
THE TALES OF
Book XII
MARIELLE CLARAC
The Labyrinth
of Marielle Clarac
Author: Haruka Momo
Illustrator: Maro



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Marielle Clarac



Jack Pieron

A reporter for a gossip rag. A middle-aged man who appears perpetually tired.

Damian

The man who made a plagiarism accusation against Agnès Vivier in a newspaper.

Eric Delmer

The eldest son of the Delmer baronage. Ran away from home at 18 due to being on bad terms with his father.

Valeriano

A young man who commands underlings of the Scalchi Familia. Appears uncaring.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.



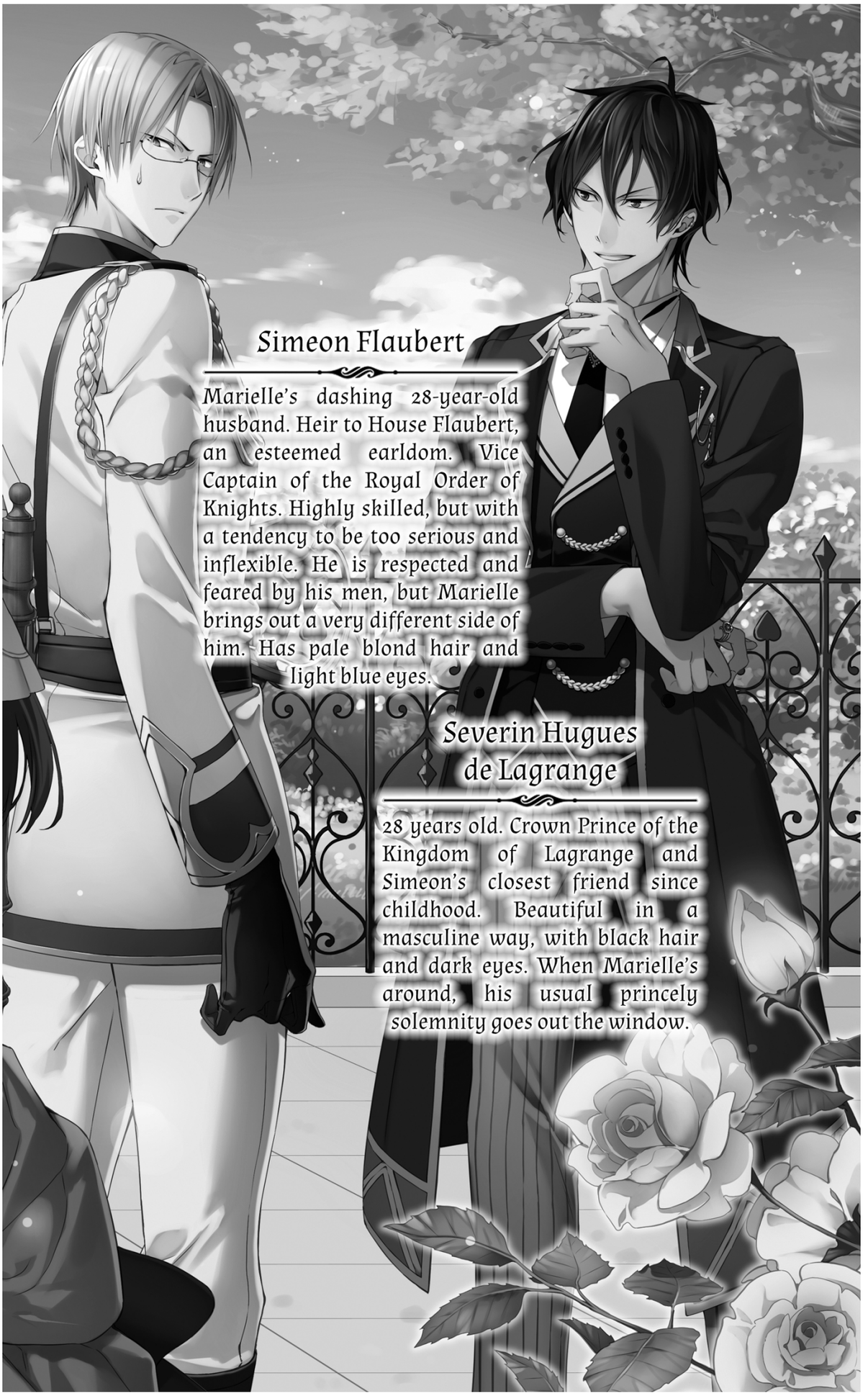

Simeon Flaubert
Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.
Severin Hugues de Lagrange
28 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.



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Chapter One

As I opened the window, a light breeze brushed past my face. The sunrays beaming down shone with a bright intensity. Flowers were blooming en masse, their green leaves happily outstretched.

Girls of all ages were fond of this time of the year, when spring was transitioning into summer, since it brought the promise of a wonderful future when they'd take their first steps as new brides. Her Highness Princess Henriette, the youngest princess of our kingdom, Lagrange, would soon be married, and her wedding would certainly be festooned with those blessed fluttering feelings.

Or at least, we had thought it would be, until just a little while ago.

"This place…"

After disembarking from the carriage, we all gazed up in confusion at the building in front of us. Though the land it sat upon had a long history, the building itself was of a newer design, with fancy construction techniques and decorations that were popular just two hundred years ago. Thick, elliptical pillars lined the front, and the windows and roof were adorned with engravings. Above one of the third-floor windows was a smaller window—perhaps an attic?

The most striking things were the giant statues along the front facade. The majestic appearances of legendary deities greeted all those who visited. These were incredible works of art that looked like they could come to life at any second.

This was one of the many tourist locations in this city, so I'd known of it prior to my visit. The building was named the Parche Palace. It was on a smaller scale for a palace—about the size of a normal mansion. As one would expect, it once served as the residence for a noble named Parche. However, it was only called a palace because of how elegant the building was, and no actual emperor had ever lived in it.

At present, it belonged to the grand duke's family, so the name was a bit more fitting now, but that family resided in the larger Casterna Palace, which was nearby—they most likely

didn’t even use Parche Palace as a vacation home. It was also vaguely unfit to be a guest house, as it was smack-dab in the middle of the city. There were no walls or fences surrounding it, only a mere plaza that led straight to the road. The neighborhood was filled with shops, hotels, and apartment buildings, and an appetizing scent wafted by, making my stomach growl after the long journey. This area was bustling with locals and tourists alike.

At present, people were gathered to catch a glimpse of the bride from the neighboring kingdom who had just arrived. Royal knights accompanied her as her guards, and they did their best to prevent the crowd from getting near her. These foreign knights garnered attention as well, not only because their white uniforms were both practical and appealing, but also because they had been assigned to this mission with their looks in mind —they were all very attractive.

Their leader in particular was a beautiful man who drew every eye, and the women in the crowd all cheered for him. This man, my capable husband, boasted both ability and an impeccable appearance. *That’s right! Push that crowd back!*

After retraining my focus onto the building in front of us, I turned to the person behind me, who was stepping down from the carriage. “I wonder why we’re at Parche Palace. I thought we were supposed to head straight to Casterna. Was this detour planned?”

“I didn’t hear anything about this either.” The black-haired princess shook her head, and her confused expression mirrored my own.

We’d been traveling by land for several days. Just when we’d thought that the princess would finally be meeting with her beloved, we’d found ourselves taken to this place. Our entire entourage had no idea why, so I asked one of the officials from Lavia who was with us. “Pardon me, but why have we been taken here? This appears to be different from what we’d planned beforehand.”

This man had greeted us at the border of our two kingdoms and accompanied us from there. He was only in his thirties, but he seemed to be quite coolheaded. He answered me with an insincere smile plastered on his face.

“Her Highness and you all will be residing here until the wedding ceremony.”

“We…were not informed of any such thing,” I replied.

“Is that so? I cannot say why that is, but we merely guided you here per our orders. Parche Palace will be your place of residence for the time being.”

The official did not appear to be surprised or bothered in the least, which led me to believe that he’d known about this from the start.

What’s going on?

I walked back over to Princess Henriette and told her what I’d just heard. Lord Simeon came over with a similarly puzzled look.

“Was there some sort of miscommunication?” he asked.

“I don’t believe so.” I quietly gestured toward the man from earlier. “That official knew we’d be confused. They seem to have made this decision without discussing it with us first.”

Princess Henriette raised her eyebrows. “Prince Liberto ordered such a thing?”

“We don’t yet know whether these were his orders or not,” I said. Though something like this would fall perfectly in line with the prince’s blackhearted nature, right now, we couldn’t say anything for sure. What we *did* know was that we probably wouldn’t be able to get any information out of the official.

My husband promptly made the first decision. “Then I suppose we have no choice. Let us go inside. Debating about it here will only make things more complicated. We’ll confirm with the grand duke’s palace staff after winding down for a moment.”

I nodded. “Agreed. It would be dangerous for the crowd to get any larger.”

An ever-growing number of onlookers were staring at Princess Henriette. There were so many that carriages couldn’t pass on the road anymore. Things were starting to get perilous, not only because of the carriages but also because people were beginning to shove one another. There could even be people plotting immoral things in the midst of the fuss, and the knights we had on guard wouldn’t be able to handle it if the mob began to push forward. I felt that Lavia’s side could have predicted something like this happening and taken measures to prevent it, such as placing guards here beforehand. *Honestly, Lavia hasn’t been very hospitable thus far.*

Left with no other choice, we had the official lead us. Princess Henriette waved farewell to the crowd as she followed him to the side of the building. The entrance there was plain, in contrast to

the splendorous design of the front facade. That small door was intended to be hidden behind the grand statues.

Once inside, we stepped into a small hall. At the end of this hall was a corridor leading deeper inside the palace, as well as a staircase to the upper floors. The ceiling, pillars, and handrails along the stairs were all gorgeously decorated in an old-fashioned style. That was fine, but…

Everyone's faces, including mine, stiffened as we peered around. Our doubts and suspicions only grew as we went farther in. The inside of the palace was dim and silent. Though the season was warm, I wondered if the chill here was because of the stone walls. That much was easy to deal with, but why was the air filled with the stench of mold and dust? One could tell that this place was not used regularly—that was just the kind of place it was. But couldn't they have aired it out before welcoming their own prince's bride, the princess of another kingdom?

Our party exchanged glances as the official led us to the second floor. White dust covered my fingers as I trailed them along the handrail.

What in the world is happening?

It's been a year since I married the person I love and began living as the young wife of an earl. I, Marielle Clarac—turned Marielle Flaubert—believe I have become a proper adult woman, as I turned twenty just the other day!

My appearance…hasn't changed, admittedly. But I do believe people have been telling me that I look less and less like a child these days. Of course they would, because I'm twenty now! Even my bespectacled face, which has no defining features at all, has surely become a bit more mature and intelligent-looking. *Of course it has! Belief turns to truth!*

As an author, I've accomplished many things and have gradually gotten my name out there. Before, I was only known and supported by a certain sphere of fanatics, but nowadays, I receive letters from the general public as well. Being given a regular column in a newspaper also seems to be having a big effect. But naturally, I'm still lacking in many areas, so I shouldn't get complacent and think that I'm perfect. I have to put forth more energy and do my best!

Unfortunately, my feelings tend to become flippant in the spring. The weather is nice, flowers bloom, and just taking a walk

makes me feel like something good is going to happen. My beloved husband Lord Simeon only becomes more and more handsome; his beauty and brutal, blackhearted flavor gets more polished by the day! I'd thought that I would fangirl over him less once we got married, but I was sorely mistaken. I've only been discovering new things about him one after another, and not a single day passes that I don't fangirl over his increasingly adult charms. There lies a spark specific to our marriage, one separate from the spark we had during our engagement. The trust we now have for each other, and the relief we feel when the other is around, is deeper than it was before our marriage. Now that we're family, we support one another through happy moments, fun moments, and sometimes hard moments. I couldn't be happier.

I wonder if Princess Henriette will be able to experience the same thing. I was sad that I wouldn't be able to see my friend as much anymore, but I wanted to cheer her on as she embarked on her new life. I wanted her to have her own happy, fun days, even though Prince Liberto was truly blackhearted and had quite a tough outer shell. Nonetheless, I was sure that the two of them could forge their own bond. Despite everything, they were perfect for each other.

Come now, the bell of celebration is ringing! Burst through the gates—at the end of the flower path lies a somewhat quirky but wonderful prince!

From the bottom of my heart, I wish for the two of them to lead a happy life together.

Congratulations!

But perhaps…it was a bit too early for me to say that.

Chapter Two

The Grand Duchy of Lavia had close ties with its neighbor, the Kingdom of Lagrange. At the beginning of last year, Lavia's heir, His Highness Prince Liberto, confirmed his engagement with Princess Henriette. It was made official while snow was still on the ground.

The two of them met for the first time over six months after that. Though this was a thoroughly political marriage, Princess Henriette was genuinely in love and couldn't wait for her wedding day. Once winter passed and roses started to bloom, the time for her to depart from her homeland to Lavia arrived.

The morning of her departure from Venvert Palace, her brother, His Highness the Crown Prince Severin, called me over with an ambivalent look on his face.

"I leave her in your care. Though...I'm not sure whether or not leaving that to *you* is a good idea."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked indignantly.

"Just as I said. You're a noisy, rampaging girl with a penchant for getting wrapped up in incidents—and you've only just turned twenty! Trouble brews wherever you go; storms and difficulties of all kinds follow you. Then, you rush headfirst into them and escape by a hair's breadth! You would have died two or three times over by now if it weren't for Simeon, mind you. I have no choice but to be worried about sending you to Lavia, of all places!" The prince prattled on with these lengthy lines, then finally took a breath. "However, Prince Liberto called for you, and Henri herself strongly requested that you be there, so..."

"You rehearsed all of that, didn't you?" I asked.

"Quiet, you! Why, I never!"

I puffed my cheeks out. "It's not like I'm getting into these messes on purpose. They're all just coincidences."

"I'm telling you off because of the frequency at which they occur!"

"You don't need to worry. This time around, the plan was to have an incident occur from the start, even *before* my involvement. This mess began on its own."

"That only makes it worse!"

I had to turn away from His Highness's tongue-lashing. *Well, what do you expect me to do about it? The one causing the fuss this time isn't me, but Prince Liberto!*

The prince of Lavia was six years older than Princess Henriette and would be turning twenty-seven years old this year. He'd been putting a certain plan into action for a while now regarding Lavia's public safety, which was worsening by the year. The severity of the heinous crimes occurring in Lavia was even known overseas, and many of them were committed by a crime syndicate known as the Scalchi Familia. There was murder, smuggling, purchasing and sales of illicit drugs, and many other evildoings. Including their external members, it was said that the number of people involved with the Scalchi Familia reached four digits. Its upper echelon had only a few members, but at that level, they weren't mere thugs. They held positions of power on the outside, with many connections to political and economic spheres. They worked with bigwigs from various fields, so they were a menace.

Prince Liberto was trying to tackle them head-on. Of all things, he was currently trying to get them to plot to assassinate him. His plan was apparently to egg them on, then uncover them once they actually made moves to do it. The upcoming wedding ceremony was to be held with that plan at stake. The knights attending to Princess Henriette were even more on guard than usual, and they would have to become Prince Liberto's strength when the time came. I was tasked with being his bride's direct attendant.

Prince Severin bared his teeth at me. "He appointed *you* for the job, citing the fact that you're more used to being in peril than the usual woman. Do you know how it felt for me to be unable to deny that? Considering the situation, that type of person is indeed preferable. There really isn't anyone more suited for the job than you. So, I had no choice but to relent! But why on earth are you so used to being in peril in the first place?!"

"As if I could answer that!"

My husband Lord Simeon wore a bitter expression next to His Highness. Beneath his pale blond hair, his shapely eyebrows were furrowed, and the white space between them was crinkled with lines. *Even that face is wonderful!* This Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights could make a crying child's face freeze over. Within his deep blue eyes behind his glasses, agony and

resignation coincided.

His Highness wasn't finished yet. "Is it really all right for me to task you with this when you haven't undergone any training? A noblewoman you may be, but as a man in a position of power... No, as an *adult*, I had to debate long and hard about this. However, with Henri's safety on the line, I had to take great care in considering who would be dispatched. No matter how I thought about it, you were the one fit for the job. I'm sorry, but please take care of her."

Despite the anguish coloring his face, he bowed his head to me. I'd thought that he was merely performing his usual complaints and jabs, but it seemed he was genuinely trying to apologize for involving me.

I was happy he felt that way, but he didn't need to be so solemn about it. He could have just said "sorry" and let that be the end of it.

"Please raise your head," I said. "There's no need for you to worry so. My role is to stay by Princess Henriette's side, so I'll be protected next to her at all times, right? There will be plenty of guards, and moreover, Lord Simeon will be with us. Also, Prince Liberto is sure to prioritize Princess Henriette's safety over anything else, so I'm sure we'll be fine."

"When it comes to you, things that are sure to be fine always turn out to surely *not* be fine."

I'd gone through the trouble of being generous to him, yet his retort had been nothing but rude. Try as he might to say that he was just worried for me, his words only made me puff out my cheeks more.

A voice from farther away cut into our banter. "Brother, how long are you going to linger there? Hurry up and leave so that we can depart."

Many people were gathered at the front entrance of the palace. In the center was the star of the show, Princess Henriette herself. Her parents, older sister, and loved ones were bidding her farewell.

"You can chat with Marielle all you want at a later date," she scolded. "I have to leave now, so please let her go."

"We're discussing something important!" His Highness's voice pitched upward at being told off by his beloved younger sister. "And, hey, wait! Don't you have something to say to me? This is our *final* farewell! You're not just going off to play! Why do you

look like you'll come right back home?!"

"Final, sure, but we'll meet again at the wedding and reception."

"I have to stay in Lagrange! I'm the *only* one of our family who can't attend!"

"Oh, right. Then this is goodbye, brother. Please stay well." Her Highness smiled and waved her hand at him.

Tears lined Prince Severin's eyes. "You can't just… Urgh, I could've attended if things hadn't gotten so complicated…! Lavia isn't safe! But counterfeit money is making the rounds here, and problem after problem keeps cropping up, so father and I can't leave the kingdom at the same time, meaning I was the obvious choice to stay home… Aaagh!"

"Enough. Between a parent and child, it's only natural for the parent to be given priority." Her Highness flatly shut down His Whining Highness.

He looked reproachful at the further scolding. "At least let me complain about it! I won't be able to see my own sister in her wedding dress. I'm the *only* one in the family who's being excluded!"

"Oh, you're making such a fuss! I showed it to you while I was being fitted for it, didn't I? We'll send photographs, anyway."



Prince Severin completely buckled after being treated so coldly. Lord Simeon looked after him as the prince faced a wall and muttered to himself.

I walked over to the princess, who whispered to me with a chuckle.

“I spoke with him plenty today and already said my goodbyes. He just doesn’t know when to let go.”

“His cute younger sister is leaving. He can’t help it.”

“Are we really so close that he’s *this* beat up over it? He’s never fussed over me this much.”

“I think that’s a bit different.”

“We’ll meet again soon anyway.”

It would take about a day’s ride by boat to travel from Sans-Terre to Lavia’s capital, Latiry. Princess Henriette wasn’t going so far away that this would be a lifelong farewell. On top of that, Lavia was a very small kingdom. It was sandwiched between Easdale to the east and Lagrange to the west, making it seem more like a border region than a stand-alone kingdom. It didn’t feel as far away as other nations.

His Highness Prince Severin and my best friend Julianne were to marry within the year as well. Naturally, an invitation had been sent to Lavia. Out of the grand duke’s family, Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto were sure to attend. In fact, the wedding and reception that the princess had spoken of earlier was her brother’s. The two kingdoms were close in both proximity and relations, so the brother and sister were sure to visit each other occasionally. Though they wouldn’t be able to meet freely, they would see each other regularly—that was how light this farewell was. Aside from a certain person, no one felt gloomy about it.

And so, Princess Henriette left Venvert Palace, where she’d been born and raised. We didn’t travel by sea but took our time traveling by carriage. This was partially to show the citizens the path she was taking to her wedding and partially so that she could meet with those she knew along the way. We stayed at Castle Embourg near the border and met with Lady Laetitia and Lady Anna—I was relieved that the two of them seemed to be doing very well. The next day, we finally crossed the border, and the princess was sentimental yet filled with excitement. As evening approached on the sixth day, she finally entered the city of Latiry.

This city, under the grand duke's jurisdiction, was the ancient birthland of an empire. In current times, the form of the kingdom and its ruler were completely different, but traces of ages long past could be seen here and there. Though it was a modern place that was no less grand than Sans-Terre, ancient ruins were commonplace features of the city, making for an interesting atmosphere.

One after another, mysterious sights appeared that made our hearts flutter. As we enjoyed the view outside the window of the carriage, we finally arrived at our destination, Casterna Palace…

Or, at least, we thought we'd ended up there. But I've already told you about what happened when we first arrived.

We were already encountering difficulties. Dark clouds were gathering even before the main event was set to start.

If nothing else, the living room on the second floor was presentable. I was relieved that I wouldn't need to worry about potential spiderwebs.

"For now, I'm just glad that we get to rest in a place roomy enough for us to stretch our legs—not to mention one that's not rocking back and forth. I don't want to ride in a carriage for a good while. Let's all take a break for the time being."

The maids were doing their best to think positively and calm down Princess Henriette, since she was probably the most confused out of all of us. She was currently sitting on an old but elegant couch wearing a slightly mystified expression. This type of furniture from decades ago wasn't meant to be soft, so I was sure it wasn't very comfortable.

Though the room appeared fine at first glance, a closer look revealed that the furnishings were all very old. In fact, the whole building felt like it had been perfectly preserved from a past era.

I went to my husband's side, leaving the princess to talk to her maids. "Have you learned anything, Lord Simeon?"

After giving a few orders to his subordinates, he gestured for me to stand by the wall near the doorway with him. He then spoke in a hushed voice so that no one else could hear. "I'm just as confused as you. We met with Lavia's officials many times before the trip, but they never informed us of this change of plans."

Lord Simeon was beautiful like an illustration in a novel, with the perfect melding of delicacy and elegance—his face was calm. But deep within his light-blue eyes, doubt lingered, alongside a

tinge of anger. It seemed Lord Simeon harbored the same feelings as the rest of us in regards to our plight.

"If His Highness was the one who ordered this," I said, "then perhaps something urgent occurred at Casterna Palace, and he can't let us—or rather, can't let Princess Henriette—go there."

Lord Simeon shook his head. "He would have contacted us if that were the case. It doesn't seem like something prevented him from rushing a message to us."

My husband glanced to the side as he leaned against the wall. A woman pushing a cart stepped through the doorway, which had been left open. Was she a servant dispatched from the ducal palace? Tea and cups were situated on top of the cart, along with two large teapots. There was enough for everyone.

Though the hallways and stairwells hadn't been cleaned, the living room was in proper order, and servants were present. It was clear that someone had prepared at least part of this palace for our visit, so wouldn't that person have had time to contact us about the change of venue?

The servant placed a teacup in front of Princess Henriette. "Thank you," the princess said. She then took the opportunity to inquire about our circumstances. "Um, I believe it's almost time for dinner. Where will we be eating it?"

The servant, who looked a bit older than us, answered without any trace of emotion. "Dinner was scheduled to take place in the dining hall, but we will bring it to this room if you so request." Her tone was polite, but somehow coldly uncaring.

Princess Henriette backed down from her innocent question. "I see. Then we'll eat in the dining hall."

"Understood."

The princess had most likely wanted to believe that we were only in this small palace for a break from our travels and that we would be at Casterna in time to dine. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Should we send a messenger to Casterna?" I asked, my voice somewhat melancholy.

Princess Henriette twiddled her thumbs. "I'd like to, but..."

Lord Simeon, still resting against the wall, folded his arms. "It's almost sundown. We're all exhausted, so we should call it a night."

"Are you sure?"

"Prince Liberto is sure to hear that we've arrived in Latiry. If he

did not authorize us being rerouted, then he'll do something about it. We could stand to wait a while longer."

"That's true..."

He was right. We were all tired after sitting in a rocking carriage for several days straight. We'd momentarily forgotten about our exhaustion because we'd been excited to arrive at a destination, but now that we were remembering it, it was taxing to think about having to resume traveling.

When we peeked out of the doorway into the hall, we found that our luggage had been brought in without our permission and was haphazardly strewn about. I wasn't sure whether to be pleased with the convenience or mad at the lack of authorization. As I pondered that little dilemma, the servant from earlier entered the room again. This time, she was carrying a basket full of wisteria and one other thing...

"What shall we do with this item, Your Highness?"

"Oh!" When Princess Henriette saw the basket, she stood up so quickly from her chair that it almost looked like she'd been launched from it. She jogged to the servant, took the basket, then removed the latch that prevented the lid from coming off. A black-and-white fluffball popped out from inside.

