slick bastard...*

Craig also seemed to have mixed feelings about the whole thing, and we didn't continue that topic any further. Instead, we got to the main point.

"And so, the leaders of the rebellion have concluded that you are an entirely different person who closely resembles His Grace. The official story is that you were threatened by the villainous duke and forced to serve as his double, or something along those lines, and thus you were merely a victim of—"

"W— Hey, wait! Hang on!" I frantically cut him off. The way this story just kept going, all presented as a done deal, was starting to make my head spin. "That's ridiculous! Do you seriously think those excuses are going to be enough to sweep everything away?! There's definitely going to be trouble down the line, one way or another!"

"Even if that is the case, His Highness Prince Sighart—soon to be His Majesty—will not issue unjust punishment to an innocent man. If

he were to do such a thing, he would be no different from that tyrant. Admittedly, we cannot simply let you roam freely outside—I expect that you will be confined to one of the palace's towers for the time being, on the pretext of interrogating you to divulge the location of the real duke."

"There's no way it's that easy—"

"*Easy?*"

Craig's words were getting more and more absurd, and I'd shot back just as forcefully, but his reaction was sharp and immediate. His hand resting against my cheek suddenly gripped my jaw, holding my head in place.

Huh?

"*Of course* it wasn't easy. I would ask that you refrain from speaking such nonsense. Would you like to know just how many dirty tricks I had to make use of in order to push things through this far?"

His anger-tinged eyes were lovely, beautiful, and so on, but the absolute blazing fury in his voice didn't leave me any time to think about that. He wasn't yelling at me, but the air prickled with tension.

Let's just put it plainly: I'm terrified.

"You wished to suffer because that's what you deserve, was it? And yet, even saying those words, you intend to take satisfaction in it, don't you? It's astonishing just how self-absorbed you can be. To be perfectly frank, that selfish side of yours is utterly, blood-boilingly infuriating. And so, as my personal punishment to you, I shall be robbing you of any and all freedom from now on. I will not allow you to make any excuses, and I will not permit you to shoulder any sins. *I* am the one keeping you alive, so your life will be *mine* to control in its entirety. Ah, how the tables have turned—and about damn time."

A-About damn time...?

He was going overboard, but if I tried to argue back, I'd probably step on another land mine. I kept my mouth shut.

I feel like a kid getting scolded... But he's younger *than me, dammit!*

While I quietly fumed, Craig lit the fuse on yet another bomb.

"Now then. Even having said all of that, I do not trust in the

slightest that you will behave yourself, so allow me to make this clear: If, by any chance, you should happen to take your own life, I will be following right after you."

"Wha—?!"

He smiled brightly at me, but his eyes still held that same burning anger—he looked scary as all hell. He delivered his finishing blow.

"*You* may be prepared to die, but you could never kill another person, could you?"

He got me.

I felt the phantom sensation of my back being slammed against a wall. When Eberhart had verbally cornered me, I'd felt like I was being pushed off a cliff—but this bastard was leaving me with nowhere to run in a different sense.

He'd dragged out the *me* hidden behind the villain and ordered me to admit my loss—to yield and surrender.

My body had tensed up involuntarily, but all the strength suddenly left me, and I fell limply back.

"Seriously... How the hell did you end up like this?"

Huh? Did I ask him something like that before too?

I felt a sense of déjà vu, but this time, I got back a *way* more messed-up answer.

"I had wanted to take our time talking things through, but my feelings have grown several times—no, several *hundred* times more complicated in the interim. I've obtained plenty of time for you, though, if nothing else... So I'll simply have to spend the rest of our lives explaining it to you."

Am I the only one who thinks this sounds crazy?

His voice was low and deep, like something slithering up from the bowels of the earth. I found myself squirming once again, but it was obvious that I was the one to blame for all of this; I couldn't say anything back.

I was stuck face-to-face with reality—I couldn't fight it anymore. He wouldn't let me.

Damn... He caught me.

Chapter 30

The wound on my foot closed up, and my stint of complete bed rest ended. Then, just as Craig had said, I was moved to a tower next to the palace. Leaning on Craig's shoulder for support, I just barely managed to climb to the top of the long, *long* spiral staircase. In my current condition, I wouldn't be able to make it down on my own.

Well, if I fell *down, it'd be over in a flash...*

I was just muttering to myself, reflecting on past experience, but Craig overheard me and absolutely lost his shit. So now, my room was locked from the outside—I wasn't even allowed to go out into the hall. Since I hadn't been planning on escaping, it didn't really matter either way, but it left me with plenty of time to reflect on my unwise remark.

All in all, my world had gotten a lot smaller. This tower had originally been built for confining nobles who'd committed crimes. It had all the essentials for everyday life, but there were cuffs and chains casually placed here and there, and the windows were barred—it was unmistakably a prison.

In fact, before I'd recovered my memories of my past life—in other words, back when I'd been a complete villain—I'd been locked in here once before. Though that didn't really matter at this point, I felt a strange sort of nostalgia, and I heard a faint mutter from my villainous memories: *Back again, eh?*

Locked away in here, I was also subject to tight restrictions on who I could interact with. A member of the palace staff would come up periodically to interrogate me about *the real Heinreid's* whereabouts and my own identity, but Craig had told me exactly how I needed to answer, *or else*. Every time they came, I just repeated the information he'd drilled into me, and neither I nor my interrogator ever pressed any further. Though it was all a formality—

a total farce, really—Craig said proper documentation was always important.

And then, there was Karl—he'd somehow ended up as one of my caretakers while I was in custody. My situation was a huge mess in all sorts of ways, so it was easier if all the people interacting with me already had a handle on the whole thing—something along those lines. But Craig had other work to do, so he couldn't be here around the clock. Someone needed to pick up the slack, and the role had fallen to everyone's favorite butler. Karl would be here when Craig was away, and vice versa. They'd come up a few times a day to bring me meals and take care of various other everyday tasks.

Now that I think about it, the top three guys from Heinreid's camp all made it through alive, and we've ended up in pretty much the same arrangement as before... Is this really okay?

Aside from those two, there was a doctor who came to check up on my foot, but today was his final visit. Unless I caught a cold or something, he wouldn't be coming back again. I watched him leave the room, then let out a relieved sigh.

"It's left a scar," Craig said, stroking along my foot.

"I'm just counting my blessings that it's still attached," I replied. "It's not like I'll be doing much moving around anyway."

According to the doctor, it wasn't just the scar—there'd be a little long-term damage as well. I hadn't totally lost the ability to walk, but I wouldn't be able to run or lift heavy objects anymore. In my life as an evil nobleman, I hadn't been doing those things much anyway, though, so that was probably fine.

"I find it infuriating, personally. It upsets me that I was unable to protect something that belongs to me."

Uh, I don't think I belonged to you at that point...

Saying that out loud would definitely cause more trouble than it was worth, though. I could hear the possessiveness bleeding into Craig's voice, and provoking him unnecessarily was a bad plan. Let sleeping dogs lie... Was that the right phrase here?

"Craig."

"What's the matter?"

Don't "What's the matter" me, dammit.

He definitely wasn't examining my injury anymore. As his hand slid up my leg toward my thigh, I grabbed it to hold him back and gave him an overly polite smile.

It's barely past noon. What the hell, man?

"Where are you touching me, exactly? I don't have any injuries up there."

"Indeed, it appears not."

"Quit acting so casua— Waugh!"

He brushed my hand off his and gave my shoulders a hard shove. My back thudded softly down onto the sheets. My eyes briefly closed from the shock of the impact, and in that instant, Craig climbed on top of me. The bed here was much smaller than the one in my old manor; it creaked sharply, but Craig ignored the noise as he straddled me.

"H-Hey—" I started.

"The rest of you is perfectly clean and spotless... So clean that I can't help but want to *soil it*."

The sinister sultriness in those words sent a shudder down my spine.

Uh-oh. I think I know where this is heading...

Alarm bells were ringing in my head.

"J-Just calm down a sec, okay? Really, cool off a little—you'll be the one who gets soiled if you're not careful!"

"You have far too low an opinion of yourself. Very well—once we're finished, we can compare and see which of us is filthier."

"Finished with *what*— Nhaah!"

I kept trying to stall, but an electric jolt suddenly raced through my body, and I couldn't say another word. Through the fabric of my shirt, Craig had dug his fingernails into both of my nipples.

Caught by surprise, I quickly clamped a hand over my mouth to cover up my humiliating moan, but it was too little, too late.

"There's no need to hide it," he said with a mocking chuckle. "You like it right here, don't you, Your Lordship? Enough to toy with them yourself, at least."

I felt my face flush with heat at his mean-spirited whisper.

Shit, that's right—Eberhart told me Craig was watching that whole

thing! Dammit, just when I'd finally forgotten about it!

While I tried and failed to come up with an excuse, my mouth opening and closing pointlessly, Craig's fingers kept playing across my chest.

"You wished to know *how I ended up like this*, didn't you? Well, allow me to tell you how it began. It started at that very moment, as I watched you punish yourself with those same hands that had dealt me countless humiliations. I wanted to topple you from all your pretenses of nobility. I wanted to drag you out and make you mine. *That* was when that impulse was born. Go ahead—mock me, laugh at me, call me a wretched disgrace."

As he spoke, *Craig* was the one with a self-mocking smile on his face. But his hands didn't stop tormenting me.

"Haah, nn..."

He scraped his nail across one of my nipples through my shirt, and while I writhed, he undid my buttons—slowly, teasingly, one by one. Finally, he spread my shirt open, and I shivered involuntarily as cool air tickled my skin. I heard an enraptured sigh from the man on top of me as he watched me squirm. His gaze licked across my body, and an unbearable humiliation flooded through me.

"Don't look at me," I groaned.

"You ask far too much. This is *exactly* what I've wanted to see all this time..."

"You're such a bully— Nhh, aaah!"

He pinched both my nipples hard, as though punishing me for my backtalk. Wracked with pain and even greater pleasure, all I could do was moan helplessly.

I lay there as Craig tormented my chest—but eventually, one of his hands moved away. It slid down my abdomen and slipped inside the one piece of clothing I was still wearing: my underwear.

"Huh— Ah— No way—!"

Ignoring my words of protest, Craig took hold and tugged me free. Without even looking, I could already feel how hard I was as I pulsed in his hand. Craig smirked as he touched me—gently, soothingly—and my hips bucked and twitched.

"It's lovely to see such an honest reaction from you," he said.

"Does it truly feel that good?"

"You're twisted, you know that? Nn!"

"Are *you* anyone to talk?" Craig asked, a little sigh of irritation in his voice.

As he spoke, his hand dipped lower and cupped what dangled below. He gave a sharp squeeze, and I shuddered.

"Nhh, aagh!"

He didn't torture me there any further, though. Instead, he returned one hand to my member and used the other to keep tormenting my nipple.

"Wait—" I gasped. "Not at the same— Hnhh!"

I frantically shook my head, but Craig was merciless. He smeared every drop that leaked out up and down, tip to base, while his other hand feverishly pinched and plucked at the most sensitive spot on my chest.

The surging waves of pleasure were more than I could take. As I shook and spasmed, he dug his fingernails into my tip, and my thoughts shattered.

"*Aaaahh!!!*"

I felt a jolt, like I was losing my footing on a flight of stairs. Squeezing my eyes shut, I let myself tumble over the edge of the climax he'd pulled me to. Cloudy white streaks spurted out, soiling Craig's hand and my stomach.

While I panted and heaved, trying to catch my breath, Craig shrugged off his vest and dropped it to the floor. He impatiently tugged off all the clothes on his upper body, exposing his broad, muscular chest. I felt a twinge of guilt as I took in the countless small scars across his skin; meanwhile, he slid my half-removed underwear the rest of the way off and tossed it aside somewhere.

It was still humiliating to be exposed, but that was outweighed by nervous doubt as he stroked a hand along my hip.

"Are... Are we really doing this?"

"We are," he replied. "I don't want to hear any complaints after we've come this far."

We've only come this far *because* you *dragged me here.*

"Have you ever been with a man before?" I asked.

"I haven't."

"Then, uh, how about we take this a little slower, okay? I've never done *that stuff* either, so maybe we can call it here for today—"

"I refuse. I still recall what happened to me the last time I withdrew. I won't be falling for that again. In any case, I've come prepared."

Craig calmly reached over to the nightstand and pulled a bottle out of a drawer. It was filled with a viscous, honey-like liquid that flowed slowly to the side as he tilted the bottle. I asked what it was, and he nonchalantly told me it was a special sort of balm.

When the hell did you set that up? How long have you been preparing for this?!

"It's something of a luxury item," he said, "but this is our first time, after all. I decided not to stint myself."

He uncorked the bottle with a *pop*.

A scent filled the room, and my body reacted instantly.

Ah...

"You like this fragrance, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said slowly.

It was the scent of roses.

As the aroma drifted over to me, my thoughts melted away. It was practically a reflex at this point. Normally, even just the *sight* of roses would take me back there—but right now, I was lying on a bed, shoved onto my back, with someone straddling me. It was like Pavlov's something-or-other—my body was conditioned to react to this situation, and it obediently submitted.

Craig watched in satisfaction as my muscles relaxed. He briefly stroked my hair, then drizzled the bottle's contents into the palm of his hand. After smearing and spreading it around his fingers for a few moments, he judged it was ready. His lubed hand dipped down, and finally, I felt a finger pry its way into my tight, puckered hole.

Immediately, a potent unfamiliarity gripped me, and yet my knees jolted and trembled.

"Nn, gh, augh..."

"I'm sorry," Craig murmured. "Is it too much?"

Too much? Of course it's too much. I've never done this before—

it all feels so weird, so strange.

Pain, discomfort, and countless...*other* sensations jostled for my attention—all unpleasant, of course. Cold sweat beaded on my forehead. But—

"Nh, I... I'm fine..." I groaned out. "I can...take it..."

—I had to behave myself. I had to let in all the strange new feelings. I had to be brave. And then at the end, I'd get to hear that voice praising me, telling me I'd been such a good boy. I'd get to feel those arms wrapping around me and holding me tight. That was what experience told me. That was how it worked.

I inhaled with a small sniffle. Even though my mind felt full to bursting, I put up with the sensation of his finger swirling inside me. Craig looked pained as he watched my face, but he didn't let up, adding more balm now and then to continue toying with me.

I couldn't say how long that went on for. But eventually, his fingertip brushed against a particular spot, and something new raced through me, entirely at odds with all the discomfort I'd felt up until then. My body twitched and bucked.

"Hwah...?" I moaned.

"Ah, excellent. So it *is* there."

"Wha... What's happening...? Wait— Hnn, ah!"

Now that he'd found that spot, Craig focused all his attention on it. Pleasure surged through me—I went from half-flaccid right back to fully hard again and dribbling. It felt like I was losing control of my body. I started to say *No, I'm scared*... But that wasn't what I was supposed to say here.

"Yes...more..."

I mumbled almost unconsciously, but Craig's sharp ears picked up those words. He stared down at me, eyes wide. Suddenly, his finger slid out of me.

"Damn it..." he swore.

He'd said the balm was expensive, but now he upended the bottle and dumped it all out onto my stomach. He dropped the empty bottle to the floor with a *clunk*. The balm hadn't been warmed up at all, and my body tensed at the cold, wet sensation, but I immediately had bigger things to worry about. He spread more

balm on his hand, and then I felt a fingertip press inside me once again. But this time, it wasn't just one—a second stretched me open, maybe a third. They moved independently of one another, each stimulating that sensitive spot in turn.

"A-aah! Don't...add— Haah, no!"

"*You're* the one who provoked me," Craig snapped.

He was being unreasonable, but I instinctively started apologizing. "I'm sorry," I whimpered.

I heard a sigh. His fingers twirled around, spreading me open even more, and then finally withdrew.

Heaving breaths spilled from my lips; relief filled me as the pleasure retreated. As soon as I closed my eyes, I started to feel a little drowsy. I wanted to just give myself over to it—but Craig had no intention whatsoever of letting me. I distantly heard the sound of fabric rustling.

"Huh?"

Something hot and firm pressed against the gape his fingers had opened, and my bleary mind instantly snapped back to alertness.

My eyes nervously drifted downward. What I saw down there definitely didn't belong to a woman. As I took in the monstrous, menacing shape of it, the color drained from my face.

"N-No, no way! Craig, don't! Hold on—"

"It's all right. I've loosened you up properly."

"It's not all right at all! You're expecting too much from me! There's no way I can take that! Please, don't! If you stick that into me, I'll break— I'll die—!"

I struggled, terrified, but Craig pinned me down.

"It's all right," he said once again, despite all evidence to the contrary. "If you die here...then I shall simply have to bring you back to life."

A tight yelp spilled from my throat, but Craig wasn't waiting any longer.

With a wet *shlup*, his thick, burning-hot length pushed inside me, prying me open. His fingers had just finished stretching me out a little, and although it was a squeeze, I wasn't so tight that he couldn't advance. Slowly, inch by heated inch, I swallowed him up.

I moaned helplessly, not knowing how to stop. Finally, the thickest part of his shaft plunged inside. I sighed with relief, mistakenly thinking I was over the worst of it—but Craig, seizing that brief opening, bucked his hips forward all at once, pounding up into me.

"Agh, guh!"

The impact left me gasping, the air rushing out of my lungs. Sparks danced in front of my unfocused eyes. I had no idea where I was anymore.

I trembled and shuddered, forgetting to breathe, until a few light slaps on my cheek dragged me back to reality.

"Are you alive, Lord Heinreid?"

"H-Hell if I know..." I mumbled.

"Ah, good, you're all right. Nothing's torn. Don't worry—I won't move too quickly. Let's keep it gentle for today. It's a bit much for me too..."

"Of course it is, dumbass—! Ngh, owww..." I groaned.

My hole, spread wide around him, was screaming that it was at its limit. There was no way he hadn't torn something—that had to be a lie. My sight blurred as tears welled up from the pain. I blinked them away, and they trickled away down the sides of my head. With my vision a little clearer, I saw Craig's face looming over me. I locked eyes with the man making me feel this way. He was staring at me with a gaze that could only be described as *devouring*.

