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The Invisible Wallflower Marries an Upstart Aristocrat After Getting Dumped for Her Sister!

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The Invisible Wallflower Marries an Upstart Aristocrat After Getting Dumped for Her Sister! Volume 3
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KONYAKU HAKI SARETA "KUUKI" NA WATASHI, NARIAGARI NO DANNA SAMA NI TOTSUGIMASHITA. Volume 3
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THE INVISIBLE WALLFLOWER MARRIES AN UPSTART ARISTOCRAT AFTER GETTING DUMPED FOR HER SISTER!

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"He can recall any thing or scenery he sees with meticulous detail. His eyes are like a living camera."
CANOPUS KUDRYA
Cano for short. One of the "dogs" who switched sides from the first prince's faction and now serves as Leikzig's subordinate. He acts innocent and naïve, but his true specialty is being an undercover agent?!

Prologue

"LUKA… *My dear son, you've inherited your amber eyes and dazzling, canary-yellow hair from your father, who hails from the direction of the setting sun."*

"My beloved, beloved child."

"You're the spitting image of my dearest, who hasn't returned since long ago. You're so bright in my eyes and simply so important to me, Luka."

"Lucas…"

His mother, with reddish-brown hair the color of black tea, began to vanish into the light. She looked different from her final moments, all frail and skin and bones, cold to the touch. She gently stroked the soft hair of her young son and flashed a bright smile. She was stern but kind and still young back then.

His mother walked toward the light.

"Wait, Mom! Don't leave me! I'll protect you! Wait until I become stronger! I'm begging you…"

As his mother's back receded, Lucas chased after her. But a child couldn't keep up with his mother's strides, and his hand that reached out looked so pitifully small. He couldn't grab his mother's hand—he never reached her. The vision of his mother grew hazy.

His mother never returned.

"Good morning, my lord," a familiar voice said.

"Wh-Whoa!" Lucas cried out.

Amid the light of the morning sun, his butler, Leikzig Kudrya, stared at his face while crouched at his bedside. The butler's silver hair was tied neatly and splayed over his shoulder onto the sheets as he rested his elbow on the bed, a hand pressed to his cheek. As he gazed at his lord, his golden eyes narrowed with glee.

"You little sleepyhea— Oof," Leikzig grumbled. A pillow was thrown into his face, cutting off his teasing remark.



“Don’t stare at me,” Lucas snapped. “Hurry up and make preparations.”

“Okey-doke,” the butler said, leaving with his usual cheeky grin as he followed his master’s orders. He opened up the curtains, letting in a stream of bright light.

No doubt Lucas had seen that dream because of the sunny skies. But that wasn’t all. As Leik skillfully helped Lucas prepare and dress for the day, the baron posed a question. “How’s Iris doing?”

“Madam has been busy with the maids since the morning,” the butler replied. “Ladies require more time to get prepared.”

“I see.”

“I suppose this shall be the last time I’ll come and wake you up like this, my lord. In the future, I shall leave it to Kiki.”

When Lucas whirled around, Leik smiled, his silver hair gliding across his shoulders.

“You’ll have your first night together after your wedding, my lord,” he said.

“Just leave,” Lucas ordered.

The butler left with a meaningful smile dancing on his lips. Lucas dropped his gaze to the white sheets and let out a small sigh.

“I should take responsibility and tie up loose ends soon…”

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IN this kingdom, the customs for weddings were to first visit a church for the couple to exchange vows before a government office accepted the required forms and considered a man and woman to be married officially. Since Lucas and Iris had a mariage blanc, their forms had already been filed.

The two would become an officially wedded couple only after exchanging vows and hosting a ceremony at a church.

It was a bright morning, and spring was in full bloom. The skies of Solalitika were sunny, with the morning dew glittering over the damp greenery. Lucas and Iris’s carriage rolled up at the church in the Solalitikan district. White marble and light-pink

flowers decorated the brilliant, white stone building that jutted out toward the ocean, showering the happy couple with its blessings.

The glimmering emerald sea could be seen from the window, and in the center of the building was a wedding aisle, the same color as the sea, stretched out in the direction of the ocean. The aisle, resembling the sea and the voyages that one would need to sail throughout one's life, was already packed with wedding guests. Lucas glanced at his nervous wife.

"You all right, Iris?" he asked.

"I am," she replied.

He took his nervous beloved's hand and escorted her under the anxious gazes of the guests. Lucas slowly walked down the wedding aisle. The hems of Iris's dress and veil were long, creating a white waterway behind her. In the depths of the church was a statue of a Solalitikan deity, its gaze blessing the happy couple. They stood in front of the officiant, and Lucas and Iris faced each other. Each signed their name on a document approved by the kingdom, placed their hands on top of each other, and exchanged their vows.

It felt like a dream to Lucas. He still couldn't process reality. Iris, cast under the warm glow of the church's stained glass, was breathtakingly beautiful.

She was wearing a stunningly white dress made from high-quality silk and a jacquard loom imported from the Orient. They made a dress from scratch based on the wedding gown of Louisa Karelia, Iris's mother. A few details were tailored to give off an air of elegance suited to Iris's tastes.

She resembled a blooming white rose, her beauty so otherworldly that it felt like she jumped out of a mystical world. The veil, reflecting the light that came through the stained-glass windows, gave off a rainbow shimmer. Her clear skin, dusted with a special kind of glittering, opalescent powder, made her look lovely and pale. It was as though she was glowing from the inside out.

Iris had personally requested that her hair be let down, her dark, glossy tresses gliding down her shoulders and back. Not even the merchants had ever seen a bride dressed so lavishly with shimmering decorations within the kingdom. The royalty and

nobility were restricted by traditional regulations, preventing them from using luxurious materials to their heart's content.

I had so much fun dressing Iris up, Lucas thought, internally tormented by a myriad of worries that flashed across his mind. *I'm more than satisfied with how she looks.* He took pride in how he was able to make a noblewoman from a fallen house, who constantly berated herself for being drab and invisible like air, glitter brighter than the sun. He *wanted* everyone to know just how stunning and gorgeous his wife was, but simultaneously, he felt the greedy desire to monopolize her and hide her from view. Lucas was acutely aware of how contradictory his feelings were, but they undoubtedly clashed in his heart.

He faced his wife, ready to kiss her and seal their vows. When he lifted her veil, Iris gently smiled at him. He was tempted to immediately lock her away, shielding her from everyone else's view, and he fought against the impulse. Lucas knew that it was imperative for everyone to take in her beauty and have them all see that she would officially become his wife.

In truth, this wedding had been bumped up six months and was hastily thrown together due in no small part to the king's younger brother. The cunning royal always troubled Lucas.

It all started a couple of months ago…

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AFTER the ordeal of House Streltsy, where Lucas had claimed his victory, he returned to Solalitika and spent his usual days hectic but cheery.

But one day, the king's younger brother started sending numerous nobles' daughters to Solalitika. Lucas's manor, which usually never saw any aristocratic guests, became lively with luxurious carriages and lovely ladies.

On the surface, these guests arrived to experience a salon hosted by Iris. Curiously, they were always present whenever Lucas was at the manor—that was no coincidence. Clearly, the cunning prince had a different intention up his sleeve. All the noblewomen that arrived had dark hair, and though many were meek and toned down, they were beautiful. They were quiet and

kind. It was as though Lucas was implicitly being told to choose someone else.

Needless to say, they came from powerful families that sided with the king and his younger brother, the third prince. In the past, Lucas would've found them to be convenient marriage candidates to serve his purposes.

"Damn it..." Lucas grumbled as he punched a wall. He'd left Iris to host the salon and had returned by himself to his office. "Don't screw with me."

When he saw Iris smile and welcome them without once looking upset, he felt like his chest was about to cave in. It was nothing short of humiliating to see his wife welcome ladies under the care of the king's younger brother. Lucas felt sick to his stomach when he grasped the royal's intentions.

"I'm not your beloved pet that needs a mate to be chosen for him," he hissed.

Lucas had known the third prince for quite a while, ever since he'd been a servant at Count Garner's house. It all started when Lucas frantically did his utmost best to save the queen from her ailment. That allowed Lucas and the king's younger brother—the third prince and a duke—to form a relationship that continued to this day. Duke Cyrus Monzlaus had been drawn to Lucas's youth, dazzling beauty that made him stick out from the crowd, and his ambition. And so, the royal had always supported Lucas from the shadows—from assisting the young man so that he could run the mines to helping found and develop the Stock Trading Company. Duke Monzlaus had always been cheering for his young friend. Though Lucas had concocted plans, negotiated at the mines, and used whatever means he could to navigate his problems, the third prince had ensured that unfair conditions set by those who outranked him wouldn't crush Lucas. Indeed, the royal had served as a patron to shield Lucas from foul schemes.

Lucas, who was certainly not of noble birth and had no one backing him, couldn't ignore what Duke Monzlaus had done for him, helping him claw his way up the ranks. Lucas was deeply indebted to him and felt a sense of duty to repay the investment he had received.

However, gratitude aside, it was wrong for Lucas to have his wife chosen for him. He felt anger rage within his heart as the

duke continued sending in beautiful ladies at his convenience. “Sure, I’ll find a wife for you. You like these types of women, don’t you? How about her?” Duke Monzlaus’s recent actions seemed to imply. Lucas had had enough.

“I declined him so firmly, and that wasn’t enough?” Lucas mumbled to himself.

“Now, now,” a calm voice said from behind him. “I suppose that old man’s thinking, ‘as long as she’s cute, anyone will do,’ or the like.”

“Leik, when did you come in?”

“Oh, I’m always by your side, my lord.” The butler had appeared without a sound and was polishing a silver knife in his hand as he continued, “Well, I’m sure he’s simply worried about you. A nouveau riche baron who started with nothing requires as much support as he can get. It’s quite logical, really.”

“I’m sure he just finds it a waste if a pawn he raised until now becomes useless.”

“I suppose that’s another way to phrase it. The best way to silence him is to show that Madam Iris, though having lost the glory of the Traditional Twelve, is still useful and can be both a pawn and a wife.” Leik twirled his knife in his hands, checking over the gleaming blade meticulously. “Perhaps if you show just how infatuated you are with the madam, you could negotiate with His Highness. As a patron, there’s nothing more delightful than being shown an unusual side of your favorite investment.”

Lucas narrowed his eyes and glared at his butler. “Don’t make it sound so weird.”

“Heh, heh.” Leik’s lips curled in a smile, unfazed. “I’m always watching with great interest as you flirt with the lady. You’ve got the funniest expressions when you’re all sweet on her.” He approached his master and tilted his head. “You’d like to undo this mariage blanc soon, too, wouldn’t you?”

As the butler’s lunar eyes narrowed in on him, Lucas could see himself reflected in that conniving gaze—he had the look of a deer cornered by a wolf. Leik smiled faintly.

“I understand *why* you’re hesitant, my lord,” he said. “But I’m sure that she will be just fine.”

Lucas pushed his butler aside and gazed out the window. Carriages were stationed outside, waiting for the ladies to finish

their time at the salon. *I can still make it in time,* Lucas thought as he jumped into action.

"I'll be off," he said.

"I wish you luck," Leik said to his master's back.

The baron headed for the salon, where his wife was hosting the other ladies.

"M-My lord?" a servant said in shock, standing by the door.

"I've got an urgent matter to address. I'm going in," Lucas said, making the servant hastily open the door so that he could step inside.

Iris, who was enjoying a spot of tea, looked astonished to see him as she hastily rose from her chair. She wore an adorable dress decorated with small floral prints. He had no time to praise her, but she looked beautiful, and the dress suited her very well. It was rare for her to look so confused as she approached her husband.

"Whatever is the matter?" Iris inquired. "Everyone's rather shocked, as they aren't used to a man joining a tea party."

He ignored Iris's question and cast a sweeping glance at the ladies. Upon seeing the lord of the manor, they all smiled faintly. Despite nouveau riche Lucas barging in rudely, it was the sign of a fine lady to never forget her manners. Their signature smile was one that Lucas learned well as he mingled with other nobles—it hid their true thoughts and feelings behind a mask. Their smiles accentuated their elegance, class, and beauty to the maximum while removing any sense of uniqueness from their faces. Their perfection and utter lack of any faults were truly the epitome of what aristocrats aimed for.

In the past, that behavior had creeped Lucas out—they all looked and acted the same, like machines. But he now knew they were all undoubtedly perfect wives personally chosen by Duke Monzlaus. Every single one was a noble to the core and educated very well.

"Um, Lucas?" Iris asked in befuddlement, requesting an answer.

Lucas looked at his wife, her earnest face trying so desperately to understand his thoughts and actions. Without hesitation, he lifted her jaw and kissed her on the lips.

Iris gasped in surprise. The kiss was unrestrained and passionate, which they only exchanged when alone. As she

widened her eyes, she was like a pitiful bird that allowed her captor to do as he pleased. The salon fell silent as the other ladies were astonished by the display of passionate affection.

As the two gauchely gasped for air in between their kiss, showing it off to the other ladies, Iris finally staggered just as Lucas had his fill. She must've been at her limit. He released his wife from his grasp and used his thumb to wipe his lips, rose-colored lipstick dyeing his thumbpad.

Iris looked as though she had forgotten to breathe and had mustered all her strength to remain standing. Lucas hugged his wife's waist and drew her close as he gazed at the other ladies. Some of them turned red while others turned pale, but all displayed their bemusement. Even the most disciplined lady couldn't hide their true thoughts in the face of such a show of love. Lucas narrowed his eyes and plastered a fake business smile on his face.

"Oh, pardon me," he apologized. "As an ill-bred man, I'm afraid I'm not too familiar with manners. Every now and then, I feel this impulsive desire and yearning to feel my wife's lips on mine."

Iris and the other ladies were frozen in place, unable to emit a single word. Lucas closed Iris's half-open mouth, wiped her lips, and kissed her cheek before patting her on the shoulder. He glanced at the other ladies.

"We'll pick this up later, Iris," he said.

Before Iris could respond, he left the room. A few seconds later, he heard shrill squeals echo from behind him. He stuck out his tongue at the maids and servants, giving them a look of triumph and satisfaction.

He trusted that Iris could take care of matters and left everything else to her.



"LUCAS," Iris said sometime later, her slender shoulders drawn back angrily. She looked like a governess ready to scold a naughty child and glared at Lucas. "Why did you do that?"

"Now I know how you look when you're angry," he replied.

"Lucas."

“Come here.”

He outstretched his arms. She pursed her small lips and stood in place. She usually posed like that to imply his sweet words wouldn’t fool her. Lucas gently smiled and repeated his request.

“Would you please come here? I want you in my arms and to calmly talk things over with you.”

“Um… All right,” Iris relented. She seemed like she wanted to say a few more words, but she approached her beloved. A faint, sweet scent wafted in the air as she entered his embrace.

“As usual, you smell nice.”

He kissed her slender neck, and possibly remembering the kiss from earlier, she jolted in shock.

“I’m angry, I’ll have you know,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Lucas replied. “Really, I am. I shouldn’t have kissed you so suddenly like that.”

As he whispered into her soft earlobe, Iris’s ears started to turn red. Was she remembering the kiss? Lucas drew her closer still and petted her dainty head.

“I showed it off on purpose,” he said. “I wanted to use those ladies to relay a clear and firm message to the third prince. I’ve only got eyes for you.”

Iris looked up at him, her bright, dark eyes showing her intelligence.

“You’ve noticed it already, haven’t you?” Lucas asked. “He assumes the type I like and has been sending ladies with the same dark hair as yours into your salon.”

“I have…” Iris confessed, averting her gaze while sounding a touch hesitant. “But Lucas, if you becoming friendly with these ladies will benefit your work, then I—”

A passionate kiss cut her off. When he released Iris from his grasp, she turned bright red.

“See? I have to be close to you, or I can’t silence you,” he said.

“L-Lucas…”

“If I have to choose a lady other than you for my company, then I’d rather sell everything off and start from nothing again.”

“D-Don’t say that.”

She turned pale as Lucas gently knocked his forehead against hers.

“That’s *my* line,” he said. “You’re so smart, and yet you’re so dense when it comes to understanding how much I love you. It’s almost frustrating.”

“U-Um, well, I…”

“If you’re gonna apologize, I’ll kiss you again.”

Iris had tried to instinctively apologize and pressed a hand against her mouth as her back went ramrod straight.

“I understand,” she said. “I won’t deny you, nor will I apologize. So, will you continue?”

“The kiss?” he asked.

“No, our discussion.”

“Heh.” Lucas chuckled at Iris’s firm words as he hugged her tightly. “In any case, I only need you,” he asserted. “I kissed you to convey that message to Duke Monzlaus, even pretending like we’d gone further than that. Do you understand my intentions so far?”

“I do.”

“Yet, you still seem like you’ve got some questions.”

“Erm…”

It clearly looked like she still had something to say. As she fidgeted, her usual mature demeanor vanished, replaced by the innocence of a lady who wasn’t twenty yet. Iris had been raised to be constantly vigilant and more mature than her age; Lucas was truly glad that there were now times when she’d slip up and look defenseless before him.

“Iris,” Lucas whispered. “If you’ve got something to say, tell me. If it’s anything but divorce, I’ll gladly hear you out. I don’t know if I can be of much help, though.”

His wife’s cheeks turned pink. She pointed her gaze at the ground as she carefully selected her words. After some time, she organized her thoughts and opened her pretty lips to speak.

“I-I understand that you have no plans to be intimate with another lady. But…we’ll be continuing this mariage blanc, won’t we?” she inquired feebly.

“Were you bothered by that?” he asked.

As the words left his lips, he realized his mistake. He reflexively put his hand over his mouth as his dear wife looked to be a little depressed. He’d begged her to stay by his side, yet their wedding had been delayed. Their mariage blanc was still

continuing. *I can't blame her for being anxious,* Lucas thought. He'd been so preoccupied with his own needs.

"You're right," he said. "I have no excuses. From your point of view, no matter what I say, I'm just a crafty lord who continues this mariage blanc without hosting an actual ceremony. I'm sorry."

"Um, I don't think of you that negatively," Iris insisted.

He shook his head. "No, I know it's too late, but it's only natural for you to feel that way about me. I'm really stupid. Please forgive me." He mussed his canary-yellow hair, firmly clasped Iris's shoulders, and gazed straight into her eyes. "Listen. I have *no* plans on ending our relationship as a mariage blanc," he said. "I can't think of any other woman than you. It's not your fault that the official wedding's been delayed. It's a problem on my end."

"Lucas?"

"Don't worry. To spill the beans, I've already prepared a wedding ring for you. It's made of platinum and perfect for your slender fingers." He kissed her forehead, then the ring finger of her left hand. As Iris remained silent, he knew he kissed her finger many times before and firmly made his vow. "I've decided to hasten our ceremony," he said. "I'll publicly announce that we'll end our mariage blanc."

Iris raised her head. "But I thought you wanted to delay it a touch longer."

Indeed, timing was important. A wedding was the perfect venue to sell his name and advertise his company. But Lucas knew very well that there was no meaning in prioritizing his work if it meant making his beloved wife anxious. He'd built his company to protect others, after all—what use was there if he couldn't even protect his dearest?

"And that time is now, Iris," Lucas said. "I want to see you in a wedding dress, and there can't be a more perfect time. What do you think?"

Those simple words were all Iris needed as her eyes grew damp. The corners of her eyes turned red as she gazed down and gave a small nod.

"I'm sorry, Iris," Lucas apologized. "I'm sorry to make you so anxious for so long."

"Don't be…" Iris said.

“When the wedding is over, I’ll tell you everything. I’ll tell you why I was prolonging our mariage blanc, and I’ll tell you about myself.”

Lucas hugged her tightly and closed his eyes. Finally, the time to face his past had come. There was no way around it.

And so their wedding would be hosted in the spring.

Chapter 1

A church in Solalitika hosted our wedding. We exchanged rings and a kiss to seal our wedding vows. After the ceremony, I left Lucas's side, touched up my makeup, and headed outside. Kiki, who was holding a sun umbrella for me, was bawling her eyes out, her face red.

"Waaah! Lady Iris, you look so beautiful! Waaah!" she wailed.

"Kiki, you've been crying a bit too much since this morning," Ray said.

"B-But... She's just so... Waaah!"

Ray and Rusk, my two maids who helped me get dressed today as well, wearily tried to console Kiki. The maids were all dressed in special attire for the occasion—an apron wrapped around their light blue dresses that resembled the sky, and flowers adorned their chests. Like the other maids, Kiki was wearing a three-quarter-sleeve dress. She had been able to take some medicine to treat her bruises from the blue flower drop disease, and the marks had gotten much lighter. If she wore some thin fingerless gloves and stockings, her marks were almost invisible under the sun.

"My lord is waiting for you at the carriage," the girls informed me.

"Right," I replied.

My maids were beautiful, like angels, as they guided me to the carriage. When I arrived, Lucas, who was already waiting for me, couldn't help but be taken aback.

"Whoa," he said. "Kiki, what's wrong?"

"She's just feeling emotional today," Rusk explained.

"Urk... Lord Lucas, you look so wonderful, too... Waaah!" Kiki sobbed.

"Oh dear... She's crying again," Ray said, wiping the tears from Kiki's face.

I exchanged a look with Lucas and we smiled. He wore a white tuxedo made from the same material as my wedding dress.

The collar was luxuriously embroidered with gold thread, just like his yellow hair.

Lucas looked at me sternly and said, “As I get another good look at you, you’re absolutely breathtaking. The dress suits you very well.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “You look quite dashing yourself, Lucas.”

“If I wear white and stand beside you, your face will look brighter than ever.”

“Go on, you two!” Ray encouraged. “If you’re gonna stare into each other’s eyes, do it after you’re in the carriage! Everyone’s eagerly waiting for your procession!”

“Ha!” Lucas chuckled. “You’re right. Since we went all out to look this flashy, we need everyone in town, including rival merchants and nobles, to see us in all our glory.”

Lucas escorted me inside the carriage. Unlike the usual black vehicle that I was used to, this carriage had an open roof and was a dazzling shade of white. Hundreds of flowers decorated it. After we were settled inside, it slowly clattered over the cobblestones from the church and into the city. The ocean breeze was refreshing as it whisked us off to our destination. Cheers arose from the streets, a touching reminder of how well-respected Lucas was in this city.

When I glanced at him, he was waving at the people, a kind smile dancing on his lips. *I’m so glad he looks happy,* I thought. My heart swelled with fulfillment as we returned to our manor on the hill. A party was already in full bloom in the estate garden.

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I’D never known this tidbit until I started preparing for my wedding, but commoners usually said their vows at a church, filed the necessary paperwork at a government office, and were seen as a married couple. It was as simple as that. Of course, some regions would host a lavish celebration involving the entire village, or at times, the lord of the land would also offer his blessings. However, here in Solalitika, many citizens worked away from home. It was unrealistic and impractical to gather every family

member for celebrations. So, it was most common to have simple parties. An employee of the Stock Trading Company had told me as much.

However, matters weren't so simple for wealthy merchant families or the nobility, which thrived off socializing with others. A luxurious and elaborate party needed to be hosted after the wedding, and the union of the newly married couple would be highly publicized.

Lucas followed tradition and spent the past few months renovating the manor and its garden to host a splendid banquet and invite numerous guests for this occasion. When we departed from the church with the carriage, rode through the city, and returned to the manor, many people had already gathered in our garden, waiting for us, the main event for tonight.

Tom, the gardener, and I worked hard to tidy the garden, incorporating the latest trends and accounting for the warm climate of Solalitika. We transformed it into the perfect place for a spring wedding. My aunt, Countess Miazea Klaus, was in charge of tonight's party so I wouldn't have to be so busy. She worked in tandem with Coldola, who won the favor of my aunt, and the pair reliably managed the occasion.

After we sat under the roof of a beautiful terrace and gave our toasts, numerous people swarmed to our side, hoping for a chance to conduct business. From bank presidents to chairmen of trading companies and their wives to nobles I've met before, they were all crowding our table. We even had potential business clients and people from overseas visiting us.

Lucas and I greeted our guests, engaged in small talk, and enjoyed ourselves. When the initial excitement of socialization died down, I noticed a fluttering rainbow emerge in the corner of my eye. When I looked up, Leik was there. His pale, silver hair was reflecting the light and forming a lovely rainbow as he looked at me and unusually flashed an honest smile.

"Congratulations on your marriage, madam," he said.

"Thank you, Leik," I replied.

"I should be the one thanking you. It's all thanks to you that my lord looks splendid and satisfied with himself."

I followed his gaze and saw Lucas speaking with the president of a trading company. Leik and I squinted our eyes like he was too

bright for us.

“He looks lively,” I observed.

“Indeed,” Leik replied.

“If I was a man, I would’ve loved to work by his side. I’d like to gaze at his working profile.”

“In his personal life, only you can monopolize my lord all to yourself. I’m rather envious of you as well, madam.”

“I suppose the grass is always greener on the other side.”

“Heh heh… I suppose so.”

As we smiled at each other, an energetic silver-haired boy jogged over to us.

“Sir Leik, I’ve got a report!” he said.

“I’ve got another eager pup on my hands…” Leik muttered.

The butler frowned ever so slightly. The young boy was slender and tall, and his long limbs looked fragile. With every move he made, it looked as though particles of light danced in the air. He was dazzling from the inside out and was a beautiful young boy. There was simply no other way to describe him. His name was Canopus Kudrya, or Cano for short.

He was one of the “dogs” we had sheltered following the incident involving House Streltsy. Lucas took the young boy in and hired him as a servant. Cano had apparently been used quite a bit for espionage within the faction belonging to the king’s older brother. He knew the latest secrets of high society and had been selected by Lucas for this knowledge. In the past, when Cano was still a “dog-in-training,” he had received guidance from Leik, and so the boy personally requested to become Leik’s subordinate.

“Ah, madam!” Cano gasped. “Congratulations! You look stunning!”

“How many times will you parrot the same compliment?” Leik asked sharply. “Hurry up and tell me your report.”

Cano bowed deeply toward me before standing upright to face Leik. “Pardon me!” he shouted. “We haven’t spotted anyone suspicious within or outside of the manor. We’ve finished dealing with reporters from three companies, and every letter or gift from our guests has been handed to Countess Klaus!”

“Very good,” Leik said.

“Ah, and earlier, I saw one of the madam’s former classmates getting lost in the garden, so I showed her the way!”

“I’m surprised you remembered who she was,” I replied. “Thank you.”

Cano smiled brightly. “I’m rather confident in my memory! Really, I am! If you tell me someone’s name, I can even tell you their current approximate location! For example—”

“Cano, stay focused. You’re in the middle of your report,” Leik interjected. He cleared his throat in warning. “Is there anything else?”

“I broke three plates!” the boy loudly exclaimed.

“Pardon?” Leik’s voice turned icy.

“I’m sorry!”

As Cano quickly lowered his head in apology, Leik looked down at him with a frosty gaze—not once had the butler looked at Lucas or me in that fashion.

“Cano, answer me,” he said coldly. “Why did you break the plates?”

“I threw them at a burglar who tried to climb our hedge, sir!” Cano reported.

“And the damages?”

“None, except for the plates! I asked Sir Toggio and his team to take over security as well!”

“Hmm… I’d predicted some losses since we’ve got quite the rowdy party on our hands, but if we think about the damages incurred, it looks like…” As Leik furrowed his brows and did some calculations in his mind, I shook my head with a smile.

“Now, now,” I said. “None of our guests seem to have noticed the burglar, and the incident was taken care of peacefully. Would you please forgive him?”

“You’re spoiling him, madam,” Leik replied as he turned to the boy. “Very well. You’ll have to write a report later. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Cano shouted. “My deepest apologies! In the future, I shall use my bare fists to punch any intruders!” He quickly punched the air a few times and nimbly left our side.

Leik watched the boy head back to his post and apologized to me. “When this party is over, I shall shove Cano into a ship and make sure that he won’t be back for a good while,” he said.

“Let him off the hook,” I replied. “Unlike you, he isn’t allowed to carry any weapons, so surely you would’ve predicted him making do with whatever he had on hand.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.” He sighed as he gazed in the direction that Cano had left. “When I look at him, I get all restless inside. It feels like I’m looking at a young version of myself.”

It was very unusual for Leik to be thrown off, but as he gazed into the distance, I smiled in understanding.

“You’ve got those sorts of thoughts, too,” I mused.

“What?” Leik demanded. “You speak as though I’m shameless.”

“Hee hee… I just found it so funny to see you making those kinds of expressions.”

When Lucas told me why he hired Cano, he’d stated, “Leik’s workload is increasing a bit too much. Since I plan on putting him in charge of managing this entire manor one day, he should probably raise a few subordinates of his own.”

Lucas had gone out of his way to hire someone who had once belonged to an opposing faction. I could sense my husband’s boldness. On the flip side, if he didn’t take large risks, a former commoner like Lucas would find it difficult to make close friends he could trust.

While lost in my thoughts for a few moments, the wind carried people’s whispers to me. The guests were also curious about Cano, our new silver-haired servant.

“They have not only one but multiple silver-haired servants…”

“To think they can have several silver-haired dogs by their side.”

“The rumors must be true. They must’ve been involved with discovering the misdeeds plaguing the faction of the king’s older brother.”

People weren’t blind to the silver-haired subordinates by our side. A “dog” served as the right-hand man of the higher ranks and those who possessed a claim to the throne. The fact that Lucas, a new aristocrat with the support of the king’s younger brother, had several silver-haired people working under him implied that he was slowly crushing the faction of the first prince, who supported protecting the prestige of the old aristocrats.

Publicly, Lucas wasn’t granted credit for discovering House Streltsy abusing the blue flower drop disease for their gain. However, astute nobles were keenly aware of my husband’s work

—they knew that he'd been toiling away behind the scenes with the assistance of the third prince.

The aristocratic society of Eizeria was undoubtedly starting to view Lucas more favorably. I was ecstatic to see him expand his market, his straightforward and bold nature shining for the world to see.

I looked up at Leik. "Tell me about your past someday," I said. "I want to hear all about how you met Lucas."

"You might get jealous if you know, madam," Leik joked and winked at me. "Before you came, I was glued to my lord's side, I'll have you know."

"Hahaha," I chuckled.

"You'd better not be saying anything weird to her, Leik," my husband said, joining our conversation.

"Lucas…"

His white tuxedo suited him well, and he was covered with numerous flower crowns and necklaces. He must've received them from various guests along the way to join us. He cast his butler a weary look.

"Iris, why don't we take a short break?" Lucas suggested. "Let's go inside."

He received the sun umbrella from a smiling Kiki, who had been standing nearby, blocking the harsh sunlight for me. He then held the umbrella out to escort me under it. Leik squinted, as if blinded by Lucas's calm and gentlemanly attitude, and quietly gave a low bow. I smiled at the butler and placed my hand on my husband's arm.

"Please take your time," Kiki said.

"The banquet isn't over just yet, so please don't completely retire to your rooms," Leik added.

As our servants called out to our backs, Lucas guided me to a structure within the garden. It was a small parlor detached from the rest of the manor, allowing guests to enjoy the beautiful garden even during rainy days. When we were finally alone, the noise I'd been in the center of seemed to vanish.

"You looked quite busy, Lucas," I noted.

"I'm sorry for leaving you alone for so long," he replied.

"Oh, I don't mind. I'm happy to see that you are beloved by everyone."

“Same goes for me. I’m happy to see you smiling proudly, looking all beautiful as you stand tall.”

Lucas stroked my cheek. His fingertips were gentle, taking great care not to brush the powder from my face as I closed my eyes. Suddenly, I felt someone gazing at us from outside the window. A smiling man slowly entered the room—the third prince. I almost gasped when I saw him.

“Looks like you’re at the peak of happiness, Lucas,” he said. Guards and attendants escorted the royal, and we stood up to bow. He gazed at us for a while. “I’m the one who approached you two, so no need to be so stiff,” he finally said. “Besides, it’s your day today.”

He sat down on the sofa across from us and didn’t even glance my way as he spoke to Lucas. “You brute-forced your way, didn’t you, Lucas?” His Highness said, an overwhelming aura cast from his sharp, dark-brown gaze. I could feel the pressure rising in this room. “I was shocked when you said you wanted to dissolve your mariage blanc. Surely, you were stunned as well, Lady Iris?”

He glanced at me; his piercing gaze that implied he could see through every thought I had caused a chill to run down my back. I was so nervous that I couldn’t even swallow.

“Lady Iris, Lucas must be far too heavy of a burden to bear,” he continued. “You may have lost your family name, but you’re the spitting image of your mother as the daughter of House Karelia. If you can maneuver around your age and the fact that you’ve been married once, surely you can hold your own against the Traditional Twelve. Are you sure about this?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re still in a mariage blanc. We can easily dissolve your union with him.”

“But we’ve already said our vows…”

“But we can pass this as a mariage blanc, can’t we? You haven’t experienced your first night after the wedding yet.”

His voice was comforting yet terrifying, as though he wasn’t respecting our dignity. I hadn’t felt anything like this before, even when facing Mikhail. An inexplicable sense of anxiety washed over me; I almost forgot to breathe. His Highness’s question touched upon Lucas’s weakness very precisely. Had I wished to continue

my life as a noble, I would've surely wavered. However, I already had my heart set on my deepest desire.

"I greatly appreciate your kindness and consideration of my circumstances," I started, taking a deep breath as I squared my shoulders and held my head high. "But I am Lucas Stock's wife. I cannot possibly imagine any other future for myself."

"A merchant who goes out on the seas is always plagued with danger," His Highness said. "If you lose your boat, your wealth will falter soon after. Are you quite all right with throwing your life and your husband's at the mercy of the waves?"

I felt Lucas's shoulder jolt. *How unusual,* I thought. But that was all the more reason why I felt compelled to protect him. I spoke firmly and without hesitation.

"If I were to cross the seas with him, I am very much prepared to swim on my own two feet," I replied.

"Your resolve is admirable," His Highness said. "Truly, you're suited for being the child of a Karelia, known for their excellent knights. Unfortunately, even in fairy tales, the prince couldn't spare the little mermaid from her woes. Do you truly understand Lucas, and do you truly possess the strength to support him?"

Suddenly, I felt Lucas's hand on my shoulder. Only then did I realize that I'd been trembling the entire time. He was quiet, but he stared straight at the royal.

"Your Highness," Lucas started. "Pardon my insolence, but may I say a word?"

"What is it, Lucas?" His Highness replied. The third prince's attitude completely shifted. His thorny demeanor displayed toward me vanished as he looked at Lucas with a face close to endearment.

"I asked every single one of the ladies that you've introduced to me," Lucas began. "I said, 'I plan on building a manor in Lapisasther one day. Will you be able to voyage across the sea with me and live in a different manor?'"

That was news to me. I looked up at my husband.

"Unfortunately, no one agreed to come with me; they couldn't even muster a lie," Lucas continued. "They'd have to step away from the noble society they knew and jump headfirst into a culture they know nothing about. It matters not how luxurious their vessel

will be. A journey across the sea is exhausting and dangerous. The ladies couldn't even lie that they'd be happy with such a life."

Lucas spoke calmly, and His Highness listened intently without even blinking.

"My life is that of a former commoner who managed to amass his wealth," Lucas went on. "I'll always be in a precarious position, no matter where I go. Even if I were to make my company flourish even more in the future, this fact won't change. Unless I am blessed with a lady willing to trek through dangerous waters as we trust each other, I shall make any woman unhappy."

"If you marry a powerful noble, you could aim for stability even as a new aristocrat," His Highness replied.

"Certainly, it may be stable for me. But what of the lady I marry? She'll find me to be an unreliable man. I am the child of a man who knew of no danger and rode on a ship and a woman of the coal mines. I only know of a life walking hand-in-hand with danger. Stability is a concept that is far too luxurious for a man of my caliber. And," Lucas paused before he added, "the canary that you bestowed your affection upon has the role of risking his life to warn his master of danger. Ultimately, this life is not as important as you'd think. I beg of you; please allow those with more stability willing to put themselves in less danger to marry the lovely ladies you sent."

His Highness fell silent. He quietly looked at me, and I nervously awaited his next words.

"Very well," the third prince said, letting out a deep sigh. "I shall bless your future, my adorable canary. To commend your bravery, I shall continue to support you. Feel free to rely on me as much as you like."

He patted Lucas's shoulder as he stood up to leave with his escort. The third prince stopped in front of the door and turned around, his gaze fixated on Lucas.

"In the past, when I did not become king, many people left my side. My older brother, the first prince, who had once commanded overwhelming might, is now being shot down as we speak. The tailwind that you call support is so very frail and fleeting." His Highness stared at my husband. "You're my adorable canary. Without any wind, a bird will be unable to fly far. However, wind is but a mere aid and will not make you fly. A flap of your

wings must catch any wind that blows in your favor. Don't you forget it."

"I shall commit it to memory, Your Highness," Lucas said with a deep bow. "I'll never forget it."

"Heh," His Highness chuckled gently. He added, "I'm glad I got to speak with you. If you have anything else on your mind, feel free to come to me."