"Pearl! I'm sorry! Sorry! I'm *so* sorry!" The princess quickly picked up the small dog, which had a short snout and big, round eyes—the little pup was happily wagging her tail and not yelping or crying out at all.

This was Princess Henriette's beloved puppy, Pearl. Still only a year old, she loved to play, but she was also obedient and didn't cause too much mischief, nor did she bark a lot. The princess had put her into that basket right before leaving the carriage, but Pearl had been promptly forgotten about since she hadn't made any noise during all the ruckus. The maid who'd been left in charge of her was profusely apologizing. We couldn't blame her, since both Princess Henriette and I had also forgotten. Our attention had been stolen away by the immediate shock of disembarking the carriage in an unexpected location.

Now that we'd all been reminded of Pearl, we began hastily searching for her necessities. The dog had to be prioritized over the humans, since unlike us, she couldn't take care of herself. We rushed to dig her supplies out of our luggage. While we were making a fuss, Pearl began sniffing her new surroundings. While a cat might have been afraid of an unfamiliar new place, a dog

likely wouldn't be—in fact, Pearl seemed to be enjoying herself. She sniffed not just the floor, but also all of our feet.

Lord Simeon looked conflicted as Pearl investigated him. "Pearl, I feel like you've known me long enough by now. You shouldn't need to confirm my identity anymore."

I put my hand to my chin. "Perhaps she feels the call of nature, so she's searching for a place to go."

Lord Simeon made an audible noise, scooped up the dog, then ran out of the room before I had the chance to tell him that we had potty pads for her. There was a brief moment of silence after he rushed out, and then we all burst into laughter. Confusion, discouragement, displeasure, doubt—all of our negative emotions were dispersed thanks to Pearl. We were finally able to laugh from deep within our hearts. Animals could truly soothe one's soul.

After that, displeased as we were, we finally felt like settling down for the night. For the foreseeable future, we'd be busy with meetings, preparing for the wedding, and many other things, so we just *knew* we would be receiving some sort of communication from Lavia's side. Prince Liberto was, of course, going to send us a message without us worrying. We were fine! All we had to do for tonight was rest, so it didn't matter where we did so...

Or at least, that was what we told ourselves.

"There...aren't any beds?"

As it turned out, our hopes had been naive. It definitely *did* matter where we slept for the night.

One of Lord Simeon's subordinates had called for him and then whispered this shocking report in his ear. The subordinate had gone to check on how the rooms would be split. At that point, he learned that not one single room in the palace had a bed.

The rest of us quickly went to scope out the other rooms and confirm. It was just as we'd been told—no matter which bedroom we looked in, the only furniture inside each was a modest desk and chair. No bed. Not only that, but there was dust *everywhere*. I stood there, agape and astonished upon discovering that the spiderwebs I'd feared really *were* here.

As one would expect, even Princess Henriette was upset by this development. She turned to the servant and demanded answers. "What is the meaning of this? We're being told to stay in this place, yet not a single bit of preparation was done to

welcome us. Do you expect us to sleep on the floor?”

Though the servant should have ideally been apologizing for this utmost ineptitude, she merely responded with a blank face. “Not at all, my lady. Your room is the next one over.”

That was correct: The only room that had an actual bed was the one right next to the first room we’d been led to. In other words, only the princess had a room prepared for her.

“Just one bed isn’t enough and you know it!” the princess bellowed. “Do you know how many of us there are here?!”

Our party consisted of four maids, thirty-six guards (including commanders), three planners, and me, for a total of forty-four people. Though the guards would rotate during the night, we would still need at least twenty-five beds.

The servant didn’t budge. “There are quarters for your attendants on the fourth floor. There may not be quite enough space, but we ask for your understanding.”

Our maids and guards exchanged glances. *Fourth floor...? That small window I could see from outside?* So far, we’d only checked up to the third floor, so we immediately made our way back up the stairs. As we’d expected, a narrow, plain hallway and six similarly plain rooms with low ceilings greeted us. Four beds had been squeezed into each one, with no other furniture in sight. *Twenty-four beds, then. Looks like we have places to sleep, but who knows whether or not we’ll be able to rest in them.*

One of the maids uttered what we were all thinking. “No matter how you look at it, these are the servants’ quarters... *We’re* servants, but...”

“W-We can be called that, but we’re not of such low status that we have to sleep in an attic...” stammered another maid. “We each have private rooms in Venvert.”

“Forget us—the men here aren’t servants, are they?”

“Maybe they’re considered civil servants since they work for the government?”

“What kind of logic is that? *None* of this makes any sense!”

By this point, all of us had come to the same conclusion: The way we were being treated couldn’t be explained away by a lack of communication or preparation. This was being done out of obvious malice. There was no doubt that someone was very intentionally treating us rudely.

Princess Henriette was only growing angrier by the minute. She kept saying that we should argue with the staff once more.

But if the culprit was doing this on purpose, it didn't matter what she did. She would probably also be looked down upon in an argument for being a young woman.

Lord Simeon took the initiative and gathered up the palace's servants. "We do not intend on wasting any more time here on these pointless endeavors. We have one request—we would like to leave this place and head straight to Casterna Palace, as was initially planned. Do you agree?"

There were only two female servants and four security soldiers present. The rest had all gone home for the night, including the one who'd greeted us in the first place. *Unbelievable!*

For the first time, one of the servants showed a trace of fear. "We're terribly sorry, but that cannot be done. We were ordered to have you all reside here, so it would be a problem if those plans were to change."

"Your side was the one who suddenly changed the plans on *us*. I'll say it again: We do not intend on wasting any more time with you all. We're leaving. *Now*."

Lord Simeon was talking perfectly calmly and not raising his voice—his expression was not particularly frightening either. However, his words were effectively shutting down his opponents' protests. *As expected of the Demon Vice Captain! You're absolutely right! It's simply a waste of time to deal with all the ifs, ands, and buts!*

The servants were indeed daunted by his unwillingness to listen. "Even so, sir..."

"If there is an issue with this revised course of action, then take it up with the person who ordered you to accommodate us in this manner. Our only option is to do as we planned." He then turned to his subordinates and addressed them. "Everyone, prepare to depart."

The knights began to move, ignoring the palace's servants entirely. Those servants flailed about trying to stop them. "Please, don't! Casterna's front gates have long closed by now, and they won't be able to tend to you even if you show up! It will be bothersome if you all ignore the orders we were given!"

Lord Simeon's eyes glinted. "I've already told you—everyone here is a waste of time. We won't be listening any longer." Though his voice and expression were as calm as ever, his gaze shot icicles through those standing in his way.

The palace's guards, who'd apparently been thinking that our knights were just pretty decorations, grew pale at the Demon Vice Captain's sheer force of will.

Lord Simeon looked back at me a bit reproachfully. "Marielle, come back to reality and get ready."

"Miss Marielle..." Princess Henriette was also staring at me worriedly. While our knights and maids chuckled, the palace servants were pulling back from the unfamiliar sight.

But... But... I'm sorry, I can't help it! Please, hold on for just a moment!

Aaaaaaah!

This, this, this is it! This is absolutely it! This intense force is Lord Simeon incarnate! He doesn't have to yell, and he doesn't have to make faces. He suppresses all who oppose him purely with the intensity that oozes from his whole body. This intensity is so delectable because he's a true man of strength! This is him—my one true brutal, blackhearted military officer!

Soooooooo coooool!!!

"Let's...go prepare." Lord Simeon gave up immediately and turned to our maids.

"Y-Yes sir."

"Um, is the madam all right?" asked another maid.

"Don't worry about her," sighed my husband. "She's a little *too* all right."

His nonexplanation only served to further confuse the entire room. I struggled to conceal my fangirling as I tried to help the preparations along. Our knights glared at the Lavians to prevent them from getting in our way. The area was just beginning to liven up when...

Another new voice cut through the air, bringing us all to a halt.

"Ah, sorry to interrupt, but could you all hold your horses for just a bit longer?"

The languid voice was that of a young man. Most of us looked up in shock—not just our party, but the palace servants as well.

Lord Simeon and I were the only ones who recognized that voice. My husband's mask of ice shattered into a wholly unhappy grimace.

Beyond the open door was a tall figure. No one knew when he'd arrived. His short black hair flipped out energetically at the ends, and his eyes were as blue as the ocean; his masculine,

chiseled face had a sardonic, man-eating look on it. His hands were somewhat rudely shoved into his pockets, and the way he was standing embodied the word *aloof*. When he locked eyes with mine, his grin deepened, and he flashed a wink.

In all honesty, I didn't feel at all surprised by this person's appearance—he was already familiar to me. In fact, I almost felt like it was about time he showed up. I was practically positive that we would reunite with him upon entering Lavia.

Lord Simeon schooled his expression back to its usual coolness…albeit with a crease still remaining between his brows. The man in the doorway made sure that Lord Simeon looked that way, then stepped into the room.

At that moment, Princess Henriette finally realized she'd met him before. "Ah, you're… Erm, my apologies. What was your name again?"

"Emidio Cialdini. Welcome to Lavia, Your Highness the Princess. We're pleased to have you." Putting his hand to his chest in an exaggerated motion, the man greeted her with a flourish.

Though he identified himself as Earl Cialdini, he was actually more famous under a different name.

The heinous phantom thief Lutin, infamous in many countries, had made his appearance.

Chapter Three

By this point, we'd had many experiences with Lutin. He usually caused a ruckus on the streets by targeting primarily nobles and the wealthy.

He was several years older than me, and though he appeared to be a bright young man on the surface, he was actually an intelligence operative who reported directly to Prince Liberto. His guise as a thief was merely a ruse to cover up his true identity—those he stole from would lose not only their treasures but also their vital information.

Because we'd discovered his top secret identity, he seemed to have put a lid on his antics. We hadn't seen any newspaper articles on him for a while now, which had made him complain that the masses were boring for being so irresponsible. In exchange, he was doing his best at his real occupation. He'd just recently thrown us around back in Lagrange, in fact. *That's right! You know what? I was just thinking that I should give him a piece of my mind about that the next time we met. That's also why I agreed to accompany the princess!*

However, I decided to put that incident aside for now. This wasn't the time for a confrontation—frankly, I just hoped we would finally be getting an explanation for the current mess. *I really do have a lot to say to you, though! Look, it's written all over Lord Simeon's face that he'd like to give you a good smack. But you see, we're having to gulp down these feelings because we're the type of people who prioritize things!*

"Man, these stares could kill," Lutin whispered, intentionally loudly. *We're trying our best here, you know!* "Are you not happy to see me? Should I not have come?"

"Oh, no, don't say that." I smiled, letting venom seep through. "We were just thinking we wanted to meet with you again. We're *so* happy you're here!"

"Indeed," Lord Simeon confirmed. "We couldn't possibly kill you before we've made use of you. We have to make the most out of this opportunity."

"Lord Simeon! You're letting your true intentions show!"

"I was trying to let him know that we welcome his entrance."

Lutin shook his head. “You guys are genuinely making me want to leave.”

He fully entered the room, and he wasn’t alone. Two more people followed him, one of whom we knew well. This was Lutin’s subordinate Dario, who was tall beyond belief and possessed monstrous muscles. Yet, he was delicately beautiful from the neck up, with a deeply chiseled face and very long eyelashes that made everyone envious. His curly blond locks made him look like an ancient sculpture, so it was a sight to see him in this city. I imagined this was what the people of the past looked like.

The other person accompanying Lutin was a very old man who walked with a stick. His posture was bent, and he kept his gaze mostly on the floor. His hair and beard were completely white, and both of his hands gripped the stick for balance. When he walked into the room, he hobbled unsteadily. Dario walked slowly by his side to watch over him.

Lutin, on the other hand, swiftly approached the Lavian workers and told them to leave. “You all don’t have to come back until we tell you to.”

The servant he was staring daggers into sputtered out, “Y-You can’t just come in and…”

“Can you not hear me? I told you to *leave*.” Unlike when he spoke to me, Lutin’s voice was cold and direct, and he effectively quieted the servants with his sharp glare. *Do they know Lutin? It doesn’t look like this is their first time meeting him.*

The palace’s servants and soldiers bitterly exchanged glances and left the room. Lord Simeon ordered two of our knights to keep watch outside. They went to stand in front of the door in the hallway, ensuring that no one would interrupt us.

“Um, Earl Cialdini?” Princess Henriette had silently observed us up until that point, but she now spoke to Lutin. “What in the world is happening? Would you be so kind as to explain?”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here. Please sit tight, and don’t look so forlorn. The situation is not that serious.” Lutin’s face had made yet another abrupt change. He then made way for the elderly man—that man and Dario had finally caught up with him.

Just as Princess Henriette began to peer curiously, the old man’s bent back suddenly straightened up.

“Huh?!” The princess and I both exclaimed at the same time. Everyone else around us was also surprised. The old man had

looked like he was going to fall over any second, but now he was standing up straight without issue.

No… Wait. This isn't an old man at all!

With his knees and elbows outstretched, he now gave off the impression that he had no trouble standing. As white as his hair and beard might have been, this was for sure a young man.

Ah, I see what's happening. Tension seeped out of my shoulders when I realized. This was something I'd long been used to: Lutin's signature disguise skill. He'd changed not only this man's appearance but also his stance and movements to make him resemble a much older person. I glanced at Lord Simeon, who was watching without a trace of shock on his face. It seemed he'd seen through the ruse from the start.

The man put his hand to his face and casually pulled off his beard. It was still a bit gross to see, even though I'd been expecting it. He then removed his white wig. Princess Henriette's eyes were as wide as saucers, and she desperately pressed her hand to her mouth.

The old man turned young man greeted us. "It's been a while. Welcome to Lavia. I'm terribly sorry that our awaited reunion had to take place in such a manner. I wish I could have welcomed you under different circumstances."

His voice was kind and soft. Dario handed him a cloth to wipe his face with. With that, the lines and wrinkles disappeared and were replaced with an unmatched beauty. He had slightly long, flaxen hair, with irises that were a rare bluish green color. Though he was slender and not particularly tall, his posture was elegant and graceful. I felt like he'd look good in a dress.

As I'd figured out halfway through the dismantling of his disguise, the old man had turned out to be Prince Liberto.

He'd visited Lagrange last year, and this was Princess Henriette's and my first time seeing him in about seven months. He was as gorgeous as ever. Sadly, his looks were the only thing that made him the perfect prince, for you see, he hid a black tail behind him. He was the complete opposite of Lord Simeon, who was a hero underneath his blackhearted appearance. However, I was truly grateful that he'd come to meet with us himself instead of sending an envoy. It further added to my relief.

But as I let out a sigh, Princess Henriette seemed to finally process the situation at hand. She turned red and became overly flustered. "P-P-P-Prince Liberto?! Huh…?! I-I'm so surprised! I

thought you were an old man… No, wait, why have you come here? Or rather, why am I in this place? Um, er, what should I say? I don't know what to do…"

As the princess panicked, her closest maid, Sophie, came to stand next to her and patted her back. "Your Highness, please take a deep breath."

Prince Liberto chuckled at the sight. Though one would think he was laughing at how cute his fiancée was, in truth, he was most likely satisfied with how smoothly his ploy had gone. *Honestly, he's just like Lord Simeon's youngest brother!*

The prince then flicked his gaze to me, as if he'd heard my inner thoughts. I silently bowed to him.

"You're rather quiet, Mrs. Flaubert. We've cleared the unwelcome guests from the room, so you may relax now."

"Pardon me. This is just how I am—please pay me no mind." This wasn't the place for me to butt in, so I held back. But for some reason, everyone in the room stared at me, shocked. *What?! Is there a problem?!*

His Highness flashed a grin. "Oh, is that so? Bambino, was she always so quiet?"

Lutin flinched. "You can't just call me that out of nowhere! Jeez…" He turned to me. "Marielle, we'd like to discuss your situation and what we're going to do from here, so could you come closer? Ah, no, Vice Captain, you can stay in the corner over there. You can hear things from miles away anyway."

My husband tilted his head down to glare at Lutin over his glasses. "We're comrades who stood back-to-back and fought together, yet you're being so cold?"

"Well, would you look at that. The vice captain's learned how to tell jokes. I think the world might flip upside down. It's creepy. Could you stop?"

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not good at speaking lightly. All I said was the truth."

"Man…you're easy to dislike."

As they went back and forth, we all sat down in the chairs around the table. The atmosphere gradually returned to normal.

Lord Simeon and Lutin stood back-to-back and fought alongside each other? When was that? I don't recall such a thing ever happening. In fact, I'm pretty sure you two were enemies last time, not comrades!

Lord Simeon and I, Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto, and

Lutin were now at the table. Everyone else stood along the walls. The princess had calmed down substantially.

His Highness spoke first to break the silence. “I shall greet you all again. Once more, welcome to Lavia. We’ve been waiting for you. You must be terribly confused as to what’s happening. My deepest apologies.”

Princess Henriette acknowledged his greeting and calmly got straight to the point. “It’s been a while. Thank you for your letters. And so, to be frank, did you order for us to be sent here, Prince Liberto? Is there a reason our destination was changed?”

He shook his head. “No. I only just found out that this happened. It’s pathetic to admit, and I’m sorry I didn’t find out faster. I lament causing so much trouble for you.”

The princess looked relieved that her fiancé had not ordered for her to be treated this way. She’d probably figured as much but was glad to hear him deny it outright.

But if that were the case, then why were we here? The prince answered that question immediately. “The grand duchess was the one who ordered that you all be brought to Parche Palace.”

“The duchess? So your…?”

“Yes, my mother. It’s unbelievably humiliating to say, but she did this to upset you.”

Her Highness turned to me, questions and doubt deep in her black eyes. I voiced these concerns to the prince. “So your future wife is being bullied by her mother-in-law before she even weds into the family?”

“Marielle,” Lord Simeon softly scolded me, implying that I should choose my words better. *It wouldn’t matter how much I sugarcoat it. The question remains the same.*

His Highness laughed bitterly. “Well, I suppose that’s it. Please don’t let it get you down—it’s not as if she personally hates this princess she’s never even met. She’s just upset that things didn’t go her way.”

“Her way? Did she want your bride to hail from Easdale?” I asked.

“That’s right. You’re as sharp as always.”

The prince sounded satisfied, but Princess Henriette’s brows furrowed in worry. I took a look around the room. Lord Simeon’s expression hadn’t changed, but I could tell he was a bit exasperated. Lutin’s emotions were much more apparent.

It was a well-known fact that Lavia’s grand duchess, Lady

Arabella, hated Lagrange. She hailed from Lavia's other neighbor, Easdale. In fact, she was the aunt of their current queen, who was the former king's younger sister.

Easdale and Lagrange had long had a strained relationship, even warring at times. At present, tensions had been soothed by several noble marriages between our nations, and we had formed an alliance, so we weren't constantly at one another's throats. Despite that, it was still common for residents of one nation to bad-mouth the other.

That was why Lavia, which was sandwiched between them, had been put in a tough position. It had survived thus far through its adept negotiation and economic skills, but among its residents were the Lagrange faction and the Easdale faction, which were often at odds. And of course, Grand Duchess Arabella led the Easdale faction. Accordingly, when Prince Liberto had come of age, she'd strongly pushed for his bride to be from Easdale.

But in the end, Princess Henriette had been the one chosen—Lagrange had won out. Of course the grand duchess would have been displeased with this outcome. What *was* hard to believe was that her son had been engaged for so long yet she was still dissatisfied.

I spoke once more, conveying my feelings as honestly as I could. "A normal wife and mother-in-law will always have their problems, but when they're supposed to be representatives of nations…any wrong move will affect Lavia's dignity, and naturally, Lagrange will strongly disapprove. I don't believe there's anything good about this situation."

Prince Liberto nodded. "I concur. My mother is not so foolish that she doesn't realize that, but she evidently lacks self-control." Though his smile and tone carried notes of affection, the prince's words were strict.

I wondered how he could say such a thing with such a kind expression. I only became more and more baffled every time I spoke to this man. "If her kingdom's reputation falls, so will hers," I pointed out.

"Even if everyone disagrees with her, she's the type of person who will double down and say everyone else is wrong. We can't expect any rational decisions from her." It was like Prince Liberto was talking about someone completely unrelated to him. His words had gone beyond "strict" into "scathing," and they

completely disavowed the grand duchess.

I wasn't sure if he really felt that way. *Just because two people are parent and child doesn't necessarily mean they'll get along. Their blood relation could bring its own troubles.* It seemed the prince and Grand Duchess Arabella didn't have a good relationship.

After I closed my mouth, Lord Simeon spoke. "So will we be able to leave this place?" As expected of the Demon Vice Captain, his demeanor hadn't wavered, even after catching a glimpse of a cold parent-child relationship. He wasn't going to let that distract him from the bigger issue at hand.

Prince Liberto appeared grateful for that, and he answered cheerfully. "Of course. We could even depart now, if you all so wish. However, Princess, won't you reconsider for just a moment?"

"Huh?" Princess Henriette was caught off guard.

He continued on with the same tone, as if nothing were wrong. "If you ask me, I don't think it would be a bad deal for you all to stay here in Parche. You wouldn't be able to avoid a confrontation with my mother if you went to Casterna. Please rid yourself of all hope of being treated nicely. I can guarantee that your time there will only be unpleasant."

The princess didn't answer him.

"I believe she'll go even further once you're there," he continued. "It would do you well to put as much distance between yourself and her as possible—you should try to limit the number of interactions you have with her. She did the least she could in preparing this palace for you, so you may as well take advantage of it. I can meet with you here, and I'll be sure to give you more servants and fix up the building. I wholeheartedly believe you'll have a much better time in this place than in Casterna."

After he'd come all this way to meet with her, *this* was the prince's answer. It was only natural for her to look downtrodden upon hearing it.

She couldn't answer him right away. Instead, she dropped her gaze to her lap for a bit as she thought. "Am I...supposed to stay here until our wedding? You're not suggesting that I remain here even after the ceremony, are you?"

"If that's what you wish, I wouldn't mind."

"I don't wish for that! I don't, but... Um, what do you wish for, Prince Liberto? That's what I want to hear most of all."

“I don’t mind either way. All I have to do is act according to your choice.”

Princess Henriette closed her lips. His response could be taken as both generous and uncaring. He was adept at concealing his inner thoughts.

The princess became even further troubled. “Then, as we agreed, I would like to go to Casterna.”

“Are you positive? If you’re trying to be considerate of me, then you don’t need to be. As I said, I don’t mind either way. As long as I can protect you, I wish for nothing else.”

“I understand. This is something small to you, Prince Liberto. You don’t care whether I run away or fight.”

The prince chuckled bitterly. “It’s not that I don’t care…”

“You said as much before. You don’t expect me to rule alongside you. All you’re asking of me is to do my part where necessary. In other words, to you, my role is to become your bride in name only, smile prettily next to you, and bear your heir.”

Her biting words were enough to make even His Highness’s smile vanish. She continued ruthlessly. “Therefore, my decision does not take your existence into account. It is purely my wish. I would like to go to Casterna.”

“And face off with my mother?”

“I am not going to see her as my enemy right off the bat.” Princess Henriette let out a small sigh, then loosened her posture, which had been stiffly upright this whole time. It must have taken her quite a bit of effort to be so honest. Her expression softened after she regained her composure. “I haven’t ever met her, and I don’t want to judge her preemptively. However, if you’re willing to warn me this much, it will surely be difficult to get along with her. As such, I’ll work hard at forming a relationship with her, but I will also prepare my heart in case the result is not favorable.”

Prince Liberto raised his eyebrows a little and chuckled softly. “I see.”

“There’s no guarantee that my hard work will pay off, especially when taking emotions in a human relationship into account. I can’t solve this problem solely through my own efforts. There are many cases in which, in the end, the only things gained are bitter feelings. With that in mind, and with a strong heart that’s prepared to not become more depressed

than necessary, I will do everything I can. I will not run before I even begin. That's the kind of person I wish to be."

I wanted to applaud Her Highness for her clear-cut declaration. She wasn't a simple, reckless girl, and she also wasn't a weak person who would opt to run away in any given situation. If something sad were to happen, she would feel down and flustered, but from there, she would do her best to face the problem head-on. I was proud to say that she was not a mere spoiled princess. The maids around us were also nodding in approval. They knew Princess Henriette even better than I did, so they probably felt double the pride and wanted to cheer her on.

How did His Highness feel, seeing such a side of his future bride? Drowning in the sea of the room's gazes, he smiled once more. "Very well. If that is what you wish, then we'll proceed as planned." His disposition was the same as before, but somewhat more satisfied. Had he been testing the princess? Had he been watching to see if she would simply do as she was told and choose the easier route?