Slowly, he leaned in closer and sucked away the tears lingering in the corners of my eyes—first one, then the other, with an almost ritual air. He started to move down, intending to latch onto my lips next—but he suddenly froze in place. I looked up in confusion. He bit his lower lip with a strangely hesitant, faltering expression, clearly trying to think something through.

Wait, is he...?

A possibility surfaced in my mind.

"Pff... Hnffh..."

Yeah, that's probably—no, that's definitely *it.*

As I became more and more certain, laughter started to bubble out of me. Laughing made my *insides* tremble as well; I tried to

keep myself under control, but my chuckles turned into a weird groan partway through. Craig gazed down at me suspiciously while my shoulders shook.

Suddenly, something about him looked absolutely adorable. I reached a hand up to his cheek.

"You're worried I'm going to get you back, aren't you?" I asked.

"No, I'm not..."

He denied it, but the truth was written all over his face.

That day—when Craig had shown up at the manor to wake me up—he'd thought he was the one in control, but I'd nearly stolen the initiative from him. He'd remembered that just now, and that was why he'd hesitated to kiss me.

Ha ha... What the hell? He's *the one pinning me down, pounding into me, and making me his bitch—but he's still getting hung up on* that*? Damn. I thought he was just cocky and full of himself, but younger guys can actually be pretty cute, huh?*

Despite the situation, despite our current positions, I suddenly wanted to spoil him a little.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll behave myself today..."

C'mere.

I opened my mouth and waggled my tongue back and forth, beckoning him in.

Craig's eyes widened for a moment. He made a small, frustrated noise in the back of his throat, then dove down into a ferocious kiss.

"Mnn, hh, mm..."

As promised, I obediently surrendered myself to him. He nibbled at my lower lip and sucked on my tongue as his mouth clamped onto mine. His saliva flowed down, and this time, I swallowed it willingly. I was letting him do as he pleased, and he definitely wasn't bad at it—but seeing how frantic he was, a little mischievous impulse sprouted within me.

As his tongue pressed into my mouth as far as it could go, trying to devour me, I suddenly dug my teeth into it. I didn't bite hard enough to hurt, but Craig froze for a moment, caught by surprise. I seized the opening and sucked on his tongue from below, as hard as I could. Our saliva mingled, and an undignified *shlurping* sound rang

out as I lapped at him. Craig jerked back away from me with an adorable flustered noise.

"Now you've done it..." he growled.

His face was flushed red, and he wiped his wet mouth with the back of one hand. He looked absolutely precious. I swallowed down the remaining spit and smiled up at him.



"C'mon, you left yourself wide open."

"*Lord Heinreid.*"

I started to reply...and froze in place.

Is... Is it just me, or is that thing *inside me getting heavier...?*

"If you chose to provoke me just now, fully aware of our respective positions, then you certainly have a great deal of nerve," he continued. "*I take it you are prepared to face the consequences.*"

He lifted my legs up. I could see his face in between my knees, filled with a pure, unadulterated sadism that made me shiver with dread. As he slowly withdrew, I had a nasty premonition, and my eyes shot open wide.

"Wait— I'm sor— Aagh!"

He didn't let me finish my placating apology. With a sharp *PLAP*, his hips slammed against me, pounding in and out, again and again. His movements were vicious, without a shred of care; tears welled up and scattered from my eyes.

"St— Ghh! Kh, nn! Y-You said—aah!—you'd be—*gentle*!" I gasped out.

"*You're*—ahh—the one who lied...first!"

I wasn't lying*! I was just messing with you a little! I don't deserve this!*

My mental words of protest were drowned out by the meaningless noises spilling from my lips. My ears were filled with slaps, squelches, and other ridiculously humiliating sounds. I tried to shake my head to clear my senses, but I couldn't get away. He had his way with me as I choked out sobs.

Then, all of a sudden, he gripped me once again and started forcefully jerking me off. Just when I'd thought I'd gone as high as I could go, waves of violent pleasure crashed over me, and I raised my voice in alarm.

"Aah, no—! Not both at— Nnn!"

"Why...not...?" Craig grunted out. "I know you're—nhh—enjoying it!"

I was helplessly manhandled back and forth. Occasionally, he'd hit a *sweet spot*, and I'd lose myself completely.

My hole. My insides. My length. Everything he did, everywhere he

touched me—all of it was ecstasy. I could only moan pathetically beneath him.

"Haa— I— I'm cu—!"

"Me too— Aah, Lord Heinreid—"

An instant before I hit my limit, his lips locked onto me again. The momentum sent his teeth lightly clacking into mine; it was an awful kiss, but I took it desperately. Before I could process what was happening, I felt something hot pumping and splurting out inside me—and immediately, I crested my climax too.

This time, as the strange sensation and the intense pleasure raced through me, my consciousness really did go flying away.

◆◇◆

When my mind floated back to the surface, the light in the room had gone dim. I wasn't sure whether it was dusk or early morning—either way, I'd been asleep for a while.

Did I seriously pass out after finishing? Even virgins are more put together than that, dammit!

I was pretty much stark naked, but I wasn't cold. If anything, I was hot—no, sweltering. The man who'd eaten me alive was right in front of me, his arms wrapped tight around my body. He must have cleaned up afterward—my skin didn't feel sticky or anything. But god, the bastard had such a smug, satisfied look on his face as he slept. I could hear his breathing, soft and steady, filling me with hatred and a little bit of love.

Right now, I just wanted to get out of bed. I started to wriggle away, but just before I could escape the enveloping warmth, I was stopped in my tracks. He tugged at my arm, yanking me back to my starting position—no, I was pressed even *closer* against his heat now. Squeezed in his iron grip, I let out an utterly unsexy *gweh*.

I was worried I'd woken him up, but he was hugging me too tightly for me to see his face. Instead, his deep voice softly muttered into my ear.

"Don't run away..."

I still couldn't see his expression. But I could hear his earnest,

desperate plea.

He almost sounds like he's about to cry...

I slipped my arm around Craig and gave him a light, reassuring pat on the back.

"I'm not going to run... You'll make sure not to let me, right?"

Craig...

He'd tied the heavy chain of his own life around me, holding me in place.

As long as I have that...I'll go on living.

Afterstory: A Knight's Mistakes

Chapter 1

When you exert yourself, you grow stronger. The more work you put in, the better the results you get in return.

Who had imparted those words to me, in the days before this country was despoiled by evil—in that time of true peace?

My father? My mother? My brother? My mentor?

Those long-ago memories had grown hazy and indistinct.

It was a simple enough homily to give to a child. One could call it trite, even. But that lesson, and the *future* it implicitly promised, sustained me during my years in service to evil, rescuing me from the brink of despair time and time again.

If I grew stronger, I could fight. I stood firm and steadfast, trusting that a better future would someday result.

And here I was, in the *now* my perseverance had won me—a present far unlike the future I'd imagined back then.

"Nn, haah... Ah, aah!"

I gazed down at the pale back stretched out beneath me. The man was slumped forward on a bed, just his hips lifted slightly in the air. Thrust after thrust jostled him back and forth, tearing intermittent moans from his throat—still, he was holding back his voice a little as he quietly sobbed. And the one inciting those cries was none other than me. I was forcing my former master to hunch over like a beast—staining him completely and utterly. The feeling of depravity only fanned the flames of my arousal. I picked up speed, thrusting in deeper where our bodies connected, and he raised his voice in an undignified wail.

"Wai— Waaugh! N-Not so—aah!—fast, dumbass— Nn!"

I sighed back at him. "You complain just as much when I go

slowly," I replied scornfully.

I lifted his lower body up before he could collapse fully to the bed. His lithe back arched, even as he shook and trembled, and I drove still deeper into him.

"Hiih, nhaa! Fh, ngh, nhnn..."

His moans grew higher in pitch, then became muffled midway through. Unable to withstand the humiliation, he had pulled over a pillow and buried his face in it. I considered taking it away from him...but I thought better of it.

This position had one major disadvantage, as it were. Today, I couldn't reach those oh-so-familiar spots that would bring pleasure to the man pinned beneath me. Ordinarily, I would toy with them relentlessly; having them untouched now must have left him dissatisfied. He was breathing in short gasps, his face was flushed red all the way to his ears, and his upper body writhed as he rubbed his chest against the sheets. The sight was utterly...

"Filthy..." The word formed itself in my thoughts and slipped directly from my mouth.

His body twitched as he overheard my quiet mutter. He took his face out of the pillow and turned his head to look at me. Those crimson eyes glared up, wet with tears—and the sight only set my heart racing faster.

A heaviness filled my nethers. He must have felt it inside him as well. His face went taut with alarm, and that spurred me on still further. I had briefly paused my rhythmic thrusting, but now I started it once more. Horrible wet squelching noises rang out, pushing both him and me closer to our limits.

"Aa, aah!" he moaned. "N-No—deep—too hard—nff, aaah!"

Even as he claimed that I was being too intense, his insides writhed around me, beckoning me with their warmth. There was no way I could hold back. *"Your body is far more honest with me..."* would be too vulgar of a line, so I swallowed it down. Instead, I plunged into his innermost depths, taking him as I pleased.

I listened to his high, pleading cries while he wriggled and wormed, as if to beg me for something. So I gave him what he

asked for, pinning him firmly in place and spilling my heat inside him.

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"You've lost a little weight, Lord Heinreid."

With all the necessary cleanup concluded, I addressed my former master—Lord Heinreid—as he lay limply in my arms.

Strictly speaking, he was no longer *Heinreid*—he'd been given a new false name and identity. But no matter how long he tried, he couldn't seem to get accustomed to it. Every time I called him by that name, he would look back at me in puzzlement, so I'd resigned myself to using his old name except during his periodic interrogations.

He'd fallen half asleep, but at the sound of that familiar name, he looked up at me drowsily.

"Mmm... Have I?" he replied. "I don't really feel any different—you sure it's not just in your head?"

"Please don't try to brush it aside. You can tell, can't you? You've obviously gotten thinner."

I stroked a confirmatory hand along his slender back as I rebutted his noncommittal response. His shoulders twitched slightly, and he fixed me with a reproachful glare.

That isn't *why I touched you...*

He sighed. "Well, I haven't been moving around much for the past while. I've probably just lost some muscle."

"You never had much muscle to begin with."

"Well, sure, maybe compared to *you*, Sir Knight."

He gave me a sharp-edged smile and punched a fist into my chest. Although it wasn't hard enough to hurt, I coughed involuntarily at the direct impact to my lungs. He seized the opening, starting to turn away from me, and I pulled him back into my arms. He complained that he was too hot, but I absolutely wasn't letting him get away.

"You've been taking your meals properly, haven't you?" I asked.

"*Karl's* the one preparing them. You know there's no way he'd slack off on that."

I fell silent. Even if it had come up naturally in our conversation, it still irritated me to hear someone else's name on those lips. In the time since he'd begun to catch my eye, I was well aware that I'd become quite petty, but I simply couldn't help it.

Lord Heinreid stared at my face for a few moments, carefully observing, then reached out a hand to stroke my hair with a wide, obnoxious smirk.

"There there," he teased. "Don't worry—you're cuter."

"Are you trying to *placate* me?" I asked, exasperated. "In any case, very well—you say the cause of the problem is a lack of exercise. Then I shall compose a training regimen you can carry out here in your room and have you perform it daily. How does that sound?"

"Training?" His hand froze, and he narrowed his eyes at me suspiciously. "By *your* standards...?"

I wasn't quite sure what that gaze meant. Since the start of his confinement in this tower, Lord Heinreid's expressions had become surprisingly rich and varied; I never tired of watching them.

A small silence had fallen over the room. I suddenly felt his toes tickling at my leg.

"We're already doing plenty of *indoor exercise*, aren't we?" he said with a leer.

"Don't be crass. In any case, *I'm* the one doing the moving."

"Oh, so that's how you're gonna be? Want me to show you just how exhausting it is on my side of things?"

"Absolutely not."

There had already been countless occasions when I'd let my guard down and he'd tried to seize control. I had no intention of letting him push things any further, even if he was only joking.

As he stared at my scowling face, he broke into a smile once again. I knew that if I let him be, he would keep on teasing me without end. I pushed away his mischievous foot and climbed on top of him, boxing him in.

"I take it you wish for another round of *exercise*?" I asked.

"You feeling me up just now got me in the mood. You'll help me out, right?"

He didn’t show any nervousness at the suggestion of a second round. Had it all been deliberate? His hand reached out to stroke my cheek, but I caught it in my grip and planted a kiss on his wrist. Watching his ticklish smile from the corner of my eye, I couldn’t help but reflect on how much things had changed.

Until recently, even as he’d accepted my advances, he’d remained thoroughly passive. But lately, he’d begun making invitations of his own more frequently. In fact, *he* was the one who’d enticed me into the act we’d just finished earlier.

The first time he’d asked me to lie with him, I’d been so surprised that I couldn’t help tactlessly asking him why. With a slightly uncomfortable—no, a *bashful* air—he’d replied, “You made me this way.” In the privacy of my heart, I’d rejoiced. I was changing Lord Heinreid. And he recognized it and acknowledged it as my influence. Even after I’d declared that he was mine and locked him away in here, he still had a certain strange elusiveness to him. Hearing those words from his mouth, how could I not be overjoyed?

As I ran my tongue along the wrist I’d captured, I reached down to his chest, to the sensitive spots I’d neglected earlier. I lightly scratched at one, and a longing sigh slipped from his mouth. Those crimson eyes, already beginning to tear up from the pleasure, wavered expectantly. Not one to betray his hopes, I pinched his nipple as hard as I could between my index finger and thumb, eliciting a high, sharp cry. I pressed my lips to his, swallowing up the sound. He moaned sweetly; his tongue welcomed me in. He obediently offered it up, lacking the strength or the will to tease me, and I savored the taste of him to my heart’s content.

I had just finished cleaning up his rear, but now I loosened him briefly once more, then shoved myself in a little hastily. At last, his tears welled up and softly scattered.

Shameful as it was to admit, the moments that inflamed my arousal the most fiercely were when I caught sight of that tear-streaked face. I couldn’t say whether it was protectiveness, sadism, or sheer depravity—it all became muddled together as my reason crumbled.

With each thrust into his body, the tears spilled endlessly down

his cheeks. It felt like a waste to let them simply fall, so I brought my lips to the corners of his eyes.

In hindsight, even at that moment, the poison was coursing through me. Not the venom that had once spread across the nation, nor the bitter liquor I'd been made to drink—a soft, sweet poison, eating away at my mind.

Chapter 2

Once my early morning guard duties had concluded and I'd reached a stopping point with my other routine tasks, I took lunch in the large dining hall for palace staff. Paperwork had kept me busy longer than expected, and by the time I arrived, people were already a little sparse.

Half a year had passed since His Majesty King Sighart had slain the tyrant and freed the kingdom from the clutches of evil. The country had been in disarray in the wake of the sudden revolution, but thanks to the capable leadership of His Majesty and those under him—along with aid from Her Majesty Queen Natasha's homeland of Mokhia—things had settled down considerably. There was still no end to the work required to keep the country running, of course, but I'd begun finding myself with more free time than I'd had in those early days.

That said, I spent most of my spare hours up in the tower—in fact, my own quarters were beginning to collect dust. Lord Heinreid, with a harried air, had tried to tell me that I needn't visit quite *that* often; I'd pressed him, asking whether he had something to hide from me. *"Hmm, do I? What do you think?"* had been his taunting reply. The exchange was still fresh in my memory. At the time, I'd merely reflected anew on his despicable character, but in hindsight, perhaps it had been a ploy to keep me from noticing that he'd lost weight.

Memories of his body in my arms last night flickered through my mind. With his reduced muscle mass, he'd felt a little smaller and frailer than before. When I'd held him down, pinning that slender body firmly in place as he'd struggled against the excess pleasure, I'd occasionally felt like I was pushing him too far. But the sight of those dark-flecked scarlet eyes that had once coldly glared down at me, now wavering and melting under my hand, had made me all the

more...

THUD.

I slammed my head down onto the table, producing a far louder noise than I'd expected. My thoughtless display caused a sudden stir around me, but any contrition at disturbing others was far outweighed by my inner discomfort.

It's barely afternoon, damn it! What the hell am I fantasizing about?!

Admonishing myself inwardly, I clutched at my stinging brow and somehow managed to lift my head. As I did, someone pulled out the empty chair by my side.

"Hey, that you, Craig? What's up?" the man asked in a concerned tone as he sat down next to me. "If you're not getting enough sleep, you oughta go take a nap instead of grabbing lunch, don'tcha think?"

I turned toward the voice.

"Sir Schmidt... No, I'm all right. Sorry to disturb you."

"Nah, no worries—as long as you're okay, it's all good. Anyway, I keep telling you, just call me Sven!"

This man, smiling cheerily as he started on his own lunch, was Sven Schmidt. During the days when evil had still reigned, he'd been the leader of an underground militia plotting their own rebellion against the king. There'd been a few such militias, but the one he'd led had been primarily composed of younger commoners, and they'd been an invaluable help to then-Prince Sighart as he'd mustered up forces to fight from the inside.

On the strength of those accomplishments, Sir Schmidt had earned a prominent position among the royal knights. The stuffy formalities of the role didn't sit well with him, though, and he would routinely complain to me as his colleague. We'd gotten to talking more and more, and at some point, the two of us had become close. Honestly, my history serving *that duke* had left me a little—no, *more* than a little alienated from my peers, and I suspected that he'd initially approached me out of concern. He wasn't any older than me, but he had a knack for looking after others.

"Still, you've gotta be pretty tired out, right?" he asked, biting into

a bread roll he'd dipped into his soup. "I mean, on top of everything else, they're making you keep an eye on that impostor... Pretty mean of Sig—uh, of His Majesty, if you ask me. Of all the people he could've stuck with that guy, it didn't have to be *you*, did it?"

Sir Schmidt's words must have been founded in the camaraderie he'd developed with His Majesty during their time fighting together, but even so, he was being a touch disrespectful. Besides, he'd misunderstood the situation to begin with.

"No... His Majesty isn't at fault. *I'm* actually the one who insisted I be given the role."

"Huh?"

All I'd done was clarify matters, but for some reason, Sir Schmidt looked troubled. He swallowed down the mouthful of food he'd been chewing, then addressed me in an undertone.