We bowed deeply as he left and maintained that position. Had it been seconds? Minutes? After a good while, we breathed a sigh of relief and glanced at each other.

"Looks like we live to see another day," Lucas said, flashing his pearly whites.

"Did you really ask those ladies about Lapisasther?" I inquired.

"Nah. I didn't even want to speak with them. But I can tell that none of the ladies wanted to go to Lapisasther."

"Oh my..."

We looked at each other and burst out laughing. There was no turning back now. The die had been cast. Just then, Kiki sheepishly approached us.

"Um, pardon me..." Kiki said. "May I speak?"

"Of course," I replied.

"What's up, Kiki?" Lucas asked.

She fidgeted awkwardly, looking embarrassed to speak. I couldn't blame her if she were present when His Highness spoke with us. But the words that tumbled out of her mouth caught me off guard.

"Erm, I've...prepared a new bedroom...for you two..." she mumbled.

"Huh?" Lucas asked.

Kiki covered her face and tried to muffle her voice as she continued, "A-At night, you don't need to go to your usual annex. Please join my lord at the main manor."

Lucas tried to feign his cool, but even his ears were bright red. My cheeks grew warm as well.

"Eek!" Kiki squealed as she left our side, leaving the two of us behind.

"Whatever is going on?" I wondered, confused by Kiki's behavior.

“Right…” Lucas murmured weakly beside me. “I mean, this *is* a wedding, so I guess people would see us like that.”

“Lucas? I simply don’t understand.”

“Tonight’s our first night after our wedding.”

“…Oh.”

Since we declared that we would officially become married instead of a mariage blanc, our first night together would mean…

I giggled. “We sometimes spend our nights together, but this feels a bit different, doesn’t it?”

Lucas frowned, his face redder than a tomato as though he was holding himself back. “I’m shocked. I can’t believe you can endure all of this.”

“Endure? What do you mean?”

“Like…embarrassment and stuff…”

“Ah, well… This *is* tradition.”

It was only natural that a newly married couple would spend their first night together after the wedding. In fact, I was confused as to why my husband looked so flustered.

“It’s embarrassing, of course, but everyone goes through it,” I said.

“No, I don’t mind,” Lucas replied. “It’s just that…I don’t want *you* to be seen that way.”

He took a few moments before he slapped his cheeks as though to hammer innocence back into him, and we returned to the venue. The banquet continued with us greeting various people and partaking in ceremonies. We had no time to speak with each other again, and the rest of the party felt like a blur.

Never did I imagine that I’d regret the careless words I said earlier. The realization only hit me at night.

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WHEN night came, we sat on our bed and struggled to speak. Though Lucas was good at holding his liquor, his face tended to turn red quite easily. He’d told me in the past that he’d been teased about this adorable side and was embarrassed by it. His nighttime clothes revealed his chest just a bit, and for the first time, I realized that those who easily turn red would have even

their collarbones look flushed. However, Lucas hadn't taken a drop of liquor tonight. Still, even the tips of his ears were red, and he was fresh out of the bath, emanating a pleasant scent.

"Um…" Lucas started.

"Y-Yes?" I replied.

"Are all nobles just…fine about all this? You know, with all these preparations that are practically encouraging us to…"

"E-Erm…"

I didn't know how to reply. Lucas looked like he couldn't bear any of this, and I wondered if I was supposed to remain this calm. As I tried to come up with the right words, my husband spoke once more.

"Hey, say something, Karelia noblewoman," he groaned.

"I…don't know what to say," I confessed. "Unfortunately, this… is my first time too."

Unfortunate? I thought. Even I didn't quite understand what I was saying, and confusion started to swirl in my mind. I had the covers hiding my entire body; I knew I was in quite an unexpected situation myself. I tried to hide myself in the white frills and could only pop my face out.

"This was beyond what…I expected," I mumbled. "Um, this is completely not what I imagined…"

I regretted how calm I sounded earlier in the afternoon, blabbing on about tradition, as I faced down.

The room, perhaps filled with the scent of some sort of perfume, was sweet and floral, enough to be suffocating. When I was taking a bath, the maids happily made me as pretty as possible, combing my hair until it turned glossy, and preparing me for my big night.

"Jeez, I'm not used to stuff like this…" Lucas grumbled. He glanced at me. "Iris, speaking of, why are you covering yourself with blankets?"

"I-I look shameless…" I stammered. "Very much so. But these were the clothes… prepared for me."

"What do they look like?"

"Please have mercy on me."

"Just a peek?"

I silently cracked open the blankets I had wrapped around me, but Lucas quickly closed the opening. His mouth opened and

closed like a stunned fish as he stifled the most inexplicable groan. He raised his voice as though he was unable to endure it.

“What are you…” he shouted. “Can those even be called clothes?!”

“I-I completely agree, I’ll have you know!” I cried back.

We both took deep breaths, our shoulders bobbing up and down as we tried to regain our cool. Lucas cleared his throat and reached out.

“This silk…is imported,” he said, touching the fabric that peaked through the blankets. “This sewing… Coldola must be involved. She probably abused her power to get this made…”

Silence settled in the room again, but I could no longer endure the awkward quietness.

“Um, what shall we do?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Lucas replied, looking a touch angry as he pouted like a child and looked at me.

“Er… We’re, um, no longer in…a mariage blanc, correct?”

There was a beat of silence. “Right.”

I made my resolve. I slipped out of my blanket defense and faced my husband; I heard him gulp nervously.

“I know I’m inexperienced in this field, but I hope for your understanding,” I said.

“Do you even understand what you’re saying?” He touched my cheek, and I nodded.

“I do.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“Then…I guess I’ve gotta steel myself, too.”

“At the women’s academy, I was told to entrust myself to my husband. It was suggested that the man would be in charge.”

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Let me ask you something. Your mother… She passed away when you were young, right?”

“Quite right.”

“Did she ever tell you or teach you anything?”

“Huh? U-Um, no…”

We again fell silent.

“Um, Iris, has anyone else, uh…told you about the first night after a wedding?” Lucas asked.

“I learned a little…from classes at my women’s academy,” I replied.

“What did you learn?”

“Pardon?”

“Tell me. No, teach me. I’m being serious here.”

“O-Okay…”

A bit embarrassed, I whispered all the knowledge that I had into Lucas’s ear. It looked like he needed a moment to process what I said as the room became quiet.

“Huh?” he asked. He widened his amber eyes and peered at me dubiously.

“Um… Was I wrong?” I asked.

“That doesn’t even begin to describe it.” He turned pale and stared at me, the warm air suddenly turning cool. “It sounds like you *don’t* understand what tonight entails,” he said.

“But you do, don’t you?” I replied.

“Er…well… I guess…”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

“Hey, now.”

“That’s what my teacher told me.”

“Ugh… Give me a break.”

Lucas’s gaze wandered at my words as I again wrapped a blanket around me.

“Iris,” he said, clearing his throat. “I’m sorry to say this after you’ve steeled yourself and all, but…”

“Yes?”

“Let’s not do this tonight.”

“There’s no need for you to act so reserved. I’m more than prepared for anything that comes my way,” I insisted.

“But I don’t want us to do it like this.”

“But…”

“Iris. This might be tough to hear, but I need you to listen.” His face was filled with reluctance as he grimaced before he whispered into my ear. “You do this… And then this… And then that…”

For a second, I couldn’t understand what Lucas had said. I froze in place and looked at my husband.

“What?” I asked.

“As I said…” Lucas started.

He looked so awkward that I almost pitied him as he again carefully explained what a first night after a wedding entailed. The more I understood tonight, the paler I became. I felt myself becoming stiffer as I hid my revealing negligee and took deep breaths to maintain my composure.

“Um, er… You’re lying, right?” I asked.

“Why would I lie here? That’s what a first night means,” Lucas replied.

Half of me couldn’t process what he said, but the other half had come to an understanding. Some of the questions that I had were being answered. I felt like screaming as I realized how embarrassing the words I’d said to Lucas earlier were.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen you so close to crying,” Lucas said with a dry laugh. He looked troubled.

How grateful I would’ve been if I could’ve just gone unconscious there.

“Has everyone been doing stuff like that…as though it’s natural?” I feebly asked in a trembling voice.

“That’s right,” Lucas replied.

“I’m sorry, I just…can’t quite process it all… Please give me some time to understand my situation.”

I was no longer able to leave the confines of my blanket.



“B-But if I don’t do it, we’ll be in a mariage blanc, right?” I asked, looking as troubled as ever.

Lucas kindly rubbed my back through the blanket to calm me down. “Don’t push yourself. I think we’ve got that part covered. We already had the wedding, and we’re sleeping in the same bed together. Even if someone tries to criticize us, I’m sure our servants will all testify and support our union.”

“In other words…we’re just going to act like we…slept together?” I asked.

“That’s the idea.”

“Can…we lie to our servants like that?”

“Sure we can. Let’s not be hasty with our marriage.”

Lucas was undoubtedly more troubled by me remaining in my blanket shield, but he smiled kindly and stroked my head to pacify me.

“You were suddenly informed of the shocking act couples do,” Lucas said. “It’s scary, isn’t it? I’ll make sure you can go to a woman you’re comfortable with to discuss this topic so you can learn from them. There’s probably a lot of things that I…uh, don’t know about.”

“O-Okay…”

“And once you’ve understood it all, we can think about it slowly and take our time. Besides, I had no plans to do anything with you tonight, you know.”

I looked up at Lucas. “Really?” I asked.

“I told you before, didn’t I? There’s a reason I prolonged this mariage blanc.”

“Right.”

Lucas looked at me with a serious expression. “Iris, I’m the son of a sailor, a man who left my mother behind and disappeared. He lived without giving a damn about my mother, who died from exhaustion after raising me and helping me survive.”

“Lucas…” I immediately understood what he was implying.

My husband gazed down at his palms solemnly and eked out, “I’m scared. Did my parents want me in this world?”

“Lucas… I’m sorry. I’ve only been thinking about myself, and yet…”

“You have no reason to apologize, do you?”

I must've been making a horrible face; he smiled and tried to soothe me.

"I just want to put an end to things with my parents," he said. "Once I've come to terms with my birth, I want to take responsibility and stick by your side. My current self has no right to be a father."

"That's..." I started, intuitively trying to tell him that that wasn't true. But before I could finish my sentence, he ended it for me.

"True, isn't it?" He continued sharply as I held my tongue. "I've got no right *yet*."

"Lucas..."

"But I also don't want to make you wait much longer. I feel bad for making you anxious, and I want to truly become a married couple in every sense soon. Could you humor me with my selfish request for just a little while more? It'll take at most six months. I won't keep you waiting any longer than that."

"I understand, Lucas," I replied. I smiled, took his hand, and said my vows as I'd done in the afternoon in front of the officiant. He was so dear to me. "You stuck by my side and helped me settle my affair with my family. And so, I shall do the same for you now. I won't ever leave your side, so let's keep calm, take our time, and end the issues that ail you."

"Thank you, Iris."

He looked straight at me, and I saw myself reflected in his eyes. His unique traits made it clear he was from a foreign land; my beautiful husband looked striking with his canary-yellow hair and amber eyes. As his gaze softened with relief when he saw me, and only me, a feeling of utmost satisfaction filled my heart. The mere thought of this man being my husband made me feel warm inside. It was then that I remembered our discussion from earlier, and my heart almost jumped out of my chest.

"So, what shall we do for tonight?" I asked.

"Well, we can definitely sleep together...in the same bed, but..." Lucas restlessly trailed off as he averted his gaze pensively. "I guess we should keep our mind off things. I'm sure you've been tired since the afternoon, and after a while, I know we'll just drift off to sleep."

He stood up and rummaged through a cabinet by the wall. He took out a small box and revealed a deck of cards.



HIS master wouldn't wake, even though it was rather late in the morning. Leik, who had finished his morning routine work, peered at his pocket watch. He decided to head to the newly prepared bedroom. The morning sunlight illuminated the corridors quite well, and he was certain that the newly wedded couple's bedroom was also brightly lit.

"I wonder what they did in the end..." the butler muttered to himself.

Leik had known his master for many years and understood Lucas's train of thought quite well. The butler had a sneaky suspicion that his master hadn't gotten overly intimate with the mistress of the house, but it was uncharacteristically odd for Lucas to be in bed for so long.

"Maybe things just got unexpectedly...heated," Leik mused.

He knew his phrasing was crass, but he couldn't hide his curiosity as he approached the bedroom. Kiki was already there, pacing to and fro in front of the door. Her braided hair fluttered around as she looked torn.

"I assume they haven't woken up yet," Leik said, making sure his footsteps were heard as he approached the maid.

Kiki looked up and smiled at him. "Ah, Leik! Good morning!" She looked visibly relieved at his appearance.

"Good morning," the butler replied before he motioned toward the door with his chin. "What's wrong? Did you happen to see something that made it difficult for you to enter?"

"Ah, no, I haven't opened the door yet."

"I see."

Her face started to turn red. "I, er...wasn't sure if...I could just step inside."

Leik could easily pick up on Kiki's implication, but he couldn't offer a helping hand here. "Well, it's not like I can enter," he said. "I believe it's best if you enter the room."

"But..."

“Madam specifically asked for you, didn’t she? Then it means you’re being relied upon.”

Kiki’s eyes glittered with determination at his reassuring words. “You’re right! I’m Lady Iris’s maid! I’m Lady Iris’s maid!”

As she repeated the words, she slapped her cheeks and nervously decided to enter the room. Leik gazed at a vase of flowers in the corridor and chose to wait outside. As he randomly assigned each flower a meaning to allow some time to pass, the bedroom door slowly opened. Confusion riddled Kiki’s face as she used both hands to carry a certain item outside carefully. It was a triangular...

“House of cards?” Leik asked.

“Indeed it is...” Kiki replied in befuddlement. This was unforeseen. The maid carried the cards in her hand and explained, “My lord and my lady are fast asleep, and cards were scattered by their bedside table. And I found this on the headboard.”

Leik pinched the tip of the tower of cards and raised it in the air. “It’s been glued together...”

“Have they...been creating a house of cards...until late at night?” Kiki wondered.

“And since they couldn’t finish it so easily, they glued all the cards together...”

Leik and Kiki glanced at each other.

“What are our lord and lady of the house doing?” the butler sighed.

The maid giggled. “I know, right?”

The two servants exchanged a strained smile, looking a touch relieved yet exasperated. It was easy to assume that his master had delayed their intimacy for another day. It was very much like Lucas to forgo a passionate display of affection on the first night after the wedding while everyone eagerly waited for him to do the act of coitus.

“He has far more self-control than your average noblewoman,” Leik muttered to himself while returning the cards to Kiki’s hand. “Nevertheless, this is a momentous occasion. Why don’t we store this house of cards somewhere?”

“I agree,” Kiki nodded. “They don’t have any plans for the day, so we should let them rest easy and sleep in today.”

Just then, the butler sensed a presence approaching from the opposite end of the corridor. Leik turned around and was the first to speak.

“What’s the matter, Cano?”

“Ah…” Cano was caught off guard and gasped in surprise as he froze in place.

“Ah!” Kiki cried in shock. “I didn’t know you were there. Good morning, Cano!”

“Y-Yes… Good morning to you both, Sir Leik, Miss Kiki,” Cano hastily said with a smile, trying to regain his composure.

“Whatever is the matter? This isn’t your post, is it?” Leik inquired.

Cano looked troubled as he lowered his head. “I apologize. I wanted to ask you a question, so I’d been tailing you, but I found it awkward to time my appearance when I realized that you were headed for the bedroom.” As though to switch topics, he glanced at the tower of cards. “What is that? Was that in the bedroom?”



Kiki smiled and nodded. “It’s very well made, isn’t it? It’s even been glued together.”

“Have those two not…” Cano started.

“You must never pry into the affairs of your lord, Cano,” Leik sharply reprimanded.

“All right.”

“Return to your post. I’ll listen to your queries later.”

“I understand. Then please excuse me.”

Cano said nothing more and smiled as he left. Kiki watched the boy leave before calmly gazing back at the cards.

“But I really do love the relationship Lord Lucas and Lady Iris have,” she murmured. “They were both sleeping so peacefully and happily.” Her kind gaze and words seemed to come from the bottom of her heart.

“I agree,” Leik said with a smile.

He glanced in the direction Cano had left. Something was amiss. The butler was bothered by Cano’s words and actions. It seemed unreasonable to assume that Cano was acting carelessly due to curiosity. But it was far too early to corner him. Leik’s master had undoubtedly realized it as well.

Kiki was none the wiser to Leik’s thoughts as she happily gazed at the cards.

“Where shall we decorate with this?” she asked.

“Hmm… How about the guest room?” the butler suggested. “I’d love to see the look on my lord’s face when guests arrive and see it.”

All Leik could do was one thing, and one thing only: work hard to do whatever he needed to so that their peaceful life could continue.

Chapter 2

A few days after our wedding, Lucas and I went on a little vacation. Under the guise of a honeymoon and a tour to inspect the area where we planned to build a railroad, we were actually chasing any traces of Lucas's mother. Our first destination was Westmierden, a city within Count Garner's domain. Lucas was born and raised there. It was also going to be the last stop for the railroad and was the very same coal mining city Lucas had once been put in charge of, which led to his rise in society.

As we traveled along the canal, riding our carriage, I began to see a city nestled between the mountains. This city was shockingly flourishing despite being so far away from the main roads connecting the kingdom. At the square, where the train station was set to be built, was a shopping district and a splendid city hall made of stone. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the carriage window.

Lucas, who sat across from me, smiled proudly. "Surprised?" he asked.

I nodded honestly. "I am. If a railroad were to connect this city to other places, it'd prosper even more."

"Yep. Until now, we used the canals to transport coal, but now we will be able to transport coal and other items more easily by train. As long as the coal mines are in demand, this city should be able to rest easy."

I blinked in astonishment at his unexpected words. "Are you implying that there'll be a future where coal mines are no longer needed?"

"Yep. Everything will come to an end someday." He remained calm as he gazed out the window. "I've heard foreign countries are starting to use maseki as a new fuel source. There've been other forms of energy recently discovered that are more efficient than coal. In fact, some countries on the continent are relying more on maseki than coal."

"Maseki..."

“Mm-hm. I hear it’s convenient because it doesn’t emit any smoke. If Eizeria starts using that, too, this town will be over. Not like it matters to me since I’ve already put this place behind me.” He chuckled and shrugged his shoulders as he turned to me. “Industrial cities like these change with the times so constantly that it’s almost dizzying. This railroad is an investment in hopes of keeping their industry alive for just a bit longer. Solalitika’s been greatly supported by Westmierden’s value, after all.”

Lucas looked back out the window, staring into the distance. “To tell you the truth, the scenery of this city is completely different from when I lived here. The center of the city has also changed drastically.”

The carriage rolled into the city. The brick buildings were erected according to the minute elevations of the land, and the old, stone street caused the carriage to shake. On either side of the street, people bustled about. The city brimmed with an atmosphere that was different from the royal capital and the thriving oceanside city of Solalitika. It felt like a city filled with strong, working men.

“Ah, look over there, Iris,” Lucas said, pointing to a corner of the city. “That’s Coldola’s home,” he explained. “Her older brother should be the owner of their store now.”

“It feels so strange to think you were all born and raised here,” I admitted.

As we conversed, the carriage pressed on and did a lap along the main street before heading out of the city’s center. The cobblestone path ended and was quickly replaced with dirt underneath the vehicle’s wheels, and I began to see vacant land scattered on either side of the road. The wild grass swayed in the wind as I enjoyed my ride.

“Don’t step off the carriage,” Lucas mumbled in warning. “It might be dangerous.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“I don’t think anyone will try to attack my carriage, but it doesn’t hurt to be too careful.”

“Okay.”

The area was devoid of people. Stray cats took shelter in the dilapidated buildings, and it was clear that the dirt roads hadn’t been used for quite some time. It seemed more like an abandoned

district than one riddled with poverty. Our carriage was quickly approaching a grassy plain.

Sometime later, Lucas had the carriage stop at a specific location.

“Here we are,” he said. “This is where I used to live.”

“So, this is the place…” I murmured.

The foliage had grown wildly around the area, and there wasn’t even a crumbling structure in place. Only the foundation of a house remained, implying that someone had once lived there, but that was all. I was at a loss for words.

“The destroyed buildings all used to be homes connected to each other,” Lucas said. “It might be difficult for you to visualize, Iris, but there used to be a lot of small rooms connected together. It’s nothing like a multiple dwelling in the royal capital, though. It’s like all the houses were connected under one roof… How do I say this? I can’t quite explain it well.”

“Where is everyone else who once lived here?” I asked.

“No clue. Some of them died. Some of them left for good. All I can say is that everyone who lived here had no other family and no promises for a future. We were all just huddled together, trying to survive the day.”

“I…see.”

“My mother’s grave is being managed by a convent near Count Garner’s manor. I have nothing left of this place. No grave, no house, nothing at all remains here.”

Lucas fell silent and gazed at the scene for a while. I imagined how a young boy with canary-yellow hair would live here with only his mother. There was no need for him to explicitly mention his past and how he’d braved through a difficult childhood. His amber eyes said it all.

He must’ve wanted to show me his home, even if nothing was left. As the carriage remained stationary, I could only silently look at the scene and peer into my husband’s past.

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AFTER Lucas dropped by Coldola’s childhood home, we visited the residence of Count Garner. Tonight, we’d enjoy an evening party at

the manor and stay a night before visiting the convent the following day. Count Garner and his wife greeted us warmly. After our stiff pleasantries ended, the countess hurried to Lucas's side.

"We haven't met since your wedding, Lucas," she said. "It was absolutely lovely."

Lucas gave a troubled smile at the countess's embrace, and I curtsied deeply to the count beside him.

"I'm glad you seem to be doing well," I said.

"...And I, you," the count replied.

We were guided to the guest room, where Kiki and the other maids of House Stock were busily preparing our things. While Lucas and I were at Westmierden, the ladies had reached Count Garner's residence first and were ensuring that we could spend the night there comfortably. After a short break, I prepared myself for the evening dinner.

I chose a modest yet elegant dress, being extra careful to pay my utmost respect to those who held to old traditions. It was a calm, silvery color made of fine silk. While I was being dressed, I told Kiki about what happened during the day. She paused for a moment before she looked up at me.

"May I say something?" she requested.

"Of course," I replied.

"Thank you." She arranged the detailed lace on my dress while selecting her words carefully. "It's not unusual for people like us—of the lower class—to not know their parents or origin. In fact, it's rather common for us to know nothing of our relatives, have our friends pass away, or get caught by those with nefarious intentions."

I gasped as Kiki continued, "We find that to be rather embarrassing, you see. And so, we impulsively hide our past. We act as though we've lived normal lives, lest we won't be hired as maids. Ah, um, I've got a reason for telling you this! Um..."

She must've seen me look rather grief-stricken and hastily tried to explain herself, but I shook my head, told her that I was fine, and calmed her down. "Don't worry," I assured her. "You can take as much time as you need. Calm down. I want you to tell me your story, with your own words."

"Th-Thank you, my lady," Kiki replied. "Um, so, even Lord Lucas won't tell others about his past and how he truly lived as a

child. He'll never say it. Those above him will treat him with scorn, and the same goes for me—we're embarrassed. We're embarrassed about our past."

"Kiki…"

"The fact that he went out of his way to show you where he once lived and how he was raised must've taken far, *far* more courage than you think, Lady Iris. I'm sure of that. So… I beg of you…" She trailed off, and I gently petted her head. I smiled, hoping to offer a sense of relief.

"No matter Lucas's past, I'll never change how I view him," I said. "You can be assured of that. And, of course, the same goes for you, too, Kiki."

"*Sniff*… Lady Iris!"

"But had you not told me the resolve that one needs to divulge their past, I would've never known. Thank you for telling me, Kiki."

When I offered her my words of gratitude, she smiled with relief. Her words made me realize the harsh truth of this world. Some people had an inferiority complex when it came to their birth. It was thus imperative for me to thank Kiki, who told me about it.

As night fell, a traditional dinner party at Count Garner's residence was well underway. Tonight's dinner was a place for old friends and nobility managing nearby lands to gather and socialize; Lucas was well-acquainted with most of them. The light emanating from the beautifully polished chandelier cast an elegant glow over the room, the richly colored furniture implying their deep history within the manor.

The food that lined the long table prioritized elegance over luxury, and everyone was smiling while chattering away with their meal. Lucas snuck in the fact that he was chasing after traces of his mother to the count and countess. The elderly couple was silent for a few moments before they agreed with his decision.

"But…there's one thing you must be prepared for, Lucas," the countess warned with a kind gaze. "A cold, harsh truth might be awaiting you. Indeed, you might wish that you had never learned some sides of your mother. You don't have to force yourself to face

the past. You can still treasure your wife, who's right in front of your eyes."

Lucas gave a deep nod, expressing his respect and gratitude for her kindness. "Thank you for your kind words, Countess. Ever since I was still just a commoner, you were always worried about me. I'll take your warnings to heart."

"Oh, don't act so reserved, Lucas!" the countess replied. "You'll always be my precious former servant!"

Beside his talkative wife, the count was silent as a tomb, as usual. His sunken, elderly gaze was fixated right on me. *"Have you made your resolve, Baroness Stock?"* his eyes seemed to silently imply.



THE next morning—our late-night discussion from the evening prior still fresh in our minds—we parted ways with the count and countess and boarded the carriage. The morning sun was rising energetically, casting a lovely glow over the budding spring plants and pastures. Our destination was already set: the convent where Lucas's late mother was laid to rest.

Lucas and I boarded one carriage, with the servants tagging along on a separate one. The neighs of the horses and the jaunty clattering of the wheels echoed within the carriage as Lucas looked at me with worry.

"You must still be tired from yesterday, Iris," he said.

"I'm fine. You're probably far more exhausted than I am," I replied.

He rested his elbow on the window frame and rubbed his temples. "It's just a hangover. I'll be fine by noon. Can't help it. When I hang around those who love to make others drink, I always turn out like this."

I'd never experienced a hangover before, but I pitied my husband, who looked to be in discomfort. I stroked his forehead in hopes of soothing his pain, and he squinted at me.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me," he said.

"Still, it's quite unusual for you to be forced to drink so much," I replied.

“Yeah, they wanted to get me drunk so that I’d spill the beans about our relationship. Good grief.”

“Our relationship?”

Lucas cracked an awkward grin. “They like to pry. You know how it is.” He kissed my forehead and asked to be left alone for a short while; he looked exhausted as he gazed out the window. He must’ve been suffering quite a bit.

As he’d promised, he was good as new by the afternoon. We took a short break at a post town known as Tesouvius, a nostalgic place. I fondly remembered this place, for I’d stayed a night here before I went off to marry Lucas. The town scenery hadn’t changed, and when I gazed out from the carriage, my memories came rushing back.

Once our belongings had been carried into a hotel where we’d stay for the night, Leik approached me while carrying my personal possessions.

“My lord went to sleep after making everyone there black-out drunk,” he said.

I was shocked to hear about it. “Oh my…”

“They’re all idiots. Did they think they’d stand a chance against a guy who has the blood of a sailor in his veins? No shot.”

“Is that how it is?”

“The only route a sailor can take is to become a hard drinker. Water can spoil after some time, so everyone consumes alcohol instead for hydration.”

“I had no idea…”

All of this was news to me, and I listened with great interest as Leik jokingly stuck out his tongue.

“I suppose my lord can look a touch deceptive,” he added. “His face gets red very easily, so people assume that he’s not good at holding his liquor. He uses that to his advantage to trick people.”

“I could see him doing that,” I replied.

“He feigns innocence far more than I ever can. Ah, speak of the devil.”

I followed Leik’s gaze and spotted Lucas walking toward us.

“I just got in contact with the convent,” my husband said, looking at me. “I was told we don’t need to host a service or anything. Let’s head there as soon as we finish lunch.”

“I understand,” I replied.

We had lunch at a hotel with a lovely view—the scenery was breathtaking. We could see the town of Tesouvius below us, and in the distance, the ocean of Solalitika. It was simply stunning. I was worried whether Lucas could stomach his food since he seemed unwell this morning, but he polished off his plate without a care, much to my relief. I always liked to watch my beloved eat, and as I did so, I locked eyes with him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing…” I replied. “You eat so neatly that I was enchanted by it.”

“It’s humbling to receive such praise from the etiquette coach.” His joking tone made me feel embarrassed.

After we finished our lunch and took a little break, Lucas gazed into the distant skies. “The convent we’re about to head to is where my mother lived when she was pregnant,” he said.

He stated that once his mother had parted ways with his father, she entered a convent for whatever reason. There, she found out about her pregnancy and was indebted to the place until she gave birth to Lucas. I could only imagine the trouble she went through, coupled with the feeling of isolation she undoubtedly must’ve experienced. I clenched my fists under the table—it was clear that his mother had a thorny past.

“Actually,” Lucas started, “it’s been a while since I’ve been to the convent. I’ve continued to send them money to manage my mother’s grave, but I can’t enter the place without another woman. I’ve never seen the inside of the building, where my mother had once lived.”

“I see…” I replied.

He glanced at me and smiled. “I just couldn’t bring anyone else but you. While there might be some people out there who know of my origins, I wanted to visit my mother’s grave with my wife. I’d decided so since way back.”

“Thank you for inviting me here.”

“This is sort of like our honeymoon, and yet… I’m sorry to take you on such a gloomy trip.”

After his self-deprecating remark, he took a sip of his coffee. I gazed down from the restaurant at the place where I’d stayed with Lucas when he was in disguise all those years ago.

“This really takes us back, doesn’t it, Dazzle?” I remarked.

Lucas coughed on his drink before he looked at me awkwardly. Dazzle was the fake name he’d used when we’d just met. “Aw, come on, don’t bring that up…” he muttered.

“Please let me,” I replied. “Because when I talked to you back then, I had so much fun.”

I looked upon those days fondly. When I was sent off to marry Lucas and headed out from the royal capital, I felt so horribly lonely. When Dazzle had kindly offered that I could go back home —to Karelia manor—I felt so happy and comforted by his considerate words.

“It was the first time I had properly spoken to another man who wasn’t a relative,” I confessed. “I had to leave the capital, my familiar home, and go off to marry an unknown man in an unknown city. Speaking with Dazzle before I’d done so felt like a valuable experience. Hee hee… In the end, he turned out to be you.”

“I was also curious about the woman I’d be marrying,” Lucas replied.

“So, you don’t have to be so bothered by things. I’m quite enjoying myself on this trip,” I insisted.

“Iris…”

“I’d like to learn more about you. I’m looking forward to the opportunity.”

Lucas widened his eyes in surprise and gazed at me briefly before his eyes softened. He smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

After we finished our meal, we left the restaurant. Kiki greeted us with a smile in the hotel lobby. “The carriage has already been prepared!” she beamed. “We can leave whenever you like!”

Seeing an energetic Kiki also made me reminisce. When we’d first met, she looked anxious and troubled, unable to meet anyone’s eye. Seeing her proudly hold her head up high with a dignified smile as she was hard at work made my chest feel so full. This trip wasn’t just for Lucas; it felt like it also gave me a chance to look upon my past as well.

“Oh?” I murmured.

As my eyes landed on Kiki’s feet, standing atop a vermilion carpet, they looked brighter and happier than usual. A moment

later, I realized that it was because she was wearing short, white socks.

"You look lovely," I observed. "You're wearing socks today."

Kiki's face bloomed like a flower, her smile spilling over her face as I noticed the change. "That's right! Please take a look! The marks on my calves have faded enough that I can now wear socks!"

As she happily lifted the hems of her skirt just a hair, her legs, usually covered with a painful-looking bruise, were practically free of any blemishes. Her skin looked clean with a healthy glow. Kiki was busy expressing her elation, but Lucas gave a strained smile.

"I'm happy that you're happy, but don't lift your skirt all willy-nilly, all right?" he warned.

"Ah! Pardon me! Tee hee…" Kiki replied.

"But I'm glad you seem to be doing better," I said. "The medicine's working."

"It is! Thank you so much, Lady Iris, Lord Lucas."

Lucas smiled back in response. While I wasn't privy to the details, it seemed clinical trials were progressing smoothly, and medicine had been developed to treat the skin blemishes caused by blue drop flower disease. In Kiki's case, her bruises had been etched into her body over several years, so it was difficult to get rid of them all immediately. Still, as I watched her condition improve by the day, she looked cheerier, too.

"Iris, if you don't mind, I'd like to leave soon," Lucas said, turning to me. "What would you like to do?"

"Let us depart immediately," I replied. "The sooner the better."

Lucas and Kiki nodded firmly. Finally, we'd be headed for the convent where Lucas's mother had lived. I pursed my lips, trying my best to hold back my impatience.

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WE'D entered a hilly area, lush with vegetation, where black sheep freely grazed throughout. Within the vast, grassy plains, a small hill watched over its surroundings. A small, old convent made of stone stood there.

Only Kiki, Leik, Cano, and I tagged along for this trip. Everyone else was waiting for us back in Tesouvius. While we were waiting at a small gatehouse for guests, Lucas turned to us.

“Only Iris and Kiki can go inside,” he said. “Leik, stand by with me. Cano, circle the area, and stand guard.”

“Huh? Isn’t it better if I’m by your side?” Cano protested. “Unlike Sir Leik, I’m not very strong.”

“I need Leik to tend to other matters. Don’t complain.”

“You heard the man,” Leik said calmly, making a peace sign with both hands and goading his subordinate. “If you’re annoyed, hurry up and become stronger.”

“All right,” Lucas said. “Iris, Kiki, I’m counting on you both.” He handed me a bouquet of lilies—flowers he’d bought on the way there. I took the flowers and nodded solemnly.

“Please do,” I replied. “I shall search for any traces of your mother.”

“And I’ll do my best to support my lady!” Kiki added.

A nun called to us beyond a screen for meetings. She was a slender woman wearing a white habit and looked around fifty years old. She bowed to us while offering a friendly smile.

“Welcome,” she said. “Thank you for coming all this way. My name is Margaret, and I shall be your guide. You must be the wife of Lucas. And you must be her adorable maid. Preparations have been made. Please step inside.”

A door opened and beckoned us inside. The moment I was guided in, the refreshing aroma of herbs hit my nose. As the butterflies playfully fluttered about, we walked straight ahead on a small path made of dirt. After we made our way through the herbs, a beautiful vegetable garden emerged, white fences on either side of me dividing the plots of land. All around me, nuns in their cotton habits were quietly hard at work, cultivating the garden.

“It’s beautiful…” I murmured.

Sister Margaret, who was walking ahead, turned around happily. “I’m happy to hear your words of praise. While this scenery is normal for us, I’ve no doubt that it’s quite unusual for outsiders.”

“Thank you for arranging this sudden request for us. I understand that people usually aren’t allowed inside.”

“We’re able to operate due in no small part to Lucas’s generous assistance. We happily welcome you, madam. I’m truly glad to see that he married. He was always a child who disliked showing his weaknesses to others. I’ve always hoped he’d one day have a family who could walk alongside him.” Only then did the nun gasp and look at me in shock. “Oh dear, I’m terribly sorry! I’ve known Baron Stock since he was a child, so I tend to speak about him in an overly familiar tone.”

Sister Margaret gazed at us worriedly, but Kiki and I exchanged glances and giggled. We both smiled at her.

“Please don’t be so stiff,” I assured her. “Thank you for always watching over my husband from afar.”

My chest grew warm as my words of gratitude came from the bottom of my heart. She felt different from the count or the third prince, who supported Lucas in social settings. Sister Margaret had a friendlier and warmer aura, as though I was speaking with a relative. It was easy to relax and breathe when I was by her side.

After she guided us by the living and eating quarters, we finally made it to the back of the building.

“His mother, Sister Matilda’s grave, is a little past here,” Sister Margaret said. “While you two are paying your respects, I believe I can gather the belongings she left behind.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Upon hearing those words, I tensed—articles that Lucas’s mother had left behind would prove to be vital clues to look into her origins. We passed through a few winding paths between buildings before Sister Margaret froze in place, encouraging us to head past her.

“This is the gravesite of the nuns,” she said. “His mother, Matilda Stock’s grave, is in the very back, in that corner.”

I took a deep breath before stepping ahead into the burial grounds. Small tombstones stood equidistant from each other, and in the back was a stone about the size of a curled-up cat. The name “Matilda Stock” was etched upon it. Many small flowers bloomed between the tufts of wild grass—the tombstone looked gentle and serene.

“Pleased to meet you, mother-in-law,” I said. “My name is Iris Stock, Lucas’s wife.”

Kiki and I kneeled to offer our prayers, and I presented the grave with a bouquet. A myriad of thoughts flooded my mind: the dilapidated structure that Lucas had shown me, where he once lived with his mother, and Matilda Stock, who had passed away from a fever. She was seen as a lady of mysterious origins. I only hoped that she was forever resting in peace now. As the gentle breeze brushed against me, I sat there for a while, hoping to burn this place into my retinas. When I noticed Sister Margaret approach us from behind, I knew that my time was up, so I gently placed a hand over the dirt that touched the foot of the tombstone.