No, I didn't feel any intention of the sort from him. Most likely, he truly did not care which choice she made. That didn't mean he didn't have an opinion on which would be better, though, surely. He could work with either one, but he must have thought that her choice to fight would make him happier. It felt somewhat melancholy that he'd forced the princess to make her decision without showing her those feelings, even if he was ultimately giving in to her wishes.

Lord Simeon wasn't one to leave all the decision-making to me. He would give me his own opinions as well, then we would find a path that would satisfy us both. Hearing his wishes and worries always made me more happy than not. By coming to understandings with each other and finding common ground, we were able to form an even better relationship.

Though it seemed Prince Liberto was respecting his partner's wishes, he was still putting distance between himself and her. What would he have done had she chosen to run away? I felt he would probably say nothing—he would likely think, *Oh, she's going to run*, then let things end there.

But don't you think that it's natural for someone to care *after learning of their partner's feelings, even when their partner wants to run away? Shouldn't one partner want to work hard to become strong for the other? Do you think of those things, Prince Liberto?* If

he really didn't expect anything of her and didn't harbor that much passion for her, then their relationship could only be categorized as melancholy.

I put my displeasure into a glare that clearly said, "What's wrong with your master?" and turned it on Lutin. He averted his gaze and didn't give me an answer.

As I quietly pouted off to the side, the prince and princess continued their discussion.

"We can leave now," he was saying, "but if you can bear with it for just one more night, why don't we leave tomorrow morning?"

"Are the preparations not complete?" Princess Henriette asked.

"Not quite. If we're going to do this, then we may as well take advantage of the situation and make an effective show out of it. May I come pick you up tomorrow?"

She didn't give him an immediate response. Instead, she looked around at me, Lord Simeon, and everyone along the walls. "Well…"

Once the words caught in the princess's throat, Ms. Sophie took the opportunity to speak. She received permission and faced Princess Henriette. "Please don't worry about us, Your Highness. We understand the situation, so none of us will have an issue with staying for just one night. It's perfectly fine."

I inserted myself into the conversation after regaining my conviction. "We even have beds. We can't all sleep at once, but would it be all right for the knights to take shifts?"

Lord Simeon wasted no time responding. "Of course. We can't have everyone asleep with no guards, so we were going to have night shifts either way."

"Indeed. Is that all right with you all as well, Sir Bernard?"

The planners that were accompanying us readily agreed. We all felt the same way. As exasperated with the ridiculous jabs as we were, we were ready to stay for just one night if that was all that was needed. It seemed Prince Liberto had something up his sleeve, so it was rather exciting.

All of our approval shored up Princess Henriette's determination. She agreed to the prince's plan, so our move to Casterna Palace was set for the next morning.

During our conference, the daylight pouring in from the windows had faded, leaving night in its wake. Prince Liberto prepared to leave, as he didn't want to linger for too long. Lutin

helped him don the old man disguise once more, and the prince headed to the door, stick in hand.

I couldn't help but marvel at the prince's hobble to the doorway. "Lutin's face-disguising techniques are skilled for sure, but the prince is also very good at acting."

Despite his appearance, His Highness's voice remained young as he laughed loudly. "I was trained alongside these two. For someone like me to safely walk outside, I have to be able to become another person entirely."

His lighthearted words reminded me that he was currently a prime target for assassination by a dangerous organization. This was honestly a more severe problem than his mother bullying his future wife.

Wait a minute—is he really okay?!

I hesitated to ask, since I didn't know whether this was something that could be spoken of in front of everyone else. I remained silent, and the three men swiftly left the room. Was it really all right for us to just watch them go like this? I looked to Lord Simeon, who aptly guessed my question. He jogged after them but was back in a moment.

"They told me not to escort them, as we would end up standing out even more."

"I suppose that's true…"

Having a foreign soldier—not to mention a magnificent knight like Lord Simeon—as an escort was like advertising for all eyes to fall upon them. Bringing Lord Simeon along would have had the opposite of the desired effect. Lutin and Dario were with the prince, so there wasn't a need to worry, right?

I went to the window to watch them go. The plaza with the mess of statues was right underneath. Now that there were no onlookers, the road had returned to normal. Underneath the dim sky, I could no longer see the carriage that transported royalty in disguise.

Chapter Four

The servants looked sour after having been thrown out by Lutin. They weren't even trying to hide their antagonism anymore. They announced that dinner was ready, then left without waiting for us to respond. Since they'd told us that the dining hall was on the first floor, we figured we'd go there.

"Oh, of course. I knew this would happen."

We laid eyes upon the table, and the only thing we could do was laugh. The only things on the table were a basket of bread and a pot of soup—this sent a clear message that we should just take what they'd given us and deal with it. There was no server, and to rub salt in the wound, the soup was cold.

I removed the lid from the pot to check. Inside, I found a clear liquid with no other ingredients. "Is this consommé? If so, it isn't supposed to be served cold."

"Just bread and soup…?" Ms. Sophie sighed with an exasperated look.

"You don't think it's poisoned, do you?" asked another maid worriedly.

It most likely isn't, is what I thought as I took some in the ladle and put it to my lips. "It tastes normal." It was nothing more than a tasty consommé, though it probably would've been better warm.

Sophie huffed. "They have some nerve, treating us like this."

"They wouldn't dare poison us here, since they'd be the only suspects," I pointed out. "They would wait until we arrive at Casterna to try something like that."

"So you're saying there's a possibility that they will?!"

"I'd like to think not, but nothing can be said for certain."

Ms. Sophie thought hard, her expression dark. I wanted to believe the grand duchess and her servants wouldn't go so far, but I had to keep the possibility in the back of my mind, and I would ask the prince to stay on high alert.

Princess Henriette was looking down at the table, troubled. "I can handle the fact that there's only bread and soup—I can even handle it being cold. The big issue is that there isn't enough for everyone. Is there any more?"

I shook my head. “Considering what’s happened to us up until now, we certainly shouldn’t expect anything.”

Listening to us from the side, one of the planners sadly pressed his hand to his stomach. “I’m fine with where we’re sleeping, but being served meals like this is…difficult.”

This was Bernard, a middle-aged man whose physique let you know that he very much enjoyed eating. He dejectedly told us bread and soup would not be enough for him.

The other two planners then chimed in with their complaints.

“I’ll struggle with this too…”

“We can bear with it for now, but can’t something be done about it?”

We couldn’t just give grown men a tiny bit of food and then tell them to deal with it. The same went for the knights, but it was probably worse for the planners. The only one of us who got to eat to her heart’s content was Pearl. She couldn’t eat human food, so we’d brought her meals with us. We’d fed her before dinner, so she was currently in a comfortable slumber back in the princess’s room.

I scanned the room. “Do you all have Lavian currency?”

Various people chimed in.

“Yes, I brought a bit of it.”

“I don’t have any. There are restrictions on exchanging currency due to the fake notes going around, so I couldn’t get any in time.”

“Same here.”

Since earlier this year, counterfeit money had been making the rounds, so people had been trusting bills from Lagrangian banks less and less. This was one of the reasons Prince Severin had to stay at home. Both the political and economic spheres were troubled because of this.

I smiled. “Then I’ll lend you all some. Don’t worry about paying me back—I’m going to charge the expenses to Prince Liberto.”

Everyone instantly understood what I was trying to say. “Are we going to buy food from outside?”

“Why don’t you planners go to a restaurant and eat there, Mr. Bernard?” I suggested. We’d been greeted with an inviting aroma upon entering the city. There had to be restaurants nearby, and they were sure to be bustling around this time. “Isn’t it better to order whatever you want, then eat it while it’s still hot?”

“Th-That sounds nice.” Mr. Bernard exchanged glances with

his coworkers. His round face had lit up with excitement. Part of the fun of traveling was enjoying the local cuisine. For him, there could be nothing more fun at the moment than dining in a restaurant.

I turned to the princess. “Princess Henriette, I’ll buy food for us, so please wait here.”

“But I want to eat out too!” she answered.

“Your Highness,” warned Ms. Sophie.

“Can’t I sneak out?”

“Hmm…” I understood how she felt, so I turned to my husband, expecting him to decline.

Even after seeing the cold soup and hearing everyone’s opinions—

“No.”

—he immediately denied the proposition.

“We’ve already decided that we’re going to bear with this treatment for just one night,” he said. “I don’t mind if we buy food from outside and bring it back, but dining out is prohibited.”

“Urgh…” It was only natural for him to say that. Letting the princess outside required a decent amount of preparation, which was impossible at the moment. As sorry for her as we felt, the only thing we could do was tell her to bear with it. She knew as much, so she gave up, albeit with a bit of pouting.

The planners and knights, on the other hand, were allowed out. Those who wished to go would leave, while the rest would stay and use the kitchen to reheat the soup. The kitchen appeared disused, but at least all that we had to do was light a fire under the pot. We just needed some fuel, which the knights found for us.

I also needed to leave the palace, since I’d been put in charge of purchasing meals. I requested that some of the knights help me carry the meals back, but Lord Simeon came with me himself.

“Is it really all right for the commanding officer to leave?” I asked, despite knowing the answer.

“I’m more worried about you going out without me. Prince Severin warned you about this before we left. It’s hard to relax when you go places by yourself because you always end up roped into something. It’s better if I accompany you.”

“How rude! You just want to eat at a restaurant, don’t you,

Lord Simeon?”

“Don’t lump me in with you.”

Though Lord Simeon usually drew the eyes of everyone around him, he smoothly blended into the background once it was dark enough outside. I quickly searched for a suitable establishment. It turned out to be a good thing that the palace we’d been sent to was in the middle of the city—we found a place after only a short walk.

Since it was around dinnertime, every restaurant was filled with customers. Bright lights, the sounds of silverware clinking together, happy voices, and bewitching scents spilled out into the streets. *Ah, the smell of garlic is tantalizing!*

“My stomach is rumbling!” I whined. “I want to eat fresh pizza and pasta.”

“We could take back a pizza, but pasta would be much more difficult,” Lord Simeon reasoned.

“Perhaps they would let us take the whole pot.”

“I wonder about that.”

We didn’t have time to waste, since our hungry companions were waiting on us. But it was fun getting to walk with my husband like this, as if we were sightseeing. Just one day… No, even *half* a day would be fine. I wondered if my husband could get a day off and we could visit this place again. Once Princess Henriette’s wedding and reception were over, she’d be a Lavian citizen, and their guards would take over her security—we’d end our services then and be on our way. I wanted at least a bit of free time before we returned home.

I snuggled up to Lord Simeon’s arm. He looked at me but didn’t resist, so I pushed in a bit closer to him. He adjusted his elbow so that it looked like he was escorting me.

“Have you ever been to Latiry before, Lord Simeon?”

“I have for work several times now.”

“Do you know any must-see spots in town? And what items are popular as souvenirs?”

“I know some of the places people traditionally visit, yes, and I suppose I could advise on gifts, but I don’t have any *recent* information.”

“Then let’s look for them, just the two of us!”

He took a moment to ponder that, seemingly understanding what I was trying to say. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get time off for that.”

“Would it be possible for the two of us to return to Lagrange just a bit later than everyone else…? No, right?”

“No.”

I bit my lip. My hunch had been correct. “I was looking forward to finally getting to walk around a foreign city with you.”

“We just returned from our trip to Lavia recently, did we not? If I receive more time off, then I’ll take you here.”

“I’ll look forward to that, but I was hoping we’d get to do something this time as well…”

“Only if we have time.” Though he was telling me things I didn’t want to hear, his voice was kind.

The truth is, I’m happy just getting to talk with you as we walk like this. We were enjoying our alone time and feeling the wind on our faces. That was happiness enough for me. It was also nice not having to worry about others hearing us or staring.

I decided to ask him something I’d been worried about. “What did you think about how Prince Liberto was treating Princess Henriette?”

“What did I *think*?” His expression seemed puzzled.

As generous as the prince had been, I’d found his hands-off approach very…lonely. “The princess was the only one trying to get through. He didn’t tell her his wishes or thoughts at all. I believe the princess is anxious—she doesn’t know whether he truly accepts her or is just dragging her along for the ride.”

I’d seen her depressed face after their conversation. They’d butted heads previously, so I’d thought that perhaps they’d gotten a bit closer, but it appeared that the prince still wasn’t within reach. The two of them were going to marry and become family soon enough, so why was he still so cold? He wouldn’t be able to put on airs forever, and I’d told Princess Henriette as much. I didn’t believe I was wrong, but the journey ahead of her was a long one. I was worried that she’d run out of energy along the way.

“I think it would be fine for him to show her that he’s trying to get closer,” I muttered absently while clinging to Lord Simeon’s arm. “It’s very disheartening not knowing what one’s partner is searching for, especially when the two are soon to be married.”

“Indeed.” Lord Simeon pushed up his glasses with his other hand. “Though I don’t believe either of us is in a position to judge anyone else.”

“Huh?” I’d thought he’d agree with me, but his words were

surprising.

Looking up at him, his brows were a bit furrowed. “We both hid our true feelings from one another while we were engaged. That time was nothing but lies and hidden truths, in fact.”

“Ah…” He’d dug up memories I’d long forgotten, and my face hitched. *Th-That’s true. That did happen…* I’d tried to conceal my interests and my work as an author. I’d thought that I would have to do that for the rest of my life! I hadn’t expected anything out of my marriage to Lord Simeon, as I’d thought that political marriages didn’t include love. I also hadn’t searched for understanding from him. I’d planned to portray a chaste wife in front of him and just do my assigned roles of housework and child-rearing. Indeed, I’d decided all of that on my own. Nowadays, I could show him my true feelings without any strings attached, but back then, I’d hidden my fangirling with all my might.

Wait, does that make me the same as Prince Liberto?

That was a shocking revelation. Had I really done the exact same things as the prince?

Lord Simeon continued. “It’s true that I experienced loneliness at the time. I didn’t fully understand those feelings—I was confused why the loneliness and anger were so intense.”

“Oh…”

“I had expressions I didn’t show you, feelings I didn’t convey. Even when I thought we understood each other, there were still many misunderstandings. We butted heads many a time. But after each instance, we’d deepen our understanding of one another, become closer, and now we’re able to be together like this.”

He’d briefly removed his arm from mine, but he pulled me close the next moment. There was no more distance between us. I could feel his warmth.

“There may still be things we don’t know.” He lowered his voice. “There may be times we miss each other’s intentions. At those moments, it would do us good to butt heads once more. That’s how confident I’ve become in these thoughts.”

“I see…” I pressed my cheek against his large body and nodded. “Do you think Their Highnesses will be able to butt heads too?”

“Everyone’s different, so we don’t know how they’ll forge their relationship from here on out. Prince Liberto, in particular, is not

easy to deal with, so the princess will surely struggle much more than we did. However, I don't believe it's impossible." Lord Simeon was able to say this calmly, yet firmly. "Indeed, the princess may be feeling rejected, but I don't believe His Highness means to disregard her. When I look at him, I see a man who doesn't seem to understand how to go about their relationship."

"Go about?" Having heard that, I thought back on the prince in my memories. He was always smiling flawlessly, and the only image I could conjure of him was a man responding to everything in a calm manner. I couldn't read his inner thoughts at all. All I could feel from him was his drive to navigate situations expertly. That poise hadn't come about from him adequately connecting with others—rather, he'd purposefully constructed templates for manners and conversational skills, which he staunchly followed. I'd thought for the life of me that this was because of his blackhearted nature, but it seemed Lord Simeon interpreted it differently.

My husband went on to confirm this for me. "I've experienced similar circumstances. I'd never dated a woman before you, so I had no idea what to do to make you happy. I attempted to reenact things I'd heard others speak of and what I'd read in books, to varying reactions. Perhaps that's how it is for all men and women who begin relationships."

"I agree." I completely understood what he meant, and I nodded again at his satisfying read on the situation. *Indeed. I've even written about this very thing in my own novels, haven't I?* It was only natural for people to not connect right off the bat, but it also wasn't easy for them to realize that they needed to put forth the effort to do so. They only came to that realization after experiencing things together and butting heads.

Lord Simeon's light blue eyes shone down on me. "While you appreciate gifts and events, what makes you happiest is for me to spend time with you alone, and the location doesn't particularly matter. Is that correct?"

"Yes." I smiled at him. *Of course! All I want is for you to be by my side, to listen to me, and to let me hear your voice. Those things are more precious than anything else.*

I stood on tiptoe to reach him, and he leaned down. We shared a light kiss—one during which our glasses didn't collide too harshly.

"I wonder if His Highness will come to understand."

Lord Simeon straightened up. “I’m sure he’s not inexperienced in the realm of deep relationships. He wouldn’t be so trusted and respected if he truly did not know how to approach others. No matter how adept the person, one cannot rule a kingdom by themselves. It’s *because* he’s received aid from those around him that he’s achieved so many feats.”

“I see.”

“He’ll most likely need a bit of time to develop a relationship with Her Highness. Also, this particular relationship is not a professional one, but a personal one between a man and a woman. I believe he’s just as lost as I was back then. The princess will surely struggle, but they’ll overcome it one day. Let us believe.”

Lord Simeon was right. The prince and princess had a future ahead of them. They’d only communicated through writing up until now, and the number of in-person meetings they’d shared could be counted on one hand. Now they could finally be together...or rather, they *would* be together. There was no reason to rush to an understanding. Even if they became saddened or angered with each other, as long as they didn’t give up—as long as they overcame those things—they would surely arrive at happiness. Princess Henriette was a hard worker, so she’d be fine.

Thanks to my husband, my feelings of anxiety had lessened. Why in the world was this man so wonderful? He was usually an obstinate rockhead, but he approached me kindly whenever I was worried. He would contemplate things alongside me until I was satisfied and give me words of strength.

I loved him so very much.

I love you. And I certainly respect that human aspect of you.

Now that I had finally brightened up, I turned my eyes back to the road. I couldn’t fix the prince and princess’s communication issues—they needed to figure out how to connect on their own. But still, I wanted to support them as much as I could. *To that end, the first order of business is finding a delicious meal!* I felt that if I ate to my heart’s content, many of my complicated emotions would resolve themselves.

Returning to our original goal, I focused on the restaurant at hand. “I wonder if they have anything aside from pizza that we can bring back.”

“Before thinking about that, we first need to find a restaurant

that will even fulfill such an order."

"That's true."

The easiest places to buy takeout food from were food stalls. Lavia surely had them, but I couldn't see any nearby, only normal restaurants. *How about smoked sausage? Things with fried potatoes would also be good. I feel like we could buy those here.*

We walked and looked around, but Lord Simeon stopped again. Faster than I could ask what was wrong, a voice called out to us from elsewhere.

"Would you two like me to show you a good place?"

Lutin and Dario were standing ahead of us on the street, even though they'd supposedly gone back with Prince Liberto.

"Huh?" My eyes widened. "You're back already?"

"We came right back," Lutin explained. "And I'm not busy at all. We're starving too, so could we join you?"

Lord Simeon looked sour, and he scoffed. "I'd like to say no, but I suppose we have no other option."

Lutin tutted. "That's my line! Eating with you is gonna make my food taste worse, but work is work."

"We didn't come here to have a meal. We came to buy food to bring back. Please take us to a restaurant that will provide that for us."

"Fine, fine. There are places where you can do both. Come with me."

After their usual banter ended, Lutin led us into a narrow alley with complicated pathways that only a local could navigate. We arrived at a quiet side street after a short walk.

Lutin casually opened the entrance to a building—I couldn't tell whether it was a restaurant or a person's home. An enticing scent welcomed us, and we followed him in.

The eatery was a small one with only bar seats and a single table that could seat four. An elderly man sat at the bar. He glanced our way but didn't greet us. The lighting in the establishment was dim. I couldn't see any more customers, which worried me. Was the place already closed for the day?

"Could we have this place to ourselves for the time being?" Lutin asked, as if he weren't worried in the least.

The owner nodded silently and went to put a sign on the door.

"Are you a regular here?" I whispered.

"Yes, although 'regular' isn't quite the right word. That guy's my comrade, so relax. Nothing we say here will reach outside

ears."

Lutin pulled out a chair at the table and immediately sat down. Lord Simeon and I sat opposite him. Dario didn't sit—he just waited at Lutin's side.

"We can't linger," I said. "The others are waiting for us."

"I know." Lutin grinned. "But I have to talk to you while I have the chance. I'll have Dario take the food to them, so play along, yeah?"

As I'd gleaned, he had a different motive. Lord Simeon didn't protest, so I requested that the owner make a lot of food to be sent to the palace. Since he was the only one here, I thought it would take him a lot of time to make it all, but he ended up preparing it surprisingly quickly—he'd most likely had some of it prepped in advance. Though hauling it all should have been difficult for a single man, Dario carried the bundle with ease and quickly left the restaurant.

I remembered a certain problem as I watched him go. "Wait, Dario can't speak, can he? Is it all right to send him alone?"

Our entourage had just met him, and his appearance was very striking, so I was sure they'd recognize him. But how would he explain the circumstances to them? Writing?

"Don't worry about that. Dario knows his way around these things since he's been like that for a long time."

"I see. Was he born mute?"

Lutin ordered our food. We didn't know what they served here, so Lord Simeon and I let him choose for us. Wine was served first, but my husband declined and ordered water.

After taking a sip of wine, Lutin answered. "No, his tongue was cut out when he was a kid. He can make vocal sounds, but has trouble speaking clearly. Apparently, he could be able to speak to a certain extent with training, but he's always been quiet and shy, so he doesn't want to."

"I see… Wait, huh?! C-Cut out?! His tongue?!"

Though Lutin had spoken so casually, the contents of his words made me tremble. I pressed my hand to my mouth without realizing it. *How did that happen?! Just biting your lip hurts enough—I'm terrified just thinking about your tongue being cut! He went through something so harrowing?*

"He's…shy?" Lord Simeon reacted to a different portion of the story. *That's what you're concerned with?!* "Are you sure?"

Lutin shrugged as he tipped his glass. "Dario would be happy

to hear that this seems unbelievable to you. The whole reason he got so ripped in the first place was to make people think he's strong. So that no one would attack him, and because people are just scary in general, he became a scary person himself. That made him awaken to something else in the process, but he's still as shy as ever."

Lutin just kept offering us more and more surprising facts. But thinking about it, they made sense. Even for someone unable to talk, Dario was exceptionally quiet. My image of him was that he was always silently standing in the back of the room despite his large body, and his movements were never wild. I felt that he was reserved by nature, not due to his line of work.

"I thought that he was afraid of Lord Simeon because my husband beat him that first time," I mused.

"Ah, yeah, that. I do remember him being overly scared back then." Lutin laughed heartily at the nostalgic memories. "Also, the vice captain's glare is terrifying."

"Please call it a sharp gaze," I chided. "It's very cool!"

"Would you say that about a wild beast glaring at you too? Vice Captain, please don't bully our innocent Dario."

"Innocent?" My husband sneered. "I find it more strange that you're treating someone of his size like a child."

"Why can't I? He's still a teenager."

"Huh?" Lord Simeon gasped.

My eyes widened. "What? What did you just say? A teenager?"

Lutin nodded. "If I recall correctly, he'll be nineteen this year. He's one year younger than you."

"Whaaaaat?!"

It was a good thing we had the entire restaurant to ourselves, because I let out a loud yell on accident. Even the owner, who'd been previously uninterested, turned around to look at us.

"You have to be joking!" I yelped.

"It's true! He was seventeen when he first met you. The vice captain beat up a seventeen-year-old boy. So mean!"

"B-Boy...? What..." Lord Simeon was in the middle of recomposing himself. "His face...is quite youthful, so the thought did cross my mind, but... So even teenagers can become that muscular. What kind of training and diet does he have...?"

"Lord Simeon? Don't learn from him! You're at your most wonderful the way you are now!"

My husband already had enough muscles, so I asked him not

to train any more. My love for him wouldn't fade no matter what his body looked like, but he was so very beautiful now, and I preferred that he maintained his physique.

Our food arrived as we chatted. Artichokes boiled in herbs and garlic, a tomato stew with meat, and there it was—pasta! The dish of golden noodles with egg was topped with a ton of cheese.

"Mm!"

I immediately went for the pasta instead of the vegetables and meat. It was still hot. The sauce was just egg plus pork drippings, and combined with the black pepper and salty cheese, these simple ingredients became quite flavorful.

Artichoke could be found all over Lagrange as well. There were many ways to eat it, such as boiling or baking it, but this one had been simmered for flavor. It was convenient that the inedible parts had been taken out. The meat of the tomato stew was apparently oxtail. I'd never had it before, but once I put it in my mouth, its soft texture melted.

"Delicious!"

I put my hand to my cheek and shivered with happiness. Lavian restaurants were popular in Lagrange as well, but there was nothing like the real thing. The pasta had been made to perfection!

"This makes me want to eat pizza as well." I managed to get words out between bites.