"Hey, you're not gonna tell me those rumors are true, are you?"

"What rumors?" I asked back, utterly confused.

He briefly scanned our surroundings, making certain that no one was nearby, then lowered his voice still further.

"They say *Craig Bauer's furious about that evil duke disappearing, and he's taking it all out on the impostor, torturing him night after night*."

"I would never!!!" I yelled at him reflexively, alarmed by the ridiculous words I'd just heard.

Sir Schmidt jolted upright in his chair. People around us were glancing our way to see what the new commotion was; he hurriedly apologized to them, assuring them that it was nothing, really, before turning back to me.

"Look, man, I'm sorry!" he said placatingly. "You don't gotta shout..."

"My apologies... I hadn't heard those rumors—your words simply caught me by surprise."

I regained a little composure, inwardly chastising myself for drawing unwanted attention twice in one day.

In any case, where on earth did that rumor get started, and when? No, given my position, it's not that surprising that people would speculate, I suppose. Actually, in a way, the truth is even

more absurd... So stop thinking lecherous thoughts in the middle of the afternoon!

I gave a self-loathing sigh, clutching my head in my hands.

"H-Hey, c'mon—don't get so down, okay?" Sir Schmidt had mistakenly concluded that *he* was to blame for my low spirits. "I was being insensitive. It's just a stupid rumor that's popped up lately—it's not like I believed it or anything. I just... Here, y'know what? I'll give you these as an apology."

He held out a small paper bag. I accepted it, staring at it in puzzlement.

"What's this?"

"They're cookies from this sweetshop that just opened up on Third Avenue. They're real tasty, but Yulia, the shopgirl, kept pushing me to buy more, and I ended up with way too many..."

"Didn't the girl at the bakery use the same trick on you the other day?"

"Yeah, yeah, you got me!" replied my friend, apparently an easy mark. "Anyway, if you don't mind taking some cookies off my hands, please, go for it. You don't get into town much, right? It'll do you good to try new things!"

I didn't have the heart to shove his gift back at him, so I opened the bag and gave a cookie a taste. I bit into it with a light crunch. It was sweet, but not overbearingly so; as the flavor slowly spread through my mouth, my eyes widened slightly in surprise.

Huh. Aggressive sales tactics aside, these really aren't bad.

"They're tasty," I said.

"Right? Sweet stuff's good for when you're tired too."

At some point while I'd been distracted, he'd somehow finished his meal. He stood up from his seat with a friendly "See ya!"

"Sir Schmidt!" I quickly called out as he turned to go. "Thank you."

"Sure thing. But call me Sven!"

He turned back over his shoulder, smiling cheerily at me, and I waved a hand goodbye.

I wasn't especially tired, but all the same, it was good to have a caring friend thinking of me. Feeling a little awkward about it all, I

glanced down at the paper bag he'd given me.

I wonder, does His Lordship like sweets?

Despite my visits growing more frequent, I would often just barely miss him at mealtimes, and lately, Karl Anker had ended up fully in charge of his meals. I hadn't been able to share breakfast or lunch with him today either, but at this point in the afternoon, he might just be getting a little peckish. I was also concerned about him losing weight—the cookies were perfectly timed, really.

So went my thoughts as I came up with excuses. I had a little time before my next shift began, so I took the opportunity to make my way to the tower.

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Just as I arrived at the tower entrance, my gaze met that of a slim man coming down the stairs—His Lordship's other caretaker, Karl Anker. The thought that he'd been in the same room as Lord Heinreid not minutes ago filled me with a jealous irritation, but there was no point in saying so. I just averted my gaze and tried to make my way inside.

Usually, Karl would make every effort to ignore me completely, but for once, he stopped me as we were passing one another.

"Wait. What is *that*?" he asked, pointing at the paper bag of cookies Sir Schmidt had just given me.

"Simply some baked goods," I replied slowly. "I've already tasted them for poison. Do you have some objection?"

I didn't like discussing my friend's gift in those terms, but I'd heard the wariness in Karl's voice, so I reluctantly went along with it. Karl silently considered for a few moments, then sharply turned his gaze away from me as though to say he'd lost interest.

"No. Do as you please."

I heard something odd in his tone, but even if I asked about it, I didn't imagine he'd explain further. His footsteps receded as he headed off to wherever it was he went; I proceeded into the tower and up the stairs, not turning to see him off. Finally, I reached the room at the top.

"Excuse me, Your Lordship."

"Gah! You're here already?"

What kind of greeting was that? I pursed my lips in annoyance, but before I could press him on it, I caught sight of him, and an entirely different question spilled from my mouth.

"What is that you're doing?"

"Hmm? Stretches. You said you were gonna have me do indoor workouts, so I figured I should warm up."

He sat on the bed, his legs stretched straight out in front of him and his torso pressed flat against them. He didn't seem to be straining himself at all. If he was this flexible, I couldn't help but wonder what use there was in stretching in the first place.

"Weren't you opposed to that plan?" I asked.

"I never said that. I mean, it's true that I'm getting out of shape—as long as you're not making me do anything too crazy, I'm up for it."

With his torso still bent, he now began spreading his legs apart. The bed wasn't especially wide, and one of his feet thudded to a stop against the wall, but if not for that obstacle, he would have been able to do a perfect split. I'd already witnessed for myself what a wide range of positions his body could accept.

"The stretches you're doing now are meant to be performed *after* exercise, Lord Heinreid."

"Wait, for real? Are there different kinds of stretches for before and after?"

"I'll give you proper instruction the next time I visit. Right now, I'm simply here to bring you a snack."

"Oh?"

He sat back up, realizing that the stretches wouldn't be necessary today, and I handed him the paper bag I'd brought.

"One of my colleagues—a friend of mine—bought too many of these at a sweetshop down in the city, so he gave me some. I can't finish them by myself, so you're welcome to them."

"Huh, you made a friend? What kind of guy is he?"

Rather than focusing on the cookies, his attention went somewhere unexpected. I didn't usually talk much about my life

outside, and he was leaning forward with a look of fascination; his choice of words was a bit rude, but I gave him an answer.

"He was originally a commoner, so I doubt you would have heard of him. He led a militia during the rebellion."

"Commoner, militia... Sven Schmidt?"

I'd given him barely any information, but somehow, he'd immediately arrived at precisely the right name. My eyes widened in astonishment.

"You knew of him, Your Lordship?"

"Well, I've never met the guy myself... But Sven's there, huh? That's good to hear..."

He'd never met him—in other words, he'd been in possession of information on the rebel militias during his time at the estate. Given his mutter of relief, maybe he'd obtained that information *after* his shift in personality and quietly worried for the man's safety? I'd never picked up any sign of that before, though...

My slight doubts were drowned out by Lord Heinreid's voice as he examined the contents of the paper bag.

"Ooh, cookies. Sven's got a sweet tooth, huh?"

"He was after the shopgirl more than the sweets."

"Ah, gotcha. Well, either way, he's got a healthy appetite. They look tasty. My throat might get a bit dry, though."

Lord Heinreid *was* interested in sweets, it seemed. I let out an inward sigh of relief. He reached for the water pitcher, but I stopped him and sat him down in a chair. I suggested that tea might be better, but he didn't want to wait that long, so I assented and poured him a glass of water. His throat must have been a bit dry to begin with—he started by taking a small sip of water, then plucked a cookie straight from the bag and bit into it.

"Mm, these are nice."

"Are they to your liking?"

"It's been a while since I've gotten to snack on anything. Oh—don't bring stuff every day, though, okay? I'll spoil my dinner."

I'd just been considering bringing more tomorrow, given his favorable response, but he'd immediately warned me against that. Disappointing as it was, it would defeat the purpose if he couldn't

finish his actual meals. I abandoned that idea; instead, I took a seat next to him, taking the rare opportunity to watch him while he ate. Seeing him pick up the food I'd brought him, bring it to his lips, chew, and swallow, I felt something clench tight inside my chest. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation, though. As I pondered, trying to put a name to the feeling, Lord Heinreid felt my gaze on him and glanced at me uncomfortably out of the corner of his eye.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"I am."

"Hmm..."

My prompt and honest answer sent Lord Heinreid into contemplation for a brief moment. Then, struck by an idea, he pressed a cookie against my mouth. I hadn't intended on eating any, but with it already resting against my lips, I had no choice but to accept. I obediently opened my mouth and closed it around the cookie, taking it from his fingers. As I crunched down on it, I heard an appreciative noise beside me.

"Feels like I'm giving a dog treats," he said, laughing.

"*I'm* the one who brought them."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. You're the master here, Craig."

"You— Mmnph!"

I tried to scold him for his spur-of-the-moment teasing, but he cut me off with several more cookies shoved into my mouth. Having forcibly shut me up, he ate the final cookie, then downed the remaining water in his glass.

"Look, don't worry. I'll make sure I don't lose any more weight," he said. "So you go out there and get your job done, all right? Don't go causing trouble for your work friend."

He gave me a warm smile. If I told him that he sounded like a wife seeing off her husband, he'd probably be upset with me. And for my part, I'd be too embarrassed to say that in the first place. Nevertheless, my heart was filled with a happiness too great to put into words. Even as I made to leave the room, I still couldn't contain my elation. I leaned in to whisper sultrily in his ear that I'd be back tonight, and he gave me a playful shove, telling me to get going already.

Ah, I simply can't wait...

I wanted every single minute I could have with him; determined to get my work finished as soon as possible, I made my way down the spiral staircase on quick feet.

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"Nh... Gh...uuh! Eguh..."

Chapter 3

Officially speaking, the man confined in the tower had been a double for that villainous duke. Deceiving the entire nation with a fabricated distortion of the facts hadn't been easy by any means, but as a result of my thorough misinformation campaign, I'd been able to keep the truth to only a bare minimum of people—few enough to count on one hand. It went without saying that this was among our kingdom's most closely guarded secrets. If it came to light that *we* were harboring the same unforgivable villain who had ground the people under his heel, riots wouldn't even be the start of it—we could easily see another revolution.

It was entirely my fault that we were stuck holding this dangerous bomb, but my young master had ultimately assented to my unreasonable demands. "*You've been through so much for my sake, after all,*" he'd told me. For that generosity, I owed him a lifelong debt of gratitude.

"You're in good spirits today, Craig."

That same master, now His Majesty King Sighart, addressed me with curiosity in his voice. That startled me—I hadn't let myself slip into a grin, but had I been smiling visibly?

"Was it showing on my face, Your Majesty?" I asked, embarrassed.

"No—it's just that you took care of all this paperwork in a single day, but you don't look tired at all."

He gestured to the sizable piles of paper weighing down his desk. I'd concluded my duties for the day, and now I was in the middle of giving him my report. Normally, a simple knight would never be called upon to report directly to His Majesty, but given my in-depth knowledge of the workings of the kingdom's government before the rebellion, I had certain special reports to make—and I was also tasked with keeping His Majesty updated on Lord Heinreid. And so, I

would periodically meet with him here in his office.

It bears repeating that Lord Heinreid's situation was an especially sensitive national secret. The only ones in the room were King Sighart, Queen Natasha, myself...and Karl Anker.

Her Majesty, sitting by the king's side, spoke up sulkily. "Oh, Sig, there's only one reason Craig would be in a good mood, isn't there? If *I* could snuggle up with *you* as much as I liked after my work was done, I'd be absolutely full of energy too."

Clad in an elegant dress and with her long hair tied back, she was the perfect image of a queen. It was difficult now to picture her as that heroine who'd cleaved through hordes of enemies, sword in hand; but her demeanor with King Sighart hadn't changed even a whit.

"A-Ah, I guess so..." His Majesty replied sheepishly. "Sorry, Natasha. I've been stuck with a lot of work these past few days. I shouldn't have pushed you to stay late with me. Let's finish things up early today and take some time to ourselves to relax and talk together."

"You haven't been pushing me at all. But I'd love some time to relax with you—I'm holding you to that, got it?"

Her Majesty had the cheerful smile of a girl her age, but her selfish little demand was likely also a subtle ploy to give His Majesty a respite from his work. The Lion Princess, indomitable on the battlefield, was now working diligently as queen to support this nation—no, to support King Sighart. Insolent as it was of me, I couldn't help but be grateful that my master had the love of such a wonderful person.

"Got it. Let's get this wrapped up quickly, then. Craig, Karl, over these past two weeks, have there been any new developments with the man in the tower?"

In just half a year, this question had already become routine for us. I gave my answer first.

"He has been well-behaved as always, Your Majesty. However, he appears to have lost some muscle due to lack of exercise, and he's grown unhealthily thin, so I plan on giving him a training regimen to perform in his quarters."

"*You* will, Craig?"

I raised an eyebrow in bemusement at His Majesty's uncomfortable expression. I vaguely recalled Lord Heinreid reacting similarly when I'd first raised the proposal with him. Was it truly that strange for me to be the one overseeing his exercise?

"Is there some problem, Your Majesty?"

"No, just... I get the feeling you might put a little too much on him. No assigning him a hundred push-ups a day or anything, all right? Go easy on him—he's not like us."

"I shall be mindful of that."

Now I understood why Lord Heinreid had initially balked a little at the prospect. Obviously, I'd never planned on assigning him the same regimen that was given to knights in training. But in addition to his decline in strength over the course of his confinement, he had been a *nobleman* to begin with. If I pushed him too far, it could easily become no different from literal torture. I certainly didn't want to turn those rumors into reality, so I resolved to adjust the exercise quotas I had been developing in my head.

"In any case, that's all there is to report, huh?" His Majesty mused. "Maybe it's time we reduced the frequency of these meetings a little. From everything I've heard, he hasn't been acting at all suspiciously over the past half year. Obviously, it'll still be a long while before we can let him out of the tower... But for now, I feel fine about leaving things up to the two of you."

"Yeah, lately, it feels like we're just meeting up to listen to Craig talk about his boyfriend, doesn't it?"

"N-Natasha..."

King Sighart gave a strained smile at Queen Natasha's playful interjection. Among those of us who knew the truth, she had been the one most staunchly opposed to letting Lord Heinreid live. Knowing that, it was frankly a relief that she had relaxed her stance to the point that she was teasing me like this. The slight awkwardness was a small price to pay.

"Ah, sorry. Right, I'm queen now... Ahem." She cleared her throat pointedly, making a slightly belated attempt to regain her composure, and resumed speaking with a more queenly air. "Very

well. Let us continue. Karl Anker, have you anything further to report concerning that man?"

Hearing his name called, Karl finally opened his mouth.

"I do have one matter to report."

Wait, you do?

Normally, he would simply ride on the coattails of my report—"*I have nothing further beyond what Sir Bauer has already presented.*" This was unusual. Come to think of it, he'd also called out to me today for once...

As I recalled our interaction earlier, Karl presented his *matter*.

"When I brought him his dinner, I found that he had regurgitated everything he had eaten earlier in the day. He had no fever, but I believe it would be prudent to summon a doctor for caution's sake."

"Huh?"

Her Majesty's mask of queenly composure instantly fell apart, and she gaped in unrestrained surprise. For my part, my mind was having difficulty catching up with the sudden new turn the conversation had taken, leaving me voiceless.

What the hell did that man just say? He didn't even blink!

As the room descended into confusion, the first to return to his senses was His Majesty.

"Could you tell us a little more?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. He began experiencing a decline in appetite precisely one week prior to today. He had not lost the ability to eat altogether, so I slightly reduced his portions for a time while monitoring his condition. He had gradually been regaining his appetite... However, the baked goods that he consumed as a snack this afternoon apparently disagreed with him."

Karl glanced pointedly in my direction without turning his head. "*Flour-based confections are bad for one's digestion*," he added.

The snack this afternoon... I recalled Lord Heinreid as I'd seen him earlier today.

That's ridiculous! He enjoyed them so much, didn't he? More importantly...

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "I've heard nothing of this."

"He requested that I keep the matter secret from you."

Secret? Lord Heinreid wanted it kept secret from me*?*

No, we could address that later. The issue was—

"Why did you listen to him?! You should have called a doctor at once!"

"Craig, calm down," His Majesty said before repeating my question. "Karl, why didn't you share this with us earlier and call a doctor?"

Karl turned his gaze forward once more and spoke with a cool demeanor, as though my shouts had never reached his ears at all.

"Notifying *this man* would have done nothing to help matters—if anything, it could potentially have exacerbated the situation. I was of two minds over whether to report it to Your Majesty. However, given that he had engaged in no wrongdoing or self-harm, that the symptoms themselves had occurred once or twice previously during his time at the Rodvelia estate, and that he had been showing signs of recovery, my outlook was slightly more optimistic than it ought to have been. I must apologize, Your Majesty."

"If it's happened to him before, does that mean you know his diagnosis?"

"Indeed—or rather, to call it a *diagnosis* may be an overstatement. In all likelihood, he is in poor physical condition due to stress."

The office fell into silence following Karl's matter-of-fact answer.

Stress... It might not have been a specific disease, but still, given His Lordship's history, any decline in his mental state was too important to just overlook.

"Do you know the cause?" His Majesty asked.

"I am afraid not. In his present location, it is hard to imagine any proximate physical cause."

His Majesty turned to look at me, but I shook my head as well, pathetically silent. Just as Karl had said, there hadn't been any changes within that sealed-off space. Even if I narrowed my focus to the past week or two, nothing at all came to mind.

"For now, we should send over a doctor right away. There might not be any point if the cause is psychological, but we can't rule out

the possibility of disease just yet. Also, Craig—I'll have you taken off duty tomorrow, so go pay him a get-well visit. If we want to find out what's wrong, you're the best one to ask him about it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Implicitly, I was being ordered *not* to visit today, but all I could do was obey. Even *I* knew that I was lacking in calm and composure at present. I needed to cool my head before seeing him, or else we wouldn't be able to hold a proper conversation at all.

Hearing King Sighart's interim conclusion, Queen Natasha gave a deep sigh.

"Looks like we're not *relaxing* tonight either..." she muttered.

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The moment we left the office, I called out after Karl's rapidly retreating back.

"What do you mean, I'd exacerbate the situation?"

He ignored me on a regular basis, but this time, I was determined to chase him down and demand an answer. Seeming to pick up on that, he stopped in place and turned around with an annoyed air.