"I pledge to protect Lucas," I whispered. "Please watch over us."

I stood up with Kiki, and the nun guided us into the lodgings. The room had a simple wooden table and chair. Sister Margaret brought in a wooden box about the size of a thick encyclopedia as she clutched it so dearly in her arms. She sat across from me and brushed her fingers against the box.

"I shared a room with Sister Matilda, you see," she said. "I was also present when she gave birth. In fact, I was the one who helped deliver Lucas."

I gasped and looked up at her as she gave a gentle nod.

"I was truly shocked," Sister Margaret said. "A noblewoman had her identity hidden and had been shoved into a convent, only to give birth to a child with unusual blond hair. Once he was born, we had prepared ourselves for her to abandon him. There were plans on pretending none of this ever happened and have her leave the convent with no child."

"And yet…she fled with her son, Lucas," I said.

The nun gave a pained nod. "Everyone was shocked at how reckless she was. We tried to convince her to reconsider her plans. If she let go of her son, we had no doubt she could return to her former life. Surely, her son could live happily somewhere. But she didn't believe our words. She was convinced he'd be killed. She stated that perhaps if she'd birthed a daughter, her life would be spared, but a son would undoubtedly be murdered."

As I listened intently, I slowly grasped the origins of Lucas's mother. Sister Margaret could never state it frankly, but I could tell she knew I had caught on.

“Lucas specifically chose for his mother to be buried here, in this convent, so that he’d never have to meet her again,” the nun continued. “He stated that his will would waver if he were allowed to visit her grave whenever he wished.”

“I had no idea…” I murmured.

Sister Margaret wiped the tears from her eyes as she smiled and offered the wooden box to me. “I’m sure Sister Matilda is overjoyed,” she said. “Her only son’s wife is here to visit her, after all.”

“Sister Margaret, I cannot express my gratitude toward your kind words.”

After I thanked her, I gazed down at the box. I slowly undid the metallic clasp and lifted the lid. The smell of old items hit my nose when I noticed a lace handkerchief neatly wrapping an item within. I took it out and revealed a small book.

“This…must be a journal,” I said.

Her handwriting was neat and glided across the pages beautifully—these were the words of Matilda Stock. Kiki gasped beside me. When I turned toward her, I saw her staring at the handkerchief, her face white as a sheet. I followed her gaze and found myself equally astonished by this discovery.

“This is…” I murmured.

Indeed, the lace on the handkerchief had formed a most unique shape.

It was the emblem of House Marquess Diascia, a member of the Traditional Twelve and a part of the faction of the first prince.

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WHILE Iris and Kiki were visiting his mother’s grave, Lucas was gazing up at the sunny skies. There wasn’t a cloud in sight. He’d left the dusty gatehouse and was waiting for his wife’s return on a hill, the breeze caressing his body. His trusty butler, Leikzig, silently stood beside him, his long, silver ponytail fluttering in the breeze in Lucas’s peripheral.

“I’m glad you met a splendid wife,” Leik said.

Lucas turned to his butler, taken aback by the sudden comment, but Leik squinted his golden eyes and smiled. His

beauty was accentuated under the sunny rays, making him seem almost empyreal.

“Any normal lady would want to cut ties with you immediately, my lord, once they learn all the things you shoulder,” Leik said without restraint as he started to count Lucas’s troubles with his fingers. “We’ve got your birth, and how you got here, and the marriage, and your first impression… Let’s not forget the ordeals that followed soon after. Continuing a mariage blanc is all at your convenience, to boot. Even if you’ve got a handsome face, it can’t cover for all those issues.”

Leik’s words rang true, and Lucas had no reason to refute.

“I know all of that,” Lucas snapped.

“Oh? About your handsome face, I take it?” Leik replied.

“You idiot.”

“But you’ve met a woman who chose to overcome all these hardships and stick by your side. I’m truly glad that there’s a woman out there who understands how splendid my master is.” Leik smirked.

“We’ve known each other for quite a while, now that I think about it,” Lucas said.

“Indeed. At first, I thought you were some sort of hooligan.”

“Yeah? And you were a lot cuter back then, too.”

“Huh?!”

It was unusual for Leik to look so visibly flustered. Lucas let out a hearty laugh. He’d known his butler for quite a while, and it was all so nostalgic to the both of them. When Lucas was still trying to make his wealth under unstable footing, Leik was a hunting dog of the first prince’s faction, dispatched to get rid of the nouveau riche. The butler had no will of his own and was used as a tool for assassination. Yet, Lucas took the hunting dog in, gave him a name, and, despite having zero prior experience, made Leik a butler. That was how desperate Lucas was.

He turned to his butler again, who was clearing his throat several times in hopes of regaining his composure. “I just wanted someone competent,” Lucas said. “I hired you for my self-interest. I didn’t think you’d stay by my side for so long.”

“Well, the same goes for the madam, doesn’t it?” Leik asked, trying to get back at his master by mentioning Iris. “You originally

married her as an etiquette coach. Weren't you lucky that a lady who's just your type arrived and became your *actual* wife?"

"Well, I'll admit that I love her."

"How terribly boring. It's no fun to tease you now."

"It's a bit too late for me to say otherwise, don't you think?"

"Then you can be honest with me too. I'm still a cutie, aren't I?"

"I'll just shut up now."

"Aww..." Leik stared wistfully at his master for a short while, hoping for a compliment, but he soon grew bored and gazed into the distance. "That's just how human relationships go. You can connect with someone out of love but end up parting ways. Sometimes, you can approach someone with a calculating scheme, and you'll find yourself with an irreplaceable relationship."

"I suppose it's fate, in a way."

"My lord... Please become happy."

Lucas turned to his servant, who was calmly looking back at him. The butler stood tall and gave a beautiful bow, a respectful attitude that a servant would have toward his master.

"Needless to say, it's for your sake, but it's also for your company's employees and your servants that you spared," Leik continued. "Everyone will be spared as long as you can attain happiness." His words were frank, causing Lucas to feel a bit awkward. It threw him off kilter when his butler sounded so earnest and forward.

"Don't be so sappy," Lucas replied. "We're not saying our final farewells. Be less stiff, will you?"

He casually glanced at his butler, who blinked in response; Lucas was sending a signal. Leik, in turn, acted naturally and approached his master, not once letting his thoughts show in his words and actions.

"Aw, come on," Leik whined. "You bought a new young pup. Guess you can't teach an old dog new tricks. You've got no need for me anymore, do you?"

"Don't suddenly act overly casual, you idiot," Lucas replied.

"Well, you *did* say that I *used* to be cute."

"You just had an adorable side when you expressionlessly were hard at work. Besides..."

“What?”

Lucas shrugged his shoulders. “I won’t cut you off after all these years. You finally became a half-decent butler. I still remember the first time you poured me some tea. You used the entire canister of leaves and had a pot bubbling away.”

“And what about you? I was an assassin until the day prior, and right before a business meeting, you ordered me to act like a butler and to just stand there proudly while making tea. *You’re* the one who sent me an unreasonable request, I’ll have you know.”

“But you didn’t say that you couldn’t do it. Despite having no prior knowledge, you still made your attempt, which made you interesting.”

The two men had been engaged in a meaningless conversation since Lucas’s initial signal. Lucas pretended to straighten his wind-tousled hair as he gazed into the distance. He expertly used his arms to hide his gaze while relaying to Leik the location where Cano’s presence could be sensed. A grove had obscured Lucas’s vision, but he was certain Cano was prowling about there.

Leik pretended to put a troubled hand over his cheek as he discreetly mouthed, “He’s listening in on us, huh?”

Lucas nodded. This entire time, Cano pretended to be keeping guard while casually staying in the direction of the wind—no doubt because the breeze carried Lucas and Leik’s voices, making it easier to hear. Even from a distance, it was safe to assume that the boy could read lips.

“Madam is late,” Leik said. “What should we do?”

“We can relax,” Lucas said, pretending to speak about Iris while sending Leik a signal. “There’s no shortage of ways to kill time.”

For now, he was going to let Cano do as he pleased.

“My lord,” Leik started.

“Hmm?”

“That smile of yours is fitting for a villain.”

“Gee, thanks.”

While they continued to engage in meaningless banter and waited for Iris, they felt a presence from the direction of the gatehouse. When they went to meet her, Iris approached the men, her face pale, a wooden box clutched tightly to her chest.

“Iris, what happened?” Lucas asked.

She was so deep in thought that she looked pitiful. “I understand everything,” Iris said quietly. “Your mother’s journal had the full account of her circumstances.”



WITHIN the gatehouse was a private room where a nun could speak with a guest through a lattice. Lucas and I took Kiki and Leik with us to speak in this room with Sister Margaret. Through the window secured with a beautiful lattice that looked like lace, Lucas and I sat in front of a simple table for four, facing the nun.

“In short, Lucas, your mother is the daughter of Marquess Diascia,” I explained. “Your father, a man also called Lucas, arrived at the port city and was a fisherman from Lapisasther. He’s three years older than your mother, and as stated, you share his name.”

The journal that Matilda Stock left behind documented her daily life and thoughts. She met with Lucas’s father and eloped; the two lived happily. She found out she was pregnant and had parted ways with her husband before she was dragged back home. She was then shoved into a convent. Her journal entry ended the night before she’d left.

“Your mother didn’t agree with the ways of her house,” I said. “She must’ve felt isolated and went to a village in the suburbs as part of her volunteer work. It was there that she met your father and fell in love. I believe your parents eloped. But a while after she learned of her pregnancy, your father didn’t return from one of his fishing trips. Your mother was discovered by her family and was forced to live in a convent. Her house wanted her to secretly give birth, get rid of the baby, and return home as an unmarried woman who had never met a man.”

Matilda’s vehement wishes to never return home had been scribbled into her journal again and again. She believed in her husband and felt lonely giving birth by herself, but she was dying to see her baby in her arms. Her candid thoughts had been jotted down.

“Her house had given her an ultimatum,” I continued. “If she gave birth to a girl, she and her daughter would be brought back

home. If she gave birth to a boy, the child must either be abandoned or deemed a stillbirth."

Beyond the latticework, Sister Margaret covered her eyes with her handkerchief as she did her best to stifle her sobs. I couldn't even look at my husband's face. All I could do was read the truth out loud.

"As we all know, your mother gave birth to a son, a boy who shared the same striking hair and eyes as his father," I said. "Your mother left any proof of her ties to her house in the convent and fled to a connection that she had through her volunteer work. She fled to Westmierden, a city far from her home where many vagrants settled. She prayed that any child would fit right into the crowd, no matter how different he looked."

Indeed, Matilda had succeeded. No one could've guessed that the former daughter of a marquess fled to the city of coals soon after giving birth.

"She decided to wait for your father," I went on. "Even if something happened to him, as long as she protected her son, she believed she'd be able to meet her husband again. Her journal entries stop here."

Sister Marget gazed down, pale-faced. "When she first came here, she hid everything about her origin. The higher ranks of the church simply told us that a new nun would arrive soon. I'm quite sure that her family had wanted to isolate her here until she gave birth. She said nothing about it."

I nodded. "Back then, I'm certain that there was a grisly fight for the throne. Tensions ran high in the faction of the first prince as they desperately tried to prevent his younger brother from succeeding as king. It's not difficult to imagine this situation. During such a crucial time, those in the first prince's faction, who valued the purity of noble blood above all else, must've wanted a daughter of the house of the Traditional Twelve to be in a political marriage. The marquesses were struggling to find successors as it was."

Yet, Matilda had eloped and given birth to a boy carrying the blood of a foreigner, which the first prince's faction despised most of all. It was rather understandable for Matilda to flee to the streets.

Lucas sighed deeply as he ran both hands through his hair in hopes of hiding his face. He was at a loss for words at the harsh truth that he faced. “So if I wasn’t born, my mother could’ve returned home,” Lucas muttered to himself.

There was nothing we could say. We couldn’t possibly say a word. How were we even supposed to console him? Even Lucas had no idea how to process this truth; his mother had tossed everything away to protect her son.

Time passed, and Lucas finally looked up as though he was trying to put the past behind him. “Thank you for giving my mother’s belongings to Iris,” he said. “I’ll continue to leave my mother’s grave in your care.”

“I understand,” Sister Margaret replied. She tightly gripped Lucas’s hand through the latticework as she struggled to speak. “Even if it’s tough to hear, I hope you will stand strong. We’re all on your side. Lucas, I’m sorry. Had we supported Sister Matilda more…”

“Don’t apologize. It’s thanks to everyone here that I’m still alive.” He pacified the sobbing nun and looked at me with determination. “Iris, we’ll be visiting my mother’s home. Now’s the time if we want to settle the score with my past.”

“I understand,” I replied with a nod at his firm gaze.

We once again thanked Sister Margaret and left.

“Lucas, please don’t push yourself too much,” Sister Margaret called before we parted. “We’ll be waiting for you to return.”

“Thank you. I leave my mom in your hands,” Lucas replied.

They spoke like old friends before we finally left the convent.

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AS night fell, we returned to the hotel in Tesouvius. The town started to turn on the lights amid the setting sun, and our splendiferous hotel towered over its surroundings. Since we’d returned from the plain convent, the structure looked more magnificent and splendid than usual. We happened to meet an influential noble of the town and were invited to attend a dinner party for merchants. I had no time to rest as I got dressed and headed for the room next door, where Lucas was waiting.

“Thank you for your patience,” I said.

“All right,” Lucas said, standing up. At a glance, he looked like his usual self.

“Are you okay, Lucas?”

“I’d be lying if I said I was, but it’s better to be busy to keep my mind off things.” He tried to regain his composure and stroked my head, his hand gliding through my hair before he took my hand and kissed my fingers. “It’s nice to see you dressed up so beautifully,” he said. “As always, you’re my pride and joy.”

“Thank you,” I replied, thanking him honestly.

Recently, I’d been able to express my gratitude naturally instead of denying his claims. Lucas extended his arm to escort me.

“Let’s go,” he said. His voice was gentle, but it sounded like he was reassuring himself as well. “If we speak with other nobles, I might be able to glean more information about my mom.”

“I’m sure things will go well,” I said.

He squinted his eyes and nodded. Tonight’s party was a jaunty affair, where young nobles who had just succeeded their house gathered. Unlike the usual stiff gatherings of the royal capital hosted by older aristocrats, for better or for worse, the young nobles in attendance were interested in Lucas. They were eager to form business relationships with him as they passionately engaged him in all sorts of conversations as though it was some sort of contest.

Lucas acted gracefully, playing the part of Baron Lucas Stock, whom everyone was eager to learn more about. By his side was a silver-haired hunting dog—Leik stood by proudly for all the world to see. Lucas’s striking appearance had already made him stand out, with his canary-yellow hair neatly arranged as he dressed in the trendiest suit. He sat elegantly with his legs crossed; his socks peaking from underneath his pants looked plain, but they were made from high-quality elastic and were rather thin, allowing the shape of his ankles to stand out. In due time, I was certain that these socks would be popular amongst the younger aristocrats.

I was sitting in the corner of a sofa with Kiki in tow while I joined in with the ladies chattering away. All of them were wearing lovely dresses and either ranting about matters they couldn’t say

to their family or bragging about themselves under the guise of a complaint.

The conversation was a delicate balancing act, for one would need to keep in mind their social ranks and relationships. Every story they shared had some sort of meaning in mind. The ladies, in turn, listened and gave vague replies to join in on the conversation.

I felt quite odd. In the past, I'd tried my best to act like I didn't exist and never tried to jump in on these discussions. I was desperate not to tarnish my family name and did my best to steer conversations away from my sister. There was no time for me to enjoy talking with others. But now, my standing was Baroness Stock, and we were in Tesouvius, a town away from the royal capital. I felt liberated from my title as the plain daughter of Marquess Karelia, and surprisingly, that fact alone allowed me to relax more and have fun. It reminded me of my carefree days at the women's academy.

"Ah, I've heard something interesting," one of the ladies said, glancing at me, her gaze filled with interest. "Baroness Stock, your husband loves you very much, doesn't he? I've been told of the time he barged into a salon, and the display of affection was simply passionate!"

She referred to that day when Lucas kissed me, and before I knew it, I'd commanded the attention of the other ladies.

"He's just infatuated with you, isn't he?" the lady continued. "But as you two come from completely different origins, surely it was quite the trial to get used to these differences?"

I tried my best to gauge this situation in my head. How much of their knowledge was truth, and how much was baseless rumors? Why did she bring this topic up? Did she have a goal in mind? Would my answer benefit Lucas or work against his favor? Lucas's kiss was his method of shooing away other ladies, but I had no idea how he wanted to display our relationship to others. My goal was to act in accordance with Lucas's wishes. And so, I suppressed my embarrassment and urge to deny those claims as I maintained a smile while taking a sip of sparkling water.

"Well..." I started, acting hesitant as I gazed down, gathering everyone's attention. I used this pause to maintain the ladies' interests and have their imaginations run wild as I gave a sheepish

smile. I was extra careful about my intonation as well. “You’re right. My husband…is a very passionate person.”

“Oh my,” a lady gasped.

“He is a very honest man. Perhaps he shocked the ladies who were present at the salon. I have told him before to tone down on the immodest behavior, but it seems he’s been doing his best to…”

I used my fan to hide my lips and gazed down once more as the ladies glanced between Lucas in the distance and myself. It seemed each lady was filling in the blanks in their own way. Some couldn’t hide their curiosity, while others looked at me sympathetically.

“It must be quite difficult to marry a man raised so differently from you.”

“I suppose, at this rate, it won’t be long before you two can conceive a child.”

“Should that time come, please invite us to your party.”

As I answered inoffensively to their words, I tried my best to prevent my face from twitching. *A child,* I thought. I recalled Lucas whispering minute details on how a child would be conceived into my ear the other day and was tempted to cover my face. Fortunately, the conversation moved on to another topic, and I kept a smile plastered on my face as I joined in.

Some of the ladies who gathered today were married and had children. The mere realization that they were speaking about children while fully understanding what that process entailed almost made me dizzy. I had just recently learned the truth.

My mother had passed away before I could receive sex education from her, and I’d only obtained a rough idea from the women’s academy. The vague sense of understanding that I had wasn’t nearly enough. I could hardly call it understanding what conceiving a child meant.

Our conversations petered out, and we dispersed to head back to our husbands and families. I was more nervous than usual, but I finally relaxed.

“I’m so glad Lucas is my husband,” I whispered as I fanned my face and took deep breaths. Just then, I felt someone’s gaze and turned around. “Am I…imagining things?”

All I could see was a lavish curtain and a clear window. Servants and employees were busy at work. When they noticed my

gaze, they tried to approach me, but I glanced at them to imply that I was all right. For the entire night, I'd felt an observing gaze. It bothered me the whole time, right until the party ended and I returned to my room in the hotel.



THE dinner party continued well into the night. I'd prepared myself for bed and dressed in my negligee to retire to the bedroom, but Lucas was already there, his back turned to me as he sat on the bed. As I gazed at his back, I was reminded of the convent we'd visited in the afternoon. The eagerness that lingered when I met him at the dinner party started to cool.

"Lucas," I called gingerly.

He turned around with a calm gaze. "Welcome back. You must be tired."

"The same could be said for you. You looked rather busy..."

He outstretched his arms. "If you're so worried about me, I'd be grateful if you were nestled in my arms. How about it?"

"All right."

I sat on the bed obediently, and Lucas hugged me from behind. His arms draped in silk were comfortable to the touch, and the aroma of his damp hair, fresh from the bath, tickled my nose. I was supposed to be comforting my husband, but I felt like I was the one being soothed.

I felt his soft lips touch the top of my head as Lucas took a few deep breaths.

"My mom..." he started quietly as he continued to face down. "I'd guessed that Matilda Stock was a noble." He spoke slowly as though he was unraveling the memories he'd kept shut inside. "She could read, write, do calculations, and we could barely make a living, but she had enough negotiation and social skills to support me all by herself. To ensure that I wouldn't be left alone in poverty, she convinced the count to interview her son for a potential job offer before her death. Only when I became older did I slowly realize that no normal woman could accomplish those feats."

His lips continued to brush against my dark hair as he spoke, and I had no idea what expression he was making. It seemed like he was carefully facing the truth while he spoke to me. In response, I placed my hand over his and listened intently.

"Not once…did my mother speak ill of my father," Lucas continued. "Her journal didn't speak negatively of him at all, did it?"

"No," I agreed.

I could feel him smile. "That's just like her. That man had caused her to lead a life of ruin, yet she didn't deny his existence. Because she knew that I'd struggle in life with my appearance, she must've chosen her words carefully. That bled into even her journal since she assumed I might read it one day."

"Lucas…"

"But now we've got a problem," Lucas said, changing his tone as he hugged me tightly. "I had no idea that I had the blood of someone in the faction of the first prince, but it makes sense now. Those in the faction of the third prince would've noticed that already."

"Then what will we do now?"

"Let's see… The safest bet is to pretend that none of this happened and stop pursuing my mother's origins, I guess…"

I twisted my body to look up at his face. "If you're curious, we should get into contact with that house, Lucas." He looked at me in shock. I pressed on, "Be it sooner or later, they'll realize you're their blood relative. In fact, they might already know. A man with canary-yellow hair that fits the age and has mysterious origins is slowly but surely gaining power. If that's the case, surely it isn't a bad plan to strike first and meet with them."

Lucas was silent for a few moments before he grinned at me. "I like how hotheaded you are."

"Er… Am I?"

"If you wanted to end things peacefully, you would've told me not to stand out anymore. I shouldn't provoke them, don't you think?"

"Ah, you're right."

"Well, your hidden strength despite your meek appearance is partly why you're so charming." He touched my jaw and tilted it up slightly, planting a kiss on my forehead, eyes, and cheek.

“Lucas,” I gasped.

“All right, I’m in the mood,” he murmured. “Play along with me for a bit, will you?”

His raspy whispers made my heart pound even more. His warm hands that touched my body made me aware of the change in the air. He kissed my forehead again as he gently pushed me onto the bed.

“Lucas?”

I looked up at him, but his gaze was a touch cold. As he hovered over me, he intertwined his hands with mine, pinning me onto the bed. All sorts of thoughts and sensations filled my head—the information that Lucas had told me the other day, coupled with what the ladies from the dinner party had told me, flashed across my mind. This was a side of Lucas that I’d never seen before.

“Ah…” I tried to speak but could only emit a pathetic gasp.

His face neared mine as he kissed my ear. My mind went blank as my husband whispered ever so faintly. “Can you just play along for now?” he asked. “We’ll act like this for a while.”

“Huh?” I asked.

In contrast to his warm embrace and flurry of kisses, his voice was low and calm.

I couldn’t hide my confusion as I let him do as he pleased. I entrusted myself to his words and squeezed my eyes shut. He hugged me from above and planted a kiss on my neck and lips. Then, just as suddenly, the air shifted again, and he sat back up.

“L-Lucas?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “You’re fine now. Can you sit up?”

He outstretched his hand to help me stand up. As I did so, I felt my hips tremble and my knees buckle.

“Eek!” I cried as I slipped from the smooth bed sheets and sank onto the ground.

Lucas panicked for a split moment before he carried me back to the bed and helped me lie down. He brought the covers up to my neck, tucking me in.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I must’ve scared you.”

“D-Don’t be sorry,” I replied. “You didn’t do anything wrong. We’re…married.”

“Don’t say that now. I won’t be able to hold myself back.” He covered his mouth and turned away. “You must be tired. Get some rest. I’ll go outside and cool my head for a little.”

I felt like he was trying to end our conversation. I nodded at Lucas, who was getting ready to head out onto the terrace.

“Okay, good night,” I said.

He stroked my hair once and turned around to head out.

“Um, Lucas?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“You’ll…be back, won’t you?”

He froze and flashed a strained smile at me. “I will. As soon as I can.”

I watched him leave and breathed a sigh. I was relieved to see a pensive Lucas smile faintly at me. After turning off the lights, I snuggled into bed. In the end, I was deeply asleep until morning. I hadn’t noticed Lucas’s return, and I woke up in his arms the following morning.

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“THANK you all for being here,” Lucas called.

It was the day after we returned home from our trip. As the morning rays of the sun spilled into the conference room, he had every servant of his house and employee of his company gather around. The warm ocean breeze carried in the crashes of the waves and the cries of the gulls. I sat beside Lucas and listened to his words while gazing at the crowd. Everyone looked anxious and eager since the company president had suddenly summoned them. The tension in the conference room had never been higher.

“I’ve gathered you all here today because I’ve got something to tell you. It’s about my birth,” Lucas said. He took deep breaths as he cast a sweeping glance around the room and continued quietly, “My mother came from the house of Marquess Diascia, part of the Traditional Twelve and in the faction of the king’s older brother.”

Everyone gasped and glanced at each other. I also swallowed nervously; those working under Lucas were all commoners. Almost all of them were displeased with the political ideologies of

the first prince's faction—they always benefited the nobles, much to the expense of the commoners. Many had supported Lucas precisely because he was a former commoner, believing he had the best intentions of their needs in mind. As I sat beside him, I could sense how nervous Lucas was. Once everyone calmed down, he continued.

"Despite learning of my mother's origins, I'm still grateful for her. I'm only here today, supported by each and every one of you, thanks to my mother, who couldn't even afford medicine as her physical and emotional exhaustion led her to her death. She lived in poverty at the very end."

Coldola gulped and listened intently. As his childhood friend, she knew a side that even I didn't; she was keenly aware of his relationship with his mother.

"I know many of you stuck by my side because you believed I was a commoner through and through," Lucas went on. "I can't blame you for hating me because I have the faction of the first prince's blood flowing in my veins. But I don't want to hide anything from you, and I'm here today, prepared to disappoint each and every one of you."

His solemn and earnest words had everyone quietly lend an ear. "I wanted power precisely because I couldn't save my mother. I prayed that I would have enough might to at least save those near and dear to me. It was my mother who provided me with the knowledge I have today. Had she not taught me the bare minimum and introduced me to the count, and had she not told me about the importance of slowly building trust to create long-term relationships, I wouldn't be here today. There's a good chance I would've just strayed off the right path, became some sort of thug, and died in the streets. I wouldn't have been able to provide you all with a job and a place to be."

He paused before he continued. "So, I'm thinking of meeting with the house of Marquess Diascia. I'd like to look into my mother's and father's past as much as I can. If there's a chance that I could learn about why I was born, I'd like to do that."

Everyone started chattering away; anxiety riddled their faces. No doubt, they feared that Lucas would return a changed man if he met with Marquess Diascia. Perhaps he would no longer be looking out for the common folk.

I'd been told that he received backlash when he married a noblewoman, after all. Lucas waited a good while for everyone to calm down. He wanted everyone to take the time to understand the meaning of his words so that his intentions would be conveyed. After everyone slowly settled down, he opened his mouth again.

"Knowing my past is a means for me to put it behind me," he said. "To continue standing at the head of the company and manor, I must put an end to my past. I know you won't doubt me on this, but I swear I won't join the house of Marquess Diascia. Make no mistake; I am still Lucas Stock, the man you have all approved of and stuck by."

His firm words had drawn everyone to him, and it was only natural. Everyone here had been by Lucas's side far longer than I had and had helped him build his wealth and power. My husband was making it clear that the Lucas Stock they all believed in was still present.

"Besides," he said, glancing at me and shrugging. "I finally managed to host a wedding with my wife. I might become a father in the future, and I can't let my past plague my mind, can I?"

I turned bright red as everyone quietly chuckled. The tension from earlier had dissipated as he continued to address his servants and employees.

"It really doesn't matter if I'm seen as a company president or baron. I'm really just some punk that got lucky. And yet, you placed your faith in me and supported me. I will *never* betray the trust that you've given me. No matter my birth and the truth that I discover, I'm a mere nouveau riche who's trying to make a city that's easier for you to live in. I'm Lucas Stock. And I don't want to hide anything from you. Please continue to lend me your aid. That's all I have to say."



When Lucas ended his speech, the room erupted in warm applause.

“We’ll stick by you, of course!” a young male employee shouted.

The elderly men nodded along. “Hey, to us, you’re just a mischievous, reckless brat. But the light you emit is so bright and reliable. We’re counting on you, sir.”

The women surrounding Coldola also offered their support.

“Oh, don’t you worry about it, sir! We’ll continue working here even if you want to shoo us away!”

“Personally, I had no idea that even *you* could become anxious.”

“I hope you can find more details about your parents!”

Lucas received each comment solemnly, but his face couldn’t hide the emotions that bubbled up within him. “Thank you,” he said.

This undying trust proved how preciously Lucas had treated his people until now. As his wife, he dazzled so brilliantly, and I was so proud of him. Endless joy filled my heart. He gazed at me, and I smiled back as he tightly gripped my hands.

“I’m happy for you,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks,” he replied.

Just then, a hand rose from the crowd, a wet blanket amid the cheers.

“Uh, sorry to spoil the fun,” Cano said. “But how exactly are you going to meet House Diascia?” The young boy’s clear voice gathered everyone’s attention. “The houses of the Traditional Twelve are on equal ranking to a duke. Isn’t it difficult for you to meet someone of that rank, my lord?”

“What a blunt and rude child this newbie is,” Coldola said with a frown.

“Aw, but am I wrong?”

Everyone gave an awkward chuckle as Leik, who stood behind Cano, pushed the boy’s head down. “I’m terribly sorry,” the butler apologized. “He hasn’t been trained well yet. Now, Cano, kneel to the ground and kiss Coldola’s feet.”

“Oh, all right,” Cano relented.

“H-Hey, stop it!” Coldola cried. “I’m not into stuff like that!”

“Now, what shall we do, my lord?” Leik asked, glancing at Lucas.

“Hmm…” Lucas loosened the buttons on his collared shirt and turned to the boy. “What would you do, Cano? You asked, so try thinking about it.”

“M-Me?” Cano asked.

“It’s important for you to think about solutions too. I want everyone to try and come up with an idea. How can a nouveau riche meet with the Traditional Twelve? And a house in the opposing faction, no less?”

“H-Hrmm…”

Cano furrowed his brows pensively as some people in the crowd glanced at each other while others turned toward the ceiling. Before I could say a word, Lucas looked at me, placed a finger on his lips, and closed one eye.

“Don’t say a thing, Iris,” he said. “You’ve probably realized it already, haven’t you?”

“I think I’ve got a vague idea,” I replied.

“I’d expect no less from you.”

He smiled happily, and some people raised their hands to say their ideas.

“What about selling them some wares that they desire?” one suggested.

“Can’t do that,” Lucas replied. “They’re regulars of the Bearbrooks Trading Company. Pushing them aside to sell our wares would be against the rules.”

“Then what about claiming your blood relation to the house?” another inquired.

“After all these years? No one will take my sudden claims seriously,” Lucas countered. “In fact, I might be put on trial for making false claims.”

“What about finding a treasure that even Bearbrooks doesn’t have yet?” asked a third.

“You’re the closest to the correct answer,” Lucas said. “You guys are getting much warmer.”

As though a trivia tournament was suddenly being hosted, everyone eagerly raised their hands as the game continued.

“Even those who haven’t raised their hands might’ve sensed the answer by now,” Lucas said. “Why don’t we have Iris tell us?”

As the room focused on me, I nervously turned to Lucas and said, “The railroad. It’s a project that you and the third prince stood at the helm of as their chief investors. When the railroad is completed, you plan to attend the celebratory party and suggest your plans on lengthening the railway to the marquess.”

“Huh? Pardon my insolence, madam,” Cano interjected. “Construction is necessary to build a railway. Land needs to be conceded to form one, and the nearby places will get noisy. I can’t imagine everyone eagerly wanting in on a railroad.”

“You’re absolutely correct. However, as a lord of a land, being left behind will be fatal,” I replied with a shake of my head. “Marquess Diascia’s land may border the main roads, but it’s a region with numerous lakes. It’s said to be difficult to extend a railroad to their territory. At this rate, should transporting goods via the railway become the norm, Marquess Diascia would be unable to conform to new technology. However, if Lucas, who has spearheaded this railway project, shows interest in scoping out the land in hopes of extending the railway, he’d surely be invited to visit.”

Lucas nodded firmly. “Bingo. If I imply that I’d like to gauge their land, the house will surely bite at the opportunity.”

The room buzzed with chatter. Some claimed not to know about the area, and others were quizzical about the possibilities a railroad could bring. Lucas clapped his hands, commanding attention once more.

“In the list of invited guests for the party to commemorate the completion of the railway, we’ve already got Marquess Diascia’s name,” he said. “It’s the first railroad within the nation, no doubt people of the Traditional Twelve will be in attendance. As I gather everyone at the party and hint at my desire to lengthen the railroad, I’ll be able to be in contact with all these nobles.”

Cheers arose from the crowd as Lucas stood there proudly. He drew my head close to him and winked.

“My wife’s amazing, isn’t she?” he said, showering me with praise and showing me off. After he enjoyed the cheering for a short while, he stood tall again. “Things’ll get busy. It’s an important time for us to stabilize our company. I hope you’ll all lend me your support.”

As Lucas ended the discussion, applause erupted within the room. The employees started to discuss future steps with Lucas as the meeting came to a close. He parted ways with me and returned to work with his employees. What he had just done was raise the morale of his employees, and he was almost blinding in my eyes.

Since the room was crowded, I waited until everyone left. I could hear Leik and Kiki whispering to each other.

“My lord looks happy,” Leik said.

“Lord Lucas has really changed since he met Lady Iris,” Kiki replied. “He barely drinks a drop of alcohol in the manor now.”

“A healthier lifestyle, no doubt. I thought he was headed straight for an overweight body when he became middle-aged. Heh heh. He’d be like those chubby nouveau riches you see in books.”

“Hmm, I should live a healthier lifestyle, too. I’d like to live longer.”

“Then why not start running with me, Kiki?”

“Is it effective?”

“Oh, most certainly.”

My chest grew warm at their conversation. Just then…

“Hmm?” I glanced around, sensing an oddity in the air.

I felt like someone was missing. When I gazed at the faces in the room, I realized Cano had disappeared. I said not a word, but my heart started to thud with dread.

“Is something the matter?” Leik asked, noticing my shift in demeanor.

“Where has Cano gone, I wonder?” I inquired.

“Oh, him?” He narrowed his eyes slightly, his sharp gaze looking into the distance. “He’s hard at work. Rest assured, my lady.”

“If you say so, Leik. I don’t doubt your words.”

“Madam, you’re trusting me a bit *too* much, I find.”

Leik smiled, conveying his thoughts. He surely knew that I was feeling uneasy and was acutely aware of whatever this oddity was. And still, he chose to offer me assurance. If he wasn’t telling me the details, it implied he had information I was better off not knowing. I knew that he would never do Lucas or me wrong.

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THE skies were a light shade of violet; the sun was about to rise for the day. Lucas left the manor and walked straight toward the garden. The quiet early mornings of Solalitika felt special. As waves crashed along the water's mirrorlike surface, the yells of the fishermen echoed from afar. Even House Stock, which stood on a hill, could always hear the sound of the ocean.

In the depths of the garden, kept slightly warm as the morning mist settled in, Cano stood on a small hill and took out a pigeon from his chest pocket. As he watched the bird leave, his serious face was different from his usual demeanor—his gaze was stern. The fact that he failed to notice Lucas's presence implied that he still had much to learn.

"Hard at work so early in the morning, Cano?" Lucas asked.

"Good morning, my lord," Cano said.

He turned around, looking slightly surprised as he bowed neatly. The boy immediately forced a smile on his face, but he couldn't mask a hint of panic that had set into his mind. He didn't expect a mere nouveau riche and amateur at combat to hide his presence completely.

That's what makes you naïve compared to Leikzig, Lucas thought. If Leik had gone all out, even Lucas would've had difficulty noticing his butler's cunning schemes. Hence, their relationship was based on trust and emotions.

"You're an early bird, my lord," Cano said with a shrug and laugh before prattling on about excuses no one had asked for. "I was just exploring this estate as I'm not quite used to it yet. I didn't notice the blind spots of this manor; hence, I'd allowed a burglar to slip through during your precious wedding and party."

"Burglar, huh?" Lucas smiled.

Cano's pupils wavered ever so slightly. That was proof enough, and Lucas turned on his heels to leave. "Ah…" Cano said in astonishment.

He was shocked to see Lucas back off so easily. The baron turned around coolly, gazing at his servant's stunned face.

"All right, well, I'm counting on you to stay on guard," Lucas said. "I'm sure there are some people who want to kill me before

the railroad's complete."

"Of course," Cano replied. "I won't let anyone lay a finger on you!"

"Yep, I'm trusting you."

After one final confirmation, Lucas returned to the manor while Cano bowed. *I'm sure Cano will risk his life to protect me should I be in danger,* the baron thought as he walked away. The silver-haired servant's true goal wasn't to endanger the life of Lucas Stock. No doubt Cano had received an order to protect the baron with his life.