"We can have some if you still have room," Lutin responded.

"Hmm..." My stomach understandably could not handle that much. I could probably eat one slice, but... I glanced at Lord Simeon, who seemed like he'd expected this—he'd gone ahead and ordered a pizza.

Lutin chuckled. "You know, I never thought a day would come when I'd split a meal with the vice captain."

"If you don't like it, then order your own and eat it by yourself." My husband was ruthless.

"If I ate that much, I wouldn't be able to move afterward. I can't believe you can eat so much when your face looks like that, by the way."

"What does my face have to do with it?"

The pizza soon arrived. It was huge, and the dough was thick, so even one slice would fill us up. It had the typical toppings of tomato sauce, cheese, and sausage. I had a bit, then the men

split the rest between themselves. It was the perfect amount of food for everyone.

Lutin eyed Lord Simeon. “You’re eating *so* sloppily! Why don’t you go get an apron? It’d be terrible if you spilled anything on that white uniform.”

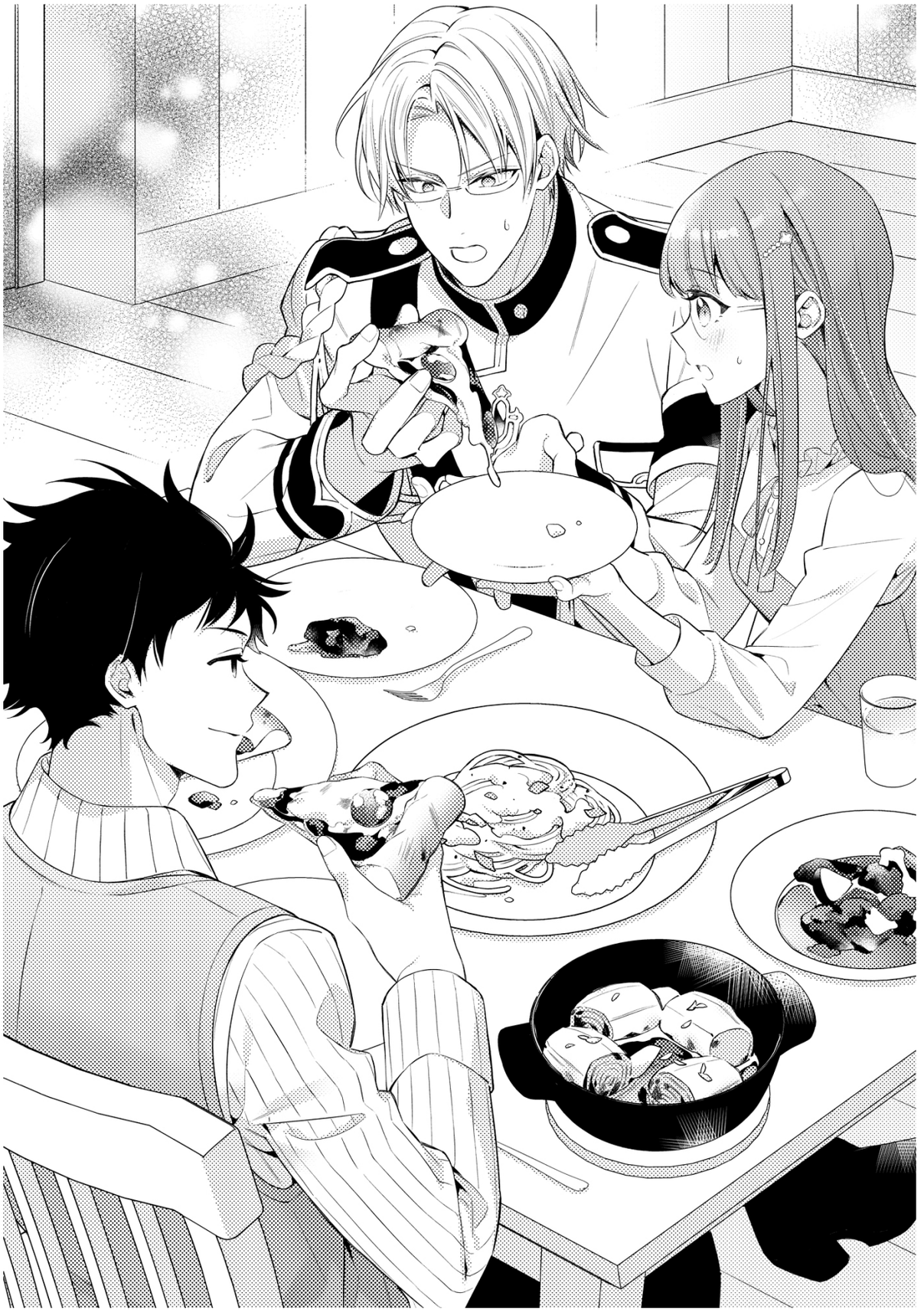
“I’m not a child.” My husband glared back. “I can handle this much… Ah.”

“See? What’d I say? Careful, you’re spilling more.”

“Urgh. I cut the slice incorrectly…”

“I think you’re just clumsy, Vice Captain.”

Perhaps it was the effects of the delicious meal, but I felt that even Lord Simeon and Lutin were being more civil than usual. I caught the cheese dripping from Lord Simeon’s slice with a plate so that his uniform wouldn’t get dirty.



I focused on eating for the time being, savoring the delicacies of a foreign country to my heart's content. When our dishes were all empty, I let out a satisfied sigh and held my stomach, which was starting to hurt. "I'm full... I'm happy."

Lord Simeon also looked satisfied. "I'm sorry to rush you, but we should head back if we're all finished here. We can't be too late."

"Indeed. We have to rotate the guards too—it's been a long shift for them."

Lutin held up a hand to stop me from getting up. "Hold on. I still haven't gotten to the main topic yet."

Lord Simeon and I exchanged glances as we remembered the issue at hand.

I gestured to Lutin. "We'll leave the bill to you. You're probably going to mark it off as a business expense anyway."

"Of course I will. Wait, this isn't about the bill!"

"Mm-hmm. Also, Dario is nineteen? Then what about you? Could it be you're my age?" I asked.

"A bit older... No, wait!" He turned to Lord Simeon. "Hey, Vice Captain, could you not ignore me on purpose? You're at work here too, you know!"

Lord Simeon looked down his nose at Lutin. "You haven't said a word this whole time about your topic, so I thought it must not have been something important."

Was he getting back at Lutin for the pizza incident?

Lutin scrunched his face up. "Marielle looked so happy eating that I wanted to leave the unsavory conversation for later."

I sat back down in my chair, and we all readjusted ourselves. The owner came to take our plates away, so our table was clean once more.

I nodded. "I also have many things I'd like to tell you, but unfortunately, this isn't the time for me to bring up a past incident. As such, I'll finish this with one punch."

"I suffered at your hands too, you know," Lutin countered. "You can go ahead and punch me if it makes you feel better, though. I wonder how much power your cute little hands have in them. Maybe it'll even be a reward!"

"All right then. Lord Simeon, go ahead."

"No! No representatives to fight for you! Vice Captain, stop gearing up!"

Coffee was brought out to us as a postmeal refreshment. We hadn't ordered it, so it must have been on the house. It came with milk and sugar, so I put a lot of those into my cup to sweeten it.

"You received a bit of information on this at a prior meeting, but we're not going for the Scalchi Familia this time. I wanted to tell you that so you wouldn't misunderstand."

Lord Simeon opted not to add anything to his coffee—he preferred the aroma of black espresso. He also didn't look surprised by Lutin's words—he just silently gazed at him.

I cocked my head. "Does the prince's plan not revolve around destroying the Familia?"

"That's part of it long-term, but they won't go down so easily. We have to climb the ladder rung by rung."

"Didn't he want to bait them into trying to assassinate him? That way, they would reveal themselves, right?"

Lutin only put a bit of milk in his coffee. "They aren't the ones we want to expose. The first people we're going to get rid of are those connected with the Familia. Prince Liberto is cutting them out since he says he doesn't need people who will bring harm to his kingdom."

"Ah... I see."

Aside from being composed of evil criminals, the Scalchi Familia was a group of commoners who didn't have any political power. Even if they were all forcefully arrested without adequate evidence, and even if people died due to that, it wouldn't be an incident that shook the foundations of the political sphere. However, the Familia was also sure to harshly rebel if Lavia did that. They seemed like they'd seek revenge through terroristic activities, so it would certainly be dangerous, but at least *politically*, they weren't Prince Liberto's enemies.

No, what complicated the issue was not the Familia itself, but those *connected* with the Familia. Cohorts of theirs had been planted in both the government and the military. They were paid money in exchange for aiding the Familia and could be requested to do dirty work as well. They used each other and both benefited—thus, it was reasonable to expose the cooperators before taking down the Familia. Unfortunately, blocking these cooperators had proven to be a difficult task. If it were that simple, the prince would have already removed them.

I pondered this. "People assassinating monarchs that go

against their wills… This has certainly happened many times throughout history.”

“It has, definitely. It’s a common tale here too. Lavia’s history is pretty muddy.”

“That’s why the prince had to come up with a plan.”

I sighed and looked to Lord Simeon. Did he know anything about this? Those plotting to assassinate the prince wouldn’t be the Familia this time, but their cooperators…people of high status in the government and military. Lutin said the prince would be cutting them out—perhaps some of them were people close to His Highness? Most likely people he’d wanted to work together with, then. If the prince had waited this long to enact this plan, then he must have searched hard for other options.

“Give us the details,” Lord Simeon said curtly. He didn’t get emotional about it like I had, and he’d returned to his work demeanor.

It seemed Lutin didn’t think much of it either. He put his hand into his chest pocket and pulled out two photos. “I want you both to remember these two people. They’re our primary targets. We need them to be suppressed, no matter what.”

The two photos on the table were both of middle-aged people. The pair looked proudly at us through the black-and-white pieces of paper. It was a man and a woman, both probably around fifty; they looked old, but they were well-dressed. The woman in particular wore a fancy, intricately designed statement necklace that left an impression.

“Hm…?” I picked up the photo of the woman when I noticed her jewelry. I brought it close to my face and acutely examined the necklace.

“Marielle?” Lord Simeon asked.

“It’s so small that it’s hard to tell…but don’t you remember this necklace?”

“Necklace?”

I handed it to my husband, who also brought it close to his face. As expected, he understood what I meant immediately. “This was the gift that His Majesty the King sent to the Grand Duke and Duchess of Lavia last year. The necklace was meant as a gift for their thirtieth anniversary.”

“That’s what I thought as well. It’s the same necklace!” I exclaimed.

I would never forget it. In the spring of last year, that necklace

had become the catalyst for the incident we'd been roped into before our wedding. A thief had infiltrated a famous jewelry store in Sans-Terre but had only stolen a single ring—they hadn't even looked at the register or other jewels. It'd been revealed that the ring was to be used as a bargaining tool for something else. The thief's true goal had been stolen just prior, so they'd stolen the ring instead, looking to exchange it.

That true goal had been the necklace in this photo…or rather, a replica of it.

"They'd wanted to cause a scandal in which Lagrange would send a fake piece of jewelry to Lavia, thereby forcing Prince Liberto and Princess Henriette to call off their marriage, correct?" I asked.

Lutin grinned. "That's right. It sure was hard back then." He was chuckling, but *he* was the one who'd stolen the ring in the first place. *You! That incident was a huge mess! You're the height of bothersome!*

I'd heard that his mission had been to inversely take advantage of the Easdale faction's plot. Lutin had disguised himself as one of their comrades and infiltrated them, then suppressed the scene of the replica replacement and unveiled the evildoings. Lavia had a long history of the two factions at each other's throats, but that didn't mean they could do whatever they wanted. That incident had been intended to warn the Easdale faction that it was overstepping its boundaries.

If the woman in the photo was wearing that fated necklace, then we didn't have to ask who she was.

"Um…" I wavered. "If your goal is to suppress this person, then…you're going to…arrest her?"

"That's right. These two are the heads of the Easdale faction. The man is Viscount Fabio Baraldi. He's the Secretary of the Interior Ministry. And as I expect you know, this one is Grand Duchess Arabella Lily Fontana, the woman who's bullying Prince Liberto's soon-to-be wife."

When Lutin spoke so bluntly, all words vanished from my lips. Lord Simeon also couldn't remain unfazed. He placed the photo back on the table and stared at it, deep in thought.

So the person behind the incident last year had been the grand duchess. That was why she had conceived of a plan involving that necklace. Of course she would—it was hers! Lagrange's king had sent it to the grand duchess as a gift, since

she would then become the mother-in-law of Princess Henriette. Though there certainly had been some political self-interest involved, at its core, it'd been a gift of friendship. The grand duchess had stomped all over those feelings. It wasn't a pleasant story to hear.

However, knowing that was the person Prince Liberto wanted to trap made me feel conflicted. *He's going to arrest his own mother...? Arrest her, and then what?*

The arrest would only be the beginning, not the end. Charges would then be pressed against her, and a punishment equivalent to the crime would be put upon her.

I recalled the prince talking about his mother. His uncaring tone, cold eyes... It seemed his feelings of ambivalence and hesitation had long passed. At this point, he couldn't cover for her just because she was family at this point. Frankly, it was *because* she was family that he couldn't forgive her. Had he already overcome this inner discord?

No matter what the outcome ended up being, there would be voices of opposition. The incident would drag out far longer afterward. *How should we tell Princess Henriette this truth?*

My stomach, which had been filled to its happiest extent, now felt like it was laden with stones.

Chapter Five

It was the morning after we'd arrived in Latiry. The front of Parche Palace started bustling a while after breakfast, which had consisted of only bread and tea, by the way. Thankfully, we'd eaten scrumptious meals the night before, so that wasn't a problem. We even laughed among ourselves that we'd eaten a bit *too* much for dinner, so this was the perfect amount for breakfast.

This was the day we were to be moved to Casterna Palace. Prince Liberto had promised he'd come to get us, so we gathered our belongings and waited for him.

He arrived much earlier than we expected. Lord Simeon called for us after we'd already finished packing, so we headed to the palace's entrance. Pearl obediently went into her basket.

The front door was already open, and we could hear a ruckus outside.

I gasped in surprise. "There are onlookers today too?"

"It will be fine," Lord Simeon soothed me.

He walked ahead of us and pulled out his saber. First, he held it straight up in front of him, and then he lowered it to his right side, positioning himself even more formally than usual. Princess Henriette, her maids, and I followed in line behind him. The planners were off taking care of our luggage, so they would be traveling separately.

I was a bit shocked when we took the first step. A red carpet had been rolled out along the path. Lagrange's royal knights were lined up on the sides with their sabers drawn and to their right sides. When the princess stepped foot onto the carpet, the knights brought their blades in front of their faces then lowered them diagonally. *I see, so their show of respect is to draw their swords. This appears to be a performance for everyone around.*

As expected, the people of the city cheered. Security guards had been placed throughout the crowd so that the chaos of the day prior wouldn't reoccur. No carriages were driving on the road in front either, leading me to believe that crossing restrictions had been enacted.

Lord Simeon gestured for us to slowly follow him. Past the line

of knights were people in another uniform. Their black jackets were abundantly ornate, complete with white trousers, gloves, and helmets with tassels that resembled horse tails. I knew right away that this was Lavia's honor guard. I'd never seen them before, but they were glamorous, just like their uniforms. Lord Simeon and the others were wearing their casual uniforms, not ceremonial ones, so they were losing out a bit in terms of splendor. *How vexing! But they'll be in their formal uniforms for the wedding ceremony! They won't lose!*

Once we passed by our knights, they ordered themselves into two lines, brandished their sabers, and marched behind us. We then passed through the honor guard, who all greeted us with similar blade demonstrations.

Including the red carpet at our feet, this was a very formal ritual for picking up the princess. I'd never participated in one—only seen them from afar—so I was nervous. *I'll have to be careful not to step on my dress. If I falter here, I'll bring shame upon Princess Henriette.*

I watched the princess in front of me—she was walking with her back straight, and she appeared quite calm. She was most likely used to things like red carpets and honor guards, so I doubted she was nervous, but…I still had to wonder if she was truly all right.

At the end of the short walk awaited a fancy carriage. Prince Liberto was waiting in front of it. He wasn't in disguise this time, of course. His appearance was princely and beautifully adorned.

Lord Simeon stopped a ways in front of him, brandished his blade in front of his face, then diagonally lowered it. *He just whirled it around in a circle, didn't he?! It was so quick that I could barely see it. Do it again!*

He ended his greeting by stomping his feet firmly on the ground as he turned to the side. Then, he took two stomps backward to make way for Princess Henriette.

So… So… Sooo coooool!!!

He needed to do his utmost to maintain his facial expression as he stood perfectly still. I thought the soldiers doing their routines were already cool enough, but this was *Lord Simeon*! I hadn't expected this show, so I felt like my heart was about to explode!

As I battled with my urge to fall over from fangirling, the princess stepped forward. *Ah, she* is *nervous after all.* I could tell

that she, herself, was fangirling over the prince. *It's definitely troubling when the person you love is just* too *cool, isn't it?! I completely understand!*

She passed in front of Lord Simeon and came face-to-face with Prince Liberto. She curtsied to him in a very ladylike fashion, and her maids and I followed suit. The prince began to close the distance between himself and her. He then got on one knee in a swift, unexpected motion and took the princess's hand. He kissed it politely, and the crowd erupted. I, on the other hand, scrunched up my face without realizing it. *Cunning. He's very cunning. So this is the "effective performance" he alluded to yesterday. I see.*

This whole "greeting of the princess" thing was so elaborate and showy, with even the honor guard involved, that the crowd could only think the single night we'd spent at Parche Palace had been planned from the beginning. The onlookers had no idea that we'd been put there out of malice and hadn't been given proper food.

Princess Henriette was not some poor woman who was finally being saved from this place and taken to her original destination—she was a princess being welcomed with the highest form of respect, in the most glittering way. For the prince of Lavia to have come to greet his bride in person, it was like staging a theater performance. The princess, who had been thrust into the lead role without having been informed beforehand, was so shy that her redness went all the way up to her ears. I doubted it was because she was embarrassed—it was most likely because the prince had kissed her hand. I was sure her fangirl meter was about to burst. *I understand. What in the world has he done to our purehearted princess?*

Prince Liberto stood in one beautiful motion, pulling the princess's hand toward the carriage. The two of them waved at the crowd as they entered it.

Lord Simeon watched the door fully close, then turned back to his subordinates. "Sheathe!"

He spun his saber once more after giving his order. *I was able to see it this time!* All the knights sheathing their blades at once made a satisfying sound.

Unbelievably...cool...

My husband had conducted himself perfectly, not missing a single beat, despite this performance having been impromptu.

One could tell that he practiced this regularly. These types of rituals were a part of the royal knights' work as well—they didn't just go out on patrol—and today had reconfirmed for me that these men were not just muscleheads. Our knights were surely putting on their best performances for their princess. They'd done a wonderful job and had exemplified Lagrange's honor.

Lord Simeon gave another soft order, and the maids and I entered other carriages. He ordered the knights to mount their horses, and the carriages departed, with the Lagrangian knights in a line on one side and the Lavian honor guard on the other.

In this grand manner, we Lagrangians set off for Casterna Palace.

As the carriage rocked back and forth, Ms. Sophie finally relaxed. "I'm surprised. I didn't think he'd do so much."

Outside, I could see the crowd still cheering. Old and young alike were fervently waving their hands. "It was a smart move for us to not have left last night in a hurry," I said. "This makes the wedding even more wonderful than we'd planned."

"I agree. I'm very grateful to His Highness. Now the princess doesn't have to begin the marriage with a damaged reputation. No one can mock her now."

I nodded. The prince really had gone far for Princess Henriette, so surely he had feelings for her. He couldn't have been intentionally acting coldly toward her. The grand duchess must have gotten her laugh the day before, but now she was probably frustrated beyond belief. As Prince Liberto had announced to us, he'd used her antics against her.

"The grand duke's family was the one who bothered us in the first place, so they have to be the ones to make up for it," I reasoned.

Ms. Sophie laughed at my biting comment and concurred.

If the prince and princess truly think of each other, then they'll be fine. They'll be able to get along.

As long as that was the case, it was time for them to face their next adversary. What Lord Simeon and I had heard from Lutin over dinner had not yet been revealed to Princess Henriette. After talking it over with my husband, we'd decided to conceal it for the time being. It was best for there to be as few people with this knowledge as possible, since we didn't know from whom it might leak. It would be easy for us to let our guard down by assuming everyone was on our side, and no one could keep

quiet about this information forever. I could imagine one's caution for their surroundings thinning out if they became too immersed in conversation. Even *I* had to be cognizant of that. Our maids and the planners most likely wouldn't learn about any of it until the events had already been put in motion. Meanwhile, it was up to Prince Liberto to decide when to alert the princess—if he told her now, it would only burden and worry her further. Her long-awaited wedding was right in front of her, so the last thing anyone wanted to do was to tell her depressing information. That might have also been why the prince had suggested that she stay in Parche Palace. He didn't want to let her witness a family feud, nor involve her in one. However, he was surely happy that she'd decided not to run away. The man was filled with contradictions and complications.

The sounds of wheels and hoofs resounded rhythmically around us. The distance between Parche Palace and Casterna Palace was short enough to be walkable. We could see a large building come into view after just a short trip. It was of a newer design, with no spires, and it gave off an overall flat, square impression, without a gorgeous facade like Parche Palace had. It was a palace from an era that had grown bored of gaudy decorations—one that sought a more calm impression.

A wide plaza came before the palace, and it was large enough that a whole other palace could've been built upon it. An obelisk pointed straight to the sky was positioned there, and many people were standing there awaiting our arrival.

Once the prince and princess disembarked from the stopped carriage, an order was issued, and all the soldiers lined up near the obelisk to pay their respects. These soldiers wore black uniforms; they were simple, but the red accents were stylish. In addition to these soldiers, people who appeared to be government officials and others who appeared to be palace workers each politely welcomed the princess. She bowed to them, took the prince's arm once he offered it to her, then entered the palace.

Led by an elderly man dressed in formal attire, three of us followed suit—Lord Simeon and I, as well as another Lagrangian knight. Everyone else was put on standby. As worried as I was, we couldn't all enter at once.

The inside of the palace was refreshing. It had been built in an era close to that of Lagrange's Venvert Palace, so the

atmosphere was similar. I was sure Princess Henriette would grow accustomed to it in no time.

Prince Liberto quietly observed our surroundings as he walked. Once we neared a large staircase, Prince Liberto called out to the man leading us. “Where are we going? I thought we were supposed to use the audience chamber.” His voice was as kind as ever, but there was an icy ring to it.

The old man turned around with an apologetic look. “I was told to change the location to the reception room on the upper floor.”

“I find that reprehensible. Not only is Henriette going to marry into our family, but she’s also a state guest until our marriage.”

“Yes sir, I said the same thing, but…”

So the grand duchess is bullying the princess yet again. I did my best not to let my expression sour.

In any given palace, the audience chamber was the most honorable room, so guests were typically led there to officially greet the royalty. Though she was the prince’s bride, Princess Henriette was also the princess of a neighboring kingdom. This might have been her first visit, but it was expected that the grand duke’s family go all out to welcome her.

Yet, they were sending her to a parlor… One on the second floor, no less, meaning it was most likely not used for official events. The only thing that could be gleaned from this was malice. Perhaps the grand duchess was upset that the prince had gone to pick the princess up in such a flashy manner and was therefore trying to irk her, no matter what it took.

Princess Henriette tried to calm the prince down. “Prince Liberto, I do not mind. There aren’t even any other state guests here—it’s only me. Please don’t fret.”

“It’s unacceptable. This reflects poorly on Lavia’s honor.”

“That would only be if Lagrange objects to it…” The princess looked back at me and Lord Simeon. “I’m only greeting my soon-to-be in-laws. This is a personal matter, not a national one. There’s no need for us to put on airs. Don’t you agree?”

I didn’t think it was my place to speak on this, so I let my husband respond. A crease formed on his brow, but he nodded without refuting her statement. His subordinate next to him looked surprised. *Are you shocked that this rockhead agreed so swiftly? It’s because arguing wouldn’t do any good in this situation.*

All it would do is worsen Princess Henriette's discomfort. And though I didn't want to acknowledge it, the princess wouldn't be keeping long relations with the grand duchess anyway, as Her Highness was due to be arrested soon. That was why my husband had decided to leave the choice up to Princess Henriette.

It seemed Prince Liberto felt the same way, as he muttered that it couldn't be helped and started up the stairs. Once we made it to the second floor, the room we were led to looked exactly like I'd predicted—a compact one that would be used for just a few people to chat in. The interior was lavish, with red wallpaper that had a floral pattern on it, a light pink ceiling, and a fireplace that matched the white of the back wall. A tapestry depicting a lakefront caught my eye.