"I mean that there is nothing you can do, Craig Bauer. You realized that he had lost weight, did you not? And yet you overlooked his actual decline in condition. He deflected, dodged, and concealed it from you—the fact that he requested me to keep it secret shows how desperate he must have been to hide it. I imagine you must be enjoying your sweet, easy life, but while you indulge yourself in foolishness, the strain simply shifts elsewhere."

His calm, matter-of-fact words stabbed directly into my unsteady heart. I'd locked Lord Heinreid away from the eyes of others, and I'd believed that we were closer than anyone—that I understood him better than anyone. This man before me had no interest in Lord Heinreid whatsoever. He always appeared to maintain a certain professional detachment—even now, I still believed that to be the case. But Lord Heinreid had kept his illness hidden from *me* and revealed it to *him*.

Karl continued speaking, striking me while I was down.

“Despite His Majesty’s words, I believe it would be best for you to refrain from visiting that man for some time. He will not be able to rest with you present, will he? Neither mentally nor physically.”

His tone was utterly condescending. As I grasped the meaning behind his words, blood rushed to my head. Barely restraining myself from charging over and grabbing him by the collar, I glared into the gray eyes behind those glasses.

“What are you implying I’d do to a man on his sickbed?”

“I couldn’t possibly say.”

The former butler gave a small, scornful sniff, then turned on his heel and left me to stew in my anger.

Chapter 4

According to the doctor who'd examined Lord Heinreid last night, it was just as Karl had predicted—the cause of the illness was mental fatigue. It was a relief to know that he didn't have some grave disease, but at the same time, the lack of any concrete cause or treatment left me racking my brain for answers. If Lord Heinreid was suffering from stress, then the best thing for him would be a change of pace, but I definitely couldn't take him anywhere outside.

I needed something within my power to do that would soothe Lord Heinreid's spirits... Well, as simplistic as it was, there was really only one answer.

Now, I knew exactly what my get-well gift would be. Not long after sunrise that morning, for the first time in a while, I made my way out into the city.

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"Excuse me, Lord Heinreid."

"Huh?"

When I returned from the city, steeled my courage, and headed into the tower, I found that Lord Heinreid wasn't in his bed. He was sitting with his elbows resting on his desk, staring out in a daze. But the moment he caught sight of me—or rather, of the gift I was carrying—he let out a stupefied noise and blinked in surprise. For a few moments, he just stared agape at my hands, but eventually, his mouth slowly curled into a smile, and he burst into laughter like a dam breaking.

"Pff, gh—! Ha ha ha ha ha! You— You brought *flowers*!" he exclaimed in disbelief. "They... They don't suit you at— No, wait, I guess they do, huh?! A golden-haired knight carrying red roses! But you're bringing them to *me*! Ah ha, ha ha ha ha ha!"

He pounded his fist on his desk, overcome by paroxysms of laughter. Unable even to tell him off, I simply stared down at him. I fully understood that the gift was uncharacteristic of me, but was it truly *that* comical? In fact, I'd brought in single roses several times before, knowing his fondness for them. Why did the shift from flower to bouquet have this much of an impact?

"Are you finished?" I asked once his laughter had finally subsided.

"Haah... Yeah, that was hilarious. You're the best." He seemed completely unperturbed by my sharp glare.

Still chuckling, he wiped away the tears in the corners of his eyes. I grabbed his arm and led him over to the bed. I just wanted him to lie down for a bit, but he stubbornly resisted, saying that if he spent any longer in bed, he'd have a hard time getting back up. The most I could get him to do was sit on the edge of the mattress. Wasting our time arguing would be a bad plan, so I reluctantly withdrew for now. I pulled up the chair he'd just been using and sat down facing him.

"So..." I started. "How are you feeling?"

"You can see me, can't you? I'm doing fine, no problems. Oh—sorry for freaking everyone out and making you call in the doctor and stuff."

"There's no need for you to apologize for that."

He wore an awkward expression as he gave his misdirected apology, but I couldn't sense any exhaustion on his face or in his voice. Just as he'd said, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with him... In other words, even now, he was still hiding his illness from me.

"Am I a burden to you?" I asked.

He'd presumably heard his diagnosis from the doctor as well. Unable to hold myself back any longer, I questioned him about it directly. Karl's snide remarks last night had started the thought forming in my mind—but as soon as I put voice to it, it gained an air of reality, and I became terrified of what the answer might be. If Lord Heinreid said yes...would I have to separate myself from him?

A heavy, oppressive silence started to fall on us, but before it could drag on for too long, his exasperated voice drove it off.

"What're you talking about? Did Karl tell you that? That guy's got one hell of a personality, seriously..."

"Lord Heinreid."

"C'mon, don't give me that look. What are you, an abandoned puppy? You're not a burden... But you don't believe me, do you?"

I'd at least heard him deny it, but just as he surmised, I was having trouble accepting his words. There was undeniably *something* amiss; if I wasn't the cause, then I wanted him to tell me what was.

"If not me, then is Karl Anker at fault?"

"Look, it's not anyone's fault, okay? I just... Sometimes I'll take a nap and have a bad dream, or I'll get a little depressed because the weather's bad—little things like those just added up, that's all."

"Do you mean to tell me you've grown so weak that you vomited just from that?"

That was even harder to believe. It seemed far too light of a cause for those symptoms. His words sounded like nothing but an excuse. Even as my suspicion grew, though, Lord Heinreid casually continued, not making any retraction.

"Yup, that's right. Stupid, isn't it? That's why I kept quiet about it. It's just a temporary thing, and I really was getting better—I guess I just let my guard down a little too much. I didn't think I'd throw up either."

He insisted that it really *was* that trivial. I still wasn't fully convinced, of course, but if that were true, then I could at least somewhat understand why he would want to hide it. If I were in the same condition, and I'd concluded that the cause was just a trifling issue, I would probably claim that nothing was wrong—all the more so if I were showing signs of recovery. There wouldn't be any reason to worry others needlessly.

Obviously, from my position, I wasn't pleased about having the truth concealed from me... But I expected he'd be more open about it in the future if I asked him to be, and it would be easy enough to resolve.

Still, I had an unpleasant feeling about it all. I felt like I was being misled, like he was dodging the question, like there was something left unaddressed.

"I thought you'd just get upset with me, and *I'd* end up being a burden to *you*," he muttered as I tried to figure out the *something* still bothering me. "That's why I didn't want to talk about it. If anything, you're making it easier—when the gloom and depression are weighing on me, you help take my mind off it all."

Part of me was just purely happy to hear those words, but I caught a hint of sweetness mixed into his voice toward the end, and I felt a heat reflexively rising within me. I'd heard that tone more and more lately—that was how he sounded when he was extending an invitation.

I nearly reached out to touch him, but I gritted my teeth and held myself back. He needed to stop thoughtlessly provoking me when he hadn't even recovered from his illness yet.

"Not today," I said.

"Oh? All right, suit yourself. I'll have these to comfort me today."

He sounded a bit put out by my flat refusal, but he leaned over to look at the bouquet of roses—I picked them up from my lap and held them out to him. As the scent drifted through the air, his composed expression melted and softened before my eyes. Seeing him happy made me feel slightly relieved; he'd teased me about them earlier, but the flowers' effect on him was the same as always.

"You really do love roses, don't you?"

"Yeah. Like I said a while ago, they bring up memories for me."

"You mentioned... What sorts of memories are they, anyway?"

I'd meant it as nothing more than an idle question. Knowing that this man was *that Heinreid*, digging into his past could easily mean stirring up a hornet's nest, but the roses didn't seem likely to be tied to any blood-soaked atrocity.

However, the reply he gave instantly destroyed whatever calm was beginning to settle over the room.

"Oh... They've got the same scent as the perfume my first lover wore."

What?

I lost my voice for a moment, unable to comprehend the meaning of his words.

Did... Did he just admit what I think he did?

The blood drained from my face; my mind fell into disarray. A lover? There had been no signs of anyone like that around him after he'd awoken from his evil ways. He couldn't possibly be talking about any of the women he'd raped and murdered in the old days... Was it his former fiancée, Lady Angelica? No, that wouldn't make sense either. He'd seemed to have an attachment to roses even before his first time meeting her. Just who on earth was he talking about?

I stared at him in a daze, but his face still had the same calm, relaxed smile as before. It was no good—I couldn't read his expression at all.

"You had a lover?"

"*That's* what you're stuck on? I mean, I say *lover*, but maybe I was the only one who saw things that way. Long ago—back when I was just a kid—there was a while when I was down and out, just wandering around. And then someone found me and...well, taught me some things."

"What sorts of *things*?"

"*All* sorts of things. Had a beautiful face too... Damn, that takes me back..."

His eyes and his voice were filled with tender affection. Given the cause of his illness, maybe it should have been a relief to see him so relaxed and at peace... But my possessive urges, thoroughly sated over this past half year, steamed and roiled with fury.

"Are you...talking about the former king?"

Unable to get my smoldering, hazy thoughts back in order, I let the question slip before I could think better of it.

When he was a child—in other words, before he changed. And back then, no one but the tyrant could have freely toyed with that man.

Even if they had the same face, even if they were the same person, I still despised the repulsive villain he'd once been. I had absolutely no affection for the old Duke Heinreid. But here and now, listening to this man speak so lovingly, I couldn't help but seethe with jealousy.

"What? No, she was a woman—I told you I'd never been with a

man before, didn't I? Anyway, why would you even think that? Is your head okay?"

I'd been certain of my conclusion, but he instantly denied it with a look of total perplexity. There was even *pity* in his gaze. He spoke as though *I* were the one saying something strange, but that was utterly unreasonable of him—no matter how you looked at it, *those two* had been the abnormal ones.

"It's not *that* outrageous of an idea," I insisted. "You know that there were rumors, don't you?"

"C'mon, that was ages ago, and the rumors barely lasted a minute. I'm amazed you even remember."

"How could anyone forget?"

I absolutely hadn't spoken on a passing fancy.

On the one hand, the Tyrant of the Century, a man of terrible and overpowering charisma, inspiring fear and awe in all who beheld him. On the other, the evil duke, fastidiously unapproachable, ruthlessly taking the life of anyone so careless as to touch him. Though their natures had been different, both had been distant and aloof, and the sight of the two villains standing side by side had inevitably drawn attention. Of course, the nobles who had whispered those vulgar rumors had all been rounded up and *made examples of* before long, and everyone had shut their mouths tightly after that—but countless people had still held suspicions in the privacy of their minds. The pair of them were far too strange to dismiss the stories as mere rumors.

"Well, I guess it could've looked sort of like that from the sidelines, maybe? He *was* a pretty weird guy, but we never did anything like that. Hmm..."

I watched him mumble to himself, pondering the question anew even as he denied it. From the looks of it, he genuinely hadn't engaged in that sort of relationship with the former king.

But, no—*so what*? No matter who it had been, I was still absolutely furious.

What had she done to him? How had she changed him? Why did she hold such sway over him? I couldn't even guess. His lover being a complete stranger was almost worse, in a sense—I had no way to

compete.

"All this time..." My frustration left me no space to breathe. My voice came out low and steady, like something crawling through the dirt. "Every time you've looked at those flowers, every time you've smelled their fragrance...have you been recalling *her*?"

Even when he'd been with me, had his thoughts been elsewhere, lost in some time and place I couldn't know? In all my memories, what had put him at ease had always been the scent of those flowers. I'd thought nothing of it—they were only inanimate objects, after all—but through them, he'd actually been remembering someone else's love...

What the hell? Are you mocking *me? You...*

A dark, violent emotion roiled inside me, growing thicker and heavier by the moment. I could only imagine the unrestrained fury that must have been in my eyes as I glared at him, but he calmly gazed straight back at me. He slowly cocked his head.

"Want to know?"

His pale fingertips quietly reached out to trace along the back of my hand; a shiver ran through me at his touch. It wasn't cold in the room, but goose bumps rose on my skin. Those cool fingers ran along my veins as though begging for my heat.

"Lord Heinreid, I—"

"Basically, you don't want me keeping secrets from you, right? If you want, I'll tell you all about those *things*. Let's call it an apology—for worrying you and for making you mad just now."

"I'm not going to—"

"C'mon, Craig."

I couldn't do this. I needed to brush him off. But he wouldn't engage with my hollow refusals. Carefully not touching the roses, he finally slid his fingers into my sleeve. His hand wrapped around my wrist, and my heart leaped out of my chest.

He would tease me all the time, but right now—despite my definite will to resist—I couldn't move. I couldn't move, so I couldn't run away.

"You said you'd come last night, but you never showed up," he continued. "I was all ready and waiting for you."

He lowered his voice to a whisper, speaking in the tones of someone sharing an intimate secret. "*You liar.*"

Those words sent a jolt through my brain. My vision blurred and twisted.

What are you talking about? Of course you weren't ready*. Yesterday, you threw up, and then you had the doctor examining you that night. There's no way you could've gotten ready for me in that state. Which of us is really lying here?*

I *should* have rejected him with that counterargument and brought our conversation back on topic. I knew that was my responsibility, after I'd boasted that I would be in charge of him... But sweet poison slowly, steadily ate away at my faculties, robbing me of any capacity for rational judgment.

I'd stiffened up in my seat. Lord Heinreid gazed at me for a little while, but eventually, he closed his eyes and withdrew, his fingers releasing my wrist. As the overpowering pressure on me relaxed, a terrible frustration filled me in its stead.

"Well, I shouldn't force you," he said. "You've got work after this anyway, right? Sorry—my bad. You must be pretty busy, after all. Thanks for coming up to vis—"

The rest of his words were cut off—I swallowed them up, along with the lips that spoke them. I tossed the roses aside; they fell to the floor with a soft thump, but I ignored them. After what I'd just heard, I didn't have the slightest desire to treat them with care.

I want you to forget everyone else. I'm the only one here in front of you. I want you to look at me. You're mine *now.*

My original purpose forgotten, I let those feelings take me over as I plundered his mouth. A pained groan spilled from his throat, protesting my self-centered actions. Both of us were panting, breathless, when I finally withdrew. That deep scarlet hue reappeared from behind his long eyelashes, gazing out appraisingly. I didn't want it to retreat from me again.

Knowing I was making the wrong choice...I reached out my hand.

"I'm off duty today."

That bewitching red smiled back at me.

Chapter 5

Lascivious wet squelching, slurping sounds rang out amid the choking scent of roses. The source of those noises was right under my gaze, in the vicinity of my chest. I was naked from the waist up, with my lower garments sloppily unfastened. Opposite me was a beautiful man clad in nothing but a shirt draped over his shoulders as he toyed with me.

I'd tried to pin him beneath me as usual, but he'd argued back: *"That won't be any different from what we always do. I said I'd tell you all about it, didn't I?"* So now, we were sat on the bed facing one another.

There was more than just saliva lending volume to the wet noises; my chest was slathered with balm as well. Lord Heinreid had straddled me and retrieved a bottle from the nightstand—that rose-scented balm, of all things. That *wasn't* the only lubricant we had. I'd wanted to give him a sharp word or two about using it with me after what he'd just revealed, but *"We might as well use up the last of it—wouldn't want it going to waste"* had been his enigmatic justification as he'd poured it out onto me. And now, here we were.

Having taken him up on his invitation, I was letting him do as he pleased for the moment. But it was blatantly clear that he was retracing those *old memories* of his, and my seething rage left me unable to fully concentrate.

"Does this feel good?" he asked.

The pads of his fingers rubbed and stroked my nipples. He'd been playing with them this entire time—licking, sucking, flicking. Those same acts would leave *him* melting and writhing in a heartbeat...but frankly, I didn't feel much of anything.

"No," I replied, shaking my head. "It just tickles a little."

Having him pressed right against me, sucking at my chest, was certainly *visually* stimulating, but the actual sensation was rather

tepid. His other hand, softly stroking at me through my underwear, was delivering far more pleasure.

"Hmm... Yeah, makes sense. I guess that's what it's normally like your first time."

He withdrew sooner than I'd expected, licking at his wet lips. His lack of stubbornness in that regard was clearly rooted in personal experience—another jolt of anger ran through me at the thought. Smiling, he reached up and used his index finger to smooth out my furrowed brow, then planted a kiss on my temple. I sighed in exasperation at his transparent attempts to placate me. He continued peppering me with light kisses, his lips softly brushing my skin here and there as he drifted lower and lower.

I simply watched him for a few moments, waiting to see what he was up to. But when his lips moved below my navel and his fingers tugged at the waistband of my underwear, I finally realized his intent. I quickly grabbed his shoulders, pulling him away. Suddenly separated from me, he blinked up in confusion.

"Th-There's no need for that," I said frantically.

"Why not? Don't like it?"

"Wouldn't it be unpleasant for *you*?"

He'd lost his title and been branded an impostor, but nevertheless, he'd once been a man of noble birth. I may have been the one who'd forcibly made him mine, fully aware of his station, but *that deed* carried an inextricable sense of *lowering oneself*. Even just the thought of it filled me with unease. As hypocritical as it was after all I'd said about wanting to *make him submit* and *mark him as mine*, I didn't want to subject this man to something so demeaning. The contradictory feelings swirling in my chest left me at a loss.

"Well, there's plenty of people out there who'd hate giving head, and only a total scumbag would force someone to do it. But it's fine. I want to do this for you. It doesn't feel degrading or anything—it's just a way of showing my love."

Knowingly or not, he'd delivered a precise rebuttal to the thoughts in my mind. He softly pushed my hands off his shoulders. To top it all off, the word *love* left my already-shaky heart reeling and adrift, and I found myself letting him do as he wished. Taking

advantage of my lack of resistance, Lord Heinreid finally buried his face in my groin.

"Nn, nhh..."

He reached into my underwear to retrieve my member, which was already firm and erect. After a few strokes of his hand, he opened his mouth wide and wrapped his lips around me. Enveloped in his warm wetness, I trembled involuntarily. He licked at me soothingly, then briefly released me, withdrawing with a small slurping sound. The next second, he moved down to the base. His fingers and palm smeared his own fluids and mine down my shaft as he traced his tongue along the bulging veins of the underside. He drifted ever so slowly up toward the head, pausing occasionally to kiss and suck. His teasing, frustrating pace sent shivers of pleasure racing down my spine. But as though deliberately dashing my hopes, his hot tongue slid back down, then up again, over and over, never quite reaching its destination.