"I'm relying on you, Cano," Lucas murmured. He was certain that the boy's true master had entrusted him with a certain mission. The baron pretended to be none the wiser, allowing Cano to continue acting in secret. "In exchange, I'll have you properly fulfill the job you're tasked with."

Chapter 3

A month passed, and the day of the party commemorating the railroad project arrived. The first railroad within this nation would stretch from Solalitika to Westmierden, a vital vein that would transport coal long distances. The station was in the heart of Solalitika, by a building belonging to the Stock Trading Company. A massive party was being hosted to commemorate this joyous occasion.

A week prior, invited guests and those connected to the railroad had started to gather in Solalitika. Lucas had quickly arranged for many hotels to fill their rooms with powerful nobles. House Stock and the manor, meant for company guests, were used to host parties or lay out various trendy items, much to everyone's delight. The buildings were bustling with life every day.

On the morning of the big day, I'd dressed and joined Lucas for breakfast. He was in a pristine suit of a vibrant color. Lucas cocked his head to one side, noticing my gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I just thought the colors were a touch unusual," I confessed.

Because of his facial features and bright hair, he tended to look younger than his actual age. Thus, he preferred to wear darker colors to give off an impression of maturity. I didn't expect such bright colors today.

"You normally don't like those colors, do you?" I asked.

"You're quick to notice, aren't you?" Lucas replied. "Yeah, I don't like hues that pop out like this. But, well, I want to make today a success, you know?"

He gave a forced smile and pinched his collar. Today, he'd speak with House Diascia, where his mother hailed from. Clothes were part of the battle for negotiations; even if it wasn't his favorite suit, there were times when he'd need to wear it.

After we ate, I stood tall and adjusted his tie. "It might not be your favorite color, but it suits you very well," I said with a smile. "Your skin looks brighter."

“Well, if you’re giving me a compliment, I guess I’ll make do with this outfit,” Lucas replied, his eyes filled with endearment. “Your new dress has the collar of a sailor. It suits you very well, too.”

“We’re trying to make this the new fashion trend, aren’t we? I’m making sure this dress leaves a positive impression on as many people as I can.”

I was wearing a flowing dress based on the design of a naval uniform. It used a lighter fabric than normal dresses and kept the body cool; our goal was to have this style become trendy for the upcoming summer months. It made one look brighter, and simply changing the collar could give off a different impression.

“Don’t worry,” Lucas assured. “Everyone will notice since *you’re* the one wearing it.”

After entrusting the manor to our servants, we left and headed down the hill by carriage toward the front of the new station. I couldn’t hide my shock as I stood in front of the new station square.

“It’s beautiful…” I murmured.

I’d never had the opportunity to see the completed square before. It was beautifully paved with stone tiles, and the lush trees and greenery were paired with a lovely flowerbed filled with blossoming flora. It reminded me of a garden for nobles. Lucas squinted happily at my reaction.

“You took me to different manors at the royal capital,” he said. “Thanks to that, I got all sorts of references. I had Old Man Tom choose the plants for us. I can’t think of anyone more knowledgeable when it comes to the perfect temperature for various greenery in this city.”

“I see… And where is Tom today?” I asked.

“I’ve already gathered his family and had him take a few days off. They should be enjoying themselves in a nearby hotel.”

My heart grew warm at Lucas’s attitude. Tom once had his land and home stolen away by cruel nobles, and I was elated to learn that he had a chance to show the fruits of his labor to his family. I stood under the umbrella that Kiki had taken out for me and walked alongside Lucas. A fountain glistened in the circular space in front of the station, and bricks lined the ground in a design of the sun, the origin of Solalitika. In the middle of the

fountain were a few goddess statues designed in accordance with the legends of this city.

Lucas pointed to the station. “It’d be awful if your feet started to hurt before the ceremony because of those heels. There’s a café on the second floor of the station, and it’s nice and cool there. I’ve prepared a room you can have all to yourself.”

“Oh my. Thank you,” I replied.

“You look so beautiful today, so I’d like you to smile until the very end. Besides, those in the factions of the first and third princes will be in attendance. We’ll have to meet all sorts of nobles of various ranks.” His tone was kind, but he was keenly aware of the tense atmosphere. “I’d like you to conserve your strength until our battle.”

“You’re right,” I nodded. “Lucas, when you meet with the people of House Diascia, would you allow me to attend as well? I may come from a fallen family, but I’m still a daughter of House Karelia, part of the Traditional Twelve. I may be able to offer some aid.”

“Of course. I’m counting on you.”

And so, we spent the rest of our morning in a cool room, enjoying these blissful moments of peace while we prepared ourselves for the afternoon.

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FOLLOWING a brief rest, the ceremony started at noon. In front of the black steam locomotive preparing for its first trip, a carpet had been laid on the platform where guests would climb aboard the train, creating the ceremony venue.

Powerful nobles from various factions gathered for this joyous occasion, and Lucas was also present as one of the investors. His Highness, the third prince, conducted the ribbon cutting, and the locomotive left the station. A thunderous roar like I’d never heard before echoed throughout the area as a massive chunk of steel glided over the rails with a low groan. I was blown away, and our guests looked equally surprised when the train left.

As it safely departed the station, another round of applause erupted in celebration. The ceremony proceeded with a few words

of greeting and other short speeches before a large party using the entire station was underway. The ceremony itself was a rather peaceful affair and ended without any issues.

The problem was the party. It was hosted within the station to promote the area as well as the railroad. The newly erected brick walls looked sturdy, like a church or a castle wall, but their shape gave a modern feel with an air of refinement. Large, dome-shaped ceilings had been constructed on either side of the station. The ceilings were tall and grand from a distance but looked more dignified when one stood inside. The animal reliefs that decorated the structures were a nod to the spirits that would protect this station.

The first floor was wide enough to host a ball, and in the middle was a mezzanine floor, where sofas allowed guests to rest. The third prince sat there with his servants, and Lucas and I decided to visit His Highness to greet him. The prince sat on the velvet sofa and happily squinted at Lucas. His Highness gazed at the floor below him.

“You seem to be doing well,” His Highness said. “You had that suit made for today, didn’t you?”

“Quite so,” Lucas replied. “How do I look?”

“When I heard that you were having that suit tailored, I thought that you’d finally gotten a better eye.”

“You’re too kind. It’s all thanks to you, for you allowed me to learn about your refined tastes.”

I found this conversation quite odd; it sounded like His Highness already knew about Lucas’s suit.

“Today’s outfit color is one that His Highness had been urging for my lord to wear,” Leik discreetly whispered into my ear. “My lord is trying to curry favor here.”

I recalled our conversation from this morning as the pieces clicked into place. Lucas had not only declined the ladies that His Highness had recommended but had chosen me, a woman who came from the disgraced Karelias, as his wife. Today’s suit implied that Lucas bore no ill will toward the third prince and wasn’t trying to rebel against him. Because Lucas took me for his wife, he would have to constantly worry about the third prince’s mood.

My chest tightened for a moment; there was no need for Lucas to choose me, and yet he did. At the same time, relief

washed over me. I wouldn't need to hand him over to any other woman who couldn't possibly understand him enough. *I've gotten rather selfish, haven't I?* I thought as I mocked myself. All the while, Lucas was expertly maneuvering his conversation with the prince. From His Highness's hobbies to joyous occasions within his family and even providing new information that Lucas had attained from his ship, my husband spoke with His Highness's best interests in mind. Lucas's submissive attitude hammered home the fact that he was a budding merchant who had received the favor of the prince.

"And I heard you're doing well with her," His Highness said, his dark eyes piercing straight through me.

His chilling eyes made me shudder as though he was gauging my worth. I did my best to act unfazed and quietly smiled as I bowed my head. The prince only saw value in Lucas. If I didn't do my utmost best so that I wouldn't be an obstacle to Lucas's success, all his efforts would be for naught. My husband's bond that he'd built up over the years with His Highness would be in vain.

"I look forward to seeing what you can do, Lady Iris," the prince said. He didn't call me "Lady Stock" or a baroness yet, implying that I was yet to receive his trust. "A husband's success depends greatly on the skills of his wife. This mostly stems from one's bloodline or connections. I'm looking forward to seeing how you use your intelligence to support Lucas."

The undertone of his words was clear as they pierced my heart: you've got nothing left, so use your head. Satisfied with the conversation, the third prince allowed Lucas to leave. His Highness shifted his demeanor in a flash as he smiled and winked.

"I've already gathered everyone over there," he said. "The rest will be up to you."

Our nerve-racking conversation with the prince had concluded. Lucas and I left to return to the busy hall on the first floor.

"That couldn't have felt good, huh, Iris?" Lucas said to me worriedly.

I shook my head. "His Highness is simply worried about you. I'm very aware that this marriage is full of trials."

"You're as reliable as ever."

As conversations between guests blossomed on the first floor, everyone enjoyed themselves as they ate from the buffet. Almost immediately, people gathered around Lucas and me, dying to converse with us. Due to the first prince being absent—as he was recuperating—and the third prince being present, no one was outwardly hostile toward us. Despite the various factions gathering for the party, we had an unexpectedly joyful time.

My dress with the sailor collar had received much praise from the ladies as well. Their opinions would be very useful when creating more items with similar designs.

A servant approached Lucas from the crowd. “My lord would like to speak with you,” he said. He handed Lucas a card with the emblem of Marquess Diascia.

Lucas immediately tensed. “All right,” he said. “Tell him that I’ll be there soon.”

“Most certainly,” the servant said, disappearing as swiftly as he appeared.

Lucas and I exchanged glances.

“It’s time,” I said.

“Will you come with me, Iris?” Lucas asked solemnly.

“Gladly,” I nodded.

I cast a sweeping glance over the hall, confirming the locations of Leik, Cano, Kiki, and Coldola. Should anything happen, I was sure that they could take care of things. Escorted by my husband, I walked to the designated corner of the venue. A single glance was all it took to understand the shift in the air. Everyone gathered in this spot belonged to the faction of the first prince.

This elegantly furnished space was dominated by a man in the center, relaxing in one of the corner sofas. Upon noticing Lucas, the man slowly raised his hand and stood up—he looked to be in his thirties with vibrant reddish-brown hair.

“Thank you for coming, Baron and Baroness Stock,” he greeted.

His sharp gaze narrowed as though he was trying to read Lucas’s thoughts. The two men exchanged a handshake, the air growing heavy as opposing forces clashed against each other.

“I thank you for making the long journey here, Marquess Diascia,” Lucas said.

The marquess gazed at Lucas like a mantis trying to catch its prey. “No need to act so stiff,” Marquess Diascia said. “Sit here. I shall especially allow it.”

“Pardon me,” Lucas replied.

The two of us obediently sat in the designated seats as the atmosphere changed again. Everyone around us was shrewdly vigilant. The marquess flashed a gentle smile while his sharp gaze sized Lucas up.

“Baron Stock, I’ve heard much about your efforts to create this railroad,” he said. “Not only did you improve the management of Westmierden, the city of coals, you even worked to advance the city of Solalitika as well. It was due in no small part to your tireless efforts.”

“I’m honored to learn you’ve heard of me, Marquess Diascia.”

“Ah, well, your canary-yellow hair tends to stand out. And I’ve heard that you’re quite skilled in charming others. Ah…” The marquess paused and turned to me, a faint smile dancing on his lips. “You’ve got a beautiful wife. Where is she from?”

We were both part of the Traditional Twelve. Surely, he had heard of me, a scion of the Karelias. Even if he didn’t know my face, news of a Karelia daughter marrying a new aristocrat had made its rounds throughout high society. By trying to make me seem worthless, he was trying to demean the value of Lucas as well.

“My wife hails from House Karelia,” my husband smiled back serenely, unfazed. “I’m truly blessed that she, a part of the Traditional Twelve, agreed to marry me.”

His words were chosen carefully. The mention of the Traditional Twelve utilized my former house’s name to raise his value. The only thing I could do here was to smile in acceptance of my husband. My quiet implication was that being married to Baron Lucas Stock was seen as of great importance to House Karelia.

The marquess gauged our reaction and casually changed his attitude. “Even in our house, we often talk about you. I’d like to hear how a commoner was able to work his way up in the world and build a track for success.”

“I’d love to,” Lucas replied. “There’s no greater honor than to speak with you.”

As the tense air loomed, the two engaged in a conversation without allowing even the slightest opening. A skillful discussion ensued, where both sides tried to steer the topic in their favor. Marquess Diascia aimed for us to become subservient and beg to hold relations with him. In contrast, Lucas spoke elegantly, trying to coax a suggestion of allowing trade to flourish from the opposing party. The conversation shifted to future prospects of the railroad, and Lucas found his opportunity.

“You see, to expand the railroad, the greatest obstacle is land,” Lucas said. “Once a plot of land has been deemed unsuitable, it’s quite difficult to overturn this decision and request a new investigation. As a result, there are quite a few places we unfortunately had to abandon.”

“So, to have a railroad, we must have a plan in place before the land is investigated,” Marquess Diascia muttered. He fell silent as he stared at Lucas. A few moments later, the marquess smiled and extended his hand. “Then I’d like to invite you to my manor, Baron Stock. Please take a look at my land and let me know if rails could be built upon them.”

Lucas shook his hand and smiled. “I’m very honored. I shall happily accept your invitation, Marquess Diascia.”

The conversation drew to a close peacefully, and we left. Lucas brought me to a discreet location, away from prying eyes, and hugged me tightly with a victorious smile.

“We did it, Iris!” he rejoiced.

“Well done,” I replied.

“It only went so smoothly because you were by my side.”

“You were very cool.”

I wrapped my arms around his back, and he only squeezed back tighter. We spent a few moments basking in this moment of victory.

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KIKI ran into our personal room, out of breath.

“Lady Iris!” she cried. “You’ve got a letter from Marquess Diascia!”

“I’m glad,” I replied. “I would’ve been concerned if he claimed our verbal promise was moot.”

It’d been a week since the ceremony, and as peace settled in again at Stock Manor, we received an invitation from Marquess Diascia. After I scanned the letter, I stood up.

“We should inform Lucas immediately,” I said. “He must be at the company.”

I had the carriage brought around front and rushed to Lucas. He was in one of the guest rooms at the main company office. I knocked before I entered.

“What’s up? I don’t see you here often,” Lucas said, his eyes wide with surprise.

He was seated barefoot on the sofa with one of his crossed legs resting on the footrest. Beside him, Leik was on his knees next to a chest of colorful socks. An assortment of leather shoes was laid out like he’d just unpacked some belongings.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m trying a few test products,” Lucas replied. “Seems like there’s unexpectedly a market for durable yet fancy socks for gentlemen.”

“I apologize for bothering you during such a busy time. Perhaps I shall inform you later—”

“You rushed here, didn’t you? And besides, I wanted your opinions on the colors and the market I’m targeting. So, what’s up?”

As Leik helped my husband with his socks, I showed him the letter of invitation.

“It came, huh?” Lucas said.

A mere glance at the letter’s seal was enough to know that it was from Marquess Diascia. Lucas opened the letter and scanned the contents, struggling to contain his excitement.

“We did it,” he said.

“Yes, but the schedule is rather tight,” I replied. “If we don’t leave soon, I fear we won’t make it in time.”

“His plan is to have us leave posthaste without making enough preparations in hopes of affecting our judgment.”

I nodded. A long journey to another land usually had the interests of the invited party in mind, for they would typically schedule other plans along the way. In general, inviting someone

three to four weeks in advance was customary. However, the marquess went out of his way to form a tight schedule for us, hammering home the difference in rank between Lucas and himself. His high rank aside, it was extremely mean-spirited.

I decided to ask something I'd been wondering about. "Lucas, what are the chances that House Diascia knows of your actual origins?"

Lucas stared at the ground, his bright yellow eyelashes casting a shadow over his cheeks. "Had they known, they probably would've acted a lot sooner and crushed me while they could," he admitted after a short while. "But even if the marquess knew, it would have to be recent, or maybe he confirmed it after meeting me. Either way, it's imperative for us to use this opportunity and try to meet with him."

Lucas wiggled his toes, trying to get a feel for his socks. He stretched his leg out and had Leik remove it for him.

"My goal is simply to confirm the origin of my mother," Lucas continued. "But it won't be odd if they try to find out more about me and attempt to threaten me by acting like they have intel on some sort of past I'd want to hide. I have to act while I can and make it clear that I don't plan on bringing up my past. If I don't ensure their house won't interfere, they might deem me a future threat and try to crush me."

"You're...absolutely right," I acknowledged.

He glanced at me and added, "And if you become pregnant, there's a chance they'll try to take you, child and all." I gasped, but he went on, "While I might be seen as an impurity, a child that you'd give birth to will be a union of House Diascia and House Karelia. Our child will have the blood of their grandmother and yours—both hailing from the Traditional Twelve. With pureblooded nobles on the decline, the child might be seen as a threat in succeeding the house of Marquess Diascia, and you'll both be in danger."

I turned back to the letter in utter disbelief. The third prince's piercing gaze and the way he called me "Lady Iris" echoed in my head. I wanted to do what I could for my husband as Iris Stock. I looked up to face my husband. He smiled at me gently, his eyebrows drooping ever so slightly with his sad expression.

“I’m sorry I said things that made you anxious,” he said. “But I’ve already steeled my resolve to protect you. You can trust me on that.”

“Lucas…” I murmured, peering into his determined eyes.

“About that invitation, I want you to stay here.”

I couldn’t hide my shock. “It’s customary to invite both the husband and his wife to these occasions. Why must I stay at home?”

“Because I don’t want to put you in any further danger. Surely, you’ve had your fill with such incidents after the House Streltsy ordeal.”

“But…”

“I promise to return home. Stay here and protect this manor for me.”

Lucas’s firm words caused me to fall silent. A myriad of thoughts whirled inside of my head.

“No,” I finally said.

“Huh?” Lucas grunted. He didn’t expect my defiant response.

But I gazed straight at him and continued, “Please take me with you.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” He stood up from the sofa. “I told you that it’s dangerous. And besides, should the worst happen to me, if you’re not here to protect the manor, who will?”

“All the more reason to be by your side.” Lucas didn’t respond. I continued, “I’ve chosen to stay by your side. I shall go with you.”

Lucas’s amber eyes widened with shock for a moment, but then he glared at me to refute. “But Iris— Whoa!” He suddenly cried out. Leik had grabbed his leg and raised it in the air. The butler tickled the bottom of his master’s foot. “Ha!” Lucas giggled. “H-Hey! Damn it! You little!”

Leik ignored his master’s cries. In contrast to his playful antics, his expression was serious. “I agree. You should allow madam to tag along with you. I don’t know what you’ll do by yourself, my lord. Worst case, should the Stock Trading Company go down, it would be unbearable.”

“Heh heh… S-Stop it! Argh!” Lucas laughed.

“Leik…” I said.

“I-Iris, s-stop continuing…this…talk!”

Leik's tone was icy as he continued to tickle his master. "You should repent, my lord. Surely, you, of all people, should know the agony of a man leaving behind his beloved wife while trying to shoulder everything by himself?"

Lucas gasped as Leik stopped his tickling.

The butler took on a kinder tone and apologized. "I'm terribly sorry about overstepping. I only ask that you don't make the wrong decision."

My husband paused briefly and gazed at a bowing Leik pensively. He gave a smile of resignation and looked up at me. "You're right," he said. "Please come with me, Iris. If you're by my side, I know I can return home safely."

"Lucas..." I murmured.

"Stop me so that I won't push past my limits."

"Of course. Please leave it to me."

I smiled back, and Leik entered Lucas's blind spot to flash a relieved smile at me for a split moment. It was as though the butler was secretly expressing his gratitude to me.

"By the way, my lord," Leik said, returning to his usual composed expression as he helped Lucas put on his shoes. "What shall we do about Cano? Shall we bring him along?"

"Hmm..." Lucas pensively muttered as he locked eyes with his butler. "We'll take him too. We should properly show him my relationship with Iris."

"Then I shall proceed as planned."

Lucas turned back to me. "Iris, do you think you can spare me a bit more of your time?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"Could you help me choose a few socks? I've been thinking of potentially popular colors."

"Are you quite all right with my taste?"

"It's the first time I've tried to sell various colors to men. Receiving a stamp of approval from my etiquette coach would be a selling point in and of itself."

"Thank you for relying on me."

Lucas sheepishly shrugged and took my hand, rubbing his cheek against the back of my hand as though to beg for forgiveness. "I'm relying on you, of course," he said. "I won't leave you behind anymore."

“I’m not angry with you,” I replied, unable to suppress a smile as I experienced his more honest side.

I switched gears and helped him choose some socks. After I finished, I parted ways with Lucas, who was off to another business meeting. As I walked down the corridor, I felt someone’s eyes on me. I turned around, but the halls were empty.

“Was…someone just there?” I wondered to myself.

Only the walls could hear my words.



MARQUESS Diascia’s marches were in the northern region of the kingdom. Lucas claimed that it was faster and safer to travel by ship, so we boarded one of his merchant vessels and set sail from Solalitika. Our destination was to the north. It was my first boat ride.

“How beautiful,” I said.

We’d left in the early morning, and it was almost noon. I was in our private room, enjoying the scenery from my window. To my right was the kingdom’s shoreline, and to my left was the horizon. Far in the distance, I could make out a hazy outline of the neighboring islands. Every now and then, I’d spot another ship sailing across, creating a wave of white in its wake. The gulls would cry out and approach the ship before flying off on their merry ways. Simple gazing out from the window piqued my interest. I’d never tire of this view.

When I gazed from the dock, it seemed like the ship was sailing smoothly, but when I was inside, it was anything but. The vessel rocked along with the waves, and the wind was strong on the deck. When I listened closely, I could hear the stern shouting of the crew. Kiki and a few other servants became unwell and were resting in the guest rooms.

“Iris, I’m coming in,” Lucas said hesitantly, opening the door to my room. “Do you feel seasick at all?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “I suppose I’m unexpectedly all right on rough seas.”

“I’d expect no less from a woman with a mole under her eye.” He gently stroked my mole with his thumb, and I couldn’t hide my

bashfulness at his touch.

“Did you finish speaking with the ship’s captain?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “At this rate, we should be docked at our destination before sundown.”

“It’s a voyage that should take a week on land. I’m shocked by the speed.”

“The mountain paths aren’t paved, so it’s only natural.” He looked hesitant for a moment before he turned to the maids and guards standing by. “I’d like to speak with Iris for a few moments alone. Could you wait outside?”

After he chased everyone out, he encouraged me to sit on the sofa. As he sat beside me, he spoke up.

“I know that this might not be the most suitable time for this discussion, but I couldn’t find any other opportunity,” he said. “It’s about Cano. There’s something you should know.”

“As I thought, he’s hiding something,” I replied.

Lucas smiled awkwardly. “You noticed, huh?”

“Only vaguely. Something just didn’t sit right with me.”

“That intuition is more than enough against a former dog. I won’t beat around the bush. He’s an agent of the third prince.”

“The third prince?” I blinked; I hadn’t expected the third prince to be the mastermind. I’d assumed Cano belonged to the first prince’s faction or someone else. “His Highness, the third prince, favors you, doesn’t he?” I asked.

“Which is precisely why Cano was sent here,” Lucas answered. “He wants to know if my relationship with you is worthy of his trust.”

“Trust…”

I thought back to His Highness’s gaze; it was sharp precisely because he liked Lucas so much.

“I’m sure you can tell, too, but Cano’s skills as a dog are inferior to Leik’s,” Lucas said. “Yet, Cano’s prized as a dog because of his special ability. When he came to work for us, he tried his best to hide it, but it’s honestly painfully obvious.”

“And what is that ability?” I inquired.

“He’s got instantaneous photographic memory. He can recall any thing or scenery he sees with meticulous detail. His eyes are like a living camera. And do you know what His Highness’s hobby is? Photography. He used his connections to learn of Cano’s

abilities and got in contact with the boy before sending him to work under us."

Photography was a rather recent technological advancement. It was imported from overseas as a way to make pictures in lieu of paintings. However, cameras were still very few and expensive. Only the third prince was allowed to freely use this luxury as he pleased.

"That reminds me, Cano remembered each guest's face at our wedding," I said. "In fact, he even recalled the faces of the guests' servants as well."

"That's probably why he noticed the burglar," Lucas added. "He saw an unfamiliar face, chased after him, and caught the thief red-handed."

Even in our daily lives, his special ability had come into play. However, I'd assumed that he was doing his best at work and didn't imagine him having any sort of special skills. I placed a hand over my mouth, using this new information to dig through my memories.

"I kept it a secret from you until today so that you wouldn't act unnatural," Lucas explained. "You may not have noticed Cano, but the paintings he can draw based on his perfect memory will cause the third prince to suspect an oddity immediately."

"I see now..." I replied.

"He even tried to peek into our bedroom."

"What?!" I couldn't help but have my voice rise an octave.

"He wanted to confirm if we were actually a loving couple. That man's got a nasty hobby." He frowned. "I don't want him to watch us having our fun, of course, so I usually used my back to hide you. Once I had Cano spy on us long enough to convince him we were enjoying ourselves without noticing his presence, I had Leik chase him off."

"I-I see. Does that mean..."

"Hmm?"

"That night...after our wedding... Did he see that too?"

I recalled the embarrassing outfit I'd worn that night and hugged myself, but Lucas turned red and vehemently denied it.

"N-No way I'll show anyone else that!" he cried. "No one else saw you. Trust me."

"A-All right."

Even when I attended a dinner party in a dress, my husband would act like a father doting over his daughter and be extra careful so I wouldn't be too revealing. I decided to trust his words. Lucas's face was still red, but he cleared his throat in an attempt to hide it.

"That's also why I didn't want to force us to act that night," he added. "No way I'd want Cano to see you. Besides, I'd rather die than have His Highness learn when we actually…enjoy ourselves after our wedding."

"You're right," I agreed. "I…wouldn't want that either."

In the old days, it was normal for a witness to be present in the bedroom as nobles slept together the night after the wedding. Even to this day, high-ranking nobles had their beds thoroughly inspected after a night of enjoyment. I'd accepted those facts without a care until now, but as I truly learned of the meaning of intimacy, I found it hard to nod. I couldn't believe that people were casually living their lives after everyone knew about their night of intimacy. That courage and strength of heart were shocking.

"I…can't have them know…" I mumbled as I covered my face.

Lucas spoke hesitantly, "Uh, Iris, so can I continue?"

"Ah, r-right. Of course."

I gasped and sat straight up as Lucas also stood upright, shifting the air in the room and focusing back on Cano.

"I'm telling you all this now, Iris, because I want him to be one of the guards when we enter the manor of House Diascia," he explained.

"You know he's a spy, but you still want him as one of your forces?" I asked.

"Yep. He's not as good as Leik, but he's still a dog. And if he's an agent sent by the third prince, he should've received orders to protect me at all costs. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Cano was ordered to put his life at stake for me. He's more than useful as my guard."

"Indeed. I don't doubt His Highness would order Cano to protect you."

"I was raised as a convenient pawn. He's invested in me quite a bit, and people like me are scarce. He can't cut me off so easily. So as long as Cano is sneaking around as my subordinate, he has to act loyal, no matter how unreasonable my orders might be."

“You’re thinking of all sorts of wicked things, aren’t you?”

“It’s best to fight fire with fire. I might be exaggerating a bit, but I’ve had to gather friends while having nothing. I don’t care if he’s a spy; if he’s got the skills and abilities, I have to expertly trick him and use him to my benefit.”

“That’s how you got Leik on your side.”

“Yep.” He nodded and gave a self-deprecating smile as he stroked my cheek. “And I initially took you as an etiquette coach and to chase away other women.”

“Perhaps so. But…” I paused as I felt his wedding ring brush against the mole under my eye. “Though our meeting was calculated, you’re kind to everyone you draw near. You do not need to make yourself sound like a bad person.”

“You’re overestimating me.”

“A merchant can’t predict how highly a buyer values certain things. Even if I *am* overestimating you, surely I can do as I please.”

“Heh, you’re right.”

My retort may not have been cute, but Lucas smiled with satisfaction. I placed my hand over his as he stroked my cheek.

“I understand,” I said. “Cano’s an agent of the third prince, and you’re trying to use him to your benefit. I should continue to feign ignorance and act as though I know nothing, correct?”

“It helps that you’re so sharp,” Lucas said. Suddenly, he drew me close. He lowered his tone and brought his lips close to my ear. “I think Cano will come and peek at us soon. We can’t have him suspect our relationship. I’ll touch you a little, but do you mind?”

“Huh?”

His raspy voice was filled with passion as he whispered, “I need to show off how infatuated I am with you.”

He kicked the table with a loud clatter and embraced me tightly. He was hiding me from the agent while showing off his passion. I jolted as his lips brushed against my ear and cheek. Lucas cracked a faint smile as he enjoyed my reactions.

“I’m also really embarrassed to do stuff like this, but endure it for a bit longer, okay?” he whispered.

“I know. You can do as you like,” I replied before I started to worry. “U-Um…”

“Hmm?”

I squirmed a little as he loosened his hold on me. I gazed up at him. “If we’re seen hugging…too much…wouldn’t it look like I’m leading you to ruin, somehow?” I asked.

“I’ve no time to be ruined when I’ve gotta protect you,” he said, kissing my forehead. “In fact, I’ll prove myself so much that I let everyone know that I’ve never been sharper thanks to you.”

“O-Okay.”

“Speaking of,” Lucas said, gazing into my eyes. We were so close that our lips were about to touch. “Why not be more casual with me? You’ve been a lot more casual with Leik recently.”

“W-Well, I suppose that’s true.” I’d been speaking with Leik as I would to a normal servant. “But I’ve already gotten used to speaking to you in this fashion. I suppose it calms me down. I won’t be able to change so quickly.”

“I know,” Lucas said, still locking eyes with me as he grinned mischievously. He brushed his lips against the tip of my nose and whispered, “Why don’t I kiss you every time you speak so formally?”

“That’s not really a punishment, is it?”

“You’ve become sharper with your retorts, huh?”

“But…”

As our muffled discussion continued, I thought I heard someone’s footsteps. I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around Lucas’s back.

“Perfect,” Lucas whispered, his hands running through my hair, down my back.

I closed my eyes and did my best to feel the heat and passion of my husband’s arms. I didn’t care who would try to tear us apart—I’d never let go of him.

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AS planned, the ship docked in the port city at the west end of Marquess Diascia’s marches before the sun had completely set. A servant of the marquess was already waiting for us under the evening sun and informed us that a carriage would arrive soon. We remained on the ship and conducted a final meeting.

We all gathered in one of the ship's large rooms and formed a circle around Lucas.

"Leik, you can step away and tend to your work," Lucas ordered.

"Your wish is my command," the butler replied.

This simple sentence was all it took for the two to communicate, and Leik bowed. Lucas nodded and turned to Cano.

"And I want you to be my butler in lieu of Leik," Lucas said.

"Huh?!" Cano gasped, pointing at himself. His curled tuft of hair on either side of his head bounced up and down like a pair of ears. "I-It's only been a few months since I started working here!"

"I had Leik tend to one of my meetings when he had zero experience. This situation's better than that."

Leik nodded in agreement. The rest of the servants also agreed that it was nothing out of the norm for their master to be a touch reckless. No one dissented.

"Ugh…" Cano feebly groaned as he relented and bowed.

Lucas proceeded to dish out orders to the crew and the rest of his servants. The carriage of House Diascia finally rolled up to our vessel. It looked splendid in its hue of black—it was clear that the marquess was treating us properly as his guests. At the very least, there was no sign of him scorning us…*yet*.

Escorted by Lucas, I boarded the carriage. I nervously placed my hand over his when he suddenly bent down to kiss my cheek. When I looked up at him in shock, he smiled faintly. He helped me ease the tension, and I nodded before I stepped into the vehicle.

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"I shall welcome you from the bottom of my heart, Baron and Baroness Stock," Marquess Diascia greeted, his marchioness standing regally at his side.

The marchioness was older than me, and she looked rather meek with her pale gold hair tied up. She was the spitting image of a traditional noblewoman. There were rumors that she was much younger than the marquess because she was his second wife. After we exchanged pleasantries, the marquess glanced at a nervous, young butler-in-training with striking silver hair.

“You’ve got an unusual servant, Baron Stock,” Marquess Diascia said as he glanced at Cano.

“I hired him quite recently,” Lucas replied. “Please get to know him.”

“I see.”

Those in the know would quickly realize that a silver-haired man with golden eyes was a dog, a person hired by the royal family to act in secret. Lucas, who had such a servant follow him around, was showing off how bold he was. Servants often switched jobs or needed to be hired. Lucas’s confident claim of recently hiring a new butler prevented the marquess from pursuing the topic further.

“I shall show you to the guest room,” the marquess said with an elegant smile. “I’ve prepared a place where you can enjoy an excellent view of our lakes.”

Guided by the servants, we proceeded deeper within the manor. The residence had tall ceilings. When I looked up, I saw elegant pictures painted on the surface. Opulent, glittering decorations adorned the rooms, and antique rugs padded the floors. They implied the long history and high rank of House Diascia. Reliefs of a bayonet wrapped in a ribbon that signified House Diascia were etched all along the walls.

After we were guided to our guest room, we quickly prepared for the dinner party. I changed clothes and met up with Lucas. Behind him stood a restless Cano.

Lucas broke into a grin upon seeing me. “That new dress suits you beautifully as well.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “You are quite dashing yourself, Lucas.”

“You’re being overly formal again.”

“Oops.”

Being careful not to ruin my lipstick, he planted a kiss on my cheek. Behind me, Kiki placed both hands over her cheeks and squealed. Lucas drew himself close to me and narrowed his eyes.

“I guess I’ve got the perfect excuse now,” he grinned.

“My goodness,” I replied.

As he smiled so close to me, I didn’t know how to react. He looked satisfied by my troubled expression and extended his arm to me.

“Let’s go, Iris,” he said.

“Yes, my lord,” I replied.

“Still a bit too stiff, aren’t you?”

“I beg for your lenience.”

“Two strikes.”

He kissed my gloved left hand and began to escort me. But I stood in place and stopped my husband so that I could glance at Cano.

“Cano,” I called.

He blinked quizzically, not expecting his name to be called. “Whatever is the matter, madam?” I approached him and fixed his collar. “Th-Thank you,” he said.

“Tonight may become rather decisive,” I said. “Should anything happen, please don’t hesitate to protect Lucas. I’m counting on you.”

“Of course! I’m his servant, after all.”

Cano looked surprised for a moment, but he pounded his chest with his fist. I stared into his golden eyes, hoping that I could trust his words. I saw his expression turn serious.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” I said, turning to my husband. “Let’s go, Lucas.”

“All right,” he said.

Marquess Diascia’s servant guided us, and Cano followed us without uttering a word.

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THE welcoming dinner party was rather plain and inoffensive. While the meals used ingredients from the marquess’s marches, the menu itself presented classic dishes favored by the nobles of the royal capital. They were all safe choices and nothing too daring.

Our conversations were equally innocuous. We discussed the weather of the marches along with recent trends amongst the nobles. Very lightly did we touch upon the subject of investing in the railroad and the future of the project, along with how the marches would operate in the future. In fact, we barely even

discussed plans to expand the railroad, the very reason why we were here in the first place.

Lucas used the knowledge and etiquette hammered into him for the past year. He always excelled in front of others and expertly maneuvered his way around his conversation with the marquess. Still, this party was a bit *too* plain. Indeed, I found it rather odd that our meeting was so boring.

If I were to delve deeper, we were in the house of a noble in the faction of the first prince—our enemies who surely wanted to protect the prestige of the old nobles. We were new aristocrats in the faction of the third prince, yet we were treated so well. This was anything but natural. However, if we were to consider how openly favored Lucas was by the third prince, along with his wife being the daughter of House Karelia, it was understandable.

When desserts were being brought out, Lucas found his time to switch topics. “Commoners quite admire paintings,” Lucas said. “However, I’ve been told it’s a privilege reserved only for royalty or highly esteemed nobles. I haven’t had a chance to have a painting just yet…”

“Oh, don’t you worry,” the marquess replied. “A person of your caliber, Baron Stock, surely would be able to have a painter soon.”

“I’m simply not suitable for such a privilege. However, recently, I’ve heard of a new technological advancement known as photography making its rounds in foreign lands. It’s much cheaper and doesn’t require a painter; it’s a hobby where one could mimic a noble should they have the money.”

“And you’re planning on having fun with that, I presume?”

“It’s still but a silly dream. But a nouveau riche like myself, who’s never had an official painting, isn’t quite sure what a normal painting is supposed to look like. If you don’t mind, I’d love to see a few of yours as I learn about House Diascia’s history and traditions.”

The marquess smiled. “Is that so? In that case, I shall happily oblige. I shall show you around my gallery room tomorrow. Why don’t you tour the lounge tonight? I’ve got a few paintings there.”

Lucas kept his fake smile plastered on his face. The men decided to retire to the drawing room to speak for a bit more.

“I’ll go search for any paintings of my mother,” Lucas whispered in my ear before he left. “Be careful, Iris.”