As pretty as this space was, it was small—the only furniture inside was a table with chairs in the center of the room. At the table sat a man and a woman, both around fifty. The old man who'd guided us bowed and went to wait by the wall. The prince and princess stepped forward.

Prince Liberto spoke first. "Her Highness Princess Henriette has arrived."

The man at the table answered, sounding uninterested. "Indeed. Good work on the long journey." He didn't exude any vigor as he stood to greet us. "Welcome. Did you encounter any issues during your travels?"

Though there wasn't any warmth or joy in his words, he wasn't letting any ill intent slip through either. As he faced the princess, he was making it clear that this was purely a basic introduction.

This was the Grand Duke of Lavia, Federico Fontana.

If nothing else, he had the same elegant facial structure as Prince Liberto. His light brown hair came in waves down to his shaven chin. He was thin and not particularly tall or built. If one were to describe him negatively, he could be said to have a poor body. His complexion looked fine, but he still had the air of a sickly person. That was how lacking in liveliness he was.

He was the half brother of Grace, a person we'd met through an incident the previous year. Their eye colors were similar, but everything else was different. I had a hard time believing this man had the same blood flowing through him as Grace, who'd stood vigorously onstage. Perhaps their upbringings and

environments had just been that different, but it was reasonable to think that the commander of an entire kingdom should have been more energetic.

Princess Henriette curtsied low and gave her polite greetings. “I am pleased to be here. My name is Henriette de Lagrange. Greetings, Your Highnesses the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess.”

The Grand Duke’s facial expression didn’t change. “I’m glad you made it here safely. Please, make yourself at home. We’re going to become family from here on out, so let’s leave the formalities.”

“Thank you very much.”

If nothing else, at least the grand duke wasn’t hostile, so the princess could rest easy around him. She was acting normal as well.

The issue was…

Prince Liberto spoke as if he were snarling. “How long are you going to keep sitting?”

The person he addressed had continued to sit as Princess Henriette and the grand duke exchanged pleasantries.

“Is there a reason for me to stand?” retorted the woman reproachfully. She turned her head away.

This might have merely been my preconception of her, but she looked much more strict in real life than in photos. Her blue eyes on Princess Henriette held clear, sharp thorns. Her reddish-blonde hair caught all eyes, and her face had the Easdalian feature of a high nose bridge, which made her appear even more headstrong. Many Easdalian women had a kind, healthy beauty to them, but evidently, not all.

This was the Grand Duchess of Lavia, Arabella Lily Fontana, Prince Liberto’s mother…as well as our enemy.

We’d been shocked upon hearing that the prince was going to expose his own mother. I thought back to our dinner last night when I’d had to ask Lutin for clarification.

“Obviously, the grand duchess would be the head of the Easdale faction, but the prince also thinks she’s working with the Familia?” I asked. “Does that apply to her family as well? It can’t be… Is it true?”

“What good would it do me to lie?” Lutin replied. “These two are the ringleaders of the enemy, without a doubt.” He tapped the photos on the table with the tip of his finger, not showing a

trace of jest. “Also, these two have been illicit lovers for many years. As for the birth timelines, Prince Liberto is definitely the grand duke’s son, but we can’t be sure about the younger three. At least one of them might have a different father.”

That revelation struck me speechless. I looked to my husband, unsure of what to say.

Lord Simeon had already recovered from his surprise. “Does the grand duke know about this?”

Lutin answered with his usual man-eating smile. “He knows all about it. He knows, but doesn’t do anything. We can’t rely on that old guy for anything. His wife could be surrounded by homewreckers and involved in as much crime as she wants, but he still wouldn’t do anything.”

“How could that be…?” I whispered in disbelief. I’d heard that the current grand duke wasn’t considered capable, but was he really so irresponsible? No wonder Lavia was in such disarray.

Prince Liberto, on the other hand, was praised for his skills. Was it because his predecessor was so terrible that it made him seem more impressive than he was? I couldn’t help but think that. I wasn’t going to deny that the prince was capable, but the possibility was there.

“Is the prince so focused on Lavia’s public safety because of his mother’s involvement?” I asked.

“I wonder…” Lutin shrugged. “As far as I can tell, that’s only one of the many reasons.”

“I see…”

A grand duke who did nothing, and a grand duchess who took advantage of that for evildoings. The place Princess Henriette was marrying into had major problems.

And now, back in the present, the grand duchess was right in front of her. I couldn’t help but remember that this woman was possibly working with the Familia, but I had to pretend like I didn’t know. After all, I was merely the princess’s attendant. I suppressed my presence so as to not attract unwanted attention and carefully observed the people at the table.

Despite the prince telling her she was being disrespectful, Grand Duchess Arabella continued to sit and glare at Princess Henriette in a disrespectful fashion. “An unsightly person has entered our palace. I understood that she’s somehow considered a princess, so I expected that her appearance would be decently beautiful, but it appears that isn’t the case. I’m disappointed.”

Wow. I wasn't sure whether her words were surpassing or letting down my expectations. Her attitude was *very* rough.

She persisted. "Her dress is flashy and has no refinement. You truly plan on introducing a person like this as a member of the ducal family? How embarrassing. It's not too late to reconsider."

"Don't be foolish. You know that opportunity has long passed." The grand duke rebuked her, but there was no power in his tone. He wasn't truly scolding her, and he wasn't even telling her off for disparaging the princess.

"I have no recollection of ever accepting her. I've been against it this whole time, but no one listened to me—you all forced her in. As that is the case, I am doing as I see fit."

She stood without any intention of listening, ignored everyone else, and headed to the door. She passed by Princess Henriette, who was stiff. The grand duchess turned her head and fanned herself rudely. "How awful. You smell of dust. What in the world did you do during your travels? Lagrange has some strange teachings—they seem to allow their royalty to greet foreign royalty while dirty."

You were the one who trapped us in that dusty place! And this morning, Princess Henriette cleaned herself well and changed into a new dress! You're taking a dig at her for yesterday's situation on purpose, aren't you? The whole thing was a very base aggravation. If the Grand Duchess were directing these venom-filled attacks at me, I would have enjoyed them, but I could only be upset that my precious friend was being bullied.

A cold air surrounded Lord Simeon as well. His subordinate shivered next to him.

The grand duchess turned back halfway. "If you have any common sense, then you wouldn't appear in front of others in such a poor state. Liberto, you don't truly intend on making her your wife, I take it? You only chose her for the political benefits. Just hold the ceremony and then leave her in some castle in the countryside. The person to stand next to you must be a less humiliating one."

The prince had a response to her sneering, commanding tone. "No need to worry. She's already a woman of whom no one would be embarrassed, so there isn't a problem." For a moment, I was almost fooled by his beautiful smile and kind tone. *No, wait, he's saying something intense!*

"Excuse me?" The grand duchess's gaze turned sharp.

The prince continued. “Unfortunately, at present, our family’s reputation has already been run into the ground. It can’t get any lower. Doesn’t that, in a way, make this easier? You’re the precedent here, so anyone I make my wife would receive praise in comparison.”

O-Oh my! My will to observe this situation as future writing reference flew out of the window. *Frightening. The prince is absolutely frightening. This blackhearted demon king…*

“You…!” As expected, the grand duchess was shaking with anger. “How dare you speak that way to your mother!”

“Ah, so you *can* understand. I was afraid that perhaps I was a bit too indirect there, but I’m glad you’re intelligent enough to make sense of it.”

Prince Liberto’s smile never faded. But behind his usual demeanor, his words overflowed with killing intent. *Er, your plan is supposed to be top secret, is it not? You can’t let the grand duchess find out about it, can you? Are you sure you can say things so bluntly?!* Princess Henriette was even stiffer than before.

Duchess Arabella’s voice grew louder as she gripped her fan. “You mock and rebel against your own parent. Why did you grow into such a person? How pitiful! I didn’t raise you to be this way.”

“Not at all, mother. You set the perfect example of what *not* to be like. Thanks to you, I don’t have to be the type of person that people talk about behind my back. Though I do suffer at the hands of such a person in my family.”

“Why, I never…!”

Though she was on the verge of exploding, Duke Federico looked bored of this exchange. “That’s enough, you two. Don’t fight so pathetically in front of other people. Liberto, you can’t speak that way to your mother.”

The prince only smiled and didn’t answer. He made it clear that he had no intention of apologizing. The grand duchess nearly broke her fan as she stared daggers at Princess Henriette, then made a show of turning her back to us. She glared at Lord Simeon and his subordinate as well but left swiftly enough to let me know that I hadn’t even caught her sight.

The grand duke sighed. “Goodness.” He appeared very annoyed with this incident. He didn’t seem to be a father that was worried about his son and his wife’s bad relationship.

With that, the meeting was cut short. The room we were taken to afterward already had Princess Henriette’s maids in it,

who were waiting for her. Our luggage was there as well. It was clean and tidy, as expected, and the room had designated workers from the palace.

Prince Liberto told us of the itinerary for the day. “There will be a welcoming banquet tonight. Things will be busy during the evening, so please rest now while you can.”

“Thank you.” Princess Henriette looked ambivalent. “Um, Prince Liberto? Will Her Highness be at the banquet as well?”

“I’m not sure about that.” The prince sounded like he was talking about something entirely unrelated to him. “She’s set to be there, but she always makes excuses—she’ll say she’s in a bad mood or that she has work to do. No one will be bothered if she doesn’t show up.”

“Y-You’re going so far…” the princess stammered.

Prince Liberto’s handsome face laughed when Princess Henriette shrank back. “Won’t you feel better if she isn’t there?”

“That’s not it. When I think about how you started fighting with her just because she doesn’t like me…”

“Oh? I thought you were smarter than this, but perhaps the cogs in your brain are rusted.”

The princess’s eyes widened. “E-Excuse me?”

His Highness didn’t even hesitate. “*You’re* the one getting dragged into this. My mother and I have always been this way. I attempted to convey that to you yesterday and told you not to hold on to any naive expectations. You won’t last here if you’re bothered by such small interactions. You agreed to marry me knowing this, so please become stronger. If you don’t, your only option will be to live apart from me, as mother said.”

Princess Henriette was dumbfounded by his frankness. “Aren’t you…being a little mean?”

“No, I believe I am being sincere.” His smile was still plastered to his face. I couldn’t see it as the smile of a kind angel anymore. “You were the one who wished for me to tell you my true feelings without a front of lies, were you not? I don’t wish to recall that ridiculous incident, but I remember the promise. I will, from now on, tell you what I think. Please keep that in mind when you find my words irritating or upsetting.”

The prince took her slender hand into his, kissed it, then immediately left. We all watched him go without any words.

What broke the silence was Princess Henriette’s sigh. “I did say that, but is this not too much?” Her face had reddened

significantly despite her complaint. *Ah, well, at least she's still in love with him.*

In other words, Prince Liberto was trying to tell her that it wasn't *her* fault. He could have, say, told her that verbatim. Why was he like this? As expected of the master of Lutin, who himself was sardonic. Their dishonest, roundabout ways of speaking resembled one another.

One of the knights that was already in the room came over to report to Lord Simeon. Princess Henriette's room was, of course, prepared, and there weren't any issues with the rest of our rooms either. Indeed, that should have been the bare minimum, but alas.

The princess went to the basket sitting in one of the chairs and pulled out Pearl, who'd been waiting patiently for her. "That was more of an ordeal than I predicted. I didn't expect Prince Liberto or his mother to go so far."

"Indeed." I petted Pearl on her little head. "I thought he was going to softly rebuke her, but he was full-on *fighting* with her."

The dog was happily wagging her tail after being picked up. Princess Henriette sat down on the chair and put Pearl in her lap for a bit, then let her down onto the floor. Pearl began investigating the room. "Maybe they don't hold back with each other precisely because they're mother and son. I don't think they're going about it the right way, though." She turned to a worker. "Ah, could you shut the door?" She didn't want Pearl to run out. Thankfully, no one here was uncomfortable with dogs, so everyone smiled at tiny princess Pearl. "He didn't lie about anything, and I plan to do my best, but it's taxing thinking about how my relationship with the grand duchess will progress in the future."

The princess sighed once more as she watched Pearl mill about the room. In my mind, I told Princess Henriette that she didn't need to worry—the grand duchess wouldn't be around for much longer. But even if Princess Henriette knew the truth, it wouldn't make her feel any better. The two of them were going to become new family members, so it was unfortunate that that connection was going to be severed from the start. I could only hope that the prince would approach this kind princess so that she wouldn't be too anguished over it.

A royal marriage couldn't survive with just the feelings of love. I knew that, but things were still so worrying that even *I* wanted

to sigh.

Chapter Six

The evening's banquet was supposed to be a smaller one, so we'd all thought that simply exchanging pleasantries would be enough. The princess had already greeted Their Highnesses, so surely no further problems would occur... Or at least, that was what our unsuspecting group had thought would be the case.

I left Princess Henriette to be escorted by Prince Liberto and began to stroll through the venue by myself. As per usual, I suppressed my presence and listened carefully to everyone's discussions—I memorized their faces as I went and searched for certain figures.

One of those figures, Grand Duchess Arabella, had actually attended the banquet. She was present alongside the grand duke. Though she'd previously called Princess Henriette "flashy," the grand duchess's gown was *quite* flashy in its own right. It had plenty of fanciful decorations that showed off Lavia's economic prowess, and these adornments reflected the lights of the venue and sparkled. As expected of the leading actress in this performance. No one could be sure whether she usually dressed like this or if she was specifically competing with Princess Henriette. The line was thin for sure, and one wrong move could put her firmly in the "competing" category, but since she was such an elegant, beautiful woman, doing so wouldn't have made her any less dignified.

The grand duchess was not even trying to hide her displeasure tonight. She had her head turned to the side and was pointedly staying away from her two sons. Thanks to that, none of us had to worry that another fight would break out. We were just relieved that things were peaceful.

Having confirmed the first target, I moved on to search for the next one—the Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Fabio Baraldi. *The Department of the Interior Ministry, of all things!* The head of that department, which maintained public safety in Lavia, just so happened to be a cooperator of the Familia. It was no wonder that Prince Liberto was plotting to purge them.

As I walked, I looked carefully for the person Lutin had shown me in one of his photos. I wanted to get a feel for what one of

our enemy's leaders was like. All of the governmental bigwigs were here, so he positively *had* to be in attendance.

Sure enough, I found him in a corner of the venue. Unlike the black-and-white photo, he was in full-color motion, which changed my impression of him considerably. It was still him, however. His clean-cut features had a masculine allure, and he sported a shapely beard. This chiseled face, black hair, and tan skin were features common to Lavians. The grand duke's family had lots of foreign blood in their lineage, so they were paler exceptions to this. True Lavian men and women had darker coloring.

So this is Viscount Baraldi. I closed the distance between us as I observed him, being cautious to conceal my presence. It didn't take long for me to realize why he'd secluded himself in this corner, away from other people—it appeared he was also searching for someone. He approached a boy who was keeping close to the walls, as if to hide.

The viscount smiled at him. "Why are you in such a faraway corner? Are you not going to greet your brother and his new wife?"

The boy took a moment to respond. "I'd just get in the way."

He looked to still be a child and was perhaps in his early teens. His voice had changed, but his body was still that of a boy's, and he was even shorter than me. His face was so cute that I was excited to see what he might look like when he grew up. Though at the moment, that face was pouting irritably.

Normally, children wouldn't be allowed at official events such as this, but it was clear that an exception had been made for this boy. His hair color and facial structure made him a close match for Prince Liberto. Once I recognized this, I immediately figured out that this was the youngest child of the grand ducal family, Prince Luigi.

There were four children in the family, but the two princesses had long since been wed off to other kingdoms—they lived far away, so they weren't here. Prince Luigi was thirteen years old, which meant that the age gap between him and his brother was even greater than the one between the eldest and youngest Flaubert siblings.

I remember what Lutin said about the grand duchess's younger three children, but Prince Luigi doesn't look like Viscount Baraldi at all. Even now, when they're standing right next to each other, I can't

see the resemblance. Though the viscount is speaking very kindly to him, I don't believe it's because they're father and son.

Viscount Baraldi leaned down to the boy. "You wouldn't be a bother at all. The princess is to be your sister-in-law, so I'm sure she would be glad if you greeted her."

"Yeah, right." The young prince scoffed. "No one's come to get me. I'm sure they've all forgotten about me already."

Hmm. He appears to be in his rebellious phase. The boy's sulky way of speaking was so childlike and impudent that it was adorable.

The viscount gestured to the rest of the hall. "That's because you've hidden yourself away from the party. I'll go with you—let us go greet your siblings. It's only proper, as a member of their family."

Prince Luigi didn't respond. Viscount Baraldi was technically urging him to do the proper thing in this situation. According to Lutin, the viscount was the other head of the Easdale faction alongside Grand Duchess Arabella, but from what I could see, he didn't harbor any resentment toward Princess Henriette. I concluded that this was either because he didn't have any personal objections to her or because he was very skilled at hiding his true feelings.

I watched the two of them as they set off. Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto had also just begun walking in our direction. It appeared that the prince had spotted his brother and the viscount, and Princess Henriette had seen them as well. But then, the couple's lines of sight drifted past those two and landed on me.

Oh no!

I locked eyes with Princess Henriette, and both of our faces took on a look of shock. Seeing the princess's reaction, the viscount turned my way.

Ack...! There was nowhere for me to hide. As I began to panic, a large body stood in front of me, blocking my view.

This person held a tray full of desserts out to me. "Would you like one?"

It was a male waiter. He was at the perfect angle to cut off the viscount's line of sight and conceal me. Thanks to this man, no one saw me and became suspicious. I could hear the prince and princess begin their greetings with the viscount.

Whew... I let the tension drain from my body. I almost felt like I

was breaking out in a cold sweat. Nothing would have happened, even if I'd been discovered, but I wanted to avoid being focused on unnecessarily. It wouldn't have been good if Viscount Baraldi had figured out that I was investigating him.

Just as I began to decide whether I should move or continue observing the royal greetings, I heard a muffled laugh next to me.

Hm? This voice... I turned back to the waiter and looked more closely at his face. Deep blue eyes gazed down at me—ones I knew well.

"Oh, it's you." I sighed, somewhat gratefully.

"You've still got a ways to go. Your friend noticed you," Lutin brightly poked fun at me. Today, he was disguised as a waiter. "Want some?"

"I suppose I'll have one." I took a small bowl from his tray. The bowls contained a variety of fruits, all sliced into small pieces and soaking in liqueur. This was the type of mature dessert that one was meant to eat with a spoon. I wouldn't be able to let my husband eat this, however.

Where is he, anyway? I scanned my surroundings for him and saw that Lord Simeon was keeping watch over Princess Henriette from a ways away. He'd already noticed my situation, and for a split second, he shot a sharp glare toward Lutin. I waved my hand to let him know we were fine.

I flicked my eyes between Lutin and Prince Liberto. "Are you guarding them?"

"Nope. Just looking." This seemed true, judging by his outfit, which wasn't much of a disguise. The dark strands of his hair, which usually flicked up energetically at the ends, had been slicked flat with a hairstyling product, and his bangs had been pinned back. That was the only thing about his appearance that seemed altered, but it left a remarkably different impression. It seemed that the disguise techniques of a professional could change even one's mannerisms and presence. *I'd love for a chance to learn those tricks.*

While gratefully letting Lutin act as a shield for me, I perked my ears up to the voices I could hear. The viscount's chatter was as friendly as ever. Prince Liberto wasn't spewing the same sarcastic remarks he'd directed toward his mother—he answered Viscount Baraldi's questions calmly. If I had just been passing by, their conversation would have sounded like a perfectly normal

one. I couldn't help but be impressed by the two of them; they were mortal enemies who would have been aiming for the other's head if this had been an active battlefield, but even though they were standing face-to-face, they were both cleanly concealing their killing intents. I wondered what they were each thinking on the inside.

A hearty laugh came from the viscount. "Prince Liberto, when you announced your marriage, tons of noble girls broke down in tears one after the other. But they all have no choice but to back down after seeing this lovely person you've chosen as your partner."

Prince Liberto responded languidly. "Someone might misunderstand if you phrase it that way, Viscount. You're making it sound as if there are rumors of affairs surrounding me and several other women."

"Nothing of the sort! My apologies. You're a very serious person, Your Highness. There's no need to worry, Princess Henriette."

The princess giggled, seemingly having fun. "Yes, I'm well aware."

She didn't know about the viscount's true nature, so she most likely took his light statements as friendly ones. Prince Liberto was playing along by putting on a bit of a mischievous expression. His attention to detail was impeccable. Watching from the outside, I felt waves of fear, incredulousness, and amazement, and I was unable to pinpoint what exactly to call this scene.

Lutin signaled to me with his eyes, silently asking me if I thought that the prince and viscount were doing great jobs. *Indeed, they both are.*

Meanwhile, the viscount was smiling down at the younger prince—he hadn't forgotten about him. "Isn't it nice that you've gained such a wonderful older sister, Prince Luigi?"

He was giving the boy a chance to smoothly enter the conversation, but Prince Luigi took this opportunity and scoffed. "It isn't 'nice' at all. What do you think is wonderful about a boorish woman like this?"

Huh...?

Excuse meee?!

Was that not an unbelievable outburst?!

Those around us who'd overheard turned pale. Even I was

doubting my ears, wondering if I'd heard incorrectly.

The little prince did not back down. "Lagrangians are lamer than I thought they'd be. What's with those thick eyebrows? I thought you were a man in a dress."

Princess Henriette's cheeks flushed red. That was one of her insecurities, and having it pointed out made her visibly recoil. *Indeed, that's one of the things she nitpicks about herself the most… She always talks about how she doesn't like the way her eyebrows make her look headstrong. Of course it's going to hurt when someone else focuses on them.*

"Come now, what are you saying?" the viscount scolded. "You won't get along with anyone if you say mean things to them. If you want to become friends with someone, you must be kind."

"Who in the world would want to be friends with a woman from Lagrange? She was pushed onto us because of how much power her kingdom has. It's pretty audacious of her to think that we're going to accept her just because of that."

Oh my… This is…

"Everyone's just dealing with it and forcing themselves to smile about it," the small prince continued without a shred of mercy. "Do you really think any of us are actually happy to have you here? You're living in some fantasy world if you do. You've got some nerve standing next to my brother with a face like that. I guess I shouldn't expect any more from the princess of a big kingdom. Your heart must be made of steel, since a normal person wouldn't be able to handle it."

Viscount Baraldi didn't let him continue. "Stop that, Your Highness."

I wonder why… This viscount is supposed to be the height of evil, yet he appears to be on the good side. Although it's obvious that he's not truly scolding the prince. He wasn't panicking or getting angry at Prince Luigi's rude comments, but instead, laughing with only a slight bitterness, as if he were watching a child play a prank. *That's not the attitude you should have in this situation!*

I'd been relieved because it didn't seem like Grand Duchess Arabella was going to come for Prince Liberto tonight, but it turned out that she'd installed a backup unit. *So Princess Henriette even has to endure bullying from her teenage brother-in-law?!*

I could hear quiet snickers from around us—it wasn't just one or two people either. I was, frankly, stupefied.

Ah…

Though all the attendees appeared peaceful on the surface, some really *were* against this marriage. Prince Luigi's words only served to satisfy their spite. Someone had finally stepped up to publicly spew venom outright, and it had become a good opportunity for them to hop on.

Princess Henriette was becoming even more flustered—she'd been attacked over and over without the chance to recover. She was attempting to remain calm, but she couldn't fully hide her anxiety. People wouldn't sympathize with this, however. They would instead see it as a failure on her part. The proper reaction for a woman in her position was to either laugh the comments off or firmly defend herself. Just standing there and taking the abuse would make the scornful laughter worse.

This is bad. Should I go to her side? But it wouldn't be good if people thought she was a poor princess who couldn't do anything for herself and had to be saved…

But actually, isn't there someone who should be acting before me?!

I glared at Prince Liberto, mentally asking him why he wasn't stepping in. He did finally open his mouth, but probably not because he could feel my glare.

"You've gone too far, Luigi. Apologize to the princess."

Is it just me…or is his tone completely devoid of authority? What's going on?! What is the princess to do if even you *are acting this way?!*

"Your actions are humiliating from a member of the grand ducal family," Prince Liberto continued. "You won't be forgiven for them just because you are a child."

The words themselves are fine, but say them with more force! Be firm with him!

Prince Luigi rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. I'm *sorry* for telling the truth."

Look at that! You did absolutely nothing*, Prince Liberto!*

Though I couldn't for the life of me figure out why, Prince Liberto wasn't scolding his brother at all, so Prince Luigi did not atone for his actions. I could hear the people around us whispering and snickering once more.