I lifted a lock of hair out of his face and brushed it behind his ear.

"Did you learn that from your *old lover* too?" I asked, not wanting to know the answer in the slightest—anything to distract myself from the overwhelming pleasure.

Hearing the unmistakable jealousy drenching my voice, he lifted his gaze to mine, offering nothing but a knowing smile in reply. His lips latched onto me near my base, then withdrew with a loud slurp. I groaned at the sensation, but I clenched my gut and rode it out, thinking for a naive instant that we were finally done.

But Lord Heinreid struck while my guard was down. He enveloped my head with those lips once more, and this time, he didn't stop there—his mouth plunged lower and lower, trying to swallow all of me. In my engorged state, there wasn't enough space to fit completely; I felt the head bumping against an obstacle. Those lips that I gazed at day after day were spread wide, stuffed full of something unbelievable. My vision swam at the utterly perverse scene unfolding right before my eyes.

"Hff, hghh, nh..."

He bobbed his head up and down for a while, sucking at me with his mouth and stroking the excess length with his hands. Eventually,

one hand moved away; I followed it with my eyes and watched him adeptly scoop up the balm still left in the bottle, then move around to his rear. I heard a small, wet noise and felt his breath catch around my length.

"Nnh, hhh... Nn... Ngh..."

That only lasted a brief moment, though. Before long, his fingers began busily working their way in and out. He made no attempt to touch himself, no effort to pursue his own pleasure—his efficient, businesslike motions were pure, single-minded *preparation*, and he himself showed not the slightest sign of enjoying it. My muddled brain cooled ever so slightly. Was that pained expression truly the face of someone *showing his love*?

As soon as that thought struck me, the groaning in his voice and the agony on his features became intolerable, and I dragged his head up and off me.

"Lord Heinreid, I—"

I don't need any more, I tried to tell him once again, but as his mouth pulled away, his teeth lightly caught on the ridge of my head, and my voice cut out. With the sentence left unfinished, he interpreted my meaning as something else entirely.

"Oh, all right... But *you* lie down. I *need more exercise*, don't I? *I'll* do the moving today."

It was a sultry admonition, a sweet-voiced command. His hands pushing on my shoulders had no real strength behind them, but for some reason, I toppled backward, unable to disobey.

The strange emphasis in his tone brought to mind our casual exchange a few days ago. The reason he'd lost weight *hadn't* been lack of exercise at all, it turned out, but he still seemed to be holding that against me. He became fixated on the strangest things...

While my mind was occupied with unimportant observations, Lord Heinreid threw a leg over my waist and straddled me, then pressed his backside against my length.

"Haah, ah—"

With little fanfare or hesitation, he sank down onto me. The swollen representation of my desire buried itself in his hole, freshly loosened by his own fingers. The sight of me invading his body,

slowly but surely, inch by inch, was utterly *intoxicating*. Unable even to speak, I looked on helplessly as he swallowed me up.

Then—just as my thickest part was almost through his tight opening—one of his legs jolted and gave out.

"Hhghhh!"

"Ah! Ngh!"

With his support gone, naturally, his hips fell. My length, penetrating him only shallowly moments ago, suddenly impaled him, sliding inside him to the hilt. I gulped at the sensation of it driving in, prising open his insides. Once I'd made it through the shock of pleasure, I tried to glare up at him, wondering whether the entire thing had been deliberate—but I quickly saw that it hadn't been. A coughing gasp spilled from his throat, as though he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him. His eyes were as wide as saucers; his body twitched and tensed.

"Hwa? Nh, auh— No—what's—oww—!"

Looking closer, I saw he'd lost his footing on the side where the former king had left him with a scar. His foot must not have been able to handle the strain of supporting his weight in that awkward position; it shuddered and trembled, pressed against the sheets. Still struggling with the sudden, unexpected rush of sensation, he didn't seem to understand what had happened or realize his body had hit its limit. He tried to raise himself back up again, but of course, his leg still didn't have the strength to lift him, and his squirming only ended up drawing me in even deeper.

"Nnnhhhhh!!! Nooo, ah, aaah! C-Craig, I'm sor—ngh!—I can't—!"

He finally began to sob as it dawned on him that no matter how he struggled, he wouldn't be able to get himself free. But for my part, I didn't have room left in me to heed his cries. The cloying scent of roses, the mark of his *old lover*, had already been inflaming my temper to begin with. And now, after he'd ordered me not to move and begun doing as he pleased, what had finally driven his hips down onto me was the wound the former king had given him. I didn't bear this man any hatred for *that*, of course, but how could I be expected to put up with it all?

I sighed in exasperation. "*You're* the one who started this, aren't

you, Your Lordship?”

I’d only meant it as a small retaliatory gesture. Ordinarily, he would just have glared back at me, eyes wet with humiliation; that was what I expected to see as I gazed up at him, holding myself back from any further outburst. But my words seemed to hit him far harder than I’d imagined. I heard a heaving sob from his throat, and his trembling body stiffened for a moment. Then he slumped forward, hanging his head limply like a worshipper confessing his sins. All I could see of him was his heavy black hair; his face was hidden from view.

Something was plainly amiss. I was at a loss for how to respond. I tried to ask him what was the matter, but before the words could reach my lips, I heard him quietly mumble something.

“Yeah... I did... But I couldn’t...”

“Lord Heinreid?”

“I told myself, I’ll do better—*ghh*—do better this time... I promised myself I would... But I’m still just—*auh*—just pushing it all off onto other people... I’m trash...”

“Wait, what are you talking about...?”

His words were fragmentary, interrupted by faint sobs and frail cries, and I couldn’t quite make out what he was saying. But what I did manage to pick up didn’t sound like it was only referring to the present situation. Before I could sit up and press him for details, his head slowly lifted, and our gazes met.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, Craig. I’ll keep on living—I swear I will. And I... I’ll do what you tell me. So just, please... I’m begging you... *Hurt me...*”

That hoarse, pleading voice—that brow, furrowed in anguish—those deep scarlet eyes, wet with tears, overflowing with faint light—would always fan the flames of my arousal. But now, somehow, they all filled me with a shudder of revulsion. He was giving me his word that he would live, but I felt as though I were hearing the exact opposite.

Kill me.

I jolted upright on pure impulse, shoving him off of me. His back thudded onto the sheets. As we changed positions, I hooked onto

the most vulnerable spot of his insides, and he let out a scream. I heard it loud and clear, but I just picked up his legs and pounded my hips straight into him.

"Hgh, ah, aah! Aaauh!"

"You—!" I growled. "What the hell do you want?! Why are you making me—? Ngh!"

"No, you're—you're too deep!!! It's too—hh!"

He threw back his head, and I sank my teeth into his throat, reaching down at the same time to claw into his tip with my fingernails. I tormented him, dragging a climax out of him by force, and he trembled pitifully as he spent himself. The heat spilling out onto his stomach made his insides writhe and clench around me. Unable to bear it any longer, I released my lust into him as well.

He panted and heaved, trying desperately to recover his breath after I'd forced him to his peak with a violent haste. But without even waiting for his breathing to steady, I immediately resumed rutting into him. The squelching noise of my spend mixed with the balm grated on my ears.

"Hgaah! W-Wait, I'm not done— I'm still—!"

He shook his head in agony as I forced my desires onto him, his black hair flailing and whipping against the sheets. I briefly paused with my full length buried inside him, staring down as he gasped for air.

"Won't you let me save you...?"

I spoke the words like a prayer.

Please. Please say yes.

I didn't care if it was conceited of me. I didn't care if it was only for this single moment, while he was dazed and confused. I just wanted him to seek forgiveness rather than punishment. After all, it wasn't as though he *enjoyed* suffering, and he certainly didn't have a great tolerance for pain. He ought to have wanted to be free from it. He ought to have wanted mercy and salvation. He'd always tried to withdraw into himself before, but over this past half year, I'd wanted to believe that he'd come to cling to me—to depend on me—at least a little.

But even now, even in this haze of abandon, Lord Heinreid still

rejected my words.

"N-No... I don't need it... Agh—aaaugh! I— I can't, I can't stop it... Hghh, hffh, aaaughhh..."

I didn't want to hear that answer. I resumed violently pounding into him once again, and his words were cut off amid moans and sobs, just as I'd hoped. But my own spirits were none the lighter. He *shook his head*, he *wept*, he *apologized*, but no matter how far I pushed him, the one thing he would never do was plead for me to help him.

By the time it was all over, Lord Heinreid was completely unconscious. I jostled his shoulder and lightly slapped his face, but his eyelids stayed shut. The faint rising and falling of his chest was the only sign that he was still alive at all. He hadn't passed out since our first time together...but nothing was the same now as it had been then. I gazed down at his body covered in teeth marks and darkening love bites, his eyes swollen from crying, his sticky, sullied nethers—I was staring at the scene of an assault.

What the hell am I doing?

I could plead all I wanted that this hadn't been my intent, but no one would accept my excuses.

The evidence of my mistakes was lying right in front of me.

Chapter 6

No matter how long I spent in self-loathing, time refused to reverse itself—it only proceeded still onward, heartless and inexorable. With my sins staring me in the face, I had neither the right nor the time to wallow. I rebuked my sinking heart, collected my scattered clothes, and stood up from the bed.

Unable to give Lord Heinreid an apology, I wiped the mess off his body. Once I'd gotten him as clean as I possibly could, I dressed him in fresh clothes. I pulled off the soiled sheets and changed them out for spare ones, then set him back down in the bed, still unconscious. Just then, as if on cue, the door opened.

I'd heard the sound of someone making their way up the stairs, so I wasn't surprised by the arrival. I turned slowly to face the man standing in the doorway. I needn't have bothered checking, of course—it was Karl Anker. Steam and the scent of soup wafted over to me from the tray in his hand, and I realized belatedly that it was already dinnertime. His Lordship's caretaker cast a brief glance at the man asleep behind me, then set the food down on the table with a dismissive sniff.

"Well?"

His voice was cold and contemptuous. There was no subject to the question, but presumably, he was demanding that I explain myself. If that was the case, then I had no words to offer in reply.

However, when he elaborated in the face of my silence, his question turned out to be surprisingly impersonal and practical.

"I am asking whether you've ascertained the cause of his illness. That *is* what you came here for, is it not?"

Well, what had happened here was obvious at a glance—Karl had even predicted it himself. Given his dislike for all things redundant or unnecessary, he would never have been interested in hearing my excuses.

Though my head had cooled a little, my mind was still dull and sluggish. I gripped a hand over my forehead in frustration, pressing at my temples almost hard enough to crack my skull, then gave my bitter reply.

"He feels guilt for his past evil deeds...I think."

Lord Heinreid had never directly admitted it to me, but when I'd pushed him to his limits, I'd caught a glimpse of the shadows he was concealing. His pain had bled into the edges of his words and onto his anguished face—a plaintive, penitent remorse.

Living on like this, with no judgment or reprisal for his former wickedness, had never sat well with him. I'd known that much. But I'd thought that with time, here in this place set apart from the world, his initial discomfort had faded.

Why had I ever been under that mistaken impression?

I glanced across the room. It was furnished with all the necessities for everyday life, but this sealed-off space was far smaller than the estate had been. Lord Heinreid was high above the world, cut off from the bustle and clamor, in a place of quiet stillness. Here in this room, by his account, he had bad dreams and grew melancholy on gray, cloudy days.

There was no way he could ever just *forget it all*. This room was a *prison*—a place constructed to force criminals to confront their crimes.

Karl scoffed. "You *think*? What a half-hearted diagnosis. You played directly into his hands, you placed yet more unnecessary strain on him, and you weren't even able to question him properly?"

He had every right to scorn me. Although I'd happened by chance to grasp a sliver of the answer, I'd committed a foolish blunder deserving of disdain, and in the end, I was no closer to solving anything.

"I shall accept my punishment," I said.

"You intend to report all of this to His Majesty? You truly are an utter imbecile, Craig Bauer."

"What?"

"If you absolutely must live your life honest to a fault, then do as you please. *However*, that man is only permitted to live because he

is *under Craig Bauer's supervision*. If you admit that even now, he still deludes and manipulates you as he pleases, what do you imagine the result will be?"

If I admit that I got tricked...to King Sighart and Queen Natasha?

The instant I understood his meaning, a chill ran down my spine.

Lord Heinreid had been concealing his illness, but at least Karl had picked up on it and delivered a report. However, *I'd* been completely taken in. They hadn't commented on it at our meeting yesterday, but if they learned that I'd been played like a fiddle by the man I was keeping under confinement, they certainly wouldn't overlook my failure. They'd lose all trust in me with regard to Lord Heinreid. In the worst case, their doubts might even extend beyond the present situation. If they became suspicious of my entire premise that *Heinreid von Rodvelia was no longer evil*, what then?

No... I couldn't let that happen. At that point, things would be entirely out of my hands. In order to keep this man alive, I needed to keep on maintaining the impression that *I* was in control.

I silently stared down at the still-sleeping Lord Heinreid. He was kind but occasionally cruel; he appeared to care for others, but he was deeply self-centered at heart. And yet, despite it all, *I* had burned with longing for him, and *I* had confined him here. However much he deceived me, wounded me, refused to open his heart to me, though it filled me with rage, I could never let him go—not after everything that had happened. I recalled how I'd felt half a year ago, as I'd gone around using my decidedly underhanded tactics to win over person after person.

No way in hell am I letting him die.

I clenched my fist tight and let out a long, deep sigh.

"Sorry. I've cooled my head a little now."

Karl, unchanging in his loathing for me, only ever offered me snide remarks, but his words were apt and observant. His advice had just saved me from committing the worst blunder I possibly could have, and I thought that perhaps I owed him a word of thanks. But before I could give voice to it, he had another unpleasant comment for me, and I swallowed my words back down.

"Although he may have been deliberately steering you, getting

‘His Grace’ to show you such vulnerability is certainly no easy feat.”

I stared back at Karl. “This man *isn’t him*.”

The problem was, Lord Heinreid himself refused to acknowledge it.

Chapter 7

I left His Lordship in Karl's care, descended the tower, and made my way alone to King Sighart and Queen Natasha. I'd expected that I wouldn't be able to meet with them until nightfall, but to my surprise, I was admitted to their office immediately. For some reason, the two of them seemed a little worn out as they debriefed me; with a bit of curiosity in a corner of my mind, I presented the information I'd just obtained.

"That concludes my report," I finished.

"Hmm..." His Majesty mused. "So, he feels guilty over his past crimes... He told you so himself?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. He concealed his illness because he didn't believe it to be a significant concern, apparently. I had him promise to tell me everything on future occasions, rather than making such judgments on his own."

"Can we really trust him on that?" Her Majesty asked. "What if it's all an act? We can't exactly give you new orders *after* he kills you in your sleep."

"In his days as a villain, he was never the sort of man to devise such strategies. He might have contemplated how exactly to take my life, but never what he ought to do to arrive at that point—such was the nature of his madness. To my mind, the fact that he hasn't charged at me to kill me on the spot is proof enough that he remains sane."

"That's a pretty disturbing standard of judgment... But, all right. I see..."

After hearing my report, His Majesty closed his eyes in contemplation. I carefully kept my shoulders relaxed as I awaited his response, trying not to let my nervousness show. I didn't feel good about concealing my failure like this; there was something deeply self-serving about it all. However, I'd given them the full truth about

the source of Lord Heinreid's stress—as much as I'd been able to glean from him, at least. I could have reported the cause as the trivial matters he'd described initially, but if I distorted things that far, I really *would* be perjuring myself. I just needed to show them that as he was now, he wasn't a threat to the kingdom. If I couldn't do that, he'd have no future. I wouldn't have been able to keep the truth from them for long in any case. The pair sitting before me weren't a mere boy and girl—they were king and queen. The saviors who'd freed our kingdom were harsh and unyielding against evil, and they had sharp noses for deception.

After a time, His Majesty's eyelids slowly opened. His clear blue eyes stared straight at me, and I stiffened where I stood.

"Craig, about yesterday... After you and Karl gave your reports, Natasha and I actually went through the palace archives to look into his history."

"You did, Your Majesty?"

"Yeah. Thinking back to the reports you've given us and the way he looked at the trial, he does seem to have become much more meek and peaceful. I was wondering whether maybe that was his true self to begin with. In that case, there might have been something specific that made him lose his mind, right? I thought if we could find out what that was, it might be the key to resolving this whole situation."

That made sense—I had to admit I'd been blind to to that possibility. I still believed that the villainous duke and the present Lord Heinreid were different people entirely, but the fact was that they shared a single body. Rather than imagining that such a cruel, brutal nature could blossom completely unprompted, it was more natural to assume that he must have suffered some sort of trauma terrible enough to drive him to villainy.

"My deepest thanks for making time to attend to this matter amid your busy schedule, Your Majesty," I said, bowing my head. "In any case, were you able to uncover any clues?"

I felt a little impatient as I questioned him, but he continued speaking with visible discomfort.

"The thing is... Pretty much all of the records on House Rodvelia

—or, more precisely, all the records from before *Heinreid von Rodvelia* became duke—were completely missing."

The records were missing?

Question marks floated in my head. I didn't understand what he meant.

"When you say 'missing,' Your Majesty..."

"I mean exactly what it sounds like. All of the records older than eight years ago are gone—his entire family tree too."

That was bizarre—no, *unthinkable*. The royal palace of Amagis held records on all the noble houses tasked with overseeing territories of the kingdom. Especially for a family as important as House Rodvelia, there ought to have been in-depth documentation of their finances and their dealings with other nobles. To erase those was to cut out an entire chunk of history. This was a major issue—it could easily lead to problems for the kingdom down the line. Given House Rodvelia's significance, there would be plenty of people familiar with their history, of course, but completely reconstructing those extensive records from oral testimony would be impossible. The duchy of Rodvelia was currently being governed by the house's various vassals as an interim measure—but eventually, when His Majesty formally appointed a new duke, the missing records would definitely cause an administrative headache. After all, the only model we had for how to run the duchy was from those days of evil.

His and Her Majesty were also acutely aware of the strangeness of the situation. The three of us in the room were all wearing the same expression of concern.