“All right. You be careful too,” I replied.

Lucas kissed my cheek to mask the fact that he was whispering in my ear and left my side. A maid approached immediately after.

“Baroness Stock, I’m sure that the long journey here has tired you,” she said. “I have a bath prepared, so please relax and enjoy.”

“Thank you,” I said, noticing that Kiki was gone. “Where has my maid gone?”

“She left to prepare the bath for you.”

I had the marquess’s maid guide me out of the dining area.

“Canopus,” Lucas ordered his butler. “You tag along with Iris.”

“Huh?” Cano replied in shock. “To the *bath*?”

Lucas flashed a withering look before he feigned friendliness again. “Just be on guard outside. There’s no need for you to get *in* the bath.”

“You idiot,” Lucas mouthed to him before he winked at me. He left with the rest of the men of House Diascia. I exchanged short words with the other ladies before they retired for their beds, and before I knew it, I was left alone with Cano and three quiet maids. The silence reminded me of the tension within the room.

“Let’s go, Cano,” I said.

“M-Most certainly,” he replied.

With my new butler in tow, I followed the quiet maids down the silent corridor with tall ceilings. None of us made a peep, and the calm party we had moments ago vanished. The hooting of the owls outside was almost deafening as it echoed within the halls.

“This isn’t right…” Cano muttered under his breath.

“Oh?” I asked.

I turned around and saw the fierce gaze of a dog. He was glancing around the walls and ceiling, his slender frame taut with tension. I followed suit and gauged my surroundings. Indeed, something was off. A manor as splendid as this should’ve been in pristine condition. And yet, the structure looked crooked and warped ever so slightly. *Where is this oddity coming from?* I wondered. *The walls? The floor? Or…* I hadn’t a clue, but I knew my next course of action.

“Oh dear!” I gasped. “I’ve forgotten something in the dining hall. I must go back.”

I turned on my heel and locked eyes with Cano as we tried to rush back from whence we came. Just then…

“Watch out!” Cano cried, tugging on my arm.

The next moment, a wall collapsed in front of me.

“Ugh…” I murmured.

My knees started to buckle from fear, but Cano pulled me up from my elbow.

“Keep it together!” he shouted, snapping me back to my senses. “We’re going down a different hall! The blueprint of the manor we saw when we entered is still fresh in my mind, and the position of the reliefs on the wall is different!”

Cano shoved the maids aside and grabbed my hand to pull me along. As we ran down the halls, he grabbed a piece of hand armor that decorated the corridor and banged against the walls with his other hand.

“Here!” he shouted. He started punching the wall with the armor using all his might. “Madam, hit this spot with anything you can find!” he yelled. “This wall can be broken through!”

“Got it!” I replied.

I gathered the hems of my dress and took off one of my stockings. I used it to cover one of the nearby decorations, improvising a slungshot. After I swung my heavy stocking around, I slammed it against the wall. It started to break with a loud crack.

“Where in the world did you learn such a barbaric way of fighting?!” Cano cried.

“Coldola,” I replied. “The stockings of the Stock Trading Company are rather sturdy.”

“The women of that company are terrifying!”

A different corridor emerged beyond the broken wall; that was our path out. Cano and I worked together to create a larger hole to wriggle through as we heard footsteps quickly approaching us. Cano checked the hole, shoved me in first, and quickly followed. The footsteps were growing louder.

“You can’t look back, madam!” Cano shouted as he pulled me along. He mumbled to himself as he took every step precisely and without hesitation. “This leads to the garden, and this path goes north…”

Something suddenly cracked beneath my feet, causing me to almost stumble. As I gasped, I realized that one of my heels had

broken off, and blood trickled down my foot.

"Argh, damn it!" Cano shouted as he clicked his tongue. He easily scooped me up and ran as fast as he could. "I've never guarded a woman before! Madam, hold on tight to me and think of me as your husband! Be warned, I'm not nearly as strong as Sir Leik!"

"I'm sorry for being a burden," I apologized.

"Oh my god! I'm supposed to *protect* you, you know! Stop apologizing about trivial matters like being a burden or whatever! It annoys me to no end! Just stay quiet and rely on me. But again, I'm really weak!"

He ran like the wind. Despite having a smaller and slenderer frame than Lucas, he wasn't any less reliable. As he carried me, he didn't hesitate to jump out a nearby window. *Ah, the night sky and full moon look lovely tonight…*

That silly thought flashed across my mind before the unpleasant sensation of falling through the air overwhelmed me. I couldn't even muster a scream. Just as abruptly, my drop came to a stop. Cano had tied a rope to a frame and was hanging on tight. He did a bit of a wind-up and kicked through the window of the floor below. We practically tumbled into the room, but luckily, a bed had been placed by the window, breaking our fall. I wasn't in any pain.

"Madam, are you all right?" Cano asked.

He had hugged me tightly to protect me from the sharp shards of shattered glass. The dress had exposed much of my skin, and I was defenseless.

"Thank you, Cano," I said. "Are you all right?"

He casually brushed away the glass shards. "I'm fine. Thank goodness that this was the bedroom. But these shards are sharp, so we should wash you off later."

"Right." I stood up, my attention shifting to my husband. "We should save Lucas."

Cano nodded. "I don't think he'll be done in so easily, but it's still dangerous. I assume Sir Leik's already on the move."

I gasped as another person crossed my mind. "Where's Kiki?!"

Cano went wide-eyed as the door to the bedroom creaked open. A man had a knife pressed against my maid as he grinned

from ear to ear. He was a noble and a relative of the marquess; he'd attended tonight's dinner party.

"I'm sorry, Lady Iris," Kiki apologized as she wept. She was clutching her skirt with both hands. No doubt, the man determined that a fragile lady didn't need to be restrained.

"Kiki!" I cried, instinctively rushing forward.

"Madam, it's dangerous!" Cano shouted, grabbing my arm and holding me back.

I bit my lip and froze in place as I glared at the man. "Let go of her!" I shouted angrily. "She is *my* maid!"

"You're just a regular old lady, Iris. You've lost the Karelia name," the man sneered. "In exchange for you, I don't mind letting your little maid go."

The knife pressed against Kiki's throat, and she jolted in terror.

"Stop that at once!" I ordered while making a million calculations in my head. I couldn't think of a plan to escape from this mess.

"You don't have time to think," the man snickered. "I can kill your maid first, then finish you off, you know. What will you choose?"

"What will you do after you kill me? Lucas is…"

"Lucas Stock is biologically related to us. We'll annul his marriage and make him our pawn."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Lucas only safely snuck in here because this entire arrangement was a trap. If what this man said was true, my husband would be safe, but the same couldn't be said for us.

"Guess it's the end of the road for us, huh?" Cano muttered behind me.

"I'll have you disappear here, Iris Karelia," the man growled.

I heard Kiki murmur a teary, "I'm sorry."

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YEAH, *I didn't think things would go so smoothly,* Lucas thought. After he parted ways with Iris, he wasn't led to the drawing room. Marquess Diascia's servants drew their guns and pointed them at

the baron, who had no choice but to raise his hands in surrender. All the while, he was thinking about the safety of those dear to him. *Cano will protect Iris no matter what. Who else is in danger...*

"Thinking about other matters while you're facing me, Lucas Stock?" Marquess Diascia asked calmly. He was annoyingly graceful as he brushed his bangs back with a smile. "Unlike you, I don't like to be so rough. I'd like to end this matter peacefully."

And you think this *is being peaceful?* Lucas couldn't help but crack a wry smile. "I thought you'd drug our food or something, but I suppose I was wrong. I enjoyed our meal tonight. It was delicious."

"But of course. There's no need for me to drug you. A meticulous plan is wasted on a man such as yourself."

As Lucas kept his hands in the air, a servant patted him down to check for any weapons. Once the servant found that Lucas was unarmed, he pushed the baron to the ground and forced him to kneel.

"I'll be frank with you, Lucas Stock," the marquess said, smacking his gun against the baron's cheek and forcing him to look up. The marquess remained expressionless and difficult to read as he gazed down at the younger man. "You are to become my adopted child and marry the girl from the Bearbrooks Trading Company."

The rival trading company was a powerful force within the faction of the first prince. Lucas snorted at the suggestion.

"Come now, can't you see my wedding ring?" Lucas taunted, flaunting his ring.

One of the servants tried to rip the accessory off his finger but failed to do so. The baron's shoulders shook with his laughter.

"Sorry, but my joints are kinda large, so you can never pry this ring from me. I suppose I'm just a touch different from you nobles and civil officers. Is that lady from Bearbrooks so forgiving that she'd accept a once-married man?" Lucas paused and eyed the higher-ranked nobleman. "Why are you suddenly trying to take me in? You guys value the blood of nobles so highly. I should be a nuisance, no?"

The first prince's faction sought to maintain the pure bloodlines of the nobility. They aimed to usurp power from the king and the third prince, who supported His Majesty from the

sidelines, because they valued new aristocrats. Surely, the first prince and his supporters wanted Lucas Stock to disappear. And indeed, he had almost been killed numerous times in the past.

"For the same reason you tried to reach out to us," the marquess replied. "When you met me under the guise of wanting to discuss expanding the railroad, I realized the truth and started to investigate on my own. You're my father's younger sister's son."

"So that makes us cousins," Lucas replied.

The marquess snapped his fingers. A servant rushed out and respectfully brought in a painting. "And I know why you acted so interested in paintings," he said. "Allow me to show you."

He removed the velour cloth, revealing a vibrant family painting to Lucas. It depicted the former marquess and his wife, along with their sons. A bit to the left was a lady with reddish-brown hair flashing a smile. She had the same habit of drooping her eyebrows ever so slightly when she smiled, and the shape of her fingers bore a striking resemblance to her son's.

"Mom…" Lucas murmured.

The memories of his mother had gradually faded over time, but they quickly resurfaced brilliantly. She was much older and wore different clothes than the painting, but this lady was undoubtedly his mother.

The marquess crouched down in front of Lucas. "We'd also given up on grasping the whereabouts of my missing aunt. But when we spoke at the ceremony commemorating the railroad, I remembered an unpleasant bit of information. My aunt had eloped with a foreign man with canary-yellow hair." He violently grabbed Lucas's hair. Lucas had to suppress the hiss of pain.

Don't be jealous of my hair, Lucas internally spat as he glared at the man.

"I see now," Lucas said. "My mother was a blemish on your history, for she eloped with a foreign man. You lot didn't care if she ended up dead on the streets, and I wasn't worthy of your attention, so I slipped between the cracks. But when we met and spoke, it triggered your memories, and you did some investigating. You figured out that you had a convenient nephew of the previous marquess on your hands and decided to use me as a pawn."

"Heed your insolent words," the marquess spat.

“Looks like you’ve got some financial troubles, my dear cousin. Though I’m not sure just how fatal a blow it was to the first prince when the misdeeds of House Streltsy came to light.”

The marquess was silent, but he grabbed one of his servant’s guns and clocked it against Lucas’s head. The baron grimaced as he felt warm blood trickle down and drip onto the floor.

The marquess glared at Lucas with bloodshot eyes and growled, “She may have had her virginity violently stolen by a ruffian and had to conceive a child against her will, but you still carry the blood of House Diascia within your veins. If you agree to be a pawn of this political marriage, I’ll spare your company and the life of your wife. Bearbrooks will take over your company.”

“Wait,” Lucas rumbled. “Are you insinuating that she was sexually assaulted?”

The marquess grinned at Lucas’s glare. “Who can prove that she wasn’t?”

“I can. My mother told me so.”

“Well, but of course. Had she not deluded herself into thinking so, she couldn’t have clung onto life.”

Lucas’s hair was released from Marquess Diascia’s grip as he pushed the baron onto the floor again.

The higher-ranking noble turned his back to the baron, his exaggerated attitude almost theatrical as he continued, “I’ve heard that my aunt was involved in charity and social events. Your father took advantage of her kindness and ensnared her, leading her into a life of ruin. In hopes of creating a space for her, she was allowed to stay at the convent where you were born, clearly taking after your father. She was encouraged to kill the child, but even if her child was the son of a devil, her religion prevented her from doing so. Thus, she left the convent and pathetically died on the streets.”

“You’ve only heard rumors, yet I can’t believe how arrogantly you can speak of my mother,” Lucas spat. He felt sick to his stomach; it felt like the life of his kind mother was being defiled.

He knew he was walking into his enemy’s trap, but he couldn’t stop his hands from trembling with the rage bubbling up in him. Lucas looked up at the painting again. From within the frame, an innocent young lady in a neat dress smiled back at him. Years later, she would turn thin and frail, suffering from an ailment until her final moments.

Was she better off never meeting his father? Could she have lived her life happily had Lucas never been born?

No. His mother had given him life, and that was all the answers that he needed.

"If only you weren't born, Lucas Stock," Marquess Diascia hissed, his footsteps approaching the baron. He grabbed Lucas's hair once more, forcing him to face up. The marquess's face was twisted with contempt and disdain as though he was about to spit on him at any moment. Only harsh criticism left the marquess's lips. "That wretched yellow hair and your disgusting eyes colored like the sunset… Your frame is much larger, unlike the rest of our family. There's no doubt that you possess the blood of a horrible man who defiled your mother and led her to ruin."

The pure loathing and abhorrence the marquess held for Lucas Stock was crystal clear. He spat, his face contorted like he was about to snap at any moment.

"There's no use denying it," Marquess Diascia continued. "As proof, your revolting father never returned, did he? He abandoned you and your mother. That's his answer. Surely, you understand that your life will bring misfortune to many more."

The man with canary-yellow hair, reflected in the marquess's eyes, was silently receiving the rage thrown against him. Lucas had lost his cool for a split moment before, but gradually regained his composure. *Why does this man seem to detest me to such an absurd degree? Is it simply because I sullied the noble blood of the Traditional Twelve? Or is it because a former commoner with the blood of a disgusting foreigner is causing his beliefs and political position to collapse? Screw that. You're just acting for your own sake.*

This marquess was simply cursing the way of life of his aunt, who fled their suffocating family. He one-sidedly claimed her happiness as misfortune, insulted her child, and accepted the half-disgraced house she'd cast aside. He was only acting with himself in mind.

Lucas took a deep breath. He wasn't about to be swayed by the petty words of this small man. He had seen his mother's diary and the words she'd jotted down. He trusted the love he'd been showered with and the path he'd paved until now. *Above all, even if everything I believed in is a lie, I've got Iris by my side.*

He felt the air shift for a split second. A familiar scent reached his nose, but as he glanced around the room, no one else seemed to notice. Was it because they were enveloped in the scent of cologne and tobacco? Or was Lucas's nose more sensitive than the rest?

"What's wrong?" the marquess sneered.

He mistook Lucas's curious eyes darting around the room for fear. The baron could only try to gauge his situation and buy some time; he acted hurt by the words hurled at him.

"What are you planning on doing with me?" Lucas asked glumly. "If you find my foreign blood to be unpleasant, surely you're against welcoming me into the family, even if we're biologically related?"

"Ah, your unlucky hair color, the hue of a canary sent to the mines to perish, can be dyed," the marquess replied. "Worst case, we can just shave all your hair off. Your eyes can be masked behind spectacles. You simply need to quietly enter the Bearbrooks Trading Company and live your life in the shade. If you remain silent and obedient, I reckon I could even have a seat within the first prince's faction prepared for you."

Lucas was disappointed by those words. *How arrogant. Just how powerful does he think he is? He's totally misunderstanding his position.* The railroad was built under the order of the third prince's faction. The first prince and his allies were being cornered even further; the marquess knew of his disadvantageous position. Hence, he was trying to welcome Lucas into his family. How could he still act so high and mighty?

Lucas's instincts, which had dulled since he'd gotten rich, started to awaken once more. He saw smoke waft from the corner of the ceiling and descend upon the room; he instinctively gauged his surroundings. There was one thing he was desperate to protect.

"Marquess Diascia," Lucas mustered in a teary voice, his pathetic tone matching his expression of despair. "Could I make one last request? At the very least, I'd like to take a good look at my mother's face. My memory of her is fuzzy, and I don't have a single picture of her."

"Very well," the marquess obliged.

He was delighted to see Lucas so distraught. He motioned with his chin toward the servants, signaling them to back away. A gun still pressed upon Lucas, he approached the painting, noticing the slight breeze from the ceiling. He took off his jacket and placed it over his smiling mother's painting, covering her up. The marquess raised a bemused eyebrow.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

A hole suddenly smashed through a corner of the ceiling, and white smoke burst into the room, filling the entire space. The teary voice of a young lady echoed throughout the area.

"Lord Lucas! Please cover your face!"

They're here! Lucas immediately covered his face as he grabbed a nearby candlestand and threw it against a window. The glass shattered as the white smoke enveloped Marquess Diascia and his servants. In a flash, they were crying with agony while a rope ladder was tossed down from the hole in the ceiling. Lucas rushed up and spotted Iris, outstretching her hand, her face covered with a mask. He grabbed her hand and climbed up.

"Lucas, are you all right?" Iris asked.

"Yep. The scent gave it away, so I was bracing myself," Lucas said.

After tightly embracing his wife for a few moments, a mask was placed over the baron's head.

"Take that! And that!" Kiki's teary voice reverberated throughout the area. "How dare you do something so awful to Lord Lucas! I'll never forgive you guys!"

A mask covering her face, the maid took out a few spheres from underneath her skirt and hurled them at the room below.

"Kiki!" Cano's muffled voice echoed. "You're throwing way too many! Calm down!" He turned to his master. "Sir Leik has created an escape route for us. Let's go!"

With Cano leading the way, the four fled through the ceiling. Outside, the garden and trees were ablaze, the flames eager to burn the manor down. That made it easy for the four to escape while preventing anyone from giving chase.

"Leik's really something," Lucas whistled.

Carrying his wife, who had been stumbling, he ran through the garden. A carriage pulled up in front of them. Leik winked, dressed like a coachman.

“I tamed these horses,” the butler said.

“You’re amazing,” Lucas muttered.

“Not a moment to lose! Let’s go!”

The four climbed into the carriage. Leik spurred the horses on and the vehicle rushed ahead. Marquess Diascia’s manor was slowly growing smaller and smaller.

“I’ve been living as Lucas Stock with these eyes and hair,” the baron murmured as he gazed at the manor. “Like hell I’m throwing it all away.”

In a flash, the rowdy ordeal was far away. Once they had gone a good distance, everyone removed their masks. The nighttime breeze felt nice against their sweaty skin. As the moonlight gently illuminated the hills, the fact that everyone had survived finally started to sink in. Lucas was still in a daze as Iris, who sat beside him, gently dabbed his cheek with a handkerchief.

“You’re bleeding,” she said.

“Hmm? Yeah, but the wound’s not deep,” Lucas replied. “How about you? You okay?”

Iris was in tatters. The hems of her dress were torn, but even so, she smiled brightly. “My heart’s still pounding,” she confessed. “I’ve never experienced anything like this before.”

“You’re a strong woman,” Lucas replied.

As he petted her head, he noticed Kiki was fast asleep from exhaustion. Beside her sat Cano, his eyes closed and quiet. Lucas had given Kiki a few tear gas balls before they entered the manor, telling her to use them when needed. She must’ve been crying because she accidentally got some in her eyes.

“You did well, Iris,” Lucas murmured.

“Lucas…” she replied.

“Why don’t you sleep for a little while?”

“All right.”

He hugged his wife’s shoulders and drew her closer, stroking her back. Her excited heartbeat started to calm down. When Iris had fallen asleep, Cano gazed at his master with his piercing gold eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Lucas whispered.

“Are you sure about this?” Cano inquired. “This was your chance to join your mother’s household.”

“Do you think that I’d like that?”

Cano was silent. He likely knew the answer.

“Thanks for protecting Iris,” Lucas added with a grin. “Things went far better than I’d anticipated.”

“Not quite…” Cano muttered. “She got hurt.”

“But you can learn for next time, can’t you? The fact that we can think about a ‘next time’ proves that you protected her safely. You should at least obediently accept the compliment tonight.”

Cano said not a word, but his expression implied that he had something to say.

“I trust relationships that I’ve built more than blood ties,” Lucas said. “I believe that I can trust you.”

“Thank you,” the young boy said. He gazed at the outside scenery pensively.

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AFTER we made our hectic escape, the carriage clattered on while I slept. It stopped at a nearby village that had a convent. Leik had already made preparations for us there, and once we arrived, Kiki and I were guided inside to have our wounds tended while we took a bath. Though men weren’t allowed inside, they were permitted to rest in the church. We’d be safe for the night.

We didn’t sustain any major injuries. Kiki had accidentally rubbed her eyes after touching the tear gas, but her tears had already subsided, and I only had a few minor scratches on my hand and legs. Once we entered the simple guest room, Kiki started to help me change. After we were in our nighttime clothes, she helped me undo my hair.

“Are you all right, Lady Iris?” Kiki asked.

“I’m just fine,” I replied. I stood up, a stole around my shoulders.

“Where are you off to?”

“I’d like to bring a blanket for Lucas.”

“Then I shall go with you.”

“I’m fine. I can go alone. I’ll be relying on you tomorrow, too, so I’d like you to rest well.”

I took a blanket from one of the beds and slowly walked down the corridor through the back gate of the convent. When I entered

the church, I spotted Lucas on a chair, looking up at a goddess statue. I quietly approached him, and he turned around and squinted at me.

“You’re still awake,” I remarked.

He looked tired. Lucas always put on a strong front in front of others, but very rarely, he’d gaze into the distance, looking a touch forlorn. He usually had that look in the evening after a busy day or the morning after spending the entire night outside for work while waiting for his cup of coffee.

Admittedly, I liked that expression. It felt like he was being vulnerable, only with me. I unfolded the blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders. I sat beside him and snuggled up close so we could share the blanket as I gently rested my head on his shoulder. As I felt his warmth, an inexplicable sense of peace overcame me. Lucas wrapped his arm around my shoulders and drew me close to his chest, allowing me to feel his warmth even more. Happiness filled my heart.

“I was just thinking I wanted to see you,” Lucas murmured. “I was calling out your name in my head.”

His voice and his heartbeat filled my ears.

“Then perhaps I heard your call,” I said.

“Perhaps so,” Lucas said. As his chest vibrated, I could tell that he was chuckling. “You sure you don’t want to head back?”

“I’d like to be by your side.”

“This chair’s hard.”

“I want to be with you, Lucas.”

“All right.”

We indulged in the other’s warmth for a while before he took my hands and fiddled with my fingertips. He was checking for any wounds.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I brought you along and even got you hurt.”

“I decided to tag along, knowing full well about the potential dangers,” I replied. “I would’ve been angry if you refused to take me.”

“Why?”

“We promised, didn’t we? I would go with you on your journey to track down any traces of your mother.” I gripped his hand to tell

him that he didn't need to worry about my injuries. "I'm your wife, you know. You mustn't keep spoiling me."

"I know. I'm not rebuffing your resolve or anything." He drew my head close and planted a kiss on my bangs. He sighed deeply as though to confirm that I was still by his side. "I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"Um… Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you a bit down? About stuff aside from my injuries."

"I can't hide anything from you, huh?" As he hugged me, he slowly started to tell me what Marquess Diascia had declared to him. "In short, he basically said that my existence caused my mother to become unhappy," Lucas said.

The marquess had practically shown contempt for Lucas's birth and his mother's life. As my husband told me the facts, rage welled up within me.

"You're angry, aren't you?" Lucas asked.

"But of course," I replied. "How could I forgive anyone for insulting you and your mother?"

Lucas gave a wry smile. "Even if I trust your words and my mother's diary, when he's so straight with me… It kinda hurts."

"Lucas…"

"My mother left her household because she couldn't see eye to eye with the others. Even if she returned to her old life, I doubt there was a place for her. But when I see that painting, it reminds me of her affluent childhood, and I can't help but think a little. Was it really for the best? Did that young lady, innocently smiling in that painting, need to pass away in tatters and poverty?"

I gazed at the ground, thinking back to the day I visited that convent and his mother's grave. It was a well-maintained and quiet place. I thought about the journal where she jotted down her thoughts and the memories of Lucas's childhood that he told me about.

"I know it's not my place to speak so casually of your mother, but there's one thing that I'm rather certain of, Lucas," I said, grasping my husband's hand. "Your mother was happy. Why not trust the words that she'd written herself? She mentioned her happiness. No matter what anyone says, only *you* can prove that she had been happy."

As I gripped his large hand, I gazed at my husband, who had more life experience than me. This was the man who spared me, and as he sat there vulnerably like a lost child, I thought about my role. He had entrusted me to support him above anyone else.

“When you feel anxious, please feel free to rely on me at any time,” I added. “I will tell you that I love you, and I’m happy as many times as it takes.”

“Iris…”

“Your mother didn’t hesitate to name you after your father, a name that means ‘light.’ You were the one who lit up her world until her final moments. Don’t fret. No matter how anxious you become, I shall be by your side.”

Lucas looked up and gazed into my eyes before he quietly pressed his lips against mine. I said not a word and allowed him to do as he pleased. Regaining his fiery attitude, he smiled.

“Iris, you’ve been overly polite with me again,” Lucas smiled.

“I’m doing it on purpose,” I replied sheepishly, fighting against the embarrassment. “You promised to kiss me if I remained polite, didn’t you?”

He tightened his embrace and kissed me once more. It was different from the previous one, filled with more passion than ever before.

“Iris,” Lucas said with a sigh.

He was so close as he stared into my eyes, the pale moonlight trickling through the glittering stained glass behind him. He looked frighteningly serious as he stroked my cheek and ran his fingers through my hair. As my hair dropped onto my shoulders, I felt the stole fall behind my back. I shivered from the cold as Lucas stroked my back.

“Iris…” he murmured.

“Yes?”

“Don’t go back tonight.”

He didn’t wait for an answer as he filled my vision. I closed my eyes, hoping to feel his warmth more intimately.





MORNING arrived. Iris had spent the entire night in Lucas's arms.

"It's morning…" she said.

"It is indeed," Lucas replied.

Silence settled in between the married couple.

"Er, I'm sorry," Lucas apologized. "For a lot of things."

"Um, I'm the one…who came here, so…"

Under the morning rays, Iris gazed at the floor awkwardly. She drew the stole around her, as if to hide her unkempt hair. As a way to apologize, Lucas brushed her dark hair with his fingers until Kiki arrived.

"Your bed was empty this morning, so I was shocked!" Kiki cried. "Huh? Did you spend the entire night on that bench?!"

"I-I suppose so…" Iris nodded awkwardly.

"Wasn't it uncomfortable? Do you ache anywhere?!" Kiki hastily approached Iris.

"I-I'm fine. I-I should get ready…"

"Right. Can you stand?" she asked.

"I can."

Iris staggered to her feet and covered her face as she left. Lucas didn't know if he should stop her and quietly watched her leave, but Kiki was visibly worried.

"Oh no! Lady Iris, you're acting so feebly!" she cried. "Should we call Leik?"

"I-I'm fine. I really am," Iris replied.

Lucas felt like he should say something and called out to the slender back wrapped in a stole. "Er, Iris," he said. "Uh, want me to escort you back?"

Iris gave an exaggerated jolt and shook her head. She couldn't face her husband. "I-I'm all right," she said. "I should go."

"O-Okay…"

Iris staggered out of the church.

"Well, I'm sure Kiki can take care of her…" Lucas muttered.

After he saw her off, he stepped outside and gazed up at the morning sky, hoping to switch gears. The sky was clear, and there wasn't a cloud in sight. It was so calm that he couldn't believe the

debacle from the night prior. In a corner of the church, before the morning service, Lucas took some time to exchange information with Leik and Cano.

“I got rid of the carriage so that it looks like we fled elsewhere,” Leik reported.

“What’s Marquess Diascia doing?” Lucas asked.

The butler shook his head. “He probably doesn’t want a scandal about hurting a man from the third prince’s faction. I’m sure he’ll be quiet for a while.”

“I guessed as much.” After a nod, Lucas turned to Cano. “Is it true that Marquess Diascia has fallen on hard times?”

“Indeed,” Cano replied. “I also checked the people who attended the marquess’s dinner party. The rumors are true. The people gathered there aren’t seen favorably, even within the first prince’s faction. I believe the marquess wanted to sell you to the powerful Bearbrooks Trading Company in hopes of gaining prestige. But the company also has the right to select their son-in-law.”

“Cano, heed your words,” Leik scolded. “You’re speaking as though our lord is stigmatized property.”

“I mean, he is, isn’t he?”

“And that’s what makes him charming.”

“Whoa…”

“In any case, Cano, you properly filed a report, didn’t you?”

The young boy looked on excitedly as he puffed out his chest proudly. “That I did, of course! I recorded it all, so no need to worry about that! I know exactly what room we were attacked in and how we were attacked. I haven’t left out a single detail!”

“I’m proud of you.”

“But of course! It’s my job! So I didn’t get much sleep…”

“Reliable, aren’t you?” Lucas chimed in.

“Yup!” Then, Cano noticed the change in the air as his eyes wandered. His panic was unsuitable for a spy, and Leik smiled so brightly that it was almost creepy. Cano stammered, “U-Um…”

“You filed a report, didn’t you?” Leik asked.

Cano turned paler by the second.

“Where to?” Leik inquired.

“Er…” Cano’s eyes darted between Leik and Lucas as cold sweat ran down his face. “I knew it. You guys noticed.”

“Of course.”

“You’re an agent of the third prince, aren’t you?” Lucas added.

As Leik and Lucas nodded, only Cano had gone white as a sheet.

“Wait, so you both knew about me and still chose to keep me?” the boy asked.

Lucas nodded.

“You’re kidding…” Cano muttered with a shiver. “Th-Then why’d you entrust someone as shady as me with the madam?”

“Because I trust you,” Lucas replied simply. “You’re not going to allow Iris to be harmed, are you?”

Cano was at a loss for words at his master’s firm declaration.

“Your job is to protect me,” Lucas continued. “But you won’t let Iris get hurt. You’ve known her for a while now, haven’t you?”

Cano’s eyes transformed into the icy gaze of a dog. “How much about me do you know?”

“When you saw the list of guests for the wedding, you didn’t mention a word about the lack of Iris’s relatives being invited. You’re not one to hold back, and surely you would’ve noticed how unusual that was. And yet, you didn’t question Iris, who couldn’t invite anyone to her own wedding. In other words, you’ve known about her circumstances for a while.”

Cano was silent as Lucas went on, “You should’ve questioned House Karelia so that I wouldn’t be suspicious of you. But you didn’t. You were worried that you’d ruin Iris’s special day. Which means that you, at the very least, care about her. That’s when I realized your past.”

The boy maintained his silence for a few moments more before he gave a resigned sigh. He pushed his hair up, his gaze nothing short of intimidating.

“Good grief,” he sighed. “I feel like a fool for acting innocent this whole time. If you noticed how oddly I was acting, I wish you’d pointed it out sooner.” The hunting dog added, “I’ve known the lady for a good while now. When she was still in House Karelia, I’d spied on her, so I’m quite aware of Iris *Karelia* when she was within the Traditional Twelve.”

He shook his head and started to share his thoughts. “I’m just a dog. No matter how much she suffered, I couldn’t lend a helping hand. I’ve always had my regrets about that.”

Leik crossed his arms at his subordinate's confession, his gaze cold. "Why didn't you divulge the truth to my lord during your interview?"

"If I told you that I knew the madam, you would've offed me, wouldn't you, my lord?"

"There's a chance I wouldn't have let you into the manor," Lucas admitted.

"I, of course, know the kind of person you are, my lord. I know things that even the madam likely doesn't. I also know that you plan on killing me soon. But even so..." Cano kneeled in front of Lucas and put his hands on the ground, offering a deep bow. "I beg of you. I promise to protect the madam at all costs. Please let me go."

Lucas sighed. "Listen."

"Yes?"

"I never said that I'll kill you."

"Huh?" Cano looked up, his eyes damp.

"In order for you to continue protecting Iris, I need you to continue as you were, as an agent. It's your job to sell me to the third prince. Use your eloquence and convey to him that we're still useful pawns in his game. That's your job. Is that clear?"

"Are you sure?" The young hunting dog's voice trembled.

"Well, I don't know when the third prince's interest in me will wane. I need to be seen as a vital pawn, one he can't cut off whether he likes me or not. Do you understand?"

"You mean you can't be in bed with him much longer."

"You could not have summarized that any worse, but I can't refute it. Yeah, that's the idea."

After being accepted by his new master, Cano's expression changed instantly. "I'll continue to be in your care, my lord! Sir Leik!"

"Quite the flatterer, huh?" Lucas muttered. He exchanged a strained smile with Leik. "And," he added, "don't tell Iris you know about her past."

"Huh?" Cano tilted his head to one side quizzically. "And why not?"

"He's jealous, quite plainly," Leik chimed in. "If you become overly friendly with her, our lord would be most displeased."

“Ah, I see,” the boy replied. “But don’t worry. She’s more like an older sister whom I admire. Of course, if you ask if I’ve *never* viewed her as a person of the opposite sex, well…”

“Leik, prepare a fishing boat,” Lucas ordered.

“Please! I beg of you to let me work here!” Cano cried.

“Argh! I’m saying that I trust you, so don’t betray that, all right? Let go of my legs, you idiot!”

Cano was crawling on the ground and groveling for forgiveness. Lucas shook the boy off and crossed his legs once more.

“You showed me your loyalty to Iris,” he said. “I’ll trust you for now. The rest you’ll have to build with how you act.”

“Yes, my lord!” Cano nodded with a smile.

After they finished making some final adjustments, Lucas stood up.

“I leave guarding Iris to you guys,” he said.

“Where are you off to, my lord?” Leik inquired.

“I’ll go scout the village. This’ll probably be the last time I’ll ever be here, so I’d like to do this alone.”

He turned his back to his servants and pushed open the thick wooden door of the church to head outside. The sun’s rays beat down on Lucas, and the skies were clear. The cool breeze felt nice. The green ears of wheat fluttered as far as the eye could see, and the thick aroma of dirt and grass, unique to farm villages, hit his nose. It was a scent that he wasn’t used to.

With his canary-yellow hair and dirty clothes, no one would recognize that he was a nouveau riche. Lucas decided not to wear a hat, exposing his unique blond hair to the world as he sullied his leather shoes with the dirt underneath his feet. He walked to the village at the foot of the hill, below the convent.

Villagers were already bustling around, busy with their work. Lucas spotted the backs of some people taking care of the crops while children ran around to help the adults. Women were busy fetching water. Because everyone fulfilled their respective roles, a village could function. Lucas was raised near the coal mines and later lived in a port city. He wasn’t too familiar with farming villages and gazed at it with great interest. Naturally, to prevent the spread of any bad rumors about the convent, he greeted people kindly and didn’t forget to engage in a conversation or two.

“You’re an outsider, aren’t you, lad?” a man tending to the water wheel called.

“I’m a peddler. My carriage broke down, so I’m here to waste some time. I’ll be headed for the port by noon, so I decided to get some exercise in before then,” Lucas replied with a smile, ensuring he looked friendly. “The land here looks fertile, but it seems like you’re having trouble repairing that water wheel.”

“Bah, taxes are too high. All our young folk have left to earn money in the city.”

“Hey, I’ve got some time to kill. Why don’t I lend you a hand?”

“You?”

Lucas chuckled. “I used to work as a servant of a nobleman. Work like this is my forte.”

And so, Lucas made his rounds around the village. After a while, his servants, who had finished helping Iris, approached him.

“Whatever are you doing, my lord?” Leik asked wearily.

“I was never allowed to do work like this in Solalitika,” Lucas replied. “If I don’t move around every now and then, my mind will start to grow dull, too.”

“Take a look, Cano,” Leik whispered to his subordinate. “My lord might even be a more skilled servant than you.”

“It *does* seem like he can make do even if he loses his wealth,” Cano replied wearily. He placed a hand over his cheek. “But we’re more in the cute department. In other words, our room for growth is infinite.”

“*We*? Don’t put me in the same boat as you. I’m not just cute. I’m cute *and* reliable, everyone’s favorite Leik.”

“What are you guys babbling about?” Lucas mumbled with exasperation to his two servants.

Off in the distance, a lady dazzled under the sun. Iris was under a sun umbrella held by Kiki. Enveloped in a white dress, Iris looked like the personification of light.

“You’ve been working hard,” the baroness said with a smile. She stretched out her hand and wiped the sweat off her husband’s cheek. “Why don’t we take a break, Lucas?”

“You walked all the way here?” the baron asked. “It must’ve been hard on your body.”

“Not at all.”

He took the umbrella and held it over her as the two walked along the creek that watered the wheat fields. There wasn't a cloud in sight, the blue skies shining down on them. Lucas matched Iris's stride as he indulged in this bit of happiness while she expertly walked along the dirt path.

"Lucas," Iris said, breaking the silence. "You came here to check if anyone knew about your parents, correct?"

Lucas stopped in place as he thought about the village. "Yep. I heard my mother met my father when she was off doing her charity work. I'd thought that maybe there were some stories about her."