Princess Henriette was going to get even more hurt because he didn't protect her. I wanted to tie up Prince Liberto and interrogate him. And I wasn't the only one who seemed to be on the verge of charging him—Lagrange's royal knights, Lord

Simeon in particular, were giving off fearsome auras. *No, no, wait! I understand how you feel, but we can't let a fight break out here*!

I desperately turned to Lutin. "C-Can't you do anything about this?"

"Don't ask me." He shrugged. "It would be impossible, of course."

I knew it! Even Lutin is useless here! Who else can I ask…? As I looked around, I caught sight of a satisfied-looking Grand Duchess Arabella, as well as the grand duke, who was turned to the side, bored. *Isn't there* anyone *I can rely on?!*

Naturally, there were other people who viewed this situation as problematic, but they hesitated to step in since even Prince Liberto, the most important person present, was refusing to put a stop to it.

Fine then. I'll go!

"Come on, stay here," Lutin warned when he sensed that I was readying myself. "You can't jump in right now. Leave it to Prince Liberto."

"Do you think he's going to do anything? Like *that*? Lord Simeon is going to snap if this keeps up! If you're not going to help, then don't get in my way."

I put the empty bowl back onto Lutin's tray, then pushed away his arm, which was blocking my path. I began to step forward.

One person was even faster than me.

"I thought I was hearing a bad child with no manners, but it turned out to be one of the sons of the grand duke. I would like to believe that's not the case, but that's the only way I can interpret this."

This person wasn't raising their deep voice, but it resounded throughout the hall. Everyone who heard it perked up and looked to see who it had come from. Prince Luigi, Viscount Baraldi, and Prince Liberto all turned to see who it was.

The man was quite tall. Lord Simeon was tall himself, but this man surpassed even my husband's height. He was not thin, but sturdy. I had a feeling I'd seen this man's glossy, impressive, honey-colored hair before.

"I didn't think I'd have to witness such a thing in a place where we're supposed to be celebrating. It's pitiful that such an ill-mannered child is part of the grand duke's family. Were you not taught properly? Or are you this way by nature? Which is it?"

This man, who was probably around sixty, said these things

relentlessly. Everyone's eyes widened even more than before. Prince Luigi shrank back at being called ill-mannered.

I forgot about jumping in and blankly watched the scene unfold. This fine man who'd said those biting words was standing so straight that one could forget his age. As for his face, his wrinkles added to his prowess, so even though he was calm, he exuded unmistakable strength. I could easily see Lord Simeon becoming a man like this when he grew older.

More than anything, this older man was a sculpted beauty. He must have been gorgeous when he was younger, and even now, he was so manly that he made many a heart beat faster. *H-He's very handsome, but I feel he resembles someone. Someone I know well.*

As everyone around gulped, Prince Liberto apologized, seemingly unfazed. "My apologies for causing such an unsightly ruckus."

The golden-haired man didn't back down. "It was unsightly indeed, but I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. Why are you so calm? You have allowed your bride to be belittled and hurt. She was humiliated, and yet you feel nothing—is that it?"

"No such thing, sir. But making a scene here is a bit…" The prince uncharacteristically wavered for a split second, then turned to Princess Henriette. "My apologies, Princess. Would you spare some time for me later?"

Princess Henriette fretted and tried to pull herself together. "Y-Yes. Um, please, do not worry about it." She turned to the tall man. "And thank you very much, sir. If it is all right, may I please have your name?"

The man didn't seem to want to continue his lecture, so he took a light breath and bowed. "Indeed, where are my manners? I apologize. My name is—"

His introduction was cut off by a high-pitched voice. "William! How could you be so rude to my son?!"

Grand Duchess Arabella was making a beeline for the man, looking livid.

"How dare you call my son ill-mannered! *You* should be the one apologizing!"

You're worried about his *behavior? What about your son?* For a moment, I'd thought she was defending Prince Liberto, despite her poor relationship with him, but she was indeed ignoring him in favor of her youngest, who was the cause of all this. She was

very bullheaded.



Lord William, as he'd been called, turned to the grand duchess, looking exasperated. "You saw how this situation unfolded. How can you defend him when you know he was the aggressor who said those scathing words?"

"Luigi did nothing wrong. He only told the truth. Are you trying to say that giving empty compliments is the proper thing to do here? It is much more sincere and *kind* to tell things how they are."

Grand Duchess Arabella cackled in Princess Henriette's direction. Her words were dripping with evil intent—much more so than Prince Luigi's had been.

Lord William's face darkened even further. "I see. So the issue here is his education. It is confirmed abuse if his personality is warping because of his parents. Thinking of it that way, he is a pitiful child."

"What...?!"

Lord William was exacting with his words. He appeared to be close with the grand duchess, but didn't hold back.

Having been told off in front of a crowd, Grand Duchess Arabella's anger peaked. She shut her fan and raised it into the air. Her height and body type were so different from Lord William's that it would have been impressive if she'd landed a hit on his face, but someone stepped in front of Lord William and shielded him before she could—a young man with brown hair. Similar to Lord Simeon and the knights, this man was most likely Lord William's guard.

Lord William placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "Oliver, stand back. There's no need to trouble yourself with this. Even if she were to hit me, it would only sting like the prick of a mosquito."

Though Lord William was the larger of the two, Mr. Oliver himself had quite an impressive physique. "Even so, sir. I cannot simply stand back and watch." His kind-looking face seemed forlorn.

Having been looked down upon by someone who was obviously just a guard, Grand Duchess Arabella lost her momentum. She lowered her arm and glared at the two of them, vexed.

I hadn't noticed until that moment, but Lord Simeon had come to stand behind Princess Henriette. He was just silently waiting, but his expression said that he wouldn't hesitate to

move as soon as anything occurred. A Lavian servant whispered in Prince Liberto's ear, probably asking for an order.

Seeing all this, the grand duchess ground her teeth and swiveled around. "All these rude people are displeasing me! This is why I didn't want to come here! Luigi, we're leaving!"

"Oh… Okay…" It took Prince Luigi several strides to catch up with her.

When I heard her call him, I remembered that he'd been the main cause of all this. I studied the boy and saw that he'd shrunk in on himself—he now appeared rather weak.

Where in the world did his previous vigor go?

Something was strange. *Would a child who's capable of spewing so much venom really back down after only being scolded a little? Wouldn't someone with his personality become sour and pout about it?* I didn't have time to observe properly, as the young prince was already following his mother. The crowd made way for them, and Her Highness walked through the hall indignantly before leaving the venue with her son and a few attendants.

The atmosphere finally cooled down. *Whew… That was an intense scene. I didn't think something like that would happen here. Nothing else will go awry, right? Please don't tell me there's going to be more!*

Prince Liberto sighed. "Thank goodness. It's finally quiet. My apologies, Your Excellency, for making you step in."

Lord William was still watching the doorway through which the grand duchess had left. "Your mother is the same as always."

"She'll never change. She'll be like that until death."

So Lord William is a duke. A duke with an appearance like that…*indeed.* Judging by his name, he was Easdalian.

"Who is he?" I whispered to Lutin.

Lutin laughed. "A relative. The old lady's cousin."

Let's put aside the fact that Lutin refers to Lavia's Grand Duchess as an "old lady."

Though he'd been silently watching up until that point, Viscount Baraldi finally spoke up. "Oh dear. I wondered what was going to happen. You were a great help, Your Excellency." *How hollow of him to say that!* "Prince Luigi seemed to have been in a bad mood from the start. Or perhaps my way of bringing him into the conversation was not so skillful. I deeply apologize for ruining the atmosphere."

The duke met the viscount's eyes. "Please do not worry about

it. I didn't think anything of it."

Prince Liberto glanced at the crowd. "I agree. Luigi was the one at fault here, so you should not apologize, Viscount. I would say that the silver lining is that we were able to discern who here we can get along with and who we can't. It was good research for determining who the princess can forge good relationships with in this kingdom."

Some of the people in the crowd were surely gulping internally at his words and accompanying glare. It seemed the prince had kept track of who'd laughed earlier. *That wasn't the reason you let your brother get away with it, though, was it? You didn't purposefully scold him lightly so that everyone else would let their guards down, did you…? Coming from you, that seems* very *likely, sir!*

The prince smiled at his bride. "The whole kingdom is celebrating our future marriage, Princess. I'm sure everyone will want to become friends with you."

"Indeed." She gave a small smile in return. "These exchanges will extend both my family and friends as well, after all. I'm excited to form new relationships."

The prince is really hammering it in! He's telling the crowd that the princess doesn't stand alone—this incident has involved his entire family, so they need to act accordingly.

That much was obvious, yes, but there were a surprising number of people who'd evidently forgotten that fact. Perhaps it was only natural for people to end up complacent when the current Grand Duke did not seem to care about his wife's actions. I couldn't help but be disappointed in the grand duke, as he hadn't stepped in at all—he'd pretended like none of this had anything to do with him.

Viscount Baraldi left the area with basic condolences, and the venue returned to normal. Prince Liberto continued to speak with Duke William.

I softly whispered, "I can't tell whether the prince is someone we can rely on or not."

He hadn't jumped in to staunchly defend Princess Henriette, but I doubted it was because he felt nothing for her. He was just doing what he could and was being cognizant of her in his own way. But even so…I wished he would have supported her more. He'd succeeded in driving away those with ill intentions, so I couldn't necessarily deny that he'd protected her. But wouldn't it

have made her happier if he'd outright defended her? Had his plot to use the situation to his advantage been applied to any other scenario, I would have fangirled over his wonderfully blackhearted nature, but thinking of it from the heroine's perspective, I couldn't be happy about his reaction.

"I wish he would understand a woman's heart more."

"You can't really ask that of him," said Lutin. He wouldn't be any help either. In times like these, he neither inserted himself nor said anything.

"I suppose it can't be helped that men don't understand things like that, but perhaps Prince Liberto could read romance novels like Lord Simeon does. I have some recommendations."

"The vice captain reads romance novels? That's hilarious." Lutin doubled over, holding his stomach as he laughed.

I puffed my cheeks out and glared at him. "He's worked very diligently to understand how women think! Don't make fun of him!"

"But it's *him*! That vice captain—that rockheaded soldier! When I think of him reading a book like that with a serious face… Ha ha ha… Ah, oh no! He's looking over here!"

Lutin spun around and ran off. I glanced over to see what had scared him, and I saw that Prince Liberto was focused on us. Duke William said something to him, and the prince motioned for me to come over.

Urgh… It's a bit frightening to be called on by him.

Lord Simeon told me with his eyes to obey the prince, so I walked over to them.

Prince Liberto smiled at me. "I was wondering where you were. You didn't need to be so far away. You could have been beside the princess."

"I didn't want to be in the way." *It's fine! I'm doing what I deem most appropriate.*

The prince introduced Duke William, who towered over me. His honey-colored eyes sparkled down at me—they matched his hair color perfectly. "I would like to greet this young noblewoman as well. I heard that one of my family members has been in your care. It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Flaubert. My nephew told me that you would be accompanying Her Highness Princess Henriette. I am excited to greet you."

"It's very nice to meet you too. Your nephew, you say?" I glanced at Lord Simeon, who nodded as he hid his expression.

Duke William put a hand to his chest and politely bowed. “My name is William Shannon. I thank you for being so kind to Nigel.”

I curtsied back. I wasn’t surprised to hear that name, as I’d long figured it out. So this really *was* “Duke Shannon.” Lord Nigel Shannon was an ambassador residing in Lagrange, and the man in front of me had very similar features that all but confirmed their blood relation. In addition to Duke William’s relation to the royal family of Easdale, he also had blood from the royal family of Shulk, a kingdom to the south.

A high-status gentleman like him had most likely been sent to attend Prince Liberto’s wedding in lieu of Her Majesty the Queen of Easdale. He lived in a different world than I did; I never would’ve thought that an opportunity to speak with him would arise. I’d imagined a more frightening person, but His Excellency had impeccable manners and was genuinely friendly to me.

“Nigel has often written about you and your husband in his letters,” the duke continued. “He seemed very happy in his initial report about the fun friends he’d made.”

“Oh my, so Lord Nigel spoke of us? We’ve been in his care as well.”

“He said that you were a very intelligent, brave woman who contributed to the resolutions of many incidents. I was very curious upon reading his reports. I wanted to meet you to see what kind of person you were, so I’ve been looking forward to this day.”

“O-Oh my. You’re speaking too highly of me.” *My face hurts from smiling! And Lord Simeon’s glare hurts too! Lord Nigel, how could you?! What in the world did you write about me?!* I could see the ambassador’s bright face in the back of my mind. He was always so playful—a free spirit who loved to bother his subordinates. There was no doubt that he’d written fancifully about me. “I don’t know what he’s said about me, but please don’t take those words too seriously. They’re just Lord Nigel’s jokes. I have not done anything special. I am a mere housewife with no talents or abilities.”

Prince Liberto let out a single, loud guffaw. *Is there a problem?!*

Duke William looked puzzled. “But at the end of last year—”

I quickly cut him off. “I’ve encountered issues, for sure! But solving them is far out of my range of ability. My husband was the one who took care of them.”

It all comes down to my capable husband’s accomplishments! I

pushed all the credit onto Lord Simeon. *I'm not lying. Lord Simeon does all the hard work. I need to be rescued all the time.*

I smiled at the duke, and he nodded. "I have heard much about your husband as well. He seems very skilled and useful in many different situations. So much so that we'd be honored to invite him into our knightly order."

"I deeply appreciate the sentiment," Lord Simeon answered matter-of-factly.

Speaking of knights… I turned to the person standing behind the duke. This was the man named Oliver who'd guarded Duke William earlier. He looked to be around Lord Simeon's age, if not a little older. Sir Oliver seemed to be a kind person—his appearance was very plain, and he didn't stand out, which made me feel a sort of camaraderie with him.

I turned back to Duke William. "The famous Knights of the Rose, yes? I heard that they were created to protect you and that their ranks feature the cream of the crop. Each Knight of the Rose can take on many foes at once! Is your guard also a member?"

The duke turned to look at the man behind him. "Yes, this is the vice captain of the knights, Oliver Crighton. The captain is on long-term leave, so Oliver has taken over the knights in his stead."

Sir Oliver bowed slightly. I returned the motion. "Lord Nigel is the captain, if I recall. I've been wondering about this, but why is such a person an ambassador?"

I hadn't really thought deeply about this question. Frankly, I'd only asked it to get the duke to speak more. Unexpectedly, Duke William and Sir Oliver exchanged glances and laughed bitterly.

"Well, as it were, there are a few…unfortunate circumstances."

"Pardon?"

"I'm sure you know this, but my nephew cannot resist anything that has to do with women."

"Ah… Indeed." I also chuckled. It was true—Lord Nigel was particularly fond of women and went out of his way to be kind to them. Coupled with his fancy looks, he was very popular in Lagrange.

"Two daughters of famous noble houses came to feud over Nigel. They both got quite heated, so their fathers petitioned us."

"Oh dear."

"Her Majesty the Queen even got involved, so we decided to

send the root of the issue away so that the ladies would calm down."

"I see. So that's what happened." I locked eyes with Lord Simeon and Princess Henriette. I wasn't sure how to react, so I just laughed.

The princess spoke elegantly. "Lord Nigel is popular with women in Lagrange as well."

"Is he causing any trouble? I can only hope that he's not bothering you all over there."

"Women are sure to quarrel over a charming man, but there haven't been any issues. Lord Nigel contributes greatly to the good relationship between our kingdoms."

"I'm relieved to hear that. I assigned someone to monitor him, but I'm worried that he doesn't listen to her."

He seemed to be referring to Lady Eva. *Indeed, she's terribly troubled!*

Prince Liberto had also met with Lord Nigel when he'd visited Lagrange. Lord Nigel had evidently had an impact, so the prince excitedly talked about him with Duke William for the time being.

I slowly exited the conversation and went to stand by Lord Simeon, returning to my position as an attendant who wasn't supposed to butt in. After observing Duke William, I decided that he'd left a good impression. In fact, I could feel nothing but positive about him. Not only was he handsome, but his manner of speaking, his expressions, and his gaze harbored no ill intent. He had a grace befitting his status, yet he wasn't arrogant. He'd tossed out a cold glare and harsh words when going back and forth with Grand Duchess Arabella, but he was very polite and kind to me and Princess Henriette.

Viscount Baraldi had given off the same impression on the surface, but hints that we couldn't trust him had slipped through here and there. I even suspected that he might have brought Prince Luigi over to the princess on purpose—he'd wanted the young prince to say scathing things in his place. Perhaps I was seeing it that way because I'd already been alerted to what kind of person he was.

Still, I didn't know anything about Duke William yet. I might have been fooled by his acting, for all I knew. Even so, I couldn't find anything to doubt him over. As I watched the prince and princess bid farewell to the duke and move on to other people, I spoke to my husband. "He's Lord Nigel's uncle, so he's similarly

friendly and bright. It would be quite scary if this were only a front he was putting up, but I don't feel that it is. Perhaps I just don't know because it's my first time meeting him…?"

Lord Simeon readjusted his glasses, which had slipped down his face slightly. "This was also my first time seeing him, so I'm in the same situation as you."

"You feel positively toward him as well?"

My husband looked deep in thought as he watched Duke William's broad back move farther away. "I do. I don't sense any malice."

"Then is it okay to take him at face value? I can't help but be on guard since we're in Lavia." I didn't think much of meeting Easdalian people in Sans-Terre, but I felt that they were our natural enemies in Casterna Palace. Even *I* thought I was being a bit too high-strung, but I couldn't help it—I'd heard so much about the opposition between the Lagrange faction and the Easdale faction, and Grand Duchess Arabella's actions only made that wariness worse. "If he thinks the same way as the grand duchess, then surely he isn't pleased with Lagrange securing the position of Prince Liberto's bride. Duke William didn't seem to be on good terms with the grand duchess personally, but political leanings are another beast entirely."

"I wonder about that. I'm thinking his leanings actually overlap with his queen's."

"Huh?"

Instead of explaining further, Lord Simeon changed the subject. "What did you talk about with Lutin earlier?"

"You're worried about *that*?"

"Should I not be?" A bit of emotion colored his cool, clean face.

I had to keep myself from laughing at his displeased eyes. "We didn't really talk about anything special. I told him that Prince Liberto should study the workings of a woman's heart since he doesn't seem to understand them. Why don't you give him some advice to start with, Lord Simeon?"

"To…start with?"

"You've read several romance novels at this point, yes? Did anything in them help you understand me better?"

His cheeks reddened a bit. "Wouldn't *you* be more informed on topics such as this?"

"I was indeed thinking of giving him some recommendations."

"Recommendations? To the *prince*?"

“People like him don’t relate to straightforward stories about pure love. Maybe a blackhearted heroic tale would produce better results. Characters similar to his type in stories make their significant others fall deeply in love with them. He could strike down those who dare attack his beloved! Fearsome in the name of love! That’s where the fangirling comes from!”

“I don’t think fangirling comes into play here—”

“And when it’s just the two of them, they’re so sweet that they melt together! They’ll have more alone time as husband and wife when they marry. That’s when he should put what he learns to the test! Oh, I simply *must* prepare reference materials for him. Of course, I’ll send him some from my personal collection, but I wonder if there are any bookstores in Latiry. There have to be!”

“Please wait. It would be an issue if the prince were to become any more frightening than he already is. Please do not feed him any strange knowledge.”

I had to do what I could for Princess Henriette, as her friend. Satisfied with my idea, I spoke in high spirits. I could think of this as part of my role as her attendant. She was sure to grant me permission to stroll the town.

Right? I sought agreement from my husband. He didn’t argue with my excitement. He just sighed.

Chapter Seven

Preparations for the wedding began immediately the day after the banquet.

After many planning meetings with the Lavians regarding the day of the ceremony, we were overwhelmed with things to remember. Mr. Bernard and the other planners were more harried than ever. The experience made me think back on the previous year several times, and I wondered whether wedding preparations had always been this chaotic. My own wedding day had been hectic, but I finally learned that wedding ceremonies for royalty were an entirely different beast.

Lord Simeon and the others needed to meet regarding the security for that day, so the Lavian soldiers went in and out. Here, they didn't have "police" as a separate organization—they left everything to the military. Palace security and public safety were both its responsibilities.

There was so much going on that one could have easily forgotten, but we had to keep the Familia in mind during this ordeal. A parade was planned to run from the cathedral, where the ceremony would be held, to Casterna Palace. This would provide the perfect opportunity for the enemy to commit a terrorist act, so we had to tighten security even more the day of.

The chief unifying the guards would be Viscount Baraldi, of all people. I couldn't shake the anxiety over how much we'd be able to trust the military.

Even among all the busy happenings, Princess Henriette was attentive to Pearl. She didn't want the puppy to get lonely after having been taken to an unfamiliar place. Anyone could see that the princess cared for Pearl from the bottom of her heart, and not just because Pearl had been gifted to her by Prince Liberto.

"I have to leave the palace today, so I'll take you for a walk later. I don't want to make the room untidy either, so… Why don't we go on a treasure hunt?"

As always, Pearl was begging for attention just before we had to leave, so Princess Henriette obliged her for a bit.

"Treasure hunt?" I asked.

"It's Pearl's special trick. That's right! We haven't shown Lady

Marielle yet, have we? Then we'll get something from her first. Lady Marielle, do you have a handkerchief or anything with your scent on it?"

Oh, I see. I pulled my thin scarf from my sleeve.

Taking it, the princess held it out, letting it dangle near Pearl's nose. "Now then, Pearl. Examine it veeery carefully. Remember this scent!"

A maid then took it over to the next room, after which the princess and I entered with Pearl in tow.

Princess Henriette clapped her hands together. "Ready? Go search!"

Let loose into the room, Pearl began sniffing around. *I wonder if she really can find my scarf? I've been in this room many times at this point, so my scent is probably all over the place.*

As expected, Pearl investigated chairs that I'd sat on and paths I'd walked. It was impressive how precise she was. Did I really leave such strong scents? I knew dogs had superior senses of smell, but seeing proof of this in real life was shocking.

In the end, she pulled my scarf out from under a cushion. The princess, the maid, and I all clapped as she proudly brought it over to us.

"Wow! Great job!"

"Good girl! Good girl! Wonderfully done! So talented!"

"Who's a smart girl? Yes, you are!"

It was only proper to shower her with praise for succeeding. Princess Henriette and I were petting her all over, so Pearl was giddy and wagging her fluffy tail so much that I thought it might fall off.

I stroked her soft head. "Did you train her to do this?"

"Yes." The princess ruffled Pearl's back. "Brother told me that the military uses this technique with their dogs sometimes, so I started training with Pearl to see if she could do it. I was sure her nose wouldn't lose out despite her size. The official dog trainer assisted me with her training."

"My, how serious! That's what's good about dogs. Cats would flat-out refuse to do it, even though they technically can."

"It would certainly be difficult to get a cat to do this."

"They're not dumb. They watch us humans carefully and even learn how to open doors on their own. Cats can also learn which words benefit them, like 'treat.' They just won't do anything you *ask* them to."

“So they ignore you, even though they know what you want.”

“They’ll do anything you tell them *not* to!”

We excitedly chatted about our beloved cat and dog, making Pearl go on another treasure hunt as we giggled. The puppy seemed elated that we were playing with and praising her so much.

Alas, we had work to do that day. As sorry as we felt for her, she had to stay home. When the time came, Princess Henriette ended Pearl’s game and patted her little head.

“Be a good girl and wait for us, okay? We’ll play again when we get home.”

Princess Henriette left her puppy to the maid and exited the room, me alongside her. Today’s agenda was to scope out the cathedral. And not just to look at it, but to rehearse as well, so Prince Liberto accompanied us. Lord Simeon and his subordinates were already on standby.

Once we neared the first floor, we saw that the prince and his entourage were waiting for us.

“Did we keep you waiting?” the princess asked, walking elegantly down the staircase.

“Not at all. You’re right on time.” Prince Liberto took a step forward to greet her.

His party was large. Scanning through them, I found several people I knew. Lord Simeon glared at Lutin reflexively. But he and I both turned around when we heard the princess calling out unexpectedly.

“Oh, Dario is coming too!” She gave a small wave to Dario, who was waiting beside Lutin.

No, wait, she’s not just waving. That seems to be some sort of hand signal.

Just as I began to wonder what that was, Dario quickly responded with his own hand gesture. The princess smiled and nodded back.

Prince Liberto raised his eyebrows. “Oh? You know sign language, Princess?”

Ah! I finally understood. They were signing to each other.

“Yes, I do.” Princess Henriette’s lovely voice rang through our small vicinity. “I was a trustee for Sans-Terre’s school for the deaf. The position was mostly just a title, so I didn’t actually do any management work, but I wanted to interact with the students. I learned many things.”