"The records were all suppressed—or destroyed, maybe. Either way, it must have been my brother's work, knowing how obsessed he was with the duke."

"Sig, I'm sorry to talk about your family this way, but your brother was absolutely insane..." Her Majesty said wearily. "We were trying to find out what turned the duke evil, but now it's looking more and more like the duke was the culprit behind *everything* from the start."

Hearing the certainty in her tone, I felt the winds shifting inauspiciously. This wasn't good. At this point, it might have been *better* if they'd found records indicating that Lord Heinreid had been

evil from the day he was born. His sudden, inexplicable shift in personality, combined with the disturbing absence of his erased history, interlocked perfectly in the worst possible way.

"The man he is today has nothing to do with that," I insisted.

"Sure, *today*. But will he keep on having nothing to do with it forever?" Her Majesty's golden eyes mercilessly shot through me and my awkward excuses. "You understand what I'm saying, right? There's always a chance something could turn him back into a monster all of a sudden. He's doing what you tell him *for now*, but in the end, we couldn't find out what made him evil in the first place. We have no idea what sort of trigger might bring the demon right back out again. Leaving a man like that alive is a danger to Sig—to the entire kingdom. That's my opinion, anyway."

Her Majesty unfolded her argument without any gap for rebuttal, overwhelming me completely. Once she'd reached a pause, she sank back into her large chair with a soft thump.

"The final decision is His Majesty's, though," she continued, slightly aggrieved and sulky. "I'll leave the conclusion up to you, Sig."

Having been passed the baton, His Majesty gave a pained smile, then quietly opened his mouth.

"Now that I've seen what records there are, my opinion is largely the same as Natasha's. Even if who he is on the inside has changed, and he's a good-hearted person *now*, the more I learn of everything he's done, the more I feel he needs to pay for his crimes. In my role as king, I can't understand him and I can't trust him. I can't save him either. I have a duty to take the side of all the people of this kingdom who he tormented in his days as a villain."

That...was perfectly right, I supposed. Rebuilding a country that had been thrown into shambles wasn't an easy task. The scars of those evil days ran deep, and there were countless people still on shaky footing. There was no way His Majesty could simply pardon the villain at the root of all their hatred and resentment. Even asking that of him was tantamount to treason.

Still... Even knowing that, I...

My thoughts went to Lord Heinreid, likely still asleep in the tower. I steeled myself and began to open my mouth.

"*But*," His Majesty said, cutting me off before I could speak. "I trust you, Craig."

His calm, powerful voice rang out as I fell into silence. My eyes widened. Given the flow of the conversation, I hadn't expected to hear those words at all, but that wasn't what surprised me. I was shocked by how clearly I understood the intent behind his statement, without needing any explanation.

His Majesty had already conveyed everything in that concise sentence, but he continued speaking as though checking his work.

"You held out for eight whole years, trusting that I'd come back, didn't you? You must have been in a lot of danger, but you never went over to their side, and even now, you're still giving your all to help us. If I started doubting a man like you, that would be even more unbecoming of me. So if you say he's different, then I'll trust that you're right. And as long as I believe that, I'll treat him accordingly."

I felt a swell of relief flood through my chest, and I bowed my head. "Understood, Your Majesty. Henceforth, I shall devote still greater care to observing him."

To sum it all up, His Majesty was allowing matters to stand as they were. As this kingdom's hero, but also as brother to that tyrant, that was the greatest compromise he could possibly offer. I didn't doubt that there was more to it than that, but as long as he was agreeing to turn a blind eye, it wasn't my place to question him.

He could have driven the point home, warning me not to betray his trust in me, but he'd chosen not to. In my heart, I resolved anew to live up to that trust, for the sake of all the things we had a duty to protect.

I heard a loud, long sigh. Glancing over, I saw that Her Majesty had slumped forward onto her desk. His Majesty hurriedly stood and stepped over to her side.

"What's wrong, Natasha? Oh, are you tired? I'm sorry for dragging you along with me in the middle of your brea—"

"*No*, that's not it," she replied petulantly. "I told you, I'm doing this work because I want to. I was just thinking... Building a good kingdom is harder than it sounds, huh? It'd be so much easier if we

just had enemies on one side, allies on the other, nice and simple."

"Yeah... It really is hard—too hard for me to handle on my own. So I'm glad you're here, Natasha. Thank you for always being by my side."

He smiled at her and softly stroked his fingers through her bangs. That seemed to improve her mood a little; she raised her head and gave a bright smile.

"You're right. And thanks to you, I've learned that there's more than one way to think about the world and more than one way to do things." She turned to me. "So, Craig? Don't forget that if there are any more incidents, *my* opinion might be the one that wins next time."

"I shall bear that in mind, Your Majesty."

The Lion Princess hadn't just driven the point home—she'd rammed it into place with a sledgehammer. I really did need to stay vigilant, no matter what.

Chapter 8

The sun had gone down, but there were still a few hours left before midnight when I made my way up the tower stairs once again. I softly opened the door at the top, doing my best not to make a sound as I approached the bed. The roses I'd brought earlier that day had been placed in a vase on the nightstand. Noting their presence with a complicated tangle of emotions, I gazed down at Lord Heinreid's sleeping face. I'd seen it countless times before, ever since he'd ordered me to give him wake-up calls so long ago. As always, his expression was calm, and his breathing was soft and steady.

Looking at him like this, it was hard to believe his claim that he was troubled by nightmares. In all the nights I'd shared his bed and all the days I'd watched him sleep, I'd never once seen him toss and turn—never once heard him cry out as he dreamed.

That said, I was freshly aware of how much of a fool I'd become of late, and I couldn't discount the possibility that I'd overlooked some small irregularity or other. Maybe he was sweating more, or his pulse was elevated, or something of that nature. I hesitated briefly, but I decided I ought to check. I reached my hand down to his neck. However, his skin was smooth and dry as I slid my fingers across his throat to find a blood vessel, and his pulse was perfectly normal. I cocked my head in thought. If he wasn't having a nightmare right now, then that was welcome news, but I didn't imagine he had them every single night.

In response to my probing at the base of his neck, he gave a quiet groan and stirred slightly. Had I woken him? It'd be well-timed for having a conversation, but so soon after the events of the afternoon, I felt a touch awkward. Wanting to give him an apology as soon as he woke, I searched for the right words as I watched his long eyelashes twitch and his eyelids slowly open. But the instant his

opened eyes met mine, goose bumps rose all across my body, and the apology I'd been crafting in my head scattered to the winds.

There, gazing up at me—mud-flecked, devoid of warmth—was the scarlet hue of blood.

My heart pounded loud in my chest like an alarm bell. The hand I'd placed on his neck moved almost unconsciously to the sword at my hip. But the moment my fingers grasped the hilt, he blinked. The red that reappeared reflected my own figure back at me, and the bone-chilling air dispersed as he softly smiled.

"Good morning, Craig," he said blearily.

"Good morning, Your Lordship," I replied after a pause.

I lowered my now-aimless hand. Somehow, I managed to keep my voice steady and natural as I parroted his greeting back at him, but my heartbeat was still ringing in my ears. Those eyes just now had been far too familiar to dismiss as a mere trick of the mind.

"Getting 'His Grace' to show you such vulnerability is certainly no easy feat."

"There's always a chance something could turn him back into a monster all of a sudden."

Karl's and Her Majesty's words, fresh in my memory, replayed themselves in my head. Just now, I'd caught a glimpse of that possibility myself; I recalled what I'd been about to do, and cold sweat ran down my back. If that scene had continued, even for just a few more seconds...what would I have done?

No, calm down. That isn't *what's happening—at least, not right now.*

Fighting off the foreboding chill, I searched for some safe, harmless remark I could use to start a conversation with the just-awoken Lord Heinreid. I deliberately avoided the topic of those strange few seconds.

"Have you been asleep this whole time?" I asked.

"No, I got up for a bit and ate lunch—or dinner, I guess? Oh, and I finished the whole thing. Didn't throw up at all."

"Did you, now? I'll confirm that with Karl Anker later."

"Oh—uh, actually, I might've left a little bit. But I finished more of it than yesterday, I swear... C'mon, don't glare at me like that."

I'm glaring at you because you don't know when to give up. If you're going to retract your lie that quickly, then just tell me the truth to begin with.

I definitely wasn't enough of a fool to fall for the same trick twice, though. I continued staring down at him silently, and he slowly sat up in bed, sliding his hips backward to rest his back against the pillows. He opened his mouth with an uncomfortable, embarrassed air.

"Um... Sorry."

"For what?"

"Y'know, for everything earlier. Getting you mad on purpose because I wanted to distract you—all of that."

"I would ask that you refrain from such behavior in future, but in that instance, the fault was mine for pushing you too hard. I'm truly sorry."

Provoked or not, I'd had my way with him while fully aware that he was in poor condition. Calling it *foolish* would be an understatement.

He'd given his apology first, but when I gave mine in reply, his shoulders slumped in frustration.

"Karl's one thing, but you're too perfect in your own way... Anyway, aren't you going to ask me anything?"

"About those things you wanted to *distract me* from? If I do, you won't tell me anything beyond exactly what I ask for, will you? I shall wait for you to tell me everything yourself."

"*That's* how we're playing it now? Either way, I might not tell you the whole thing, and I might lie about stuff, don't you think?"

"Do as you please. I'll judge for myself whether you've been honest with me."

Despite my encouragement, Lord Heinreid remained silent. He seemed to be at a loss. He'd likely been prepared for an interrogation, and he'd planned to play on my emotions and manipulate me once again—he really had *no* respect for me whatsoever. Faced instead with my unexpected calm, he was left pondering how to respond. I saw him steal a glance at the roses.

I didn't know whether it had been involuntary or deliberate, but

ultimately, when his back was against the wall, *those* were what he turned to for refuge. I felt a stinging twinge; my heart festered with ugly pus as I took in the reality before me. With a dreary, aggrieved sigh, I decided it was already time to play my trump card. I'd said I would wait, but I had no interest in a battle of attrition.

"Is that it, then?"

My strained voice, that of a man on the verge of tears, was intolerably pathetic. If it had all been an act, then I would still have retained some dignity, but my true feelings were undeniably mixed in as well. I felt a tinge of hatred toward this man for setting me up to suffer such humiliation.

"Am I *that* undependable? *That* undeserving of your faith?"

Nevertheless, I couldn't leave him alone. I endured the shame, giving voice to my pitiful lament. I hadn't wanted to use this tactic, but I could clearly see that if I tried to keep up appearances, he would only continue ducking and dodging.

He visibly gulped as he picked up my needy whine and apprehended my meaning, there in the quiet room. Despite my mixed feelings about this method, it *was* effective—unlike the evil duke of old, this man was vulnerable to others' tears.

I could only imagine the unsightly expression on my face. Lord Heinreid looked shaken; he faltered for a few moments, but he finally understood that I wasn't looking for superficial reassurances. Eventually, his shoulders caved in resignation.

"It's the opposite. If I tell you what's wrong, you'll actually think through what to do about it, and you'll work to try and fix things... I know that much."

Then why...? I started to ask, but I swallowed it back down. Having made my declaration, I decided to focus solely on hearing him out, and I silently urged him to continue with a glance.

"So... So that's why I felt like it'd be *more* unfaithful of me to talk about it. I *can't* get myself to work on fixing it... I'd just be making you worry for no reason."

As he gave his fragmentary confession, his voice sounded much like mine had moments ago. It was the voice of someone forcibly dragging out a truth buried deep in his heart—a truth he didn't want

anyone to see. Watching his fingers restlessly scratch at the bedsheets, I didn't feel like he was putting on an act.

It certainly wasn't a pleasant line of thought. He likely *had* just been trying not to worry me unnecessarily. But what did he mean, he couldn't work on fixing it?

"You probably got the gist of it earlier. Ever since all the chaos settled down, in the little quiet moments, I'll remember the old days. Even if I'm just sitting around doing nothing, when I look at the floor, I'll remember crushing someone's skull under my boot. When I look at a wall, I'll remember nailing someone up. And when I go to sleep, in my dreams, I'll really be *right back then*—even just now."

Just now. His words brought back that momentary disturbance I'd carefully avoided bringing up. He really *had* been having a nightmare. But...while he was there in his dreams, they *weren't nightmares for him*, were they? While he dreamed, he went back—back to the evil duke he'd once been.

His face was filled with pain, with grief. I could clearly see the anguish flooding his mind. It wasn't something he could simply overlook and set aside. Still, though...

"I know," he continued. "You're gonna say it's not my fault—you're gonna tell me to forget about it. That's exactly what you want me to do, isn't it? But I can't. I just *can't*. If I could laugh and smile without any guilt while remembering the things I've done, then I really *would* be the same as back then. So, Craig... If you're going to tell me to live, then please—just let me keep carrying this feeling."

It was a heartfelt plea. I'd finally gotten the truth out of him, but rather than relief, I felt despair seeping through me.

If Lord Heinreid was carrying a pain too great for him to bear, then I wanted to understand it. If there was something he wished for, then I wanted to do whatever it took to grant it. I wanted to tear him away from that vile, horrific past. And I wanted to see him smile from the bottom of his heart. I'd believed that if I could just learn the truth, then I could make it all happen.

But he wanted me to overlook his pain. He felt that if he forgot it, he couldn't go on living—he couldn't be himself.

Unable to keep my emotions bottled up any longer, I finally

spoke.

"Then...what do I have to do to make you happy?"

I gazed pleadingly at him, and he fell silent for a brief moment. Finally, he gave me an uncomfortable smile.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have brought this up after all."

"No, that's not it!"

That wasn't what I'd said. Why was *that* how it worked? Why couldn't he understand? If he'd apologized for keeping silent, then I would have accepted it, but he'd just apologized for *speaking*. He was sorry he hadn't been able to keep the truth concealed from me.

"I mean, no matter how hopeless things are, you'll always worry and plan and try to do something about it, right?" he asked. "You're finally back with your real master, and you've finally made the friends you were supposed to make—so I didn't want to get in your way. Craig, you... You'll be happier if you stay over there."

THUD.

I felt as though some illusory fist had slammed into the back of my head with all its might. For a moment, I couldn't comprehend the words he'd just said to me. All the clinging fog had cleared, leaving only reality before us.

"Are you trying to tell me...that it's a mistake for me to live by your side?" I asked.

His silence spoke louder than any answer.

I expelled all the air in my lungs and looked down at the floor, averting my gaze from those scarlet eyes. That was the only means I could come up with to hold myself back from yelling in his face.

This was too...too much. Just too much. I'd told him that I wouldn't let him die, that I wanted him to live, and he'd accepted it on the surface while rejecting it in his heart. He was still tormented by his unpunished sins and his guilt toward me—even now, he didn't have the slightest desire to go on living. All he was doing was surviving, out of duty and obligation to me. *I* was holding *his* hand, but he wasn't holding mine. No matter how long I waited, his fingers would never grasp me back. And if my grip ever loosened, then...

Suddenly, Lord Heinreid's arm appeared in my lowered field of vision. I reached out vaguely toward his dangling wrist and gripped

it tight, making certain that he was still there. I heard a small, reflexive cry of pain, but I was in no place to listen.

It was so thin. Even through his clothes, I could tell he wasn't healthy. I had no clue how he'd managed to hide it from me this long.

Am I just enjoying the fruits of his *self-sacrifice?*

His arm looked fragile, like I could break it if I held it wrong. I slowly removed my hand, and he rubbed at the red mark my grip had left. But somehow, I couldn't find the will to offer any words of apology or care.

"You're awful," I said instead.

There was no response.

"You never tell me anything, and you're never going to listen to what I have to say..."

All I could give him were pathetic complaints. The pitiful, lowly feeling in my chest spurred me on, and even as my throat trembled, I couldn't leave my grievances unspoken.

Silence held for a while. But eventually, he spoke up with concern in his voice, offering quiet words of reassurance.

"That's right. It's all my fault."

Chapter 9

Wretched.

Three days had passed since I'd dragged the stubbornly concealed truth out of Lord Heinreid. Ever since, I'd been in a bleak, melancholy mood, unpleasantly reminiscent of my time serving at the Rodvelia estate. Even I had to admit I'd been through enough to warrant it. I'd been searching for a hint at a solution, but I hadn't found a glimpse of light—no, I'd come face-to-face with a pitch-black, bottomless swamp. Though my spirit hadn't broken, it had certainly bent.

After our conversation, all I'd been able to do was ask him for some time. I'd just barely held on to enough calm to recognize how shaken I was, but I'd been scared that if I stayed and engaged with him any longer, this time I really *would* commit some irreparable blunder.

Did I need time to come up with a way to soothe Lord Heinreid's pain? Or to resign myself to his suffering, just as he'd begged me to? Even I didn't know which it was. But he'd accepted my request without any hesitation, and I'd at least gained time to think things through.

That said, I had no intention of stepping down from my role as Lord Heinreid's caretaker—even ignoring that it was simply my duty and that His Majesty had placed his trust in me. After a sleepless night, still unable to arrive at an answer by the next morning, I'd ascended the tower as always. As I'd opened the door, I'd braced myself for an awkward, uncomfortable atmosphere, but—

"Oh, good morning. You're up early today, huh?"

His tone and his words had been so utterly casual and nonchalant that for an instant, I'd almost thought the previous day's events had been nothing but a dream. He'd even had the gall to play dumb, asking me *"What's wrong? Why the weird look?"* with a smile on his

face. If I hadn't already fallen for his tricks once before, he might genuinely have taken me in.

I certainly hadn't been *hoping* for an awkward interaction. But now that I'd learned the truth about the anguish he was grappling with, I could tell that he was actively making an effort to keep things light and breezy. I'd felt a deep sense of unease that I couldn't wash away.

There was no way he hadn't noticed my undisguised distrust, but he'd ignored that as well, putting on a practiced performance of *life as usual*. He'd shown me anew exactly how little intention he had of working toward a solution. No normal argument would persuade him to relinquish his grip on his sins; he'd simply do his best to pretend that he'd been convinced.

Since then, I'd just been thinking around in circles, unable to find an exit, while time kept on passing. My frustration at being unable to get through to him had birthed irritation, dulling my thoughts still further in a vicious cycle. It really was absolutely *wretched*.