Needless to say, he didn't expect much. This village was a good distance away from the port. They were unlikely to have any information. But somewhere in his heart, Lucas had hoped that someone had heard something about his mother through the grapevine.

"Lucas, why don't we come back here again one day?" Iris asked.

"That's probably difficult," Lucas countered. "I don't think we can ever set foot within Marquess Diascia's marches again."

For whatever reason, Iris giggled as she put a hand over her mouth. "That's not like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." Iris's dark eyes looked up at Lucas as she mischievously tilted her head to one side. "The usual you would've come up with a plan that allowed you to freely enter Marquess Diascia's land as you please. You've got the railroad and the port, and House Diascia is on the brink of ruin. You have plenty of openings to take advantage of, I'd imagine."

"You're bold."

"Oh, not as much as you, dear husband. Who is it that barged into enemy territory?"

"Haha, I can't refute that."

Lucas's mind grew sharper again as he clapped his hands, filthy with mud from fixing the water wheel. After he got all the dried mud off, his heart felt lighter.

"Speaking of, Iris," Lucas started.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Are you still going to be formal with me?"

Iris smiled, her expression brighter than the sun. “I’m doing it on purpose.”

The couple continued to trek through the village until Leik called for them with the carriage. The peaceful village was comforting, and their hearts were soothed by the place as though time had stood still.

When they boarded the carriage, Lucas decided to consult his wife.

“Iris,” he said. “I think I’d like to go to Lapisasther.”

Iris widened her dark eyes.

His destination was the Lapisasther Kingdom.

Lucas had finally made his resolve to visit that nation.

Chapter 4

IT'D been a month since the debacle at House Diascia. The fuss hadn't been discussed by the newspapers, nobles, or merchants. Indeed, it hadn't made a single ripple within society, and outwardly, our visit had ended smoothly.

One afternoon, Lucas invited me to the reading room, a space prepared for me beside his office. He had used the room to take breaks at work, and when I didn't have anything in particular to do, I spent my days reading books or writing letters there.

When I set foot inside the room, Lucas wasn't there. The gentle sunshine filtered in through the windows, keeping my toes warm. From the bay window, one could get a splendid view of the fabulous garden, and there was a table and a set of seats for four to enjoy the indirect light. A floral rug was in front of the bookshelves. Lucas was still a budding businessman, and we ensured that regal furniture was placed within the manor to add to his dignity. However, once we were officially married, we gradually created a few spaces that looked lovely and relaxing in our residence.

Once Lucas finished his work, he entered the room.

"We cleared up the incident with House Diascia, so I wanted to share it with you," he said as soon as he entered. He grabbed a deck of cards decorated with foil from the table and started to build a house of cards. He wasn't using glue today. "I gathered proof that I, a pawn of the third prince, and you, a descendant of the famed House Karelia, were attacked," he explained. "I made sure to keep the first prince's faction in check."

"Does my family name still come in handy?" I asked.

"Of course. The first prince's faction isn't keen on touching you, a woman who still carries the blood of the Traditional Twelve. In any case, we should be safe for now."

"I'm glad to hear that. But things shall get busy."

There was a knock on the door, and Cano entered the room with a box in his hands. "My lord, I've brought the shoes."

He appeared without a sound, living up to his former status as a dog.

“Can you show them to Iris?” Lucas ordered.

Cano removed the contents of the box and quietly placed them on a tray. He went on one knee in front of me and showed me the item. The unique shape drew me in as I leaned forward eagerly.

“Oh my,” I gasped. “Are these shoes without a heel?”

They were smooth and thin, like layered handkerchiefs.

“I’ll help you wear them,” Lucas said.

“Oh?” I asked.

“Come on.”

He gave me a squinty-eyed smile as he knelt before me and slid the shoes gently onto my feet. During times like these, he was always serious and gentle. I couldn’t help but hold my breath, enchanted by him. When he gazed at my feet with the shoes on, he looked more than satisfied.

“A perfect fit,” he said.

Cano averted his gaze and mumbled awkwardly, “Stop flirting in front of me.”

“The fact that you averted your gaze from her legs is laudable.”

The shoes were soft and comfortable, like the type I wore during dance lessons.

“We referenced ballet shoes,” Cano explained after he saw that I was wearing them. “They’re for daily wear. They’re made of soft leather and can be safely stored away as well. You can even have your servants carry these around while you’re out and about.”

As I walked around in them, it felt like I was walking around in socks. The leather was soft to the touch. I could also move around nimbly should the need arrive.

“How wonderful,” I said. “They’re round and cute. They’re easier to run around in, too. It’s difficult enough to move around in dresses; these shoes will be a huge help during any distressing situations.”

Lucas studied me closely. “But because of the lack of heels, the hems of skirts would need to be adjusted for daily wear for

nobles. These might be better for working women or students since their skirts are already much shorter to begin with."

"Then what about the nuns?" I suggested. "They're working hard within the convents every day, and I'm sure they'd appreciate shoes that are easier to move around in."

"Good point. Maybe I should make the shoes a touch thicker, and I think they'd be happy if I donated these as an act of charity. I think I can also receive candid feedback on how the shoes feel."

I could see his new prospect glimmering in his eyes, and I couldn't hide my elation. I wanted to help him somehow.

"I can contact a few interested ladies I know from the salon," I offered. "Their opinions will be invaluable if we wish to market to the nobility as well."

"Huh. Madam, you really do look a lot livelier when you're with my lord," Cano said as he listened to our conversation.

"My, do you think so?"

"I do. You used to—"

Lucas cleared his throat loudly, interrupting the boy. My husband glared at Cano. "Come on, write this stuff down, Cano. You have to sell my relationship with my wife to him."

Cano paled before his face became a shade of red. "L-Lady Iris, did you also know of my secret?!"

I nodded awkwardly. "Well, yes… You were sent by…the third prince, no?"

He turned redder still, looking visibly embarrassed. I pitied him, but I thought he was absolutely adorable. Perhaps sensing my thoughts, Cano sheepishly cleared his throat.

"I-In any case, it's my job to protect you, madam," he said. "Should anything happen, I shall be sure to provide my assistance."

"I understand. Thank you," I replied with a nod.

Was I imagining things? Ever since that night at House Diascia's manor, Cano's attitude had shifted. It looked like he was freed from his chains, in a way; he must've had some sort of change of heart.

A hand touched my chin and gently pulled my face in a different direction. Lucas's frowning face was so close to me that I jolted in shock.

“Stop gazing at him for so long, Iris,” he pouted. “I’ll get jealous.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I replied. “He’s just so cute. He reminds me of a squirrel.”

“A squirrel?!” Cano cried, his voice rising an octave.

Lucas and I giggled.

Our days went by peacefully, filled with joy. We were preparing to leave for our trip abroad. The day we’d set off for Lapisasther had finally been decided. Our journey would be good for business and socializing, but most of all, we’d have a chance to find traces of Lucas’s father.

My husband’s face was filled with determination as he tirelessly prepared for the trip.



ANOTHER month later, we were aboard a lavish ship deck, gazing at the red and gold sea reflecting the dazzling sunset. Lucas and I were walking along the promenade on the ship’s deck. I peered up at my husband, who was escorting me.

“It reminds me of your eyes,” I murmured.

“The sunset and the sun both seem to remind you of me,” Lucas mused. “You must be quite busy always thinking of me.”

“I just trace everything back to you.” I smiled, and Lucas petted my head with a look of satisfaction.

We boarded the *Counoir*—a different ship from the one we used to visit House Diascia—not normally seen on the docks of Solalitika’s port. It was a large vessel that transported people instead of merchandise. The ship’s mast fluttered elegantly in the ocean breeze, and people were walking along the deck, dressed in glimmering clothes. Everyone looked so relaxed. Since this year, the ship had been making regular voyages from the main port within our nation to Lapisasther. Many new aristocrats and young nobles were curious and eager to enjoy this new ocean route, leading to its popularity.

“My lord, madam,” Leik said as he approached us. “We’ve finished unpacking your belongings in your rooms. You can relax

at any time.” Leik then filled us in on the schedule until the dinner party.

Lucas turned to me. “Let’s go check out our room,” he said. “We should rest until dinner.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

We entered the ship, and Leik guided us to our room. As we walked down the corridor, I was a touch confused; this floor was too lavish for a new aristocrat. The suite prepared for us was one of the best within the vessel.

“Oh my,” I gasped.

I stood in place, unable to set foot inside the extravagant room. Lucas had already stepped inside when he turned back toward me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Um, isn’t this suite normally reserved for royals and high-ranked nobles?” I asked.

“You’re amazing. You can even tell room ranks at a glance.” Lucas continued casually, “My origins may leave much to be desired, but I’m a friend of the third prince, and my wife is the last scion of House Karelia. Those factors allowed me to get my hands on this room.”

He grinned, happy to see my look of surprise, and strolled into the room. This VIP suite was split into several rooms, and a luxurious carpet lined the halls connecting them. The decorative windows were fitted with beautiful stained glass. Had it not been for the gentle rocking, I would’ve forgotten we were on a ship.

“I feel like I’ve been invited into a castle,” I murmured.

The view outside made it clear that we were still on board a vessel. After Leik left us, Lucas brushed his hand against one of the pillars.

“The owner of this vessel is a regular client of mine, and he usually buys marble from me,” he explained. “Our company took care of the majority of the furniture in this suite.”

“Ah, no wonder,” I replied. “Some of the items here look to be of your taste.”

“I’ve been allowed to board this ship since it was completed, but I’ve never gone to Lapisasther before. Iris, could you come here?”

He motioned to me with his hand, and I entered one of the inner rooms. I just noticed it was the bedroom when Lucas pulled me in for a tight embrace. I couldn't hide my shock as I was caught off guard.

"Um, Lucas?" I murmured.

"We've got some time until dinner. Let's relax for a bit," Lucas whispered into my ear, his warm breath tickling me.

I hastily put my hands on his chest. "P-Please wait…"

"Hmm?"

"Cano isn't here…is he?"

Lucas chuckled at my worried tone. "I'm not showing you to anybody. In exchange for keeping quiet about his work, I told him to stay away when we're shooing people out."

"So, no one's here, then?"

"Nope. I wanted to be alone with you. You can rest easy and act cute as much as you like."

I saw myself reflected in his amber eyes, the same color I saw when I was out on the ship's deck. His gaze was filled with expectation, and as I imagined what his desires were, I could hardly look him in the eye.

"Cute? How can I do that?" I asked. I averted my gaze shyly, but the warm arms around me and his tantalizing whispers wouldn't let me go.

"Want me to teach you?" Lucas murmured.

"If it's not too embarrassing," I replied.

"You drive a hard bargain."

"Do I?"

"We've still got time until dinner. And…"

"And?"

"You're still taking a polite tone with me."

He lifted my chin and sealed my lips, preventing me from making any further excuses.

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AFTER climbing the massive staircase that led to the hall, I could hear the lovely symphony played by the orchestra as the ship's crew welcomed all the guests with a warm smile. A lavish dance

party was being hosted here. A beautiful chandelier hung from the ceiling and glimmered like a jewel as it illuminated its surroundings. Mirrors around the room reflected these lights, accentuating the gorgeous atmosphere. As light flooded into my vision, I let a gasp escape from my lips.

Such a grand party was rare even within the royal capital. In fact, if we were going by recent trends, this ship's party was ahead of the capital by leaps and bounds. The owner of the vessel soon spotted us and came over to give a word of greeting. He exchanged a friendly word with Lucas and gave me a gentlemanly bow.

"It has been a while, madam," he said. "You looked beautiful in your wedding dress, but I must say that you look just as lovely tonight. You're twinkling like the North Star on this ship."

"My, thank you," I replied.

"Lucas and I have been old acquaintances through our work. I respect you for training a ruffian nouveau riche like him into a gentleman, Baroness Stock."

The owner's name was Viscount Martinez. He hailed from a noble family but left his home to start a merchant ship company. He used his connections with relatives in the navy to rapidly grow his business.

"Who're you calling a ruffian?" Lucas grunted.

The viscount grinned and raised an eyebrow. "I know of your days during the construction of the gulf. You really clashed against those opposing you, didn't you? You only seem meeker and tidier now because you've got more ladies working at your company."

"You idiot. If you're gonna keep dredging up the past, I'm heading back."

As Lucas's true nature started to show from being goaded by Viscount Martinez, I couldn't help but giggle.

"What?" Lucas asked with narrowed eyes as he gazed down at me.

"I'm sorry," I giggled. "I've been seeing you act more like a nobleman these days, so when I see you act more natural, it's refreshing. Or perhaps I should say nostalgic."

His rough words only made him more adorable in my eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he mumbled.

The viscount laughed jovially. “Hahaha! It’s clear she loves you! I’m glad to see it.”

Lucas shrugged. “You seem to be doing well yourself. I thought you were building a flashy ship, but looks like you’ve got quite a few guests, huh?”

“The furniture I got from your company has been receiving compliments. You’re getting orders from the guests now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but your ship’s too lavish, and you require a lot of custom furniture, so I’m running short on suppliers.”

“Sounds like a cry of joy to me.”

I enjoyed listening to their conversation. Seeing Lucas speak with another person in his industry revealed a new side of him. People gathered, forming an arc around the two men. Men and women of all ages surrounded them, dressed in the same glimmering attire as Lucas and Viscount Martinez. They were brimming with energy.

This party differed quite a bit from the other social occasions I partook in recently, and I couldn’t hide my excitement. Once the energetic music stopped, the people scattered, eager to dance. Lucas took my hand.

“Shall we dance, Iris?” he asked.

“Let’s,” I replied.

He guided me to the dance floor and started to dance in harmony with the slow music. The awkward steps that he’d fumbled through before were a thing of the past. He guided me well, like a man who was born a noble familiar with these societal occasions. I was secretly delighted, not only with his growth but, as his “etiquette book,” I was proud of myself as well.

“Hey, Iris,” Lucas whispered as we held each other close and twirled. “When we’re dancing like this, it’s hard to forget what we did earlier, don’t you think?”

“Earlier?” I asked.

“Did you forget?”

He drew me closer still, his whispers tickling my ear. Before I could process what he’d said, my face grew red, and in my panic, I almost tripped over my feet. Lucas stifled a chuckle as he supported me.

“Goodness,” I sighed. I tried to glare into his amber eyes, but my legs felt like jelly when he was so close to me. In a pathetic attempt to make another excuse, I eked out, “People will think we look odd if you act like this in public.”

“No, they won’t,” Lucas replied. “It’s normal for a couple to be close to each other when they’re dancing, isn’t it, Miss Etiquette Coach?”

“But…”

“And we’re a newly wedded couple. I’m sure we’re allowed a little lenience.” Lucas smiled, and I could only give an awkward smile back.

“Goodness gracious,” I said.

He chuckled. Illuminated by the chandeliers, his canary-yellow hair glimmered brightly and fluttered with every twirl. The gentle rhythm of our dance, coupled with the serene rocking of the ship, made me feel like I was floating. Happiness filled my heart, and the night felt like a lovely, lovely dream.

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EVERY day and night, a splendid gathering was hosted within the ship. It was as though an endless banquet continued during our journey.

Lucas had attracted the eyes of many, for he was a nouveau riche favored by the third prince. Gazes of envy, anticipation, jealousy, and interest were cast upon him. He acted befitting for this attention, splendidly shifting his demeanor and mannerisms for every person he met. He ensured Cano acted as a spy and had him remember every face. I noticed the pair of them discreetly discussing matters now and then.

Once we left the lounge, I addressed my husband.

“Lucas,” I began.

“Yeah?”

“You’ve again made me realize how skillful you are at socializing.”

Those were my honest thoughts after spending time with him at banquets over the past few days. Lucas had absorbed everything I’d taught him about etiquette, and he could blend in

with the rest of the aristocracy quite well. His canary-yellow hair that shone brilliantly under the lights symbolized his pride, and when he acted meek, he dazzled even brighter still.

"It feels good to be praised by a daughter of House Karelia," Lucas replied. He gave me a squinty-eyed smile, a kind expression he never showed to others. Another man approached us as we were chatting. "Baron Robertson," Lucas said.

We stopped our conversation and turned to the man. We'd exchanged a few words with him earlier. Baron Robertson handled ceramics and manufactured them overseas to sell within our nation. He was the president of his own trading company in a maritime city of a foreign nation. He was the same age as Lucas and was one of the younger men aboard this vessel. He must've had good reason to break off from the crowd to approach my husband.

"You're quite the popular man," Baron Robertson said. "You've become more confident now that you've gotten a splendid wife."

"Thanks," Lucas replied. "You're not doing too bad yourself."

Baron Robertson gazed at the coastline in the distance and lowered his voice. "I've brought some news that may come as good or bad for you, Lord Stock."

"And what would that be?"

"Lapisasther Kingdom will once again raise their brokerage fees."

"What?"

"Because merchants have started to frequent their nation. Sure, they're getting money, but the sudden influx of foreigners has caused a spike in crime rates. I hear they might raise customs and the transient occupancy tax soon, too."

A flash of realization hit Lucas, and he smiled. "I see now..."

Baron Robertson winked and smiled. "Yep. I believe that you can conduct yourself quite well."

"Thank you. I won't forget this kindness."

Baron Robertson smiled and turned to me. "Apologies, my dear lady. I didn't mean to interrupt your intimate time with your husband. I hope you can continue to pick up where you left off now."

"Thank you," I replied. "I wish you a lovely night yourself."

After watching him leave, Lucas turned to me. “Iris, do you understand what he’s implying?”

“This is simply a guess as a layman, but he’s implying that he’s passed along useful information. If you’re able to win over the royal family with it, he’s asking for you to accommodate him in the future. That’s what I’ve gleaned.”

“You’re just way too smart,” Lucas replied in amazement.

I hastily waved off the compliment. “I’d received a few hints. If memory serves, Baron Robertson manufactures ceramics overseas and imports them into our nation. In recent years, delicate and thin porcelain has been selling well amongst women as they use it for tea parties. But if one would want a pipeline with the Orient, it’s imperative to have ties to Lapisasther, which is nestled right between our nations. And if he came to you with that information… Plus, you handle much of his items as well.”

“You’ve got an impressive memory. I’d like you to handle one of my companies one day.” He drew my head close and stroked my hair as he continued, “Ever since I set foot on this ship, everyone’s been trying to win my favor. Because I look like I hail from Lapisasther, they all believe I can blend into that kingdom without any issues.”

“Lucas…”

“Only you and the people who serve me know the real reason I’ve boarded this ship. Only you guys are privy to my thoughts.”

I sensed a hint of vulnerability in his voice and nestled closer to him in an attempt to quell his fears. He started to speak quietly, the mask of an energetic, nouveau riche baron quietly slipping off.

“I’ve ridden on many ships until now. I’ve bluffed my way through some, made bold claims on others, and even made large gambles. But never have I been on a ride that made me this uneasy,” he said softly. His large hands enveloped mine like he was clinging to me desperately. It pained my chest terribly to see him suffer so. “I can only be there for about two weeks. No matter what reality I’m faced with, or if I can’t even track my father down, if I’m with you, Iris, I can endure it all.”

“You’ll be okay,” I assured him. “This is your first step, after all.”

In his arms, I looked up at my beloved. His fingers gently brushed against my neck, and he leaned forward, locking lips with

mine. I felt someone watching us, but I entrusted my body to my husband and coiled my arms around his back.

Finally, we'd made it to Lapisasther.



BEYOND the glimmering blue sea, a hazy set of blue islands slowly emerged. The ship docked at a port within a cove, and we disembarked. White-walled houses lined the rocky cliffs, and the people working at the port all had the same canary-yellow hair as Lucas. Their skin was suntanned, and their eyes were a brilliant shade of amber.

After we set foot on land, Lucas froze for a while. The scenery shocked me, but I had no idea how my husband saw this place.

Our servants were loading the carriage with our belongings. I only called out to my husband once they were all done.

"Lucas," I said softly.

He gasped and shrugged. "I didn't think that this scenery actually existed."

I heard a fuss in the distance. It sounded like someone was chased, then pushed down. Leik swiftly moved to protect us, but I noticed it was Cano who had shoved someone to the ground.

"Cano, what's going on?" Lucas asked as he approached the boy.

"Nothing much, really," Cano replied. "Just a baggage thief."

"You mustn't stand around so carelessly, Cano," Leik chimed in frostily. "You let a child get the better of you? How pathetic."

"S-Sir Leik! I'm terribly sorry!" Cano cried, turning pale.

Indeed, a boy around ten was on the ground. His clothes were dirty, his limbs were slender and frail, and he had the same yellow hair as Lucas. For a moment, I thought I'd laid my eyes upon a younger version of my husband.

Lucas crouched in front of the child. "Hey, kid. If you're honest, I'll let you go. Just tell me who ordered you."

The child turned pale and averted his gaze in shock as he stammered, "N-No one ordered me to…"

"Sorry, but I don't believe you. A lot of wealthy people were stepping off this ship. I can't see why you'd aim for us. It's unusual

for you to go after us when a lot of flashier people are around."

Lucas glanced at Leik and Cano, who replied with peace signs.

"B-Because..." the child started with a pout. "Because a good person said that you're an evil merchant."

"An evil merchant, huh?" Lucas replied. "And who is this 'good person' who told you so?"

"I'm not telling an evil person like you! Everyone knows your ploy! You dyed your hair to look like a Lapisasther native and spread bad rumors about us in Eizeria!"

"Hmm, I see..." Lucas grinned and showed the boy his hair. "Take a look. Even my roots are of the same color. I was born with this hair, unfortunately for you."

"Impossible! No one from Eizeria can have this color!"

"But I'm proving you wrong, aren't I? Besides, simply dyeing my hair won't get me this hue. Any adult can tell that at a glance."

The boy gingerly stared at Lucas's hair. "I can't believe it..."

"You should. I'm indeed from Eizeria, but my dad's from here."

Despite irrefutable proof pressed against him, the boy couldn't quell his suspicions.

"My lord should just show him the hair growing from other parts of his body," Cano whispered.

"Shhh!" Leik scolded. "My lord might not have hair growing anywhere else!"

"I heard that, you two," Lucas said loudly. "There are a *lot* of anchors in this port. I can easily tie you to something and sink you to the bottom of the ocean."

"But Super Bear told me..." the boy said anxiously.

"Super Bear? Who's that?"

"A guy who dresses up like a bear and visits our village every now and then. He brings snacks from Eizeria and teaches us all sorts of things."

"Interesting..."

Lucas's gaze turned sharp as he processed this new information. He then took out a few business cards from his chest pocket and handed them to the child, ensuring that the boy would keep a tight grip on them.

"Wh-What are these?" the boy asked.

"Hand it over to Super Bear and any other adults. I'm pretty sure you won't get in trouble even if you failed your theft attempt,"

Lucas replied.

“Really?”

“Yep. And if you still get beat, come to me. I’ll speak to them in your stead.”

Lucas patted the boy’s head and had Cano rush back to the ship to buy him some bread.

“Here, eat this and head back,” Lucas said, handing the boy the bread.

My husband continued to watch the boy until he disappeared from view.

“You’re so kind,” I said.

“Not really,” Lucas replied. “There are a lot of poor villages near the port, and I think they’ll be useful in the future. I’m just having them owe me one. And if the Bearbrooks Trading Company is already trying to mingle with them, I should appease them before things get troublesome.”

His logic was sound, but I couldn’t help but point out one thing. “Then why did you give him some bread?”

“If he carries around money, it’ll quickly get stolen by an adult. But he can prevent bread from being stolen by simply eating it. All he needs to do is to bring back proof that he bumped into me, and he should be able to avoid punishment from the adults and the Bearbrooks Trading Company.”

I didn’t find it odd that Bearbrooks was brought up. They were in the first prince’s faction, and it was only natural for them to try to obstruct Lucas’s path.

“I see now,” I muttered.

“Looks like business is slow for Bearbrooks if they’ve got the time to throw cheap shots and get in my way,” Lucas said. He grinned and patted my shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“Right.”

With a sunny disposition, we headed for the carriage.

“Ah, you must be Baron Stock…” the coachman we hired said as he looked at my husband in surprise. He gave an innocent smile. “Oh my… I’ve heard rumors, but you really do seem to originate from our kingdom. As a fellow Lapisasthan, I’m quite pleased.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Lucas replied with a fake smile. He boarded the carriage and added humorously, “They see me as an

outsider one moment, then treat me as a fellow citizen the next. It's so funny."

"It's no laughing matter," I replied.

"It's all right. I think it's funny enough."

The rest of our trip was quiet as Lucas solemnly stared out the carriage window with great interest. He was soaking in the scenery, but it also looked like he was searching for his father.



AFTER resting for an entire day, we attended a party hosted by the king of Lapisasther.

"Truth be told, we had a present for the king in one of the packages the child tried to steal yesterday," Cano divulged as he busily made preparations.

"Oh dear. That must've been quite troublesome then," I replied.

"Indeed. But I managed to protect your belongings, so surely that's worthy of some praise."

"Madam, please don't forget. If the thief hadn't been able to target our belongings in the first place, this would've *never* happened," Leik reminded as he passed by.

"Ugh, you're so strict, sir..." Cano sobbed feebly as he followed Leik and left.

"Lady Iris, your dress is ready," Kiki called.

"Thank you," I replied.

I stood up to get dressed. Lucas selected a dress for me with an indigo hue that looked as though the curtain of night descended upon my clothes. It was simple in design and took advantage of the excellent fabric quality. Some beads and silver embroidery were scattered across the dress like twinkling stars that shimmered with every step I took. The translucent lace gloves and the powder sprinkled on my skin looked beautiful.

When I gazed at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but feel happy. It was a big step forward for me—I could only dress in lavish clothes unpretentiously since I met Lucas. Even when I felt a touch sheepish, when I thought that I had to wear these clothes to

promote a new trend for my husband, I naturally stood tall with a smile.

"You done?" Lucas asked, approaching me.

I looked up at him, dressed in a suit that matched my dark dress. "Lucas, are you wearing different colors again?"

"I'm surprised you noticed. My hair won't stand out here, so I decided to go for a different color this time." He happily winked at me.



THE royal palace dazzled a brilliant white under the night sky. A gorgeous banquet was underway, welcoming the guests who arrived via the ship. When I stepped off the carriage, the lovely sounds of the ocean reached my ears. The illuminated port allowed the waves to shine, making it seem like a sea of stars rippled before me.

The royal family of this kingdom was friendly and had even extended a letter of invitation to Lucas, a former commoner. We were grateful to have the opportunity to attend this occasion. We headed over to greet the elderly king and queen; they welcomed us warmly like old friends.

"Baron Stock, I've been looking forward to meeting you," His Majesty said. "I was quite lonely, for you wouldn't visit us sooner."

"I apologize for the long wait," Lucas replied.

My husband bowed respectfully and took the white package that Leik had held out. Lucas offered it to the king—the gift almost stolen by that boy when we first arrived at Lapisasther.

"It's a protection stone made of calcite," Lucas said. "I hope this can commemorate my meeting with Your Majesties."

"Hmm… How very unusual this is," His Majesty replied.

Wrapped in fine silk, the calcite emitted a faint glow and looked like an orange, unpolished rock at a glance. It was paired with a piece of fine lapis lazuli in the shape of a star in accordance with the legend of how Lapisasther got its name.

"The lapis lazuli represents the islands of our kingdom, and this calcite…" His Majesty murmured. "Baron Lucas Stock, I'm surprised by your vast knowledge despite your youth. Indeed,

calcite is treasured as a stone for navigation. The orange variety is especially rare and unheard of in this kingdom, so I'm ecstatic to receive this."

Lucas placed a hand over his chest and bowed. "I learned this fact from a poem my mother taught me about my father's birthplace in a land far away. Unfortunately, I've never met him."

His Majesty nodded. "So I've heard. You're looking for your father, aren't you?"

"I am, sire."

"Lapisasther is less than a third of the size of Eizeria. We're a small island nation, and what's more, our population is also far less than a third of Eizeria. We don't have many immigrants either, so it shan't be too difficult to find your relatives here. I shall dispatch a few messengers tomorrow."

"You're far too kind. You have my utmost gratitude, Your Majesty." Lucas bowed again.

"And you must be the lady from House Karelia of Eizeria," Her Majesty said, turning to me. Her elderly eyes of pale amber studied me as she smiled. "Karelia is highly esteemed within Eizeria. Surely, you would've received some backlash from marrying a husband with foreign blood in his veins?"

I internally smiled at the word "backlash." I'd received nothing but since I was an etiquette book purchased by a scary, nouveau riche baron.

I shook my head. "I've received many blessings from those around me, and I'm quite happily married, I assure you."

A smile naturally formed on my lips, and that was more than enough to convey my happiness. The two royals turned to each other and smiled from the bottom of their hearts.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. Her Majesty recited an old Lapisasther verse as she gazed at me. "The truth is at the end of the voyage. For adventurers who fight against the raging sea and head for land, the glimmer of the North Star shall guide the way. You're a wife who brings good fortune with that mole by your eye. I hope you can be a compass to your husband, who lives in Eizeria, far from Lapisasther."

After a peaceful conversation, we parted ways with the king and queen to greet others. We stepped away from the lively grand

hall of the royal palace and headed to a quiet corner with a sofa facing the terrace.

“That went well, Iris,” Lucas said.

“I was nervous, but I’m glad it went smoothly,” I replied. “By the way, orange calcite is excavated in the same spot as the Marmaria stone slabs, which kicked off your success, isn’t it?”

“Yep. The people there treat it as debris, but here in Lapisasther, it’s a priceless gemstone. Did you know? Polished calcite can be a natural compass.”

I gazed at his face, which was turned away from me as he talked. Perhaps Lucas had initially tried to get his hands on calcite, a prized stone of Lapisasther, his father’s hometown. He just happened to stumble upon Marmaria stone slabs, but that wasn’t his primary goal. I felt like my theory wasn’t far from the truth.

“You’ve always been searching for your father,” I said.

“Well, yeah,” Lucas replied, a hint of loneliness in his voice. He stood up, shaking himself free of melancholic thoughts. “The night’s still young. I need you to accompany and socialize with me a bit more, Iris.”

We returned to the grand hall and joined the dancing. An equal number of Eizerian nobles and Lapisasthan nobles mingled and enjoyed themselves. I could tell that the Lapisasthans were proud of their canary-yellow hair that glimmered under the lights. I quietly looked up at Lucas beside me. His hair usually made him stand out, but here, he blended in naturally.

“Iris?” Lucas asked, gazing at me. He noticed that I was a beat behind on the dance routine.

“Nothing,” I replied with a smile. I tried my best to forget the emotion I’d just felt for a split moment.

Once the song was over, Lapisasthans came up to Lucas in droves. Like the royals, the nobles of this nation were familiar with the language of Eizeria.

“Welcome to Lapiasther,” one said.

“I’ve been wanting to meet you,” another added.

They were all dying to exchange words with my husband. It seemed rumors of a noble in Eizeria with Lapisasthan blood had made its rounds within this kingdom. I also assumed that he looked rather handsome even by this nation’s standards—many

ladies were eyeing him with interest. Shocked by this sudden shift in scenery, I was filled with an inexplicable sense of loneliness.

Once freed from the crowd, Lucas relaxed and smiled gently at me. “You okay, Iris?” he asked. I felt like his amber eyes could see right through me and averted my gaze.

“I’m fine,” I replied.

“Was it boring?”

“Nothing of the sort.” I didn’t want to worry him and decided to be honest. “I suddenly became rather embarrassed of myself. You stood out in Eizeria, and your appearance was special. I felt like I could monopolize you there and be the only one by your side. I was proud of that. But here, you blend in with your surroundings well, and I just feel…”

“Huh…” Lucas said, listening with great interest. He gazed at me with amusement.

Confused, I tilted my head to one side. “Um… Have I said something odd?”

Lucas grinned happily. “It’s just that you can get jealous too, huh?”

“What?” My cheeks grew hot. “Th-That wasn’t my intention…”

“The past you would’ve said something unromantic, like, ‘I’m sure there’s another lady who suits you better than me.’ I see, I see. So, you’re finally jealous of me, are you?”

“That’s not true, I…”

“*I’m* happy to hear it, you know.”

He brushed a stray strand of hair away from my face, the back of his fingers tickling my cheek.

“Please don’t tease me,” I said.

“I’m not. I think it’s cute,” he said.

He kissed the mole by my eye and smiled. “I can only blend in because of my appearance. But rest assured, I’m a man who hails from the same nation as you, and I’m *your* husband.”

“Lucas…”

“What’s more, did you know I’m related to a noble in the faction of the prestigious first prince?”

“There you go again…” I giggled, and Lucas flashed a satisfied grin. I was relieved by his words; he was able to joke about his origins instead of desperately hiding them. That was a happy sign of growth.

“You two look like the perfect couple. Care to quench your thirst?” a servant called out to us.

Curious about the awkward intonation of the Eizerian language, I looked up and saw Cano.

“Good evening, madam. You look lovely tonight as well,” he said. He was wearing a canary-yellow wig and glasses to hide his golden gaze.

Lucas took a glass and asked, “Do you know the faces and names of each guest?”

“Most certainly,” Cano said. He winked and pointed to his eye. “I’ve also memorized most of their conversations, especially when I can see their lips.”

“That’s amazing,” I said.

“See? He’s useful, isn’t he?” Lucas said.

I nodded in agreement. Cano’s gold eyes wouldn’t stand out too much among the Lapisasthans’ amber gazes. Combined with the wig, he could blend in quite well with the citizens here.

Cano proudly smiled. “I’m not good with rough affairs like Sir Leik. But I can still cross-dress to a certain degree if needed. Madam, if you ever need to sneak out and evade my lord’s notice, please be sure to call for me.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “But I don’t think I’ll keep secrets from Lucas. Rest assured.”

“You two are so passionate. Now, then, I shall be scouting around as a Lapisasthan. Even if you see me on the streets, please don’t call out to me.”

I watched his receding back as he disappeared into the crowd.

“He does his work well,” Lucas said. “You don’t have to worry about him. As a skilled agent, he should know well what would happen if he betrayed me here. In fact, I gave him the perfect circumstances that allow him to eavesdrop on our conversations boldly without the third prince suspecting anything.” He patted my shoulder to quell my fears. “The third prince wants to put a collar on me; I want information, connections, and a useful subordinate, and Cano wants a convenient position. It’s a win for all of us.”

“I see…” I said.

Amid the cheery music and the jovial conversations, I could tell the banquet was becoming even rowdier. I could hear a waltz

in the background, mingling with the sound of the waves. The nighttime breeze that blew through the terrace had the scent of the ocean that differed from Solalitika's.

"Shall we dance again, Iris?" Lucas suggested.

"Let's," I agreed.

We again intertwined our hands and headed for the grand hall illuminated by stunning chandeliers. All the while, Cano was working hard to gather information. I couldn't see Leik anywhere. I guessed he left this place to his subordinate to work behind the scenes. When the music started, Lucas gave a happy smile.

"I don't know this song," he said.

"Me neither," I replied.

"There's stuff even you don't know, huh?"

"Not to worry. We're in a foreign nation, so I'm sure we can make do."

We got into position and locked hands. We danced the rest of the night away. I believed that everything would go smoothly tomorrow, too.

However, the following day, an unexpected incident occurred.

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THE next morning, as the gentle morning rays shone upon us, we headed for a public office with the messenger from the royal castle in tow. We needed to officially file a request to take a glance at the list of citizens within the nation.

However, on our way there, shocking news awaited us. Our carriage had just rolled out of the hotel lot when a man rushed to our side, out of breath. Lucas had the coachman stop, and I noticed that the man who approached us was Jim, an employee of the Stock Trading Company. Sweat clung to his outfit, and his face had gone as white as a sheet.

"Mr. Stock! It's an emergency!" Jim gasped between huffs. "Just this morning, our client suddenly…"

"Stopped trading with us?" Lucas asked calmly.

He stepped out of the carriage and tried to pry further details from Jim. The employee wiped his sweat with a heavy expression.

“I was chased away at the entrance,” Jim explained. “I managed to get some info from an apologetic staff member and was told that the Bearbrooks Trading Company pressured them to do so.”

“They’re continuing their harassment from yesterday,” Lucas said, pursing his lips.

“It’s not just yesterday. They’ve done quite a bit to harass you, so this is to be expected,” Leik said, popping out from his seat beside the coachman.

Despite an adorable tuft of dandelion decorating the butler’s hair, he looked quite serious. I stepped out of the carriage as well, assuming this discussion would take a while. Kiki quickly held a parasol over my head.

“What shall we do?” Jim asked Lucas. “We *need* this import route, or else we won’t be able to import our silk thread! Miss Coldola will be disappointed in me!”

“Ah, right,” Leik mused. “The manager of that factory was Coldola. And if memory serves, you were interested in her…”

“Aghhh! She’s gonna say that I’m unreliable again!”

“Isn’t that a splendid reward?”

“I’m not like you! We have different tastes!”

Leik’s teasing took the tension out of the air, but this was still a precarious situation.