“That’s incredible. There are different sign languages depending on the region, though, and I don’t believe Dario knows Sans-Terre’s.”

“Indeed. We can still only have simple interactions. But he can hear just fine, so he’s taught me several signs.” The princess smiled warmly at Dario to get him to confirm, and the man turned his face away, embarrassed.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one who was surprised at their relationship. Lutin’s eyes were wide as he stared at his cohort, while Prince Liberto looked at the princess in awe.

“I’m surprised,” he said. “He’s often feared by women because of his size, but it appears he’s opened up to you already.”

Princess Henriette put a hand to her lips as she giggled. “Oh? Have you forgotten? He was with you when you visited Lagrange. He participated in the offense *and* defense of the Tour de Prison.”

A bit of a crack formed in the prince’s smile—that was a memory he’d rather have erased. The princess took no notice of this and continued to have fun talking about the experience. “He responded to Lady Marielle calling out to him because they were close. I felt he had a good sense of humor and was an interesting person.”

Having recalled that time, Princess Henriette had immediately recognized Dario when he’d delivered the meal the other night. She’d been happy to see someone she knew, so she’d spoken to him first and learned that he couldn’t talk. She must have tried sign language after that, and she’d managed to open up his heart. They’d swiftly become friends—she’d even invited him to eat with them.

Lutin’s eyes had somehow opened up even wider. He was still staring at Dario. “Really…”

I most likely had the same expression on my face. Dario had turned red up to his ears. Two emotions welled up in me: a bit of disappointment that someone who’d previously only opened up to me had been taken away and, of course, respect. Though the princess looked like a very normal girl, at the end of the day, she really was a princess. It was no wonder her horizons were broad and she was able to properly observe others.

This revelation had surely improved Prince Liberto’s assessment of her as well. Dario was not only the prince’s confidant but also someone prone to being discriminated

against. Yet the princess had not hesitated to approach him and become close with him. Wouldn't that make the prince happy? She didn't do it because anyone had told her to—she'd done it because she wanted to, putting her kind, fair disposition on display. Surely the prince would fall in love with her all over again, thinking, "What a wonderful person my bride is!"

I couldn't necessarily expect such an exaggerated line from him, but he *did* appear pleased with the situation. His smile did not look like a lie, for once. Perhaps he and the princess would be able to grow closer bit by bit through events like these. *Indeed, this is setting a good pace!*

A servant came to inform us that our carriages were ready, so we set off. *I'd like to learn sign language myself*, I thought as I headed toward the exit.

That was when I felt a presence behind me. Swiveling around, I could see a figure looking down at all of us from atop the staircase.

It was Prince Luigi, standing alone. He was watching his brother leave with an emotional expression. I wasn't sure whether it was anger or sadness.

I wanted to call out to him, but most of our party was already out the door. Unable to stop, I followed them, with worry lingering in my heart.

On top of being the capital, Latiry was important in Lavia for a religious reason. What reason, you might ask? Why, because the grand cathedral and the pope resided there.

I'd assumed that the ceremony would be held at that cathedral, but as it turned out, it wouldn't be. The pope would greet the new couple at a later date after the wedding, by which time I would've already gone home to Lagrange. *Aw, I was looking forward to seeing His Holiness. I wonder if I can ask someone to take photos at the cathedral.*

"No. Absolutely not." Lord Simeon grew dark and shook his head when I asked him. He'd refused me even more sternly than usual.

"You don't have to make such a face." I pouted.

"We can take care of most trouble that arises, but please don't get the religious court involved. That would be putting too much on our plate. My stomach aches just thinking about you standing next to His Holiness."

“Why must you presume that any trouble would arise at all? And it wouldn’t be the court—it’s the cathedral! I just wanted to see the parts of it that are open to the public. Though I suppose I *would* like to see the court if I’m allowed.”

“You may not! Please do not approach the cathedral. Knowing you, you wouldn’t stop at mere sightseeing.”

“Th-That’s so rude! I’m the one who’d be getting roped into things if anything were to occur—not the one causing them!”

“My lifespan shortens either way!”

My husband was just denying everything and not listening to me, making me puff my cheeks out even more.

Lutin cut in. “What’s this? I would *love* to help with anything that reduces the vice captain’s lifespan. Marielle’s star is sure to call in some interesting ruckuses.”

Lord Simeon shot him a sharp glare. “You’ll run into a world of pain if you act so nonchalant about this.”

Though I assumed Lutin would have his own smart remark in return, he actually turned his eyes away from my husband, looking somewhat ambivalent. *What’s with the two of them? Just what kind of harbinger do they think I am?*

“Anyway…” Lutin readjusted himself. “She wants to see the bald old guy, right? I don’t think there’s anything interesting about him.”

I was offended. “Such an insolent comment! All believers wish to gaze upon his face at least once.”

“And that’s just it—I have no idea about any of that. Ah, well. I can take you to him if that’s what you really want, though.”

“You will?”

“Stop that!” The lines on Lord Simeon’s face were deep.

This conversation occurred while we were stepping down from the carriage and about to enter the church.

Our voices had evidently echoed around, as Prince Liberto, who was walking a ways in front of us, turned around. “His Holiness shows his face through a window once a week. The general public is allowed to come onto the plaza in front.”

I searched for the window, worried. “My vision is not so good. I wouldn’t be able to see him.”

“You wanna see him up close?” Lutin grinned. “That leaves us with no other choice, then. We’ll have to disguise you and get you in there…”

“Stop that!” Lord Simeon was genuinely blue in the face by

this point.

Prince Liberto also gave a passing warning. “Bambino. You mustn’t speak of such things in public. Do it where others cannot hear you.”

“You’re not going to stop him?!”

It seemed Lord Simeon’s stomach wouldn’t survive this after all. I felt bad for him, so I decided to close my mouth. *But…disguising myself and infiltrating the cathedral? With a professional’s help, at that! Th-That’s a very charming plot…!* Lord Simeon gave me a look that said that his heart was wrought with worry at my giddy face.

Once our back-and-forth banter was over, our first order of business was planning for the ceremony and the rehearsal. The pastor who would be officiating the ceremony greeted us.

This was a historical location—the enormous church was splendid as a temple from another kingdom, and it was very much worth seeing. I wanted to spend an entire day taking my time to look around, if that were indeed allowed.

I closely examined the interior as I walked through it with Princess Henriette. The place had a different style than Lagrange’s churches. A monk was guiding us, giving us details on several aspects of the design. I jotted down everything I saw in my notebook.

“There are ancient ruins underground. No one is allowed in most of them, as the foundations are unstable, but certain parts are open to the public. You may visit them if you are interested.”

I latched onto this fact immediately. “Would that happen to be an underground cemetery?”

Latiry’s underground cemeteries were well-known. Different from Sans-Terre’s, which were nothing more than simple columbaria, Latiry’s were ancient religious archaeological sites. I’d always wanted to visit one ever since I’d read about them in books.

Prince Liberto laughed raucously. “Do you wish to see the underground cemeteries, Mrs. Flaubert?”

“Yes, I do!”

Though I was vigorously nodding my head, Princess Henriette avoided all eyes. “I don’t wish to partake… I’m not good with things of that sort.”

The prince smiled. “We’d have to go a bit far away in order to see the underground cemeteries. Only the ancient city is buried

under here.”

Apparently, during ancient times, it’d been forbidden for graveyards to be built in the middle of the city. People who wanted to see the underground ones had to go a bit beyond the city itself. Instead, archaeological sites of the old city remained here and there. Latiry could boast that it was a city built atop another, more ancient one, which could be dug back up if the people so wished. Several of these ruins had still been in their original forms upon discovery—these were the ones that we would be able to visit.

“But why was the entire city buried in the first place?” I wondered aloud.

“Because they wanted to bury the old as they constructed the new,” Prince Liberto explained. “That method was easier than having to destroy it all.”

Though that sounded like a tremendous task nowadays, it’d evidently been a more logical decision to the ancient people. Burying the previous city underneath would raise the overall elevation and help prevent floods. Lagrange was descended from the same original empire as Lavia, but the nations differed in many ways. The terrain and people that lived in each must have played a big part in that.

Another city underground… An ancient one… That’s fascinating! I can’t stop my dreams and delusions from spilling out!

I stole a glance at Lord Simeon, who was already staring back at me, having predicted this outcome. He flatly shook his head. *This again?!*

“But why…”

“Marielle.” He scolded me with a stern face.

Urgh. I haven’t forgotten my role here. I’m just asking for a bit of time after the wedding, before we return home… Can we not?

“You’re such a blockhead, Vice Captain,” Lutin cut in from the side again. “Ignore him and come with me, Marielle. I’ll take you to any underground city or cemetery you want.”

The valley between Lord Simeon’s brows grew ever deeper. “Please don’t. It’s too dangerous to take Marielle to places like those.”

“Now you’re saying it’s *dangerous*? You’re overprotective and a worrywart. You’re gonna go bald soon if you keep that up. Underground ruins are a run-of-the-mill sightseeing spot. There’s one under Casterna too.”

“And I’m asking you—do you really think she would stop at mere sightseeing? This is Marielle we’re talking about!”

“Um, Lord Simeon?” I had to pull back a little.

“The pathways would not only be complicated, but some of them may have caved in, so she could get lost. The ruins here are perilous. And what about the off chance that she were to separate from either of us? She would be left in complete darkness since light doesn’t reach those places. And then if she digs up something unbelievable to add to the disaster? Can you say for sure that she wouldn’t?!”

Lutin laughed. “All of that just makes it sound even more enticing! It’s exciting to think about what Marielle might dig up.”

“I’m not going to dig up anything!” I huffed indignantly. “I told you both, I just want to *look*. You’re overthinking this, Lord Simeon!”

Princess Henriette peeked over her shoulder at our collective fuss. “I wonder about that… Marielle does seem like she would dig something up.”

Prince Liberto had to chime in too. “I have to say, that interests me as well.”

My cheeks were surely puffed out to the max at being told off by everyone. *Why are they talking about me as if I’m the cause of all human calamity?! I’m not some dog that likes to dig holes! I just want to* look*, not go excavating!*

The prince chuckled at my expression. “The least I can do is take you to famous places aboveground. It would only be about a half day’s trip, but you should be able to enjoy it.”

He must have made this promise because he felt sorry for me being rejected over and over. He’d originally wanted to take Princess Henriette around the city anyway, so he was free today. The princess’s eyes sparkled upon hearing that we could relax this evening.

Our time during the rehearsal was much more lively and free than the one we’d had in Casterna Palace. Even the prince himself seemed to have let the tension out of his shoulders. After we left the church, we went sightseeing, as he’d promised. Though I initially declined, thinking that I’d just be in the way, Prince Liberto invited me to join them in the same carriage. Lutin climbed in and sat next to me. Lord Simeon mounted his horse and rode right next to the carriage. I figured he was concerned about me, so I gave him a smile through the window.

Our first goal is to sightsee! I'm too busy looking out the window to make conversation. Just as I'd thought, I was enraptured by the city scenery. I pressed myself against the window to see the foreign sights as the prince and Lutin explained them.

The civilian buildings were no different from the ones in Sans-Terre, so I didn't feel any particular mystification at them. But ruins would pop up here and there. One could see a flash of ancient times in between the modern cityscape. What caught my attention in particular was the number of obelisks.

Tall stone pillars that stretched to the sky stood in front of the churches and plazas, including in front of Casterna Palace. These had originally been constructed in a country far to the south to worship a sun deity. The emperor at the time had brought them all the way to Lavia, as his political power extended even to here. Words of a different language were inscribed onto the surface of the pillars.

Chardin Square in Sans-Terre also had an obelisk, but in contrast to that single one in Lagrange, Latiry apparently had more than ten of them. In other areas, these relics of the past had vanished along with the times they came from, but in this city, they still remained.

We passed in front of the ruins of ancient mansions and shrines. They were all covered in arches and round pillars. And what I was most excited about was the famous colosseum! A tall, circular structure that rivaled even that of a temple, it maintained its magnificent appearance despite a part of it being dilapidated.

I was overwhelmed by the intensity of its presence, which was even greater than I'd imagined it would be. *It's so huge…and tall. It's as tall as five or six buildings, or maybe even more.* Arch-shaped holes that seemed to be windows decorated the walls. They were beautifully lined along the wall in their uniform shapes and sizes. I could only be shocked that a building like this had been constructed close to two thousand years ago yet was still standing today. *How in the world did the people build this when they could only use man power back then? The architectural techniques are also impressive—doesn't that make the people of the past even more impressive than those of the current era?*

I leaned out of the window, in awe as I stared up at the colosseum.

Lord Simeon rode up and pushed me back in with his hand.

“You’ll fall out.”

“Lord Simeon, please take some time off before we return home and bring me here again. I’m begging you!”

He grimaced for a moment before replying. “Not to any underground cemeteries?”

“I would like to see those as well, but here moreso! I want to see you standing in the colosseum, like a swordsman of ancient times! Ah, but a saber wouldn’t fit the era. We’ll have to obtain an ancient weapon from somewhere. And an outfit to match, if we can!”

“What exactly are you trying to make me do?”

I could hear Lutin scoff behind me. “The vice captain wouldn’t be fit for the job. None of the warriors back then were as pale and pretty as him.”

That reminded me. “Ah, I’d love for Dario to play a part as well. I’m sure this would suit him to a T!”

“I agree, but I don’t think he’d want to do it if his opponent is the vice captain.”

My husband’s horse missed a step. “Honestly, what are you trying to make me do?”

While dreaming of times past as I watched the buildings go by, I could practically hear the fervent cheers of spectators in the stands. These cheers would shower Lord Simeon as he fought valiantly. Stronger and more beautiful than any fighter, he would glare down at his opponent after knocking them to the ground! His glasses would glint coldly... *Ah, I don’t believe they had glasses back then. Aw... He’s still cool without them, but they add to his charm as a brutal, blackhearted military officer!*

As I worried over what to do about that particular setting, our carriage made it past the colosseum. We headed toward the next destination, all the while catching the eyes of the civilians on the streets.

We went to as many places as time would allow. Finally, we rode up a somewhat tall hill. A park was situated at the top, and it overlooked the entire city, so we stopped the carriage there for a break. I felt a bit sorry, but we had to get away from the locals for a while. Public safety was still a concern in Lavia, so we couldn’t bring our guards with us up the hill. Our knights and Lavia’s soldiers were pushing the crowd back at the bottom, where the people were craning their necks trying to catch a glimpse of the prince and princess.

People were welcoming no matter where we went. The only ones who had a problem with the marriage were inside the grand duke's palace—the citizens were overall excited for the ceremony.

"Is this a relic as well?"

In a corner of the park stood a statue with pillars surrounding it. It looked a bit like the ruins of a temple. The statue was of a man holding a staff; he also wore a helmet adorned with wings. This was most likely one of the most famous deities in all of mythology, Mercurius. He governed travelers and merchants, so I assumed he had been placed here to guard the city from this specific hill.

"Unfortunately, this one isn't from ancient times. This park was built only ten or so years ago, so that's when the statue and pillars were constructed."

Sure enough, the statue was merely performative. Prince Liberto's explanation disappointed me slightly. Upon closer examination, the statue was indeed too clean and unscathed to have been from ancient times.

I approached the pillars. "This is Mercurius, right?"

"Indeed," the prince answered. "It is a duplicate of a statue that was found in one of the ruins."

According to him, the real one had been preserved in a museum. *Ah, yet another place I would like to visit! They just keep piling up!*

"Should I have Angelo guide you? I can have him take you there in secret without the vice captain knowing," Prince Liberto whispered, after sneakily looking around to ensure my husband wasn't nearby.

"Angelo" was Lutin's real name. Lutin himself was standing a bit away from the prince with a sour look on his face. "I'm telling you," said Lutin, "I don't need little offers like that. Please don't."

"What's this?" asked Prince Liberto. "You're hiding your tail between your legs in front of the lady? You find the oddest moments to be cowardly."

"What are you saying? Why don't you focus on your own relationships before worrying about others? Let's go over there, Marielle." Lutin appeared fed up as he pulled me along, but the prince merely shook his head and sighed as he watched us go.

"Marielle?" Lord Simeon came over right away once he noticed. Lutin took his hand away from my arm and pretended

like he didn't know what was happening.

"Nothing to worry about." I blinked. "Lutin was merely running away after His Highness made fun of him."

Lutin shrugged. "I don't need his help. If I wanted to invite you somewhere, I would do so without him having to set anything up for me."

"Invite?" Lord Simeon looked incredulous.

Though I hesitated for a moment, I told him about the exchange that had just occurred. There wasn't a need for me to hide it. I hadn't agreed to anything, and Lutin had refused as well.

Lutin gestured toward Lord Simeon. "See, Vice Captain? It's because you keep saying no this, no that, shutting down all of Marielle's requests. *That's* why stuff like this happens. Make an exception for her once in a while."

"There's nothing I can do about it. We're here for work."

"There are other people here with you, though. I think it'd be fine for you to go play while you're on vacation, but what do I know?"

"I cannot let that happen. We are on the clock from the first day until the final day. We did not plan this trip with free time in mind. Any lulls in activity are for waiting on orders and rest. Both Marielle and I agreed to these roles, so she also understands that we cannot act as we please."

Yes, yes, yes. I know. I know very, veeery well. I hurriedly nodded at him. *I'm only getting distracted because of all the fascinating things popping up around me. But I know! We're here for work.*

Lutin snorted. "And there it is, the vice captain's grand speech. I wonder if it's possible to crack open your rock-solid head. Stiff, inflexible—an all-around boring guy. You can get your work done for sure, but you're pretty much empty inside, huh?"

Lord Simeon clenched his fist. I placed my hand on top of it to tell him not to take each and every insult to heart. He looked down at me.

I smiled at him. "You're rockheaded for sure, but my trust in you is just as solid, and you have interesting traits of your own. Please don't believe him. And you..." I turned back to Lutin. "How would you feel if someone told you that you're too sardonic and are always hiding your true thoughts, so you can't be trusted?"

"Well...they'd be right." Lutin shrugged again, turned his back to us, then shoved his hands in his pockets as he stared down at

the city.

"I can also praise your flexibility in responding to different situations. You don't let your emotions get in the way, and you have a bird's-eye view of everything. Everyone's strengths and weaknesses go hand in hand. Everyone has both, which is what makes people interesting—both you and Lord Simeon."

Lutin didn't answer or turn around, which let me know that he wasn't interested in this topic anymore.

I looked back up at Lord Simeon, whose eyes seemed apologetic, and smiled at him. "It's true that I would like to have free time to explore, but only after I've accomplished the task given to me. I was even able to sightsee a bit thanks to His Highness. This is enough for me."

My husband nodded softly. "I'm sure you've been charmed by all these sights since it's your first time seeing them. I completely understand wanting to play around. I'm sorry that I'm making you hold back and cannot grant your wishes."

I shook my head. "You've only been telling me the truth. There's nothing for you to apologize over."

Instead of forcing the discussion to come to a close with a strict order, Lord Simeon was taking my feelings into account. He was a proper, kind person.

"I don't mind if we visit here once the ceremony is over. We'll be heading home with Their Majesties, so we'll be in Lavia for several days longer. Do as you please during that time."

"Will you not be joining me, Lord Simeon?"

"I can't possibly play around…" He glanced at Lutin's silent back, then continued as if he were swallowing something bitter. "Just…don't go alone. Go with someone you know… A local…who can guard you."

"Um, Lord Simeon?"

"I… I don't mind if you…ask…him."

Well, it certainly looks like you do! You really are upset about what he said earlier, aren't you? Such a serious man! Your feelings of wanting to accommodate me to the fullest are adorable, but I don't want to go if it makes you make such a face!

Lutin turned around, evidently not able to take it any longer. "Honestly. Just go play for *one* day, Vice Captain. I'll even tag along so you can relax."

Isn't it impressive that my husband was able to out-stubborn even Lutin? A victory for the rockhead! I almost burst out laughing. "We

don’t have to decide anything yet. Let’s leave the plans for that until after the wedding.”

We also had to monitor the situation in general, which I pointed out to them. Lord Simeon nodded, so the topic was set aside for the time being. *If our plans come to fruition, then Lord Simeon and Lutin will be going out to town together. I can only imagine they’ll fight the whole time, but that might be enjoyable too.*

I turned to the foot of the hill. I wouldn’t be able to see every place I wanted, so I at least had to find one really good one.

The city that blended the old with the new spread out under the afternoon sunlight. There didn’t seem to be a particular pattern to the layout; everything appeared to be packed together. It must have been difficult for the people to develop new buildings on top of the old ones. Though not demolishing them made things inconvenient, it was proof that this city treasured its history. The scenery was beautiful.

Nearby, Prince Liberto was pointing to places in the city and explaining them to Princess Henriette.

“Do you…know where the slums are? Can we see them from here?” I asked after stopping to watch the scenery for a while.

Lutin and Lord Simeon turned to me at the same time. “The slums? Why do you ask?”

“Because that’s where…the Familia’s base is said to be.” I lowered my voice after making sure no one was listening.

Lutin answered, acting no different than he had before. “The entirety of Latiry is their base, not just the slums.”

“Really? But my image of the slums is that frightening people tend to gather there.”

He let out a noise that was a mix between a sigh and a light laugh. “I guess that’s how nobles would see it. Not all the residents there are criminals.”

I didn’t take his reaction to be a good one. Perhaps I’d said something rude.

There were places called slums in Sans-Terre as well. While my parents and brother didn’t prevent me from going into town on my own, they’d warned me against those places. That was why my impression of them was as it was, and the gambling den that I’d gone into during a previous incident wasn’t the type of place normal people would go either. But maybe not all of the slums were like that.

I recalled what Lutin had told me before. It had been on a

very cold night, right before we'd welcomed the new year. He'd said that he'd been beat up at the bottom of the slums and had survived only on pieces of moldy bread. He hadn't spoken of that on purpose—it'd felt more like he'd let it slip. He'd continued on with his tale after that, so I hadn't had time to ask about it. But that was how I learned that he'd been in the slums as a child. Perhaps he'd taken my words as insults.

I regretted saying them without thinking about it. I'd even sounded sure of myself despite not knowing anything.

As I felt thoughtless, Lord Simeon put his big hand on my head and consoled me. "The reason slums develop in large cities is because the poorer of us gather in them searching for work. They believe they'll be able to make money there, but most of them do not possess invitations and don't have backup plans. That's why they remain unemployed and cannot escape from poverty. Those people band together to create the regions known as slums."

"So they don't live there from the start? They gathered from elsewhere?"

"In the beginning, yes. They'll even have children, but since they have no access to education, the children's only choices are to either live like their parents or choose even worse paths. It's a vicious cycle of poverty."

"In which case, slums are only *gatherings* of poor people—they don't have any relation to crime…?"

"I can't say for sure that there isn't *any* relation. They have higher crime rates than any other region. It's easier to commit crimes there since the police can't possibly catch all of them. That's why those whose intentions are criminal specifically choose to live there. Your impression of slums was not entirely incorrect."

So while bad people did live in the slums, some of them had only gotten trapped on bad paths due to poverty. Good people even lived among them. It seemed the situation was beyond what I'd imagined. It really wasn't my place to comment on it.

"Then…may I ask? What kind of places are the slums?" I didn't want to end the discussion with just my misunderstanding. I wanted to learn more.

I was worried that Lutin would evade the question since I'd displeased him again, but he answered me immediately. "I may not be the right person to ask. I only remember being cold and

hungry all the time."

"I see..."

"The guys who raised us... Well, that's a nice spin on it, but they only kept us alive to use us to steal things. They didn't feed us properly so that we wouldn't grow too big. We basically always had empty stomachs."

"O-Oh..." So they hadn't been fed, not because funds had been lacking, but so that they wouldn't grow properly? That wasn't what I'd expected to hear. "Were they a group of thieves?"

"Something like that. I don't know why we were under those people. The earliest thing I can remember is helping them out."

Lutin's skills as a phantom thief had evidently been polished in the slums.

"So...it wasn't as if your parents were part of them?"

"Nope. Dario's parents were there though, I think. There was a woman—she must have been Dario's mother. She apparently took care of me too. No one knows who his father was, and she died pretty early on, so I don't really remember her."



I glanced over at Dario without realizing it. He was still standing near Prince Liberto, so he most likely couldn't hear us.

"It wasn't rare to see children without parents," Lutin continued. "We all begged, pickpocketed, made pocket change by cleaning the streets, hopped from meal to meal. That's how we all were, so I didn't think anything of it. And with how hungry I was, I didn't really have time to consider anything else. I wanted food more than a parent."

He looked at me as he said that. I wondered what it was in his blue eyes... It didn't seem to be anger or hatred.

"Do you feel sorry for me?" he asked.