As I sat there, anxiously lost in thought, a lively voice rang in my ear to shove it all aside.

"C'mon, Craig, what's with the nasty look? Those wrinkles on your forehead are gonna stick if you keep that up!"

"Mm..."

"What do you mean, 'mm'? What's wrong? You mad at me for dragging you out here? You haven't drunk a drop!"

Even as he chided me disapprovingly, the man gave a jovial laugh and pushed my still-full glass toward me. This was my colleague and friend, Sven Schmidt. His energetic, unrestrained voice rang out loudly, but it blended seamlessly into the background din of our clamorous surroundings—we were in a bar near the outskirts of the capital.

Why was I here, of all places, while I grappled with the heavy worries weighing on me? Because this man had brought me here half by force. Sir Schmidt had been lying in ambush for me as soon as I'd finished my final patrol of the day, and he'd pulled me along with him, brooking no refusal. Since we'd arrived, my friend had been one-sidedly working himself into high spirits while I gave half-

hearted replies to his small talk—which brought us to now.

I'd had no desire for a change of pace, but now that he'd ordered me the beer, I decided I ought to at least take a sip. I reached out a hand to the glass beading with condensation...but after a moment's hesitation, I stopped short of raising it to my lips. I recalled a bitter taste stabbing into my tongue and the awful sensation of all the strength being leeched from my body.

I slowly withdrew my hand and shook my head.

"I'm not upset. It's just... I drank more than I should have a while ago, so I'm holding off for now."

Nothing I'd said was a lie. It wasn't as though I absolutely couldn't drink, but these feelings of discomfort would well up now and again, so I naturally found myself abstaining. I didn't remotely suspect Sir Schmidt of mixing anything into my beer, but my lack of caution back then with Lord Heinreid had been my downfall. I knew that was all in the past now, but there was no need for me to force myself to drink.

"Aw, c'mon! Drink up, just for tonight! My treat! Times like this, getting good and drunk is what'll help take your mind off stuff! Just knock it back!"

Sir Schmidt, of course, had no way of knowing any of that history. With a slightly more raucous, enthusiastic air than usual, he kept on urging me to drink.

Even setting aside his ignorance of my circumstances, I couldn't help but feel that he was acting a little *too* unreserved tonight. I knew he liked to look after people, but he wasn't normally this pushy about it, was he? As he held the glass out to me, I lightly pushed his hand back down to the table, trying to rein in his enthusiasm.

"You're awfully eager tonight, Sir Schmidt. What's going on? Is something the matter?"

"No—something's the matter with *you*, right?"

"Me?"

What could he be talking about? Well, he wasn't exactly off the mark, but none of what had gone on in the tower could possibly have leaked to the outside. So what was he imagining had happened?

Before I could arrive at an answer, Sir Schmidt let loose an utterly absurd reply.

"You got dumped, didn't you? By your sweetheart?"

I stared at him. "What?"

For a moment, I hadn't been able to understand what language he was speaking. And who could blame me? His words were simply that outrageous.

Heedless of my total confusion, Sir Schmidt continued speaking with a strangely commiserating look on his face.

"C'mon, don't try to hide it! I've done my legwork—I know you bought a bouquet of roses at Isabella's place last week. Knew you had a soft side in you somewhere!"

What legwork? *He* was the one who'd recommended that florist in the first place. Come to think of it, when I'd asked the shopgirl for the roses, she'd had a strange gleam in her eye—she'd been oddly eager to assist me as she'd explained the importance of the number of flowers in a bouquet and asked whether I wanted to attach a card and so on. As I'd left, she'd wished me luck *very* enthusiastically as well. Wheels slowly turned in my mind.

"Anyway, that's when it all started, right?" Sir Schmidt continued. "You've been down in the dumps ever since then. And you've had a real scary look on your face the whole time you've been at work—it was making all the other guys nervous. Oh, I explained the whole thing to them, so they're fine now."

"What? What did you *explain*...? No, never mind. I don't want to know."

A broad picture emerged in my mind, and I clasped a hand to my forehead. So *that* was why my commanding officer and the other knights had been giving me pitying looks these past few days...

"You've got it wrong," I insisted. "It's nothing like that at all."

"Like hell it isn't. When do you buy a bouquet of roses except when you're proposing to someone?"

"You're jumping to conclusions too much. That's not it. Those were for...a get-well gift."

"A get-well gift?"

"That's right. I was visiting someone sick. Roses are his favorite

flower.”

All the excitement and enthusiasm drained out of Sir Schmidt as he leaned over the table toward me. His face blanched a little, and he nervously retreated back into his chair.

“Um, uh... Sorry.”

“I was the one who invited the misunderstanding. I’ll be more careful going forward.”

However upset I was, if I’d been visibly scowling even during my regular duties, then I needed to rein myself in. A slipup like that would end up worsening Lord Heinreid’s position as well. There were likely some embarrassing rumors spreading about me now, but if anything, I owed Sir Schmidt gratitude for informing me so quickly.

Sir Schmidt, now thoroughly sobered up, opened his mouth again with a newly hesitant air.

“Is he in bad shape?”

“No, I don’t think there’s that much to worry about physically. It’s just...”

I faltered for a moment, unsure how to explain.

“Sir Schmidt... Have you ever felt overwhelmed by guilt?”

Unable to sum things up properly, I found myself asking a strange question.

Sir Schmidt did have some thoughts on the matter, though.

“Ahh...” He exhaled, coming to a realization. “If you’re asking me, then I’m guessing you’ve never felt that way, huh?”

“I’m not quite sure. I thought I knew the feeling, but after seeing the state that man was in, I think what I felt must have been something different.”

“Well, yeah,” he said with a wry chuckle. “If you were that sensitive, then you wouldn’t still be up and about working as a knight. Sorry to disappoint, but I’m the same as you. I do know a guy who ended up like that, though... Want to hear about him?”

“Please.”

I straightened my posture, bracing myself for a heavy conversation. Sir Schmidt, on the other hand, slumped forward in his seat and nursed his drink. Lightly closing his eyes, he began to recount his story.

"This is about an old friend of mine. Nicest guy you ever met—an honest-to-goodness saint. When the government was bleeding us dry and folks were struggling, he went without sleep to help people out, and he gave away everything he could spare. He organized these community dinners on the regular where he'd gather up all the townspeople and hand out food to everyone. For a lot of guys, that was the only time they could forget about the bad stuff and smile together...until the local lord caught wind of it, that is."

Sir Schmidt's voice was still quiet, but his hand clenched tightly into a fist.

He wasn't from the duchy of Rodvelia, so the old Duke Heinreid hadn't been involved directly, but I remembered hearing that there'd once been a large-scale "blood purge" in the town Sir Schmidt hailed from. The duke had grumbled that they'd thrown such a lovely party but hadn't thought to invite him—that was probably what it had been.

"No advance warning. One day, soldiers just came charging in, tearing up everything and everyone there. They were spouting some bullshit about it being a gathering to plot treason—said they were purging the rebels."

"Was your friend all right?"

"Yeah—sort of. All the folks there threw themselves in the way to keep him safe. By the time I got there, almost nobody was still alive, but he didn't have a scratch on him. Maybe that's part of why he started blaming himself for the whole thing. Said everyone had died because *he'd* gathered them together—felt like he'd basically killed them all himself... Craig, if you were in his shoes, how would you feel?"

If I were in that man's shoes—if my actions had resulted in others' deaths... *That* must have been what he meant.

After a slight pause, I gave my answer. "I imagine in the immediate aftermath, I'd feel much the same as he did—but after that, my hatred would turn to the soldiers who'd carried out the order and the lord who'd handed it down."

"Yup, figured. You're good at moving on from stuff—I like that about you."

I couldn’t sense any irony or sarcasm in Sir Schmidt’s words. He was genuinely looking at me as I was, divorced from my history.

“Well, I saw it the same way as you,” he said. “And that’s exactly what I said to try and get him back on his feet: ‘It’s all the nobles’ fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. Nobody blames you for any of it, and if anyone ever does, they’ll have to answer to me.’ I meant every word of it, and I thought it was the best thing I could tell him. But, well...”

Sir Schmidt paused briefly to drain the rest of his beer, then let out a breath. He continued speaking, leaning his head back to gaze up at the ceiling.

“That was the wrong thing to say to him. He broke down crying. Told me he couldn’t just put it all aside like that—it’d be the same as running away from his sins. He said I was putting a burden on him by pushing him to move on... That really stung, I gotta say.”

Sir Schmidt smiled bitterly, and I felt a deep sympathy. I’d found myself in the exact same situation just a few days ago. This was the sensation of doing something you thought was for the best but having your efforts rejected—worse, being told that *you* were the one putting pressure on the person you were trying to help. It felt utterly pathetic and shameful.

How had Sir Schmidt gotten past that? Impatient to know, I encouraged him to continue.

“What happened after that? If it’s all right to ask...”

But the answer I got back was nothing like I’d imagined.

“Yeah, sure thing. Once we’d calmed down a little, we talked one last time, and then that was it.”

“That was it?”

“Yep. We talked things out, and we decided we ought to give each other some space. Haven’t seen him since.”

“Were you all right with that?”

“Well, depending how you look at it, I guess you could say I ran away. But he wanted some space away from me too. That’s how I learned that you can open up to each other and acknowledge your real feelings all you want, but it won’t always make stuff better. Oh—it’s not like we totally cut each other off, okay? We’ll write letters

once in a while, to let each other know we're still alive. Last one I got, he wrote that he's been helping rebuild the town. He said doing volunteer work takes his mind off stuff."

Sir Schmidt's voice was calm as he told me what his friend had been up to lately. He didn't seem regretful, but I sensed a faint loneliness in his voice.

Well, of course—the two of them weren't on bad terms, after all.

But now that I'd heard his story through to the end...Sir Schmidt's friend really was just the same as Lord Heinreid. Even now, with the revolution over, neither one was fully free of their suffering. They couldn't hand off their sins to anyone else, and they couldn't bear even the slightest sensation of irresponsibility. So they took all those sins onto their own shoulders, no matter how unreasonable. In my head, I could understand the thought process they'd fallen into, but...

"I'm still lost," I said with a sigh. "I'd hoped maybe hearing a different example might help me see something new..."

"Sympathizing's tough, isn't it? I totally get it—and I'm still the same way now. That's why I couldn't be a refuge for him."

I gazed back at him silently.

"That's just how he and I ended up, though. I can't tell you what's the best thing for you and your guy to do. But if you're not gonna walk away, and you're ready for some pain...then don't leave him behind, okay?"

The harsh reality before me, wrapped in soft words of advice and support, sank into my heart and sent tremors echoing through my chest.

I can't be a refuge for him... That was exactly the position I was in now. Maybe people with different beliefs and different values could never truly share their burdens of pain and sadness with one another. That was the case for me and Lord Heinreid, at least. I probably had to make my peace with that truth... And then, with that in mind, I needed to prepare myself to stop moving—so I wouldn't leave him behind.

Feeling daunted by the long, hard battle ahead of me, I caught sight of the glass still sitting on the table. I pushed aside my slight

hesitation and grabbed the drink, then downed it all at once. All the ice had completely melted, watering down the already-cheap beer; it wouldn't even get me drunk, let alone poison me. Nevertheless, the slight bitterness reminded me upsettingly of that paralyzing liquor. A laugh spilled from my throat.

"Ha ha... Haah. Hey, Sven. Even now that the nightmare's over, we never run out of things to worry about, do we?"

"Sure don't. That's just what real life's like, I guess... Wait, did you just call me by my name?"

"Did I?"

"C'mon, don't play dumb!" he shouted cheerfully.

I laughed again, then ordered some slightly pricier beer.

Chapter 10

Tap, tap, tap.

The footsteps were obsessively well-mannered, too calm and quiet to disturb the ear. I listened to them descend as I lay in wait. Their pace was on the quicker side, and it wasn't long before they arrived in front of me. The neat, orderly sounds came to a stop; I was standing in the narrow staircase, stance wide, blocking the way. The footsteps' owner—Karl Anker—glared coldly down at me as I obstructed his path.

"Move."

"I will not. Karl Anker, I have a question for you."

"I have no obligation to tell you anything. I refuse."

I silently took in his reply. I'd anticipated as much, but he'd turned me down even more flatly than I'd expected. Even now, I still had no idea why on earth he bore me such resentment. We'd locked horns more than once during our time at the estate, but there shouldn't have been any reason for us to clash at this point. Did he still hold a grudge against me for forcing him to take the stand to testify to Lord Heinreid's innocence?

Well, no matter. I turned my gaze slightly upward, locked eyes with Karl, and began my negotiations.

"I'm about to go speak with *him* as well. If I mishandle matters and his position becomes shaky, that will also leave *you* on an unsteady footing, won't it?"

"That threat won't work on me anymore. I am already aware that His Majesty has placed his trust in you and agreed to leave that man undisturbed for the time being. Unless the *real one* were to suddenly appear, his position as impostor will be stable for the foreseeable future."

I sighed. "You really are unpleasantly observant."

"Karl's way too perfect at everything he does. Feels like he's never

made a mistake in his entire life... Well, except for working for me, I guess." I recalled Lord Heinreid saying something along those lines at some point—he'd mixed in a little self-deprecating joke that I couldn't bring myself to laugh along with.

Personally, I didn't like having this man at His Lordship's side in any capacity, but the fact of the matter was that Karl had never been especially close with him. However, precisely because Karl could continually maintain that distance and observe him at a remove, he could grasp a clear picture of His Lordship's overall state and make sound judgments on that basis. I simply couldn't do that, and I didn't imagine I would ever be able to. That was precisely why I wanted to learn what Karl saw from his vantage point.

"Regardless, I *will* be asking my question," I said. "If you want me out of your sight, then answer me."

"Indeed, that is exactly what I would like. Very well, then—get on with it. That said, no matter what I tell you, you've already decided how you plan on engaging with that man, have you not?"

"Stop predicting my actions like that. It's disturbing."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Shut up... Well, that's what I want to ask you about, Karl. You saw all of this coming from the very start, didn't you?"

He'd always been quick to react and impossible to read, but even so, his report to His Majesty and his admonition to me had been *too* precisely delivered. He'd known about Lord Heinreid's loss of appetite, so it wasn't impossible that he'd begun analyzing and strategizing from there—but I had a nagging hunch that this man had anticipated the entire situation from the moment Lord Heinreid had been placed in the tower. And if that was the case, then for future reference, I absolutely needed to know what his basis had been for that prediction.

However, the answer that emerged from Karl's mouth wasn't some complex chain of deductions. In fact, it was anticlimactically simple.

"There was no need for me to predict anything. It's quite easy to tell when that man is depressed. His sighs become more frequent, and he has an unconscious habit of biting his nails."

What?

My belief that Karl wasn't particularly close with His Lordship suddenly felt shakier. This was no time to be petty, but I couldn't help but feel a surge of frustration that Karl was privy to a side of Lord Heinreid I'd never seen.

"He really does let his guard down around you, doesn't he? He's never behaved that way even once in front of me."

I couldn't fully keep my emotions under wraps, and a bit of jealousy bled into my words. Karl, for his part, made no attempt to conceal his derision as he turned up his chin and looked down his nose at me.

"Of course he hasn't. Why would he ever reveal his discomfort to you, knowing that you would simply reject it? It's obvious at a glance what you wish of him, and he has been forcing himself to live up to your expectations. It's a thoroughly warped state of affairs."

"Warped?"

"Is it not? With his evil ways ceased, have you forgotten who that man is? He is heir by birth to the duchy of Rodvelia, a man of noble pedigree—His Grace Duke Heinreid von Rodvelia. Under any normal circumstance, a man such as *you* would be unworthy to stand by his side, let alone *above* him. You forcibly reversed your positions—distortion and strain are the natural result. There's nothing more to it than that."

My foolish antagonistic impulses withered away in the face of his calm, matter-of-fact verbal onslaught. The bitter mockery packed into every corner of his words made it difficult to discern his meaning. But if I unraveled it all, the essence was that Lord Heinreid wasn't being especially open with Karl—he was being especially deferential with me. He was trying to heed my wishes, however much he had to force himself. Warped or not, that was the shape of His Lordship's love and penance. And indeed, while I'd been consuming the sweet poison wrapped in that kindness, blind as I'd been to the truth...I couldn't deny I'd been happy.

That ended today, though. I couldn't keep on drinking down that poison any longer. I let out a deep sigh, realizing that what I needed to do hadn't changed at all.

"Sorry to take up your time."

One way or another, he *had* given me the answer I'd needed. I offered my brief apology, then stepped to the side. Karl made to walk on through the space I'd opened—but as he passed me, he glanced down at what I held in my hands.

"I care not in the slightest how you and he amuse yourselves, but *again*? Does your idiotic brain only have room for one idea?"

"Oh, go away already."

◆◇◆

The former butler's words were on the mark, I supposed. The tower's occupant didn't call me an idiot, of course, but as soon as he caught sight of me—or rather, of what I was carrying—he got an odd look on his face.

"Um, so... Is this, like, a running gag now? Should I laugh?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, but you're welcome to."

"Ha ha..."

"I didn't say to force yourself to laugh."

At my scolding, his strained laughter turned into a deliberate clearing of his throat. The source of Lord Heinreid's unexpected confusion—the bouquet of red roses I held in my hands—bloomed beautifully, as though feigning ignorance of the awkward atmosphere.

Come to think of it, when I'd visited the same shop to ask for the same number of roses with the same wrapping paper, the shopgirl had worn a strangely pitying smile. Perhaps she'd also been wondering whether this was the only idea in my brain... Well, I didn't care. I simply wanted a do-over of that day.

"I do appreciate it, though," he said. "I didn't think you'd ever bring any more roses—not after I told you all that stuff you didn't want to hear about."

Stuff I didn't want to hear about—his story of his *old lover*. And now, cruel as ever, he was deliberately trying to rehash that all over again. But I also had an inkling that his provocation was meant to convince me that I didn't need to worry about his feelings. Whatever

the reason, it really was despicable of him. I furrowed my brow in frustration.

"They're your favorite flower, so I thought that bringing them would make you happy—that's all. My own feelings don't enter into it."