Lucas rubbed his chin and looked at the ground while his employees bickered. “I can probably smooth things out, but we’re short on time…” he mumbled.

“Lucas.” I stepped forward. “I shall search for your father. Why don’t you prioritize taking care of the Bearbrooks Trading Company?”

My husband fell silent as he pondered my words. After a beat, he finally nodded. He turned to his butler. “Leik, protect Iris for me.”

“Woof,” Leik replied with a nod.

“But who will guard you?” I inquired worriedly.

“Don’t worry, I can take care of myself. It’s dangerous to have Cano with you in this situation, but I know Leik will protect you at all costs.”

Leik barked happily, perhaps elated to hear his master’s rare words of praise. Lucas patted my head.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be all right,” Lucas reassured me. “And if worse comes to worst, I’ve got you.”

“Me?” I asked.

“As a former Karelia, I’m sure you can negotiate with not only those related to my company but even the king and the other Eizerian nobles, can’t you?”

“Lucas…”

He trusted me so much; he believed I could support him and lend my aid no matter what.

“I understand,” I said. “I pray that it won’t come to that. Don’t you worry about me. Give your all to take care of Bearbrooks.”

“I’m counting on you, darling,” Lucas said with a wink and a grin.

He proceeded to give out orders to Jim and Leik. Finally, he stroked my cheek and tilted his head to one side ever so slightly.

“Won’t you kiss me like last time?” he whispered.

I froze. It was embarrassing to do so in front of everyone, but when he acted so endearing, I couldn’t deny his request.

“Excuse me,” I said, standing as tall as I could to give him a light peck.

Lucas smiled happily at me. “I feel like I can buy an island now. Thanks.”

He waved goodbye and gallantly strode away with Jim in tow. Cano covered his mouth and turned to me with an explicable expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“When he shows off like that, I just…” Cano mumbled before he trailed off. “No, it’s nothing. Please excuse me.”

He hastily chased after his master without once turning back. I watched them all fade into the distance as I stood beside the carriage.

“I pray you all come back safely,” I said.

Upon saying my prayer, I switched gears and stood tall as I turned to Leik and Kiki.

“Now then,” I said. “Let’s continue searching for Lucas’s father, shall we?”

“Indeed,” Leik said.

“Let’s do our best, Lady Iris!” Kiki exclaimed.

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EXPOSED to the dazzling sunlight of Lapisasther, I followed the royal messenger to the public office. The building was quaint, painted white with a cute triangular domed roof. It reminded me of a small church. When I stepped inside, a man in his fifties dressed in a long, white coat—an employee of this office—greeted us.

"Welcome, and thank you for coming all this way," he said. "My name is Jake, and I shall be helping you today."

After we said our greeting, he guided us deeper inside.

"I've already heard what you need," Jake said. "I've gathered records that would match the generation of Baron Stock's father, and we've already parsed through the papers. We're currently doing one final check in this room to ensure we haven't missed a thing."

I peeked into the room from the corridor and saw several employees rifling through the records, carefully checking each and every name.

"Thank you," I said with a deep bow. I glanced at Kiki to give her my signal. "Jake, may we borrow the kitchen? We've brought some light snacks for everyone to enjoy."

"Are you sure? Thank you very much."

He smiled and Kiki smiled back. My maid bowed and headed for the kitchen.

"Right this way, please, madam," Jake said.

He led me and Leik to one of the drawing rooms. Any information that the employees had found was laid out on the wooden table. I took one of the documents bound by string. There was a page of Lucases.

"In our kingdom, a citizen must file for a birth certificate within a month of their birth," Jake explained. "Only then is a citizen's record newly created, listing the birthdate, parents, birth location, and sex of the baby. Our duty is to add to these records when the child grows up to become a legal adult, marries someone, or changes professions."

"These papers summarize a person's entire life..." I murmured.

“It’s a practice that was born out of our religion. We may be a public office, but we used to be a church. Our uniforms sort of give off that feel, don’t they?” He outstretched his arms, showing off his long garb.

“You’re right. They look quite comfortable and fitting for Lapisasther. You look splendid.”

Jake smiled before he continued, “Foreign nations don’t view us very kindly, so we’ve tried our best to hide our religion, but technically, we’re registered as clergymen. We’re a small island nation, so it’s quite difficult for us to maneuver our way politically.”

He gave a strained smile, but it was clear that Lapisasther had their fair share of troubles. It was then that I realized why His Majesty had personally filed a request with this office to help Lucas find his father. Lucas had the blood of a Lapisasthan and an Eizerian in his veins, and supporting him would imply friendly relations with Eizeria in the future. No doubt, the Lapisasthan royal family was aware that the third prince heavily favored Lucas.

“Pardon me,” Jake said, steering the conversation back on track. “Let’s discuss Baron Stock’s father.”

We sat around the table as he laid out the information he’d gathered.

“Lucas’s father must be one of these men,” I said.

We’d narrowed down our search with the following criteria: a man, alive or dead, who went by Lucas with an unknown last name and birthplace, a bit older than Lucas’s mother, and is or was a sailor.

“While we don’t boast a high population, it’s difficult to narrow it down to one person. However…” Jake said as he gestured to the names with tags next to them, “Fortunately, for lack of a better word, there was a period when our nation forbade fishing in foreign waters. My guess is that the baron’s father departed to sea before this ban, and if we were to calculate the mother’s age, there are only about ten Lucases that fit the bill. Of course, if we’re completely wrong about the age, I can’t say this presumption is completely accurate.”

I scanned the records and asked, “Do people in this kingdom not have last names?”

“Precisely. Unlike Eizeria, where even commoners are required to have a family name, only the royal family has a last

name here. When necessary, we may use the name of our birth village and our father's name or profession instead. For example, my name is Jake Merla Shane. It means 'son of a priest in Merla Village.'"

"I see…" I muttered pensively.

"No wonder my lord's mother's journal didn't have a last name," Leik said beside me. "There was no need for the man to use a last name to differentiate him from other Lucases in Eizeria."

Kiki, who had been preparing tea for us in the corner of the room, brought a tray of herbal tea for us as she looked on inquisitively.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Um," Kiki said. "What about the last name 'Stock?'" She was referring to my husband's last name.

I shook my head. "The last name, 'Stock,' was created by his mother as a cover when she entered the convent. It won't be a clue for our search."

"Ah, I see."

Leik added, "When nobles of high rank can't use their real names, they can provide a hefty donation to the church to create a fake one. A fake name will usually be one that no one uses, but my lord *has* been using it as his official name. I believe the name 'Stock' comes from a flower."

"Then it's such a cute family name!" Kiki said. Thanks to her question, the tension in the room eased.

"Now then, we should check each and every person," I said.

Jake and Leik nodded. Energized by Kiki's smile and her herbal tea, we silently flipped through every page of the records, hoping to find a clue. The dust that filled the room danced in the air, glittering under the sunlight that trickled inside. The sounds of us flipping through the pages and the occasional sigh were deafening.

"What do you think, madam?" Jake said, breaking the quiet air. "Is this information simply not enough to go off of?"

"Well, there *is* one thing that bothers me," I confessed. "I read through the other Lucases aside from the candidates you gave me, just in case." I'd perused the list of candidates and the other men's records that had been picked out. "Around the time of that fishing ban, did something happen? It seems like many people of

a certain age group died rather young. I feel as though there was a spike in premature deaths during that time."

The moment the query left my lips, Jake frowned. I had apparently touched upon a sore spot.

"Well…" he started.

"Something happened with Eizeria, correct?" I asked.

I'd taken a shot in the dark, but his gaze was informative—I had hit the nail on the head.

With a look of resignation, Jake faced the table. "A certain incident occurred after the Battle of Lionel. We were still on unstable footing."

"Incident? And what would that be?" I inquired.

"It may be rather cruel to tell a lady of Eizeria. Would you still like to hear about it?" He was gentle, but his gaze was testing my resolve. I nodded.

"I am the wife of Lucas Stock, a man who has the blood of Lapisasther coursing through his veins," I said firmly. "For my husband's sake, I mustn't turn away from the truth."

Jake sighed deeply, pressed his fingers against his eyes, and slowly stood up. "Why don't we take a short walk?" he suggested. "It'll be a great change of pace. I'm sure the opportunity to speak with an Eizerian like you is a fate guided by the hands of God."

I stood up and looked at Leik and Kiki, silently requesting for them to follow me. My two servants solemnly nodded back.

We left the drawing room and headed deeper into the structure; we were guided toward a square corridor surrounding the courtyard. The glass windows, etched with gentle waves, let us view the vibrant courtyard greenery, emitting a serene atmosphere. I felt like I was stepping into a tranquil temple.

No other employees were in sight. I noticed that paintings were drawn on the corridor walls, depicting Lapisasther's thorny history and how the nation was founded. Jake walked slowly in front of us.

"Since we're not here to discuss history, I shall spare you from that story," he said. "Over there is an illustration of the Battle of Lionel, around forty years ago."

A massive naval ship of the Eizerian armada clashed with another foreign vessel. Lapisasther had been caught in the middle of this war and was at the mercy of the opposing nations. The

painting portrayed the tumultuous sea and the wretched state of Lapisasther, destroyed by the fighting nations. We passed by the painting and saw another one portraying the calm sea.

“After the war, Lapisasther became a buffer between the larger opposing nations, allowing us to maintain our independence,” Jake explained. “But the sea hadn’t stabilized, and times weren’t as peaceful as they are now. A decade after the war, while the ocean was still in the midst of its stormy period, an Eizerian noble had cast suspicion against Lapisasther.”

“Suspicion?” I asked.

“Our sailors were suspected of piracy and harming the Eizerian cities on the coast.” He turned to face me, his gloomy gaze causing me to shudder.

“Please continue.”

He quietly nodded. “Back then, Lapisasther wasn’t as skilled at relay trades as we are now. We were practically forced to be self-sufficient and were so poor that our only way of attaining foreign currency was through fishing. The Battle of Lionel still remained fresh in the minds of the people, and as the Eizerian noble cast doubt on us, our kingdom had no choice but to become subservient.”

He gazed at the painting. Despite it being an illustration of the serene sea, many names were meaningfully written down in thin letters on one side.

“Though they had no proof, many of our sailors were executed,” Jake said. “Those who managed to evade the death sentence were imprisoned for life. To this day, we cannot publicly claim that these were false charges, and so we can only quietly etch the names of the lives lost into paintings. This incident forced us to ban fishing in foreign waters.”

“I…had no idea,” I murmured.

“We then switched gears to relay trading and built our wealth.”

I was at a loss for words. Despite this atrocious past, they still accepted people from Eizeria in hopes of developing their island. Faced with the cruel truth, I could only gaze at the names etched into the painting.

Jake shook his head and kindly smiled at me. “I apologize. To answer your question about the records, I had no choice but to

speak of our past. I understand that story is far too cruel for an Eizerian lady to bear."

"No," I replied. "Thank you for telling me. As I said earlier, my husband is half Lapisasthan. It's something that must be known. I appreciate you telling me without hiding the truth."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Jake looked visibly relieved by my response.

As an Eizerian, if I were to exhibit malaise, I knew it'd become an international issue. In fact, I was afraid that that would lead to their execution. I was certain that Jake was well aware I originated from a family with a deep history within Eizeria.

In the past, an Eizerian noble had accused Lapisasther of its misdeeds, leading to many wrongful deaths. Telling me the truth today must've taken an immense amount of courage. I once again looked up at the painting, depicting the brave Lapisasthan sailors, the name of the incident, and the names of those who had fallen victim.

"Ah..." I gasped, remembering a horrifying tidbit that caused me to shudder.

Lucas's father was a sailor. And the time of his disappearance matched the year of the incident. In order to maintain relations with Eizeria, the incident had been swept under the rug. Even if I used legal methods to investigate further, I doubted I'd find anyone related to this debacle.

"Now that you've told me such an important story, will you please grant me another request?" I asked. "Please show me records of a Lucas who was dragged into this atrocious ordeal."

Jake nodded without a word—his expression said it all. He and His Majesty, who had personally provided us with assistance, must've known who Lucas's father was even before we requested this investigation. And they were testing me, carefully trying to gauge if I was an Eizerian worthy of trust, worthy of the truth.

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MEANWHILE, Lucas was at the counter of a bar in a corner of the white-walled city erected on the cliffs. It gave him a splendid view of the cove. The afternoon sunshine beat down upon the window

of the building in front, and the reflected light illuminated his surroundings beautifully.

He was having a pint with a trader of Lapisasther, who had just declared he'd no longer do business with Lucas. The trader was smiling and slapping Lucas's back, his face red from the alcohol.

"Listen, I'm really glad you came here, buddy," the trader said. His short, canary-yellow hair, tanned face, and amber eyes greatly resembled Lucas. Perhaps the only striking difference was his plump stomach that tested the tensile strength of his shirt. No doubt his clothes were on the verge of popping. "Ha ha ha! I'm sure my abrupt decision troubled you!"

"It sure did," Lucas replied. "I'm glad you understand now, though."

Cano was stunned, unable to hide his surprise, as he stood beside Lucas and watched the trader chug down more liquor. "I didn't know what you were up to, but I didn't expect you to start drinking with him."

"Men of the sea can resolve almost all issues with drinking and gambling," Lucas replied simply.

"Hey, you! Butler-in-training over there!" the trader called. "Why not have a drink with us, sonny?"

"I-I'm still in the middle of work!"

"Ha ha ha!"

Lucas poured more beer into the trader's mug, and the trader happily put his lips on the chilled stein to chug down the liquor. He gazed at Lucas pensively.

"You *really* look like you originate from here," the trader said. "I'm honestly a little surprised."

"Well, my father's from here," Lucas confessed. "Partly why I'm here is to find traces of my father."

"Yeah? I really hope you can find your dad."

Cano muttered under his breath, "I didn't think simply drinking and laughing while talking would make one reverse their decision to quit doing business with us."

Lucas visited each and every firm to personally speak with the person in charge in hopes of having them reconsider their decision to cut Lucas's company off. This trader was the last person on the list.

The merchants of Lapisasther detested Eizerian nobles. However, the former couldn't cut off the latter as the profits the island kingdom raked in were astronomical. And so, the Lapisasthans had begrudgingly continued business with Eizeria. However, when faced with the choice of siding with an Eizerian merchant favored by its nobles and demanding the Lapisasthans to stop doing business with others, or a young merchant with Lapisasthan blood who was being harassed by Eizerian nobles, many would naturally side with the latter. Who could blame the Lapisasthan merchants for thinking so? Furthermore, the company president had personally visited each client to drink and converse in hopes of continuing their relationship. Indeed, many viewed this earnest and honest president rather favorably.

After all was said and done, merchants required a network and needed to be likable people. They may chase after profits without regard for anything else, but they generally tend to favor those close to them and exercise nepotism as they see fit. Lucas was valuable in that sense, for he could sneak his way into being "one of us," a fellow Lapisasthan. In any case, Lucas was used to negotiating under harsh circumstances.

The trader had a foam mustache from the beer as he shrugged wearily. "To tell you the truth, I also thought suddenly cutting all ties with you was a bit unreasonable. But I can't outwardly clash against them, y'know? I only reluctantly followed their orders."

"Did people from the Bearbrooks Trading Company order you around?" Lucas asked.

"Yep. We're all scared, man. It's easy to get thrown into the slammer by fighting Eizerian nobles."

"Because you're a Lapisasthan."

"Mhm. So, if you're willing to protect us on that end, I don't mind keeping our relationship. We *do* want to continue trading with you."

"I'm happy to hear that." Lucas gave a friendly smile. "I don't want you to get the short end of the stick. I'll make sure the Eizerian nobles can't lay a finger on you. We can do that, right, Cano?"

The butler-in-training stammered in shock. "O-Of course! Yes!"

“Bwa ha ha!” the trader laughed boisterously. “I’m grateful to hear it!”

Cano was an agent dispatched by the third prince. The hunting dog could accurately relay all the information he received from Lapisasther to His Highness. And so, Lucas continued to cram Cano’s head with information regarding the third prince’s faction uncovered in Lapisasther. Even the Bearbrooks Trading Company of the first prince’s faction wouldn’t expect its harassment of Lucas to be relayed so quickly to the third prince.

Their meeting came to an end, and the two men walked back from the bar to the trader’s company. The ocean breeze felt nice, and the two drunk men sobered as they walked. Both the trader and Lucas walked steadily as they descended a steep staircase to discuss business matters seriously.

“They’re both so good at holding their liquor that I don’t get it…” Cano muttered under his breath.

“Things were rough way back when,” the trader said, the sea breeze brushing against his cheek. “We used to handle marine products, but when fishing was banned, it all went up in smoke. The guys working in the warehouse in the back all used to be fishermen. Most of them almost got executed or imprisoned, so I can’t have them work out front. I wouldn’t want Eizeria to go after them.”

“And what about you? Are you safe sheltering all these people?” Lucas asked.

The corners of the trader’s lips curled up. “His Majesty has given his tacit approval. In truth, we must be subservient toward them.”

“Must’ve been tough for you. Thanks to your efforts, I can do business with you, so I hope I can somehow help you get rewarded for your struggles.”

“Heh. Don’t sound too laudable.”

As they engaged in small talk, they headed for the warehouse by the port. Lucas wanted to check on the silk threads he’d been importing through Lapisasther. The brick building had its usual scent of dust combined with the musky sweat of the workers who were toiling away. When Lucas and the trader walked inside, many employees loudly greeted the two men, their voices reverberating throughout the structure.

“These threads are from the Orient, but there was a bit of a fuss as they made their way here,” the trader said. “We don’t have enough indigo thread, but in exchange, we’ve got a few test products.”

“Test products? Have you seen them yourself?” Lucas inquired.

“Well…”

The two continued to converse as Lucas scanned for his items among the stacked wooden boxes. Just then, a man entered his peripheral vision. He looked around fifty, his skin tanned by long years in the sun. His canary-yellow hair was tied back, and he was wearing thick gloves and a shirt filthy from his work. He looked flabbergasted, his amber eyes wide as he stood stupefied while staring at Lucas. The trader also noticed the man frozen in place.

“What’s wrong?” the trader asked.

But the man completely ignored his employer, his eyes fixated on the baron. “Lucas…” the man murmured. “You were all right?”

The trader made a quizzical expression. “You know the owner of the Stock Trading Company?”

“Huh? N-No…”

The man gasped and snapped back to his senses upon hearing the company name. He blinked several times, rubbed his eyes, sized Lucas up once more, and hastily bowed. “I’m terribly sorry for my insolence,” he apologized. “He bears a striking resemblance to a friend.”

The trader shrugged and gave a forced laugh. “Ha ha ha, I’m sure he isn’t your acquaintance. Mr. Stock here is visiting Lapisasther for the first time. He hails from Eizeria.”

“Eizeria…”

“That’s right. He’s a nouveau riche who’s half Lapisasthan, and he’s quite the guy.” The trader chuckled and clapped Lucas’s shoulder, introducing the baron as one of his own. But he was surprised by Lucas’s reaction. “Mr. Stock? What’s wrong? You look white as a sheet,” he remarked.

Lucas didn’t move a muscle, his heart racing at the older worker’s words. He approached the man. “Hey, can you tell me something?” Lucas asked. “Were you a fisherman? Does your friend, who also looks like me, have the name ‘Lucas’ too?”

The man was surprised by the baron's curiosity but stammered, "Y-Yeah. You're the spitting image of one of my fisherman buddies, so I couldn't help but be shocked. But on second thought, you can't be him. You're much younger than him, and he wasn't a company president. What's more, he's—"

"Lucas!" a dignified voice of a lady called out. She seemed out of place for a warehouse like this.

When the baron turned around, he saw Iris rushing toward him, gasping for air—a rather unusual sight for the normally composed noblewoman. Leik followed the lady, and Cano bowed to them.

"There you are," she said.

The trader couldn't hide his surprise. "Madam, there's no need for you to be in here. You'll get sullied with dust."

"I'm terribly sorry for rushing into your warehouse. But this is an emergency," Iris said. She gave a small curtsy to the trader as she handed Lucas a bundle of papers, her face pale. "Lucas, I need you to calm down and listen to my words. We found your father."

For a moment, Lucas felt his body grow numb. His heart pounded louder than ever, and he didn't feel grounded in reality. He felt sucked into Iris's intense eyes. Encouraged by her, he gazed down at the papers. It was written on new parchment, stamped with the word "copy." It was a replica of the records.

"His name is Lucas Sara Wotel," Iris continued. "It means the son of a fisherman from Sara Village. He received a life sentence and is currently imprisoned."

"That's right," the man from earlier said in a trembling voice. "I thought you resembled *that* Lucas. Despite the maritime ban, he insisted on going out to Eizeria and was arrested. He was Lucas from Sara Village."

Lucas's mind grew numb, his eyes scanning across the copy of the documents. He read the name, origin, and current situation of his father.

The trader placed an exasperated hand on his head. "You've gotta be kidding me… Tell me this isn't true!" he said. "You're saying Mr. Stock's father is…"

Everyone around them fell silent as they gazed at Lucas and Iris.

“Are you…certain about this?” Lucas asked. He couldn’t suppress the trembling of his voice.

His wife placed her hand over his and nodded firmly. “I am. Without a doubt, Lucas. The man you’ve been searching for your entire life, your father, is Lucas Sara Wotel.”

A myriad of emotions flooded Lucas’s mind. His expression changed from shock to confusion to resolve. He gripped the stack of papers tightly, slowly placed them on a table, and took a deep breath.

“Where is he imprisoned?” Lucas asked.

Iris gave an immediate reply. “He’s in Levino County Jail, in the eastern region of Lapisasther.”

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I returned to the hotel with a stunned Lucas. He stated that he wanted to be left alone for a while, and I watched him leave for a separate room before I sighed on the sofa in the living room. Kiki said not a word and poured me a cup of tea.

Lucas Sara Wotel was fifty years old and the very father that Lucas had spent his entire life searching for. The now-imprisoned man was born and raised in the quiet village of Sara and was the eldest son of his household. But the Battle of Lionel had caused him to lose his family, and at a young age, he was all alone in the world. His solitude, however, had given him some freedom in his position, and he threw himself into the world of sailing. He stepped away from his hometown and made a living while calling his ship his home.

The records stated not a word about his life in Eizeria, nor the fact that he had a wife and a child. It only listed that he was born in Lapisasther, became an orphan, and was a sailor. He then was imprisoned for life because of the debacle with Eizeria. His entire life was summarized in a few lines; it felt almost cruel. After he’d gone fishing, he must’ve tried to return to Eizeria, paying no heed to the risks. He was then suspected of being a pirate and imprisoned. A life sentence had been cast upon him, preventing him from ever going out to sea, and he was in chains, forever spending the rest of his life behind bars.

“I wonder if I should say I’m glad he’s still alive…” I murmured, my words causing the steam from the teacup to waver slightly.

Leik approached me from the corridor with Cano in tow. “Madam, I received word from the royal palace. The court and His Majesty have provided their approval, and the man can be released as early as tomorrow evening.”

“Thank you for telling me. That was rather quick.”

Leik furrowed his brows. “It’s likely that Lapisasther condemned him to life in prison as part of a stunt for Eizeria. If they had an excuse for a victim, an Eizerian noble requesting a pardon with the support of the royal family, I’m sure they could’ve released him immediately. I’ve heard that Lucas Sara Wotel is a model prisoner. He’s also a victim of conflict between two nations.”

“And I heard that my lord gave quite a bit of money to the royal family,” Cano chimed in beside Leik. “But the man’s release aside, can my lord meet his father? He’s been shut in his room for a while.”

“Well…” I started.

Lucas emerged from his room. Cano gasped before hastily covering his mouth. My husband only glanced at the boy as he approached Leik and handed the butler several thick stacks of paper.

“Thank you for finding my dad,” Lucas said. “Can you take care of these next?”

“Most certainly,” Leik replied. “I shall finish it all while we’re still here.”

“What are you guys on about?” Cano piped up.

“Nothing for you to know about,” Lucas replied. “You’ll find out in due time, so just be patient.” He turned to me and smiled. “Sorry to worry you. Don’t fret. I’ll meet my dad.”

“Lucas…” I murmured.

“But I don’t know how our meeting will go. I just wanted to clean up all the work I meant to do in Lapisasther before my mood turned sour. That’s all.”

He petted my head and gently hugged me to ease my worries.

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THE next day, Lucas and I headed for Levino County Jail. It was on the other side of the island, in the opposite direction of the city. In the early morning, we rode a donkey and slowly made our way over the paved white steps on a steep slope.

It was hot outside, and Lucas had told me to wait back at the hotel, but I'd promised to stick by his side. I couldn't let him head to the prison by himself. I had a stole around my shoulders to shield me from the sun as I rode a donkey for the first time. As I bounced up and down, I followed my husband to meet his father.

We took a few breaks and spent half a day on the backs of donkeys before we finally reached Levino County Jail. The walls were plaster, which was very fitting for this kingdom, and the angular building stood in the middle of a forest. The energetic cries of mysterious insects and birds resting in the shade reached my ears.

Lucas was silent the entire trip, perhaps from the heat, the exhaustion, or the nervousness. A prison guard guided us to one of their simple waiting rooms, and we were served iced tea. Lucas only stared at the table, sweat dripping down his face. Only the sunlight trickling through the foliage, the ocean breeze, and the rustling of the greenery filled the room.

"Lucas," I said. "It's not good to be dehydrated. Why not have a drink?"

"Yeah, you're right," he replied, snapping back to reality.

He downed the tea in one gulp. Silence settled in the room again. It felt like an eternity.

The sun spilling in through the windows was past its apex and starting to set when there was a knock on the door. The prison guard had brought a man.

Dressed in simple prison clothes, an unshaven man with long, unkempt hair emerged, looking pitiful. With weary, sunken eyes, he gazed at Lucas, then at me. Confusion slowly filled his face as he glanced between us.

"Who are you guys?" the man asked. "I heard you were an Eizerian noble, but that appearance… And why would you do something so capricious?"

I handed my husband a ring. "Perhaps this will jog his memory."

It was an accessory fitted with an amber stone—his mother's keepsake. Lucas approached this man, who jolted in fear and shrunk back from him. Lucas unfurled his hand, revealing the ring on his palm. The moment the befuddled man saw the jewelry, his eyes glittered with life.

"How did you…" the man gasped.

His exhaustion completely dissipated as he kneeled in front of Lucas, clutching the hands of his son. The man couldn't believe his eyes; his gaze was fixated on the small ring. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

"I gave this…to Matilda… How did you…" the man stammered. He sheepishly gazed up at Lucas, his expression gradually transforming. It looked like long-lost memories rushed back into his mind. With trembling lips, he spoke. "Are you…"

"Lucas Stock. I'm your son."

The man's face made several expressions as he questioned reality. "Matilda… My wife… Where is your mom now?"

"She's dead. She had a fever when I was fourteen and passed away."

Despair. Elation. Agony. Regret. The man went through numerous emotions in a span of mere moments. He sank to the floor, practically begging for forgiveness, his loud wails drowning out the noise of the forest.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I'm so, so sorry…"

He wasn't able to stand for a while. Lucas remained silent, only clenching his fists as tight as they would go. He neither hugged with joy at their reunion nor did he blame his father for the prolonged absence. My husband was expressionlessly gazing down at his father. I saw Lucas's knuckles, white from squeezing so hard, and enveloped his hand with both of mine as I stood close to him.

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WE took Lucas's father and returned to the hotel where we were staying. By the time we made it back, it was well into the night. Lucas ordered his servants to take care of his father. My husband took a bath without grabbing a bite to eat and fell fast asleep.

When I decided to go to sleep and stepped into the bedroom, I hesitated to slip into bed with him—perhaps it was best to give him some space. But a hand snuck out of the sheets, grabbed me, and pulled me inside. His body, beat by the sun, was warm to the touch, and I silently soothed my husband.

The next morning, we met up with Lucas's father again.

The servants had cut the man's hair, and he wore a tidy shirt and pants. He looked haggard, but his appearance made it clear that he was Lucas's father. He couldn't lock eyes with his son and averted his gaze as he awkwardly stood there.

"Did you eat breakfast?" Lucas asked quietly.

"Yeah," his father replied with a hesitant nod.

Still unable to look at his son, it was plain that his mind couldn't process his situation. He had no idea how to interact with Lucas. The ocean breeze comfortably blew through the drawing room, and the lovely aroma of the flowers that sat by the windowsill filled the air. Lucas and I settled in on a set of rattan chairs; across the table sat his father, facing the floor while entangling his fingers.

Lucas maintained his silence. In front of his father, he suppressed the feelings bubbling up within his heart and kept his mask of indifference. It seemed both men were desperately searching for a way to start a conversation. When the ice in the tea had started to melt, his father finally opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking the silence. "If only I hadn't been greedy…"

Lucas widened his eyes but pursed his lips and kept his feelings pushed down. He gently asked, "Will you tell me what happened? I'd like to hear it from you."

"All right. It happened over two decades ago, but it feels like it was just yesterday."

Lucas remained quiet as his father slowly started to unravel the past. He gave a full account of his happiness and dreariness—how he happened to meet his beloved wife and how they fell deeply in love.

"Your mother was too kind," he said. "Be it a commoner, if someone was in pain, she didn't hesitate to lend a helping hand. She would do whatever she could as the daughter of a marquess to provide her aid."

But her household, House Diascia, had taken sloppy measures for their citizens. Despite poor harvests plaguing the marches, floods, and piracy that loomed on the beaches, the marquess seemed to give no care at all. It became up to their residents to fend for themselves and to fix these issues without any support. As the daughter of the marquess, she volunteered at a convent within the march and taught the bare minimum of literacy to the residents, ensuring that they wouldn't sign clearly unbeneficial contracts.

"She was beautiful," Lucas's father went on. "And she hated corruption and was virtuous. It must've been difficult to lead her life. One day, she was dragged into a fuss with some merciless people. Stones were hurled at her, and she got injured. I happened to be docked at a nearby port, so I ran in to save her."

Matilda had thanked him for his help, but he still couldn't shake his worries about her. She was the daughter of the marquess, yet had few guards around her; it sent chills down his spine. It implied that her father had *hoped* she'd get hurt and learn from her actions.

Lucas's father suggested that she quit her charity work to protect herself. If she truly insisted on continuing, he begged her to only do so while he was around. The two deepened their bonds. Once a month, he would become her personal guard. As time progressed, the two fell deeper in love.

"She didn't look at me bizarrely despite my Lapisasthan origin," Lucas's father went on. "When our ship docked at the port, she stated that we resembled twinkling stars spilling out on the sands. Our yellow hair, which dazzled under the sun, had apparently stood out like a star from the hill she was on. She said I popped out like the North Star and was easy to spot."

He sounded enchanted as he reminisced about his past and the excitement he must've felt back then. But she was the daughter of a marquess. She had no choice but to follow the orders of her house, and the day of her marriage had been set. Her fiancé was a general who served in the Battle of Lionel and had produced excellent results. He was known to be a violent man and often hit those around him; in fact, he had shouted and ordered Matilda, who was still only his fiancée, to quit her charity work at once. He hit her so hard that her cheeks had often turned

swollen, and the seashell that she had received as a gift from Lucas's father had been crushed into smithereens by the general. Matilda wept while apologizing to Lucas's father.

"To this day, I'm not sure if I made the right decision," the haggard man said, clenching his fists above his lap. "But I just couldn't endure it any longer. Even when she was punched so hard, no one came to her aid, and she didn't even receive first aid treatment from her family. I just wanted to spare her from her wretched fiancé. That was all."

On the night of a new moon, the two decided to elope. Fortunately, the citizens and servants loved her, and many had helped her flee. The couple headed for Solalitika. Many foreign ships docked in that city, allowing people from all nations to gather there. They wouldn't stand out. Back then, Solalitika had just lost its use as a military port and wasn't well-maintained. It had become a den for people engaged in illegal business. The city he knew back then was nothing like what I was now familiar with.

He made that their home and did whatever he could to make a living for his new family. The two lived in a small apartment for working families in the city and led a modest life.

"I was truly happy. And I loved Matilda," Lucas's father said. He gazed into the distance, reminiscing about his past, but his expression soon grew dark. "But I was just too young. I thought we were happy, but one day, I saw my wife and only felt despair. She wasn't wearing a hint of makeup, and her fingertips were cracked from work. When I saw her toiling away at her job while she sold her dresses to make a living, I wondered if I'd made the right decision."

It seemed Matilda was doing her utmost best to blend in with a different lifestyle, a polar opposite to her days as a noblewoman. She sold all her beautiful dresses, tied her hair up, and worked hard from morning until night. Lucas's father started to agonize over the choice that he'd made.

"I considered bringing Matilda back home," he said. "I wondered if that was the best choice for her and would allow her to lead a happy life of wealth. I'd been so spoiled by our days of happiness that I made her conceive a child."

He turned pale as he covered his face with his bony hands. "If she gave birth to a child who was the son of a Lapisasthan man, I

knew that there was no going back for her. While I was agonizing over my decision, I learned that she was seeing a doctor dispatched by the convent. I felt absolutely hopeless. She once did charity work for the impoverished, but now she was on the other side, receiving charity from a convent. I was the one who made her lead such a desperate life."

Lucas's father spoke quickly. The regrets that had built up in him came tumbling out as if a dam had burst. A deluge of remorse spilled from his mouth. "So, I decided to make my resolve. The only thing I knew was fishing. I climbed aboard a whaling ship and wanted to make it rich so I could support my wife and soon-to-be-born child. I wanted to help her lead an easier life."

For better or for worse, he had a friend, a fellow sailor from Lapisasther, who had an enticing offer. Whales were abundant that year, and a single catch could allow him to buy a house.

"I told my wife I'd be out to make money," he explained. "I promised her that I'd help her lead an easier life. I still remember it now—she was against it. She said that she was happy as she was and didn't want me to do anything dangerous. She just wanted me to be by her side. I…married her and promised to never leave her, but…I did just that."

Lucas's father covered his face and started sobbing. "I'd been praying for the safety of my wife and our child. I knew that I left them behind. We'd even talked about a name. If she had a girl, we'd name her after Saint Crouzette of Lapiasther. If the child was a boy, we'd name him after me."

I glanced at Kiki, and my maid offered the man a towel so that he could wipe his face. Unfortunately, Lucas's father had been caught, but as he wasn't in charge of the whaling ship, he evaded execution. Still, he had no family back in Lapisasther, and no one would come to save him. No one could pay his bail, and he was set to live the rest of his life in prison.

"Baron Stock," the man said, giving a deep bow. "Please tell me. What happened while I was gone? What kind of life did you and Matilda lead?"

"All right," Lucas replied quietly.

He spoke indifferently of his life until now, casually listing events. He spoke of how his pregnant mother overcame adversities to give birth to him and how she fled the convent to

protect her only son. He discussed his life with her in Westmierden and her death. Lucas then went on to explain how he survived until this point.

Lucas spoke in a monotone. It sounded like he was suppressing his rage and sorrow at the same time; I'd never heard him speak like that before. He talked at length, the time feeling like an eternity. Even as the sun had started to set, I remained by my husband's side. Now and then, Kiki would pour new cups of tea and lay out refreshments and snacks on the table, but the two men didn't have a single morsel.

"Thank you for telling me everything and for not hiding it from me," his father said.

When all was said and done, it was already well into the night. Lucas's father had grown weary from crying so much, and his voice sounded raspy under the lamplight as he continued to apologize to his son.

"I'm not asking that you forgive me," he said. "I'm truly sorry for what I've done and the suffering I caused you two. I even made you spend so much money to have me pardoned. It's audacious to even call myself your father, and I'm aware of that. I can never apologize enough to you…"

As the man apologized, I couldn't see my husband's expression; he had barely moved a muscle since this conversation started, and I was a bit scared to see what expression he had as he listened to his father speak of the past. All Lucas did was quietly give a very deep sigh as the man lowered his head.

"I understand now, and it's all in the past," Lucas said. "I've already gotten what I wanted." He was surprisingly calm as he fixed his posture and crossed his legs. "And I didn't pay all that money just to be nice. Unlike my mom, I don't have a noble heart. I'm just a merchant who chases after profits."

"Then…why?" his father asked, raising his head with confusion.

"I'm gonna have you work for the Stock Trading Company in the Lapisasthan branch. You better make profits to make up for lost time and repay me with even more money than I used to get you out. I've already secured the land near Sara Village. The royal family has given me permission to build a branch here and buy the land as long as I aggressively hire Lapisasthans."

“Wha…” Lucas’s father froze, his mouth gaping open.

Lucas pushed up his canary-yellow hair and narrowed his eyes. “Thanks to you, I became a nouveau riche merchant. I’ll use whatever I can and have at my disposal, you see. I’ll use my birth, the needless meddling that Bearbrooks is doing to be a nuisance, the fact that the Lapisasthan king owes me for throwing my innocent father into jail, and my father. I’ll use anything and everything.”