The curt, blunt tone of my answer must have been exactly what he'd been hoping for, but my words seemed to catch him off guard. Looking a little ill at ease, he shifted to a more accommodating, placating register.

"You... You really don't have to put my feelings first, okay? I belong to you, right? You can just do whatever makes you happy."

"I have been. But that's not good enough. If we only ever do things *I'm* happy with, you'll be left unfulfilled, won't you? Lord Heinreid..."

My vision of happiness would leave him stifled, unable to breathe. I'd simply decided that rather than leaving him to writhe and suffer, I'd be better off reining in my own desires in order to allow him whatever peace I could. In a sense, even this was just me doing as I pleased; there wasn't any reason for him to worry over me. But Lord Heinreid started glancing around anxiously, his gaze wandering restlessly across the room.

"No, look... What'd I do to make you start thinking that way? Is it because I'm still making you call me Heinreid, acting like that's me?"

"Lord Heinreid."

"Right, yeah. Little details like that are important—gotta get that stuff nailed down. Craig, I'll make sure I get better at answering to a different name, so you don't need to call me Heinreid anymore. You can call me Felix, or Reynard, or Tsukasa—well, that one might stick out a bit—but anyway, just call me whatever you—"

"You *know* that's not what this is about, don't you?"

I cut off his nervous, misdirected rambling. As always, whenever I tried to get to the heart of the matter, he tried to change the topic and keep me at a distance. But he was only doing that because I'd wanted us to be happy. I'd failed to realize it all this time...but, well, I couldn't fault myself. Who would ever imagine that seeking happiness could be a mistake? I didn't want to sink myself in regret

over it; I just needed to learn from my mistakes and do better from now on.

I set the roses down on the desk and stepped over to him as he sat on the edge of the bed. Once I'd gotten close enough that I could reach out a hand and touch him, I slowly got down on one knee. I knelt before him, gazing straight up at his face as he looked at me in confusion.

Now that I'd come this far, I wasn't going to engage in any unnecessary back-and-forth. He probably didn't want to hear this, but I was going to say it anyway.

"Duke Heinreid von Rodvelia. My former master. Not far in the future, we will be officially informing the people of your demise. Even if they oughtn't forget their pain, they must be allowed to heal from their wounds. For their sakes, we need your sins to die as well."

He stayed silent, looking uncomfortable and dissatisfied. He believed that even if he lived on, he ought never to be redeemed or absolved; the future I'd laid out wasn't what he wished for at all. But there was no changing it at this point. The majority of those now living didn't want to be tied down to the past. They might not be able to forget, but they would do their best to, and slowly but surely, they would consign it to silence.

"I, for my part, had already severed you from the villain you once were. Even if you and he *are* one and the same, I intended to leave that all in the past, just as everyone else will. I believed it was for the best. But, Duke Heinreid... If you insist on carrying your sins with you, no matter what..."

For a brief moment, my voice fell away. I felt a stinging pain deep in my chest. That was how little I truly wanted to say the words I was trying to get out.

"I won't deny your sins any longer. So, please, Your Grace. Just...don't let yourself be alone."

I forced it all out anyway, my heart creaking under the strain. I nearly let out a groan as intense agony surged within me, but I pushed through the pain with all my might.

The truth was, even now, I still wanted to save him. I wanted him to be happy. I wanted us to be happy *together*. But I'd resolved

myself to give up on all of that—no, to hide those desires away. Even if my efforts would never bear fruit, even if there was no destination in sight, I wanted to be by his side. After all, I...

"I love you."

From the bottom of my heart.

Still kneeling, I took Duke Heinreid's hand and pressed the back of it to my brow. This was an ancient rite in our kingdom—a pledge of devotion from servant to master. Painfully, bitterly, that was what I offered him.

He looked a little shaken, but eventually, he let out a single weary sigh. He placed his other hand on my cheek, and I turned my face upward as he guided me. His uncomfortable smile entered my field of vision.

"I'm not gonna be able to make you happy."

"I don't care. If the price of happiness is abandoning you, then I don't want it."

"Right... You're real messed up too, huh, Craig?"

Those slightly cold fingers stroked my cheek, and I lost myself in his smile. A hazy memory surfaced from my childhood—back when I'd thrown tantrums over little irrelevant things, my mother and my brother had worn smiles just like this one. It was a smile that met selfishness with care, acceptance, and simple kindness. Looking at it, I found myself smiling a little as well.

"Indeed," I replied. "Pitiful, aren't I? If you'd like to give me an apology, you're welcome to."

"Can I really?"

I'd meant it as just a small, mean-spirited joke, but the man in front of me had a far more pronounced reaction than I'd expected. His scarlet eyes deepened and wavered. There wasn't any gleam of hope there—but they held a darkness brimming with guilty anticipation and pleasure.

The moment I saw those eyes, I suddenly, finally, truly understood.

Oh.

"Go ahead."

Oh. It's him. It's Duke Heinreid.

He tugged my head in closer and embraced me tightly. Feeling his slender, delicate frame clinging onto me, I quietly awaited his words.

Finally, after a long silence—there, in that room with just the two of us—those fervent words softly echoed.

"I... I'm sorry..."

"Y-Yes, Your Grace."

"I'm really sorry... I'm so sorry..."

It was as though a dam had burst. The words that came pouring out were devoid of sweetness. They were bitter like medicine, like venom. And they certainly weren't directed at me alone. I felt as though his self-centered apologies were flying all around me, carving into my body like knives.

What an utterly despicable man he was. What a despicable man I'd fallen in love with. This acrid, stinging pain was sure to keep on going—I could say for certain that there was no happiness to be found on this path.

But nevertheless... Even knowing that this love itself was a mistake...

I would go on living with him.

Coda: A Frail and Fleeting Love

In a little town a short distance from the capital, a young girl walked down the road carrying a paper bag. The bag was a little heavy, packed with jars of spices, sugar, and other seasonings. The girl didn't find the weight bothersome, though—if anything, it provided her a tangible sensation that she was carrying out the errand her mother had asked of her, and that filled her with pride.

In the days when King Eberhart had reigned, she had hardly been able to go outside at all. This part of the kingdom had been somewhat more peaceful than the duchy of Rodvelia, which had lain under the villainous auspices of the infamous Venom of the Nation, but that was hardly any basis for comparison. Her town had still been constantly filled with a dismal, dreary air, and the adults had all forbidden their children to leave their houses for their own safety. So no matter how bright and sunny the weather, the girl hadn't been allowed to go out and play. She'd spent day after day shut in her room, trembling in fear at the occasional screams from outside.

However, now that the tyrant's brother Sighart had carried out his rebellion and seized the throne, those days were finally at an end. The newly appointed local lord and his soldiers were all kind and caring; it was plain to see that they were taking pains to be especially gentle so as not to frighten the townspeople scarred by terror. Even after the new king had taken over, the townspeople had still been fearful and on their guard for a time, but thanks to those efforts, they had gradually come to accept the newfound peace.

The girl's parents ran a restaurant, and that, too, was more lively and bustling than it had been in years. The girl no longer needed to fear that her family would die the moment she took her eyes off them; now, she even got to go shopping all by herself.

"There's no need to rush. Just be careful and take your time."

Taking her parents at their word, the girl walked slowly along the

road home. By the light of the bright, clear afternoon, she drank in the peaceful scenery of the town, thoroughly savoring that precious joy and feeling a soft warmth spread through her heart.

She was simply casting her gaze aimlessly at the buildings around her—and so, it was only by pure coincidence that she glanced up at the window of the inn.

Oh...

An unfamiliar man was resting his elbows on the sill of the open second-story window, gazing out into the distance. Who was he, again...? She tried to recall. That was right—the men staying in the inn were an aid worker from the capital and a knight accompanying him. She'd heard they were traveling all across the kingdom, conducting proper funerals for those who'd been killed and distributing food to people who were having trouble getting back on their feet. The girl had seen them at work off in the distance once before. But at the time, they'd both had hoods pulled tightly over their heads, and she hadn't been able to see their faces at all.

Now, though, the man had his hood off. Of course he did—he was in his room, after all. He was lightly dressed in a simple shirt, resting his chin in his hands. There was nothing at all concealing him, and she could even clearly make out his expression.

He's so pretty...

That was where her gut impression began and ended. He had pale skin like fine porcelain, and his long, delicate eyelashes were visible even at this distance. His inky-black hair had a slightly imposing air, but that simply served to accentuate the man's presence. Before she knew it, the girl was thoroughly absorbed in the stranger's otherworldly beauty. She was a little bit curious where his listless, idle gaze was pointed, but she didn't want to take her eyes away from him. So she simply kept on staring up at him.

Perhaps she'd been staring a little too hard. The man's gaze suddenly lowered, intertwining with hers. It was then, for the first time, that she learned the color of his eyes—they were a deep, *deep* scarlet.

A chill ran down the girl's spine. Was she flustered that their eyes had met? No. Was she startled by the unfamiliar hue? No as well.

The tension that paralyzed her body was born of sheer terror. She somehow felt as though the man looking down at her weren't human at all—as though she were face-to-face with some horrifying monster—as though she'd caught the attention of a demon. She'd never experienced those things before, but they would definitely have felt something like this. Her vision swam, faced with that unknowable horror. She needed to get away right this instant, or else those eyes would swallow her whole—but despite that feeling, she still couldn't turn her gaze away. She silently trembled in fear.

The man, meanwhile, didn't take his eyes off her either. He blinked a few times, as though he'd spotted something strange.

They stayed like that for a few trifling moments—or terrifying moments, in the girl's case—but eventually, the man seemed to realize that the girl was definitely looking back at him, and a warm smile spread across his face.

In that instant, the girl was certain she heard the *thump* of her heart leaping in her chest. She felt her blood, stagnant with tension, begin circulating again all at once. Her cheeks flushed bright red, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Not half a minute ago, she had been utterly terrified of this man; but now, to her confusion, she felt her body and spirit trembling with joy. Her thoughts melted away with the exultation, leaving her still more immobilized.

Entirely ignorant of her inner turmoil, the man gave a small wave of his hand.

What to do? Should she respond somehow? Maybe she could get away with that trifling bit of connection.

She faltered for just a brief moment. Unable to resist the sweet warmth, she took one of her hands away from her bag and was about to wave back to him—when all of a sudden, the man's figure pulled back inside with an unnatural jolt. The next instant, before she could even begin to be startled, the window snapped closed and the curtains were tightly drawn. In the blink of an eye, every trace of the man's presence had been erased.

Unable to follow the sudden turn of events, the girl stood there in a daze for a short while—but her bag started to slip out of the one

arm still holding it, pulling her back to reality.

Oh no! I was still in the middle of my errand!

She hurriedly put both arms back around the bag. Her parents had told her not to rush, but they'd get nervous if she took *too* long to return. She didn't want to worry them if she could help it. The man who'd disappeared behind the window still nagged at her mind a little, but she shook her head to clear the thoughts away.

Next time I see him... I'll be braver and try talking to him, the innocent girl quietly resolved as she raced down the road on quick feet.

As it happened, she would never see the man again—but she didn't know that at the time.

◆◇◆

Lying back on the slightly stiff bed, I stared over at the man sharply closing the window. He was in the prime of his life, and his muscular body projected a dependable air. Meanwhile, I couldn't even run anymore; of course he could pick me up and throw me without a second thought.

As I pondered, not even particularly annoyed at him for grabbing me roughly by the arm and dragging me away, the man pulling the curtains tight—Craig—slowly turned around to face me.

"When will you develop any sense of danger, Your Grace? Showing your face at the window in broad daylight..."

He scolded me in a low, quiet voice. The annoyance on his face was plain to see, and I could feel the irritation radiating off of him. Well, he did have a point—I couldn't deny that it had been a little careless of me. It'd been a few years since Sig had carried out his rebellion and ended the long years of tragedy; news of the evil duke's death had been officially released and spread throughout the kingdom, but my face hadn't changed at all. If I walked around too openly, there was always a risk I'd end up on the sharp end of someone's misplaced (or perfectly placed) grudge.

Still, though...

"Craig..."

I sat up and called out to him, beckoning him over. He furrowed his brow suspiciously, but he still did as he was told. Once he was right in front of me, just as he crouched down a little to level his gaze with mine, I grabbed him by the collar and pulled his head in close. Peering straight into those emerald eyes at point-blank range, I pressed my forehead against his.

"Cutie," I teased. "You were letting me get away with it for a little while there."

He narrowed his eyes sullenly, but he didn't have anything to say back—he knew I was right.

We didn't have any particular plans for today, so we'd been idly sleeping away the afternoon. I'd been the first to wake up, but I knew I'd woken him the moment I'd slipped out of bed. Usually, he would have called out to me then and there, but this town was far away from the duchy of Rodvelia, and it was a relatively peaceful place. Even when I'd rested my elbows on the windowsill, he hadn't scolded me at first, just quietly watched from the bed. If I hadn't waved my hand, I was pretty sure he would've kept on pretending to sleep. In other words, the real reason he'd told me off was probably jealousy. He could be a real pain sometimes, but I meant it when I said he was cute.

On impulse, I started tousling his hair, but he irritatedly shoved my hand away. Spoilsport.

"Well? Just who were you flirting with?" he asked sternly, sitting down next to me with a thump.

"Why've you gotta put it like that?" I grumbled. "It was just a kid—a little girl. She was staring *really* hard at me, so I waved at her. That's it."

The girl had been carrying a big paper bag—she'd looked like she was on her way home from shopping. The strange man leaning out the window and spacing out in the middle of the afternoon must've caught her eye; she'd been staring up at me, so I'd waved hi. I'd thought it was a better move than acting suspicious and closed-off, but Craig's severe expression didn't budge. If anything, I had a feeling he was glaring at me even harder now.

"Well, then... She's going to remember your face."

"You think? She only saw me for a moment, and she was pretty far off."

"No—she'll definitely never forget you as long as she lives."

Craig's words were absolutely packed with certainty.

If he's that sure, then maybe I did make a bad call, huh... Even setting aside Craig's possessive streak, the fewer people who know I exist, the better.

I heard a sigh from next to me.

"Well, we've just about finished up our work here anyway," he said. "It's about time we moved on, don't you think?"

"Guess I'm causing you trouble again, huh?"

"Indeed. I'd say I've earned myself a reward by now..."

The wrinkles in his brow finally smoothed out. He smirked at me, a bit of sadism bleeding onto his face. I slumped my shoulders and leaned in closer; he grabbed me by the waist and pulled me onto his lap. Our faces now nearly touching, I leaned in to close the gap, pressed my lips against his, and slipped my tongue into his mouth. He nibbled at it and slid his tongue along mine; a shiver ran through my leg.

He's getting better at this, the little twerp.

"Beguiling an innocent youth in such an immodest state..." Craig murmured as I pulled my lips away for a moment to catch my breath. "You wicked, evil man."

Wicked man. Evil man. In the days since I'd left the tower, Craig would say things like that to me from time to time. He was as terrible an actor as ever, and his delivery was always wooden, but the words would still prick and stab at my heart—and they'd remind me why I needed to go on living.

"Immodest state," though... He must've been talking about me wearing nothing except a shirt, but...

"Nf— *You're* the one who...stripped everything...off me— Hwaah!"

"Trying to pass the blame, are you?"

"Sorry— Gh! I said sorry! Wait, not there— Aah!"

Craig pulled up my long shirt and immediately thrust a finger down and into my rear. My head jolted back as he penetrated me. He'd already wrecked me the night before, and the heat inside me

still hadn’t fully cooled. His finger kept grinding into me, working me open—in the blink of an eye, I could barely think straight anymore. I clung to his toned body, unable to get away, but his mean-spirited finger pulled out surprisingly soon. In its place, I heard the sound of fabric rustling underneath me. I did my best to catch my breath as much as I could during this momentary reprieve.

I inhaled deeply, and the humid air of the dimly lit room filled my lungs. I sat there in a daze. As my head went fuzzy, my thoughts turned to Craig.

He’d *earned himself a reward*, he’d said. But I knew I couldn’t give him the one thing he really wanted.

Attachment.

When I’d begun settling my affairs all that time ago, that was the very first thing I’d thrown away. That was what he wanted from me now.

As pleasure ravaged my thoughts, a single fervent wish burned inside me. Even if I couldn’t offer what he longed for the most, I at least wanted to give him everything else I had.

Afterword

I'm Miori Kayamoto—it's nice to meet you. Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *The Despicable Duke Settles His Affairs*! Originally, I released this story on a website called Moonlight Novels, but thanks to the enthusiastic support of countless people, I was able to get it published! I can't help feeling like it's too great an honor, but I'm incredibly happy to have made it here.

Now then, my protagonist for this novel was an *irredeemable villain*—what did you think of him? I think that situations where it's too late to fix things can sometimes spur people to work even harder, so I had Heinreid devote all his effort toward achieving his goal. There may be some issues with the *direction* he takes, but I think he did a good job pursuing it unwaveringly, at least.

I feel kind of bad about everything I put Craig through, sticking him with Heinreid—but at the same time, I absolutely *love* seeing men struggle and get in their own heads in the face of adversity, so I was really enjoying myself during the actual writing process *laughs*. During one of our meetings, my editor even asked me, "Miori-san, do you hate Craig?" I was just *that* gleeful about tormenting him. I'm so sorry for giving the wrong impression—I really do love him.

Aside from the two protagonists and their dynamic, the one thing I absolutely wanted to write when I was working on this novel was a *charismatic villain with an overpowering presence*—"my liege," Eberhart. I often find fictional villains incredibly compelling, so I'd wanted to try my hand at writing a villain who's completely undeserving of sympathy but strangely alluring all the same. With that in mind, I put a lot of emotional investment into his character, so I hope he was able to get his claws into all of you a little bit too. I really want to see more and more villain-lovers out there—please?

Finally, I'd like to give my thanks once again to everyone involved with this novel. Thank you to my editor, who reached out to me and

supported me all the way through the publication process. Thank you to Karatsuyu-sama, who took my vague, fuzzy character bios and turned them into absolutely gorgeous, dazzling illustrations. And thank you to everyone who read this novel of mine. I can’t repeat it enough—thank you all so much!

I hope we can meet again someday, somewhere. I’ll look forward to seeing you then.

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The Despicable Duke Settles His Affairs



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