I had no idea. Finally, the mystery behind his actions and the work he toiled away at before he headed for the prison had been revealed. No wonder he forgave that thieving child and gave him business cards to show off to the parents. And the fact that Lucas had personally met His Majesty to receive permission to search for his father made sense. They were all connected—no, Lucas had connected them and expertly used them for his own gain.

As he saw our shocked expressions, he chuckled jovially. “Thanks, Dad. Because you’re still alive, I can prove I’ve got Lapisasthan blood. As your son, I can proudly set up business here and expand my company. Lapisasther is rather strict toward foreigners, you see. Seems like this nation has got a lot of eager workers familiar with this land, too. I can expect profits greater than the money I used to set you free. I can’t help but be excited just thinking about the future.”

His father looked up as he stopped crying, and Lucas grinned back.

“I’m a lot more severe than you are, Dad. You don’t have to apologize to me, but I need you to live a long and healthy life so that you can work for me. That’ll be good enough.” Lucas stood up. “So, starting from tomorrow, don’t act so awkwardly reserved. Why don’t we get along like father and son?”

Relief washed over Lucas’s father, his haggard expression vanishing as he smiled. “My son’s rather stalwart, I see,” he said.

“I got it from Mom,” Lucas replied. “She raised me all by herself as a lady left to her own devices. I would’ve loved to show you how bold she was.”

“Heh… You’re right. Matilda was indeed a stout-hearted woman.”

Lucas’s father covered his face as he smiled, gazing up at the ceiling. After he calmed down, he saw Lucas’s outstretched hand

and exchanged a firm handshake.

"Thank you," the man said. "Thank you for showing me how splendid you are. Out of all the misfortune, it's the one thing that I'm truly thankful for."

"Thanks," Lucas said with a chuckle. "I know we just met, but sorry for surpassing you already, I guess."

And so, a long day with his father drew to a close.



I was in the hotel in Lapisasther. I'd gotten used to this place now, and I was fresh out of the bath, on the search for Lucas. He was usually in the study or bedroom, but he wasn't there. After I went through all the rooms, I spotted him out on the terrace, puffing away.

It was an unusual sight; I'd never seen him smoke around me. When he noticed me approaching, he gasped and quickly snuffed out the flame. The vestiges of purple smoke wafted through the air, giving off a bitter and sweet scent before it dissipated.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I didn't think you'd be here."

"Please don't mind me," I replied. "You felt like enjoying a puff, didn't you? I'm sure the afternoon made you tired."

He leaned his back against the terrace railing. I approached his left side, and he stroked my freshly washed hair.

"Thanks for being by my side today," he said. "You should head to bed."

"And what about you?" I asked.

"I'll be awake for a bit longer. I've still got some work to do. I wanted to take it easy here, but I guess I'm not so lucky." He shrugged and chuckled. But as I remained by his side, refusing to head to bed, he raised an eyebrow. "What's up?" he asked. "Did you want me to be all sentimental or something? I'm sorry, but I won't be doing that."

"That's not what you meant, is it?" I asked.

"Huh? What are you on about?"

"You said earlier, 'I've already gotten what I wanted,' didn't you?"

“Yep. I told you, remember? Now I can expand into Lapisasther.”

“Perhaps you’ve gotten your hands on something else.” Lucas froze in place and fell silent, but I didn’t avert my gaze from my husband. “What you wanted was your father’s heartfelt words—affirmation that he loves you and that you’re a son that’s wanted. That you aren’t a mistake. And you also wanted him to repent his actions and confess what he’d done while apologizing to your mother. You forgave your father because he did both, didn’t you?”

“And what of it?”

“If my guess is true…I don’t want to leave you all alone tonight, Lucas.”

“Why not?”

“Because I think you’re putting up a strong front.”

“And if your guess is wrong?”

“Even if I’m wrong, I don’t want to leave you alone tonight.” Lucas fell silent, and I continued, “I’m just being selfish.”

“You’re really…” Lucas trailed off, his lips trembling ever so slightly as he shook his head, trying to rid himself of his emotions. He turned his back toward me and laughed through his nose, trying his best to sound as cheery as he could. “I’m just being stubborn!” he said. “I’ve been able to survive without relying on my father. I want to at least act like I can save my father without breaking a sweat, you know? How can I show my vulnerabilities? If I did, my mom, who raised me all by herself, wouldn’t be able to have the last laugh.”

He spoke rapidly before he fell silent. I gazed at my husband’s back. *That’s probably not his only goal. If he leaves their relationship as it is, a father who abandoned his child and a son who was left behind, he fears his father will continue to act distant toward him for the rest of his life,* I thought.

Lucas wanted to start over and build a relationship with his father. At the same time, he didn’t want to sweep his mother’s hard work under the rug. In a way, he was firmly acknowledging his life until now—a life that he desperately worked hard to obtain.

My husband purposefully showed his calculating side and face as a merchant. But he tended to hide the truth away. He *had* to sound crass and act tough to mask his more sensitive side. Or

else, he'd be far too kind, and he wouldn't be able to navigate this harsh world.

"Lucas, I love you," I said.

I approached his back and wrapped my arms around his sturdy waist, nestling my body against his. Lucas's unsteady breathing reached my ears, and I closed my eyes, refusing to see anything more. If he didn't want to show this side any further, I wasn't going to pry.

"May I stay like this for a bit longer?" I asked.

"Yeah," he eked out. It was all he could muster.

I felt warm droplets fall onto my hands as I hugged his trembling body and quietly placed my forehead on his back. We stayed like that for a long while, and I did my best to support my husband.





THE next morning, Lucas took his father around to busily take care of certain documents and processes. As for me, because I'd been awake until morning and battered by the heat of Lapisasther, I couldn't wake up early.

"You've gotta rest for today," Lucas told me. "Just stay in bed."

My husband had astutely noticed my condition and tried to leave the bedroom, leaving me behind.

"W-Wait, please," I called. "I'm fine, really. I just woke up late."

I hastily dressed in my negligee and tried to chase Lucas out of the bedroom, but he looked at me and sighed, looking a touch proud of himself.

"Iris, the fact that you woke up late implies that you really shouldn't push yourself today," he said. "Just lay back and go to sleep."

"B-But if there's anything I can do…" I started.

He turned around without lending an ear to my insistence. After laying me back on the bed, he brought his face close to mine.

"Just take it easy today, all right?" he said. "Don't wear anything tight like a corset. Stay in those clothes, or wear something loose and laze around. I don't want you to push yourself now only to fall ill on the ship ride home. I wouldn't be able to stand it. Just rest up, okay?"

"O-Okay," I nodded obediently. I felt like a child being pacified by an adult. "I understand. Please take care of yourself, Lucas."

"Good girl. I will. Oh, and here's your punishment for being so polite again." Lucas grinned and gently pecked me before he left.

"I forgot that we were still doing that…"

I suppose I'm also partly to blame for maintaining my polite speech, I thought. Kiki entered the room right as Lucas left, and she spoiled me quite a bit. No doubt she'd received orders from my husband. I had breakfast in bed and dozed off until just before lunch. After taking a few bites of lunch, I sat on a cozy rattan chair in a breezy place to cool off.

“I feel rather restless doing absolutely nothing at all…” I murmured as I gazed up at the ceiling. I wore a breezy dress and had my feet in a basin.

“Now, now,” Kiki told me with a smile. “You taking it slow today will benefit Lord Lucas as well, Lady Iris.”

She was neatly combing my hair, using a fragrant oil that gave off a sweet, floral scent and gently massaged my head to the tips of my hair. Comfortable, I closed my eyes and cleared my mind—only then did I realize I was truly tired.

I grabbed a cup from the table beside me and wrapped both hands around it, delighted by the pleasant temperature. I entrusted my body to the quiet, lukewarm ocean breeze and indulged in this moment of peace.

“I wonder what Lucas is doing right now…” I said.

“I saw him off this morning, but he seemed to be rather friendly with his father,” Kiki replied. “His father has quite a beautiful face. I wonder if Lord Lucas will look like that when he’s older.”

I couldn’t suppress my giggle.

My maid continued, as though she was talking to herself, “I’m glad that Lord Lucas’s father seems like a good person. My lord has been working hard his entire life searching for his father.”

Her heartfelt words made me realize she had witnessed Lucas’s agonizing struggle for far longer than I had.

“Lady Iris, I hope you can keep this a secret from Lord Lucas,” she began.

“Of course. What’s wrong?” I asked.

“To tell you the truth…I hoped that my lord would never find his father. I thought if he was never found, Lord Lucas would never get hurt. In my heart, I’d already decided that his father was an awful person.” She gave a forced smile, making it obvious that she was worried about her master in her own way.

“Kiki…”

“So, I’m just really, *truly* happy. I hope the two can slowly rebuild their relationship over time.”

“I agree.”

I gazed down at my cup of tea. Lucas’s father may have been released from prison, but he’d been arrested due to international affairs. Even if he could work in the Lapisasthan branch of the

Stock Trading Company, it was likely impossible to bring him back to Eizeria. He would never be able to step inside Eizeria again, where he lived with his wife, and he would never be able to see with his eyes the Solalitika that his son had developed. It felt heart-wrenching to leave the poor man in Lapisasther alone with no one around him.

"If only there were a way to connect those two men…" I murmured.

A strong breeze blew through the room, causing the nearby paper napkins to fly away. Kiki jumped up and expertly caught them. She locked eyes with me and smiled.

"That's it," I said. A light bulb went off in my head, and I stood up. "Cano, you're there, aren't you?"

The silver-haired butler-in-training had taken off his blond wig. He emerged from the corner of the terrace like a shadow that had suddenly appeared.

"Eek!" Kiki cried. "Y-Y-Y-Y-You were here this entire time?!"

"Sorry for being around, I guess," Cano said. He puffed out his cheeks before he gave me an obedient bow.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," I said. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all, madam. What shall I do for you?"

"I want you to sketch something using your special talent."

"I see… Your wish is my command."

He placed a hand over his chest and bowed, flashing a confident smile.

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THAT night, as I dozed off in bed, I heard footsteps approaching, creating a symphony with the low roar of the waves that constantly crashed in the distance. Just as I sat up, Lucas entered the room. He was fresh out of the bath, and his canary-yellow hair was still damp, the scent of soap lingering in the air.

His gaze softened as it fixed on me. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was waiting for you," I said.

"It seems you took it easy today. I'm proud of you."

"I apologize for making you worry."

Lucas stroked the area around my eye just as I completely sat up, in high spirits. I was embarrassed but was happier to see him touching me so dearly.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked. “If you want to rest by yourself tonight, I can leave.”

“No, please stay by my side, Lucas,” I replied.

“Okay.”

His voice was sweet as he drew me close. My heart grew full from the warmth of my beloved on my skin. I was so comforted that I almost forgot what I was going to say to him. After grounding myself, I stared into my husband’s eyes.

“Lucas, there’s something that I’d like to tell you,” I said. “May I?”

“Of course,” he replied. “What’s on your mind?”

I slipped out of bed and handed Lucas a sketchbook I’d taken from the table.

When Lucas opened the book, his eyes grew wide. “These are Cano’s…”

I sat beside my husband, completely drawn by the picture on the page, and gazed down as well. The illustration was done in pencil, depicting the splendid scenery of Solalitika.

“I had Cano draw this for me in the afternoon,” I said.

“I knew he was good at drawing, but wow…” Lucas murmured.

He flipped through the pages, only gasping in shock. Cano had drawn the Solalitikan manor at the top of the hill, the Stock Trading Company’s building by the newly built station, and the merchant vessel. The pictures accurately portrayed the expressions of people who were busily working in the city, and of course, Lucas was in the middle of it all.

The illustrations looked like photographs, a moment of time caught forever within the pages. Cano’s splendid pencil strokes depicted Lucas’s daily life so precisely.

“I was thinking of handing these drawings to your father,” I suggested beside him. “He can have an image of your life in Eizeria. A picture is worth a thousand words at times. Details you may struggle to verbalize can be elegantly conveyed through Cano’s artwork.”

“You’re right,” Lucas replied. “It’s not so easy to show him Solalitika’s port in person. This will work.”

He fell silent, engrossed in the illustrations as he turned the pages. There were drawings of life in the manor, Lucas being hard at work, and the magnificent new railroad station. There was even a drawing of our wedding. The scene was when we exchanged rings and said our vows in the church as we stared into each other’s eyes. I didn’t expect that to be drawn, and I covered my mouth in awe while Lucas smiled deviously.

“Did you ask him to draw this, too?” he inquired.

“N-No,” I replied.

I shook my head, but Lucas was visibly pleased. He readjusted his grip on the drawings and gazed intently at that particular illustration.

“It looks nice,” he said. “Your composed expression is great, but you look the most beautiful with this serene smile. I don’t like that Cano seems to have been especially meticulous with this detail and drew you very well…”

“E-Enough about me…” I stammered.

“Okay, okay.”

He flipped through the pages and settled on the final illustration—the convent where his mother was forever resting.

“He drew this too?” Lucas whispered. He stared at the drawing for a while before carefully shutting the book. “All right, I’ve decided,” he said. “Tomorrow, I’ll take Cano with me to meet my dad. I want him to draw this place. And my dad, too.”

“That’s a splendid idea,” I replied.

“I’ll leave Leik as your guard.”

He placed the sketchbook on the table and swiftly turned the lights off. At once, I felt a shift in the air.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Lucas whispered, nestling me in his arms.

I felt his warmth through the thin negligee and closed my eyes, entrusting myself to this comfort.

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LUCAS spent the remaining days of the trip taking care of matters with his father and work. Now and then, I joined in and spoke of my life in Solalitika as well as the grave within the convent where Matilda Stock was resting. When Lucas's father heard of what had occurred at House Diascia, where his wife originated from, he laughed boisterously for the first time. He was chuckling as he wiped tears from his eyes and gave a beaming smile; he looked refreshed.

"Well done!" he complimented. "You burned that house down, huh? Ha ha ha ha!"

"We didn't burn the house down, just the surrounding forest," Lucas replied.

"Either way, good going! Oh, I'm sure Matilda is leaping with joy about it."

"Mom isn't the type to be happy upon hearing that her family house burned down!"

Leik, Cano, and Kiki, who were standing by the wall, gave awkward smiles as the two men bickered. Both Lucas and his father seemed to be trying to make up for the time they'd lost. Their time together was enjoyable and warm. In the blink of an eye, our final day at Lapisasther arrived.

We stayed in the hotel lobby until the absolute last second, reluctant to board the ship and part ways with Lucas's father.

"Mr. Stock! Pardon me, but I'd like your input," an employee said.

"Sorry, I'll be back in a jiff," Lucas said as he stood up.

"Good luck," I said.

The moment I was left alone with his father, he stared at my face solemnly.

"Miss Iris, I know I'm repeating myself, but thank you for marrying my son," he said.

"The pleasure is all mine," I replied. "Lucas saved me as well."

"I didn't think both myself and my son would have Eizerian noblewomen as wives... Like father, like son, I suppose. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

He brushed his fingers against the sketchbook cover on the table and smiled faintly. He was reminiscing. Cano had drawn more pictures since, at the request of Lucas's father. The

sketchbook was now crammed until the final page with images of Solalitika.

“Lucas, my son, resembles Matilda so much,” he said. “His profile looks just like hers. The way he speaks and his minute gestures remind me of my wife. I’m truly happy, from the bottom of my heart, that he came to meet me.” Lucas’s father locked eyes with me. “Miss Iris, he’ll be fine. Unlike me, I’m certain that he’ll make you happy. I beg of you to stay by his side.”

He gave a deep, deep bow, filled with regret for being unable to protect his wife and child. He was frustrated at being unable to do a thing for his son and could only be indebted to his own child. There was helplessness, anxiety, loneliness, and powerlessness in his heart. But amid all that, there was hope. The melting pot of emotions he must’ve felt was painfully obvious.

“Please raise your head, Father. I’ve already vowed to spend the rest of my life by Lucas’s side. And above all, I’m your daughter-in-law,” I said. The man jolted and faced me. I smiled and continued, “I would also like to meet you again, so I shall be back soon.”

“You’ll…accept me as your father-in-law?” he asked in disbelief.

“Of course. Life isn’t that short. We’ve still got plenty of time. Why not slowly build our family relations?”

Leik and Lucas returned, having finished their business meeting.

“Iris, the ship’s ready to depart. Let’s go,” Lucas said.

“Very well,” I replied as I stood up.

This was where we’d part ways for now. We left the hotel lobby and headed for the carriage parked out front. Before Lucas boarded the vehicle, he turned toward his father.

“Later. I’ll be in contact with you,” my husband said.

“Be well, Luka, my son,” his father replied.

“Yeah. You too, Dad.”

It was a simple farewell, but they exchanged a smile. Lucas helped me into the carriage before he stepped inside himself. The wheels creaked forward as we made our way to the ship, but not once did Lucas turn back.

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OUR ship ride back was much like our voyage when we first arrived at Lapisasther. A constant party was going on, and an elegant socializing occasion was on full display. We attended the first night out of obligation as we joined a round of applause at the ship owner's speech in the corner of the grand hall.

I wore a splendid dress and gloves that caused light to scatter all around me with a welcome drink in my fingers. It felt like my time in Lapisasther was all a dream. My time on the ship was also fantastical, but my days in Lapisasther were equally unusual.

Lucas sized me up pensively, and I tilted my head to one side, wondering what was on his mind. "Iris, can you grant me a selfish request?" Lucas asked.

"Of course. What would it be?" I replied.

"I want to spend the entire boat ride in our room with you. This'll be the only night we're out to socialize. I want to be holed up together for the rest of the voyage."

His frank words made my ears grow warm. My eyes darted around, wondering if anyone had heard him, and I nodded in reply.

"I-I don't mind that at all," I said.

"Then that's that," he said. He downed the rest of his glass in one gulp and turned on his heel, leading me out of the party that had just started.

"H-Huh? Um, Lucas?"

"We joined in and did the bare minimum for greetings. I'm sure people would allow a newly wedded couple to be in a room for a few days while on vacation."

He snaked his arm around my waist and gallantly left the party behind. We approached our room in a flash, and he turned around to give Leik, who was following us, an order.

"Don't let anyone come close until we step off the ship. It's at my behest," Lucas said. "Tell people we're seasick or something."

"Your wish is my command," Leik said.

The moment Lucas entered the room and shut the door behind us, he tilted my chin up and kissed me passionately. I could hear him undoing his necktie with the other hand.

“L-Lucas,” I gasped.

“I’ve been wanting to spend some time alone with you without thinking about anything troublesome,” my husband said. “Once this ship docks, I’m gonna be busy again.”

“I-I’m also…happy to spend some time with you, but…”

“Is there a problem?”

“This is far too sudden.”

“I can’t help it. I’m at my limit. When I see you dressed up all beautifully and stealing the gazes of everyone else, I just want to trap you inside so that my mind can be at peace.”

He tossed his jacket aside and bridal carried me to the bedroom in the back. After he set me down on the bed, he locked me in a tight embrace, his breath hot against my ears. I felt myself become a touch dizzy. When I looked up at the ceiling, I noticed the chandelier rocking back and forth with the waves ever so slightly. I found everything to be so humorous.

“Hee hee,” I giggled.

“What’s wrong?” Lucas asked.

He glared down at me like a beast looking at its prey. Despite his scary expression, the fact that he looked like he had no time to spare was so endearing. I couldn’t stop giggling.

“It’s so curious,” I said. “We’ve been together this entire time, but there are still so many things that I don’t know about you… I’m making all these discoveries…”

“Huh? You’re one to talk,” Lucas said. He enveloped my cheeks with both hands and kissed my forehead with a smile. “I didn’t think you were the type to continue being polite with me on purpose,” he said.

“I…told you before,” I insisted. “I’m used to speaking politely. It’s more like…a force of habit.”

“Liar.”

His sweet whispers lit a fire in my heart, and my face grew fiery hot. Satisfied with how flustered I became, Lucas mischievously grinned, flashing his pearly whites.

“What do you wanna do? Will you kiss me? Or shall I do it first?” he asked.

“I’ll…leave it up to you.”





I awoke to the cries of the gulls. When I looked outside, I saw the orange rays of the morning sun, closely resembling the color of the sunset. The coastline of Solalitika's port emerged into view. We were getting close. I wanted to go get a closer look, but Lucas was fast asleep with his arms around me, locking me in place.

"It's sad to think that this time together will end," I murmured.

The voyage back home allowed me to indulge in happy times with him. It was nothing short of enjoyable. Lucas was asleep beside me, looking defenseless. He was so endearing. I touched his cheekbone and stroked his beautiful, canary-yellow hair. It seemed almost natural for me to be by his side, and I could hardly remember my life before I spent mornings with him. How did I live without him in my life?

"It's so odd," I whispered. "I spent most of my life without you in it, and yet, it feels like I've known you since before I was even born."

I snuggled beside him and remained in his arms. I closed my eyes to take a deep breath. His warmth and our skin touching felt only natural. It felt like we were supposed to be this close. We were born in different places and ranks, but I felt like we were two halves of a shell—a perfect fit for each other. It felt so comfortable to be by his side and was so wonderfully mysterious. In a foreign nation far away, there was a religion that believed in reincarnation. Perhaps the person who first conceived this idea had the same emotions and thoughts I currently had.

"Lucas," I whispered.

I kissed his left hand, which had a wedding ring that matched mine on his long, slender finger. Those fingers found me and held me tight while showering me with affection. They were kind, and I had this vague conviction that I would forever be by his side. When I nuzzled my cheek against his hand, I noticed amber eyes staring right at me.

Lucas smiled, moving the fingers I'd just been playing with and brushing them against my cheek and lips. As I indulged

myself in this moment of happiness, Lucas also gave me a smile of pure bliss.

“Morning, Iris,” he said.

His amber eyes were clearer than the morning sun and brighter than the sunset. I saw myself reflected in his eyes and heard the cries of birds echoing outside. The ship was slowly reaching the port.

We’re living in happiness.



Epilogue

LUCAS went about his days as normal upon his return to Eizeria. It was as though the past few months of his desperate search for his parents were all a dream. He was on a business trip to the royal capital today with Iris in tow; the two were scheduled to attend an evening banquet hosting the new aristocrats of the nation. Even in the royal capital, the number of new aristocrats rapidly increased as they gained more power, and Lucas was at the center of all the attention. Baron Lucas Stock was still a bizarre existence, but he had built a place to belong in his own way.

Iris was enjoying a chat with a lady of the royal family, and Lucas had just finished conversing with a nobleman. The third prince wasn't about to miss this opportunity.

"Why don't we have a little chat? Just the two of us," His Highness suggested.

"Most certainly," Lucas said. He handed Leik his half-empty glass and entered a private room that the third prince had prepared. The baron was all alone.

A butler brought in a wagon, prepared a drink for the third prince, and lit his cigar. The royal gazed down at Lucas and grinned. "You look rather refreshed," he observed.

"Thanks to you, work is going well," Lucas replied.

"That so? I heard you made a branch in Lapisasther."

"I did."

"The Bearbrooks Trading Company no longer has a stronghold in Lapisasther. I'm sure you'll still run into your fair share of troubles in the near future, but you can assume that they'll be on the decline."

It seemed the first prince's faction was slowly weakening. Marquess Diascia hadn't raised a finger against Lucas since, and those in that opposing faction were slowly trying to conduct business with Lucas. The first prince was already over the age of fifty, and he probably didn't have much fight in him left.

“Heh…” the third prince chuckled. “It truly is fun to raise a little chick.” He took a satisfied drag of his cigar and gazed at Lucas with his sepia eyes. “I didn’t think my little canary would transform into a hawk.” He flashed a testing smile. “Perhaps people won’t try to shoot down a flying bird for much longer. Indeed, *you* will be fighting against a different force now.”

“You’re absolutely correct, Your Highness,” Lucas replied. “Danger will always follow me around. But for you, Your Highness, who approved of my wedding with Iris, I will continue to give my utmost best.”

“Lucas…”

“Yes?”

The third prince stared at the baron and narrowed his eyes with another chuckle. “I didn’t think you could make a face like that. Perhaps I must thank the lady. I can have fun with you for quite a while yet it seems.”

“We can happily invite the ladies to our salon again.”

The third prince gave a strained smile. “Don’t say that. I’ve been receiving complaints from their parents, claiming their daughters have been pestering them to visit Solalitika again. The summer trend might be visiting Solalitika—it’ll become a tourist spot.”

“I couldn’t wish for more. Guests can enjoy a ride by train.”

“I’m still having fun, so I shall continue to support you. Even if you’re a hawk, you’ll always be my adorable canary.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“So, Lucas Stock. What will you do now?”

“I would like to continue protecting what I desire. That mindset shall never change.”

“Is that so…”

“And I would also like to be your shield, Your Highness.”

“My shield?” The third prince blinked back.

“Because you supported me until now, I’m here today. I don’t want to only be constantly supported. As a former commoner, I’d like to be your footing and be the one to support you in turn. Not just you, but your future generations as well.”

Lucas gave a squinty-eyed smile, trying to look as friendly as he possibly could. In a way, this man was like a second father to

him, and Lucas was rather aware that he would need to deal with this royal for the rest of his life.

“I don’t think this will be a bad deal for you either, Your Highness,” Lucas added.

The third prince chuckled upon seeing Lucas’s smile. “Depending on your work…perhaps I shall consider reinstating titles as well.” He patted the baron’s shoulder and stood up with his servants falling in line behind him. Before the royal left the room, he stopped in place. “Ah, Lucas, do you like puppies?” he asked.

“I’m still struggling to train him, but he’s adorable in his own way,” Lucas replied. “I’ve got no plans on tossing him out.”

The third prince, satisfied with his response, finally left. Once their conversation was over, Lucas headed back to Iris. She was conversing with a few noblewomen. Enveloped in a navy-blue dress reminiscent of the night sky, her pale, slender arms stood out beautifully within the dark hue. Her pearl necklace decorated her collarbone splendidly, and she suited the precious accessory very well. As she smiled softly at a lady cracking a joke, she didn’t look like air at all—indeed, she was proud and confident, standing out in her own right. When Lucas thought this dignified flower was his wife, he couldn’t help but beam with pride.

Iris noticed her husband gazing at her and smiled back, her radiant expression enough to make flowers bloom. Her face alone conveyed her affection for him, and Lucas’s chest warmed.

He tried to maintain his composure as he smiled back warmly and headed for his wife to take her hand. Lucas felt the stares from people around him with every step he took. He gathered everyone’s attention and took his wife’s hand as people started to focus on her as well.

Iris was self-deprecating and called herself plain, an invisible wallflower that should be treated like air. She had pushed herself down, but to Lucas, she was his pride and joy. Even if other men had noticed her charm now, it was far too late.

“Let’s go, Iris,” Lucas said.

“Of course, love,” she replied.

Like the hems of her dress, the gazes that gathered upon her felt nice. Lucas’s wife, who had gotten used to being the center of

attention, stood beside him proudly and walked alongside him as though it was only natural.

“His Highness, the third prince, seems to be in high spirits,” Iris remarked.

“Why do you think that?” Lucas asked.

“The strong scent of cigars is on you. You must’ve spoken with him in close proximity.”

Iris was as sharp as she was beautiful. Lucas gently patted the small of his wife’s back and smiled.

“Bingo,” he said. “I need you to bury this with your scent instead, Iris.”

Her cheeks turned scarlet as Lucas planted a kiss on that beloved mole by her eye. Iris gave a sheepish smile, but her endearing expression was reserved for her husband and her husband alone.

“Yeah, stay by my side, Iris,” Lucas whispered. “Don’t ever leave me.”



YEARS later, a man with dark hair and brilliant eyes the color of the sunset would be conferred a peerage of the Traditional Twelve—he would be a part of House Karelia.

His name was Marquess Travis Karelia.

Travis was the eldest son of an incredibly wealthy merchant named Baron Lucas Stock; the baron was commended for his many deeds in helping his kingdom prosper. Once Baron Stock retired, he moved his residence with his wife, a former Karelia noblewoman, and took a few servants along. Baron and Baroness Stock spent the rest of their lives peacefully in the countryside.

It was said that the couple had first tied the knot as a mariage blanc, a connection without love, but they were so affectionate toward each other that it was hard to believe that rumor. The couple was blessed with many kids, and they lived their lives in happiness.

Many claimed Baron and Baroness Stock needed to be by each other’s side; they were inseparable, much like how a person requires air.

End of Volume 3

Bonus Chapter: Iris the Canary

CANARY-YELLOW wigs were the latest trend. My husband, Lucas, had a dazzling head of bright yellow hair, attracting the attention of aristocrats, and it was apparently seen as a symbol of prosperity.

I'd heard rumors of this trend, but when I saw a line of superb wigs on mannequin torsos within the Stock Trading Company drawing room, I couldn't hide my shock.

"These need to be specially bleached, so it takes a lot of work," Coldola explained to me. "We've got some factories that know how to make normal blond wigs, but our president's hair color is unique… If you add too much color, it becomes too dark, and you need to add some gloss or polish to make it dazzle with that hue."

"Which is why you want Kiki and me to check on the quality since we're used to seeing Lucas," I concluded.

"That's right. I'm sorry to have you come all this way, madam…"

"Um," Kiki piped up as she raised her hand while gazing at the wigs beside me. "Why not call Leik as well?"

Coldola furrowed her brows. "He'll go, 'Huh? You think a mere *factory* can replicate my lord's hair?' and glare at us. He's a real piece of work, I tell you."

"I can imagine…" Kiki replied with a forced smile.

I studied the wigs. This set was aimed at women—the coiffures were tied up or braided to create a fabulous design. Upon closer inspection, the chignon hairstyle had been padded. This shape likely turned high profits and would fit the needs of the consumers.

"Since you've got the chance, why don't you wear one, madam?" Coldola offered.

Because of my long hair, containing it all within the wig was difficult. I wore it simply over my head and had my hair stuffed

inside. After I smoothed the wig out, I nervously gazed into the mirror and peered at myself.

“It doesn’t suit me at all,” I muttered.

I was almost impressed by how off-putting I looked as I inspected my blonde self in the mirror. It made my skin look dark, and my dark eyes and the mole by my eye stood out unnaturally like a sore thumb. Only my hair color was different, and it was completely unfitting for my appearance. Both Coldola and Kiki groaned about how awkward I looked as they averted their gaze.

I shrugged in response. “If we make a color that matches Lucas’s too closely, we might inadvertently narrow our market. Perhaps it’s best to have several hues and recommend one that suits the customer best.”

“You’re right,” Coldola agreed. “The president’s hair is just too bright and vibrant.”

“Lord Lucas’s hair reminds me of a baby chick. It’s cute,” Kiki added.

I thought about my husband; his skin must’ve been clearer and paler than I’d thought. Even his eyelashes had the same vibrant color, and it all looked natural on him. Just as I was about to remove the wig, I had another suggestion in mind.

“I’d like to go outside under the sun,” I said. “Perhaps that will affect the colors.”

“You’re right! Let’s head out!” Kiki agreed.

The three of us marched out into the corridor, where we bumped into Lucas.

“Lucas,” I said.

“Mr. Stock,” Coldola added.

“Lord Lucas,” Kiki chimed in.

The pocket watch he had tumbled out of his hand, dangling in front of him on its chain. It was bouncing about as Lucas turned pale.

“Iris! Your hair!” he cried as he hastily ran toward me. He stroked my hair as he panicked. “Hey, what happened? What did you do? What went on? Your dark hair was gorgeous. Were you still worried about it being too plain or something? Why did you… I’m always telling you that there’s nothing more beautiful in the world than your hair. And yet…”

I fell silent as he spoke swiftly; I didn't have time to butt in and could only stand there in astonishment. Behind him, Leik crouched down while trying to stifle his laughter. It apparently was difficult to laugh without making a sound.

"No, if you willingly chose to dye your hair, I don't mind that," Lucas went on. "You should do what you like since it's your own body. I'm not forcing you to maintain your black hair. B-But, I...I really loved your hair. You bleached your poor strands until they turned so brittle and rough... Why did you... If only you told me. I would've at least thought of a way to dye your hair without making it so rough."

"Lucas. Lucas, I must have you calm down," I said.

"How could I?"

"I didn't dye my hair. It's just a wig. Take a closer look."

"Huh?"

I felt sorry for him and removed the wig from my head. My dark hair, messily kept underneath, cascaded out for all the world to see. There was a moment of silence as Lucas's face went through a swift transformation. He became shocked, then relieved, then confused, and finally, redder than a beet.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Leik burst out laughing, unable to contain himself any longer.

"Leik! Damn it, stop laughing!" Lucas roared.

"Pffft... H-He's right, Leik..." Coldola said as she tried her best to stifle her laughs. "Y-You can't... Heh heh..."

"Oh, you're one to talk, Coldola!" Lucas growled. "You should see the face you're making right now!"

"Ha ha..." Kiki and I chuckled. We were the only ones who maintained a straight face, though we could only smile awkwardly as we also masked our laughter.

"U-Um, I'm sorry, Lucas," I said. "I was just testing these wigs out, so no one's at fault here. I should be to blame for wanting to step out with this wig on."

"No, I get it now," Lucas replied. "You want to test how it feels and see the color and stuff, right? Yeah, I get it. Really, I do."

He placed a hand over his face to hide his flurry of emotions.

"All right, we'll head back to work," Coldola said.

"P-Pardon me!" Kiki said.

Once everyone left, Lucas took my hand and pulled me into an empty drawing room. He held me in a tight embrace and stroked my hair.

“My heart almost stopped,” he whispered softly by my forehead. “I love your hair. It’s so beautiful. If you don’t mind, I would prefer if you didn’t dye it…”

“I’ve got no plans to,” I replied. “I like it when you stroke my hair.”

As he kept me in his arms, he reached out to comb my long locks that cascaded down my back.

“Hee hee,” I giggled. “It’s tough for Kiki to maintain for me.”

I looked up at my beloved. Even in the shadows, his hair emitted a brilliant glow.

“Lucas,” I said.

“Hmm?”

“May I…also touch your hair?”

“Of course.”

He carried me to the sofa, sat me sideways on his lap, and offered his hair to me. I gently stroked his locks along his scalp with both hands, his yellow fluff illuminated by the afternoon sun. His silky strands tickled the back of my hand as Lucas closed his eyes. Naturally, his eyelashes, eyebrows, and vellus hairs were the same canary-yellow hue, shining brightly to accentuate his white skin. Stunning didn’t even begin to describe him. He looked comfortable as I stroked his hair, and he seemed blissful.

“What’s wrong?” he asked when my hands stopped.

Even his amber irises that reflected me were vibrant. He was much taller than me, and it was rare to be so close to his eyes and touch his hair. I felt blessed to have this chance and kissed the spot by his eye, just as he’d always done for me. He couldn’t hide his shock, his cheeks turning red as he looked at my face.

“Iris?” he asked.

“I’m sorry,” I replied with a smile. “You just looked so cute, so I…”

He drew me close in retaliation, stroking my hair that he claimed to love, and rolled me onto the sofa beneath him, completely encapsulating me in his arms.

“Lucas, what about work?” I asked.

“You think I can just head back to work now?” he whispered back.

I said not a word. He scooped up my dark tresses that spilled over the sofa and kissed a lock as he smiled, his amber gaze turning sharp like a hawk’s.

Afterword

THANK you so much for picking up the third volume of *The Invisible Wallflower Marries an Upstart Aristocrat After Getting Dumped for Her Sister!* This series was only around 50,000 characters initially, but I'm grateful I've been allowed to write three volumes!

I'm so glad I could make both Iris and Lucas so happy!

As I mentioned a bit in the first volume, Lucas and Iris are two types of characters I love so much that it's almost embarrassing. I'm thrilled I could culminate this story that started in 2021, filled with emotions, passion, and intensity, and made it something so sublime! My heart feels so full! The kind and positive words I received from my readers gave me so much energy as well. I truly cannot thank you all enough.

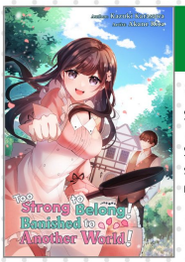
This was my debut series, yet my editor allowed me to have quite a bit of freedom with it; *The Invisible Wallflower* will always be a very memorable series for me. I'm very happy to claim this series as my debut story! I'll keep doing my best so that I won't let the hardworking Lucas and Iris down…

Now, for some acknowledgments. I give my deepest gratitude to all the readers for their support. Thank you to Murasaki Shido for illustrating all three volumes for me. I'd also like to thank Momiji Tsubakidani, who is crafting an excellent manga version of this series as we speak. Thank you to my editors, publishers, and everyone else involved in making this book. Thank you to my family, friends, and grandmother, who always cheered me on. I cannot thank them enough.

On the website, *Shōsetsuka ni Narō*, there are a few other side stories for *The Invisible Wallflower* that didn't make it in this book. I've also written a few bonus stories for the manga version as well. And I have other series that sort of touch on Eizerian merchants now and then. If you ever spot them, I'd be happy if they remind you that Lucas and Iris are well and alive!

Again, thank you all very much! I hope to meet you all again!

From a lucky day in November 2023
Makino Maebaru



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illust Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal… But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illust Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

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