I took some time to ponder that, then shook my head. "I think it would only be possible for me to empathize with you if I had the same experiences to some extent. The only thing I can do is vaguely imagine it, not fully understand it. That's why I can't speak as if I understand. And you're not looking for empathy or pity, are you?"

Emotion floated through his clear expression; he grinned then laughed. "Correct. That's all I need. I would come to hate you if you pitied me. Don't let me down now, you hear?"

Lord Simeon had something to say about that. "You were the one expecting it from her. Marielle, give him as much empathy as you can muster. Don't be moved by his story—just pity him! I want nothing more than for him to hate you."

"You don't have to worry about that, Vice Captain. I already hate *you* enough."

I had to chuckle at their banter. Lord Simeon hadn't changed his demeanor, even after learning of Lutin's dark past. He wasn't holding back, nor was he laughing at him—he was telling Lutin that he disliked him the same amount regardless of where he'd come from. I believed that my husband's demeanor provided a sense of relief to Lutin more than mine did. Watching Lutin as he fought back against Lord Simeon, I could see that he appeared...happy? Maybe? Or maybe not? I became less confident about that after hearing his sardonic remarks and complaints. But at the very least, Lord Simeon's good intentions had gotten across to Lutin, despite the fact that he'd never accept them in good faith.

After a while, our break came to an end, and we climbed into the carriage once more. We made it back to the palace after enjoying our free time to the fullest.

But then, a worrisome report awaited us: Princess Henriette’s beloved puppy Pearl had escaped from her room and gone missing.

Chapter Eight

“Pearl! Where are you?”

After dinner, the sky had grown dark, and I searched the inner gardens for the puppy.

The main building of Casterna Palace was rectangular at one end, with no opposing wall to the front entrance; another building stood there instead. The garden was therefore surrounded by buildings, which had turned it into a sort of beautifully paved plaza. I assumed the grand duke’s family held ceremonies here.

At present, it wasn’t quite time for everyone to have gone to sleep yet, so lights were still on in the main building, and it wasn’t completely dark. That made it more difficult to see near the center of the garden, but a canine’s ears could surely pick up a voice calling for it. Pearl loved humans too, so she would definitely come running once she heard my calls.

That was what I’d anticipated, but I received no response. I even moved locations as I called over and over, but Pearl never revealed herself.

“Maybe she isn’t here…” I sighed. I’d really thought I’d heard her barking earlier.

The moon and stars couldn’t be seen in the night sky tonight, and the wind was a bit strong. The weather didn’t seem too fair, so there was a chance of rain. Try as I might not to, I ended up imagining Pearl drenched in the rain, wandering the streets, unable to find her way home. She was a little princess that had been raised indoors her whole life—who knew if she’d be able to survive in such conditions? All I could do was pray that it wouldn’t rain.

According to the maid who had been in charge of Pearl, the puppy had disappeared a bit past noon. “I told the ladies-in-waiting to watch over her in her cage as I went to clean, since I didn’t want people going in and out. It was nap time for her as well, so I thought she’d just be asleep the whole time… But when I came back, the door to her cage was open, and she was nowhere to be found. I’m so sorry.”

The cage most likely hadn’t been locked properly. Pearl must

have jumped against it, and the impact had made the door burst open.

Princess Henriette had, of course, been worried when she'd heard what had happened. The maids and I split up to search for the puppy, asking the knights and palace workers for help, but we couldn't even find any eyewitnesses, much less Pearl herself.

I would think that a puppy walking around all alone would be something memorable. I wonder why no one's seen her?

Someone suggested that perhaps Pearl hadn't run away—maybe she'd been kidnapped. I had to disagree, since someone would have noticed if she'd been stolen away while the maid was out cleaning. As quiet as Pearl tended to be, she'd resist if someone she didn't know tried to pick her up. The maid had also been monitoring the ladies-in-waiting, just in case they tried to steal any valuables, so she was able to say for sure that no one had been acting suspiciously. But in turn, she'd focused too much on them and had failed to notice Pearl leaving her cage.

Night had fallen, and we'd gained no clues to Pearl's location. Lord Simeon comforted us—we were stumped. "It doesn't appear she's left the palace grounds. I checked with the guards, but they didn't see her leave. It's also hard to think that she would go straight for the exit in such a large, unfamiliar building. She has to still be inside."

"I agree…" Princess Henriette nodded as she sighed. "She must have wandered into one of the rooms."

Lord Simeon spoke with a kind voice so the princess wouldn't worry. "I'll ask the workers once again to bring her here if they find her. Dogs are sure to bark when they're surprised, so they'll find her in time. It will be fine."

Princess Henriette seemed to calm down at those words, and she encouraged us all to turn in for the night.

I returned to my assigned room as well. The air was rather stuffy since the door had been closed the whole time. I opened the window to let the night breeze in, then removed my makeup. I was exhausted after having moved around the whole afternoon. Pearl herself was surely asleep by now, so I told myself I'd resume the search the next day. Someone could even find her in the meantime.

I went to the window after wiping my face. I was about to close it so that I could change, but a high-pitched bark faintly resounded through the quiet of the night…or at least, I thought

that was what I heard.

I paused and focused on the sounds around me. *That had to have been a dog's bark, right? It was so quiet that another sound could have easily drowned it out, but it didn't seem like the sound of the wind or a noise from afar. I could hear it because I opened the window—meaning it came from outside.*

Looking down at the inner garden, it was so dark that I wouldn't have been able to see Pearl. My only option was to investigate for myself. She could have still been nearby. I grabbed the lamp from the bedside table and rushed out the door.

There was no one in the hallway. It would only be a waste of time to call for someone, as Pearl could easily run somewhere else in the meantime, so I hurried to the staircase.

It wasn't easy getting outside. All of the windows and entrances were locked at night. Princess Henriette's room was on the second floor of the left wing, while the first floor held the salons and reception rooms. Everywhere was reticent, and the hallways only held faint lights pouring from the bottoms of the doorways. The doors leading outside were firmly locked. That left me with no other option but to run to the center tower and explain the situation to the security office. That was when they finally let me into the garden.

Searching for Pearl, I ended up underneath the window of my room. There was no one around, and I couldn't hear any barks. My shoulders slumped as I stood alone in the dark garden, the night wind brushing by me. "Ah... If only I'd left sooner. Or maybe I misheard? I don't feel too confident about this anymore."

I scanned the entirety of the inner garden. It had been troublesome enough trying to get here, so I could only imagine that Pearl wouldn't be able to go back inside once she was out. She had to be somewhere nearby. Perhaps she'd made it to the other side of the opposite building?

I looked over to said building. There weren't any lights on inside, so I couldn't tell whether people were in it or not. A dog wouldn't have been able to get in there, but it was possible for one to get behind it by passing through the space between it and the main building. Beyond even that was a fence, and there'd be no getting past that. It was possible for me to find Pearl there if that was really where she was.

It was quite some ways away though, so I wavered. Searching

during the daytime was one thing, but going so far off at night was another. I considered returning to the main building and asking Lord Simeon for help.

I contemplated this as I stared at the building. That was when I saw something move in that direction.

“Hm…?”

It looked like someone was outside of the farther building, not inside. The lights from the main building filtered weakly into that area. Shadows were moving in front of the farther building; not just one, but several. *Are the Lavian soldiers patrolling? It would certainly be convenient if they were. I could ask them for help.*

I jogged as fast as I could to the building, with one hand holding my lamp and the other holding my skirt. It was difficult despite the path being a straight line. I huffed and puffed as I ran through the garden.

Once I passed through the center of the plaza and told myself that there was only another thirty seconds to go, the shadows that had been stuck in one place the whole time suddenly moved. They ran to the right wing, then disappeared between the buildings. They’d gone behind the building, just as I’d suspected Pearl of doing.

I skidded to a stop out of surprise. The shadows looked like they had run away from something in a hurry, not simply moved locations. *But why? Is it because I came near?* I had a light with me, so they had most likely immediately recognized that I was a person. If they’d run away because they thought I was approaching them, then they definitely weren’t soldiers on patrol.

I…shouldn’t be here alone in this situation. Could those people have been thieves? They seemed to have come from the farther building.

I was going to lose track of them if I didn’t give chase, but it wasn’t as if I could catch them even if I tried. I swiveled around in hopes that I could call for someone.

“Marielle!”

It was Lord Simeon’s voice. Looking up, a window on the second floor of the main building was open.

“Lord Simeon! Perfect timing!”

“For what?! Why are you outside at this time of night?”

I flinched at being scolded so bluntly. His voice had boomed around the garden since everything was quiet.

He lightly leaped over the windowsill. *Wait, what?!* He hung from it for a moment, then let go and jumped to the ground. He didn't fall or get hurt, and he stood up as if he'd just done the most normal thing in the world. *As expected of a gorilla... I mean, the cream of the crop of the Royal Order of Knights. Something like this is nothing for him. But should you really be doing that in another kingdom's palace?! Ah, wait, this isn't the time for that!*

I rushed Lord Simeon since I didn't want the thieves to get away. "You can lecture me all you want later. We have to hurry that way! There were suspicious figures..."

As soon as I pointed to the farther building, several voices raised up from that direction. Shocked, I closed my mouth and turned toward them. A light had lit up in front of the building, probably a lantern. A person was there.

Several people from the main building came running toward us as well. I could immediately tell they were Lavian soldiers. It felt like they were running toward me specifically.

"Marielle."

I jumped when a hand was placed on my shoulder. Lord Simeon had arrived first.

"Where are these suspicious figures?"

"Um..."

I didn't have time to explain before the soldiers were upon us.

"You bastards! What have you done to His Highness?!"

"Huh?"

The soldiers yelled at me as fast as they ran. My eyes grew wide. *Why me?!*

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb! You did this!"

"Did *what*?"

As I wavered, one of the soldiers reached his arm out toward me. Lord Simeon swiftly put himself between us and pushed him back. "What is the meaning of this? I would prefer that you refrain from using violence."

"Out of our way! Are you her accomplice?!"

"Can you not tell? We came here accompanying Her Highness the Princess of Lagrange. It seems some kind of issue has arisen, but if you're suspecting us of involvement, then you're mistaken. Marielle, you didn't go over to that building, did you?"

I hurried and nodded at Lord Simeon's question. *I see, so that's what's going on.* "I didn't. I was on my way over there, but figures

noticed me approaching and ran off. I felt that was strange, so I turned back."

Lord Simeon agreed. "I saw you running that way as well. I jumped from the window to chase after you, so you never left my sight." He turned back to the soldier. "She hadn't made her way over there yet."

"As if I'll believe you!" the soldier bellowed. "You're just covering for your countryman! Or maybe you're working with this woman—"

"Watch your words." Intensity filled my husband's voice at once—it became icy. The force in his tone was enough to make the soldiers shrink back despite their previous bloodlust. "This young lady is a wife of the Flaubert earldom and the attendant of the princess, who requested that she be here. We will cooperate if you're asking for eyewitness reports, but if you're going to treat us as suspects from the very beginning and call my wife 'that woman,' then your insolence knows no bounds. Do you really have enough evidence to justify such treatment?"

The soldiers quieted down, fuming silently. They could only mumble after that, making one wonder where their previous vigor had gone. "Well… Then why was she wandering around at this time of night?"

"R-Right!" Another one backed him up. "It's suspicious, no matter how you look at it!"

Urgh, I can't deny that. I explained my circumstances, acknowledging that I was also partially at fault. "I was searching for a lost dog. I thought I heard her bark, so I asked the guards to let me outside. You can ask them to confirm."

Turning back to the place I'd exited from, I could now hear voices from that direction too. People must have come out to see what the fuss was all about. More lights were on now than before as well. *The guards from before are still there, right? I wonder if they can confirm when I left the building.*

"What's going on, anyway?" Lord Simeon asked the soldiers. "You said 'His Highness,' earlier. Which one are you referring to?"

I gulped as I realized. Indeed, the soldiers had said that something had happened to "His Highness," and they'd thought I was the culprit. *Which Highness?!* Had Prince Liberto been attacked? He was the one most prone to being targeted in this entire palace!

I jumped out from behind Lord Simeon. "Is the prince all

right?!”

The soldiers leaned back, since they were now the ones being lunged at. “Th-The prince? No, the grand duke is the one who’s —”

“The grand duke?!” I yelped at hearing an unexpected name. *Why is* he *the one in question? And what happened to him?!* “Wh-What…?”

“Where is he?” Lord Simeon looked toward the farther building. “Is he over there?”

The soldiers looked displeased at not being the ones asking the questions, but they had to nod at my husband’s sheer force. “Th-That’s right. He was found unconscious.”

“I’m going to investigate.” Lord Simeon stepped forward, tugging me along by my shoulder. The soldiers fell back, feeling unable to retort. We boldly passed through them toward the farther building.

Really, what in the world is happening? I could understand Prince Liberto being attacked, but the grand duke *was the one found unconscious?*

The entrance to the building was open, and people were gathered nearby, including soldiers and some of the palace workers. *What kind of facility is this?* It was so dark inside that I couldn’t tell.

Right in front of the building was a person lying on their back. Upon closer inspection, it was undoubtedly Grand Duke Federico.

“Stand back!” A soldier stopped me from going to the grand duke’s side.

“We’re attendants from Lagrange. What is His Highness’s status?” Lord Simeon spoke as if this were Lagrange’s royal palace. Just like before, his upright demeanor made the soldiers lose their momentum.

“Ah, well, he won’t respond to our calls. He’s breathing, but is barely conscious.”

“May I check?”

“Sure… I mean, no! Please don’t take action on your own!” The soldier regained his composure and shook his head. He spread his arms and blocked our path. “No outsiders allowed. We’ll take care of this ourselves.”

“I don’t plan on taking any action. I just want to check.” Lord Simeon was as calm as ever.

The soldiers from before caught up to us and began hassling us again. “Halt! You’re still under suspicion! You need to give us your eyewitness reports. Explain why you were out here so late at night!”

“We told you. We were looking for a dog.”

“A worthless excuse like that isn’t going to work here!”

The people around us began raising their voices as well. “Where’s the doctor?!”

“We need a gurney first! We have to take His Highness elsewhere!”

“*Where*, exactly?”

Everything was in chaos. More and more people began speaking at once, with nothing under control. I wished the soldiers would prioritize getting His Highness aid over suspecting me. I wanted to suggest getting him inside the building in front of us rather than the main palace, but it didn’t seem anyone would listen to me.

Suddenly, a loud noise like a clap thundered around us, making all eyes turn in its direction.

“Silence. Could you all let me through?”

It was Prince Liberto. Lutin and several soldiers were with him. One of them had a gun pointed to the sky.

“Y-Your Highness…”

The prince passed through the crowd toward his fallen father. Lutin, who was following him, gave me a small smile as he passed by. Prince Liberto bent down on one knee with his ear to the grand duke’s mouth to confirm his breathing. After he checked the grand duke’s entire body, he straightened up and took a breath.

“He doesn’t seem to have any external injuries. He either had some sort of stroke…or he was punched in the stomach.”

The surrounding soldiers glared at me again. “I bet you forced him to drink poison!”

Prince Liberto cut them off before Lord Simeon could. “We don’t know anything about the situation yet. Refrain from jumping to conclusions.”

“But Your Highness! It’s true that this woman was acting suspicious!”

“Did you see her directly injure my father?”

“Well…”

Lutin scoffed at the soldiers, who were at a loss for words.

“You can pin it on her all you like, but there are a ton of things you have to investigate first, like why the grand duke was in a place like this and who found him.”

Everyone around us started muttering. *That’s true. The situation itself is just so unnatural. This doesn’t seem like the type of place His Highness would go in the first place, much less alone at this time of night. Once you calm down and think about it, everything is strange.*

The crowd looked at each other, confused—everyone was thinking the same thing.

Lutin eyed some of the soldiers. “You guys are the ones who found him, right? Why were you here?”

“Because we were patrolling, obviously!”

“Patrolling, huh. Is this area really part of your route?”

“No, but we saw suspicious figures, so…”

Hmm. They were saying the same thing that I had said earlier. It was true that that was what had happened, but if they’d seen the same shadows I had, then wasn’t it strange that they were treating *me* as the prime suspect? The shadows had run behind the farther building—between it and the left wing of the main building—yet the soldiers had come after me, who’d been closer to the left wing in the garden.

It would have only added to the confusion if I said that though, so I kept quiet, planning to tell the prince afterward. I didn’t have to worry about being arrested with Prince Liberto around.

That was when a gurney finally came for the grand duke. The first order of business before any of the investigating was getting His Highness to a doctor. We all put aside the details and focused on transporting him.

The prince gave orders to the soldiers he’d brought with him. “Have those three over there wait in the main palace. Don’t let them out until I say the word.”

The soldiers who’d suspected me fretted at having the point of the blade turned their way. “Why are we being punished?! That *woman* is the one you should be investigating!”

“I am not investigating anyone. I am merely getting reports from you and everyone who was present at the scene. Is there a problem?”

“N-No sir…”

“Of course, I will have Mrs. Flaubert cooperate with us later as

well. Is that acceptable?" The prince turned to me.

"Yes, of course." I responded immediately, since I had nothing to hide. I myself had questions to ask, and I wanted to tell him about what I had seen just before the guards had come running.

Four people lifted the grand duke up and gently placed him on the gurney. His Highness moaned at the light impact. "U-Urgh…"

"Father." Prince Liberto bent down and gazed at him.

The grand duke was groaning, pained. He must have regained some semblance of consciousness, as his eyes opened slightly. He seemed to be trying hard to tell the prince something.

"Where are you hurt?" His son spoke slowly. "Can you tell me?"

"Ah… Ugh… *Meh*… *Meh*…"

"What?"

No one could tell what he was saying. The sounds he uttered didn't seem to be words. He must not have been fully conscious yet.

"*Ri*…"

"Your Highness!" A loud voice cut off His Highness's struggling words from the side.

The new people who joined us weren't soldiers. At the helm was a man who appeared of high status and wore fancy clothing. This was Viscount Baraldi, with his subordinates trailing behind him. He rushed to the gurney, halfway shoving the people in front of him out of the way.

"What's going on here? Prince Liberto, what happened? Why is His Highness hurt?"

"You were still in the palace, Viscount?" Prince Liberto raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, there was still much work left for me to do. But aside from that—what happened? His Highness…"

The prince held up a hand at the viscount's speed talking. "We need to prioritize getting him help first. May I speak with you after things have calmed down?"

"R-Right. My apologies. Let's call for a doctor immediately."

We've already called for one without your help, Viscount. Regardless, he began ordering around the crowd, falling naturally into a leadership role. Prince Liberto didn't say anything about this—he just shook his head, exasperated.

It was probably very exciting to the viscount for the grand

duke to have fallen, since Viscount Baraldi was committing wrongdoings with the grand duchess. If the grand duke didn't regain consciousness, then Prince Liberto would probably be suggested as the heir. Grand Duchess Arabella was already at odds with the prince, so if he were to come to hold all of the power in the grand duchy, he'd become even more of an impediment to Viscount Baraldi. *That's probably why he's so desperate to help the grand duke…I assume.*

It was natural to think that way, but something bothered me. I wasn't satisfied with this theory. But the first order of business was getting His Highness to safety, so Lord Simeon and I followed the gurney to the main palace building.

A doctor had been called. As they examined the grand duke, I was questioned in the next room over. The noisy soldiers had been taken to another room entirely. Viscount Baraldi was in the room with me, but so was the prince, and Lord Simeon had been granted permission to be with me. I was able to answer all of the questions asked of me since I didn't have to be alone.

I was sitting face-to-face with Prince Liberto, who was conducting the questioning. "Do you remember exactly how many of the figures you saw there were, as well as how tall they were?"

"There was some distance between us, so I couldn't determine their heights, but I believe there were four or five of them, and they were men. They didn't seem to be fighting or anything of the sort. They were just gathered, seemingly doing something… I'm sorry. I really was far away, so I couldn't tell for sure." I did my best to remember precisely what I'd seen. Lord Simeon was gripping my hand to calm me down. Viscount Baraldi was silent for the time being, simply watching.

The prince sat with one leg folded over the other. "You were roughly in the middle between that building and the main one, yes?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "In that case, there's nothing you could have done. You believe they noticed you approaching?"

"Most likely, sir. They suddenly ran off behind the building. I lost sight of them after that."

Unlike the soldiers, the prince didn't one-sidedly attack me. I was able to remain calm since he really was just questioning me. I quietly observed the other people in the room. Viscount Baraldi

had a tight expression on his face, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He wasn't glaring at me, but it wasn't an expression of kindness either. I could tell Prince Liberto was trying to calculate what kind of situation this was in his head. He'd dropped his gaze and was thinking hard.

I still hadn't told him the most important thing yet. "I'm sure you're in pain because something like this happened to your father."

"Hm?" He glanced back up at me, then laughed lightly. "Thank you very much."

"You must be in shock."

Prince Liberto didn't appear particularly ambivalent. He simply leaned back in his chair. "I suppose so. He doesn't have an illness that would make him prone to collapsing, and I can't think of a reason he'd be attacked, so it's strange." There was no trace of anxiety or worry in his face. He was speaking as if the person who'd fallen weren't his own father. "No one would benefit from attacking him anyway."

"Y-You mustn't say something like that..."

The prince wasn't saying anything inappropriate. The viscount aside, the soldiers around us all looked to be agreeing with him. Everyone was confused, but no one was in dire shock. The soldiers' master might have been attacked, yet the atmosphere was quite apathetic.

Grand Duke Federico had been called useless behind his back, and he hadn't made much of a name for himself. He never lifted a finger to help with his family's strife, nor his wife's and son's respective wild actions. Frankly, he seemed to have given up. These things must have led to the people's hearts straying from him, yet I still felt sorry that no one was worried about his condition.

Prince Liberto continued on. "I'd like to think that a sudden illness befell him, but there are too many strange circumstances. There's no doubt that the figures you saw near the building are involved."

"So you really think he was attacked?"

"It's hard to think so, but we're left with no alternative."

It seemed the prince was at a true loss. This situation hadn't been accounted for in his plans...though even if it had been, it would still be terrible. Prince Liberto himself would be suspect in such a scenario. Even a blackhearted prince couldn't possibly

attack his own father, could he…?

“Your Highness,” Viscount Baraldi said. “Pardon my frankness, but I don’t believe it’s wise to believe her words so easily.”

The prince looked at him, serene. “And why not? Do you distrust her?”

“I don’t mean to pin her as the culprit, but I believe it is still too early to make any decisions purely based on witness accounts. She may have mistaken or misunderstood something, or even left something out.”

The last part was most likely what he’d really wanted to say. He thought I was hiding something. It didn’t make me feel good, but there was nothing I could do about being doubted. So long as there were no other witnesses, opinions like these would arise.

I bore with it, but the person next to me was bubbling with anger. *H-Hold it in!*

“Of course, I don’t think this is the be-all-end-all of it.” Prince Liberto uncrossed his legs. “We’ll search for any other witnesses.”

“Then we should detain her just to be sure,” the viscount pressed. “I believe it would be best to have her monitored so that she can’t destroy any evidence.”

My husband’s anger grew even more. I clamped his hand and pulled on it to tell him to calm down.

“That would be going too far.” The prince turned to Lord Simeon as well and told him to remain composed. Lord Simeon settled for glaring at Viscount Baraldi with a displeased look. “People will stop cooperating with us if we treat all witnesses as suspects.”

The viscount didn’t back down. “It’s only logical to suspect the first witness. She also does not have a reasonable alibi—she claims to have been outside searching for a dog. Her, a woman, by herself.”

Ouch! I couldn’t bring myself to fight back. *I’m sorry for not being a normal woman…*

Prince Liberto’s gaze also stung. “I understand what you’re trying to say. Anyone who doesn’t know her would think the same way.” Underneath his smile, I could tell he was scolding me for my foolish actions. *Augh!* “But had she brought anyone with her, it would have been either Vice Captain Flaubert there or one of her kingdom’s knights. Aren’t you simply doubting her because she could be coordinating with her comrades?”

“I’m saying no such thing, sir. I am merely stating that there is reason to doubt her.”

“Then I’ll ask: If she’s really the culprit, then how did she attack my father? He may be middle-aged and out of shape, but do you truly believe he is so weak that he couldn’t fight off such a thin woman? It may have been possible for her had she hit him from behind or stabbed him with a hidden knife, but we found no injuries on him.” Prince Liberto placidly denied the viscount’s suspicions. He wasn’t believing me because we were acquainted; he was confident that the allegations didn’t apply to me due to pure logic. I sometimes felt the same reasoning coming from Lord Simeon when I’d discuss things with him. I was grateful for people with opinions like this—they made me feel safe.

Viscount Baraldi wasn’t going down without a fight. “I also don’t believe she is the one who attacked His Highness directly. However, there is a high possibility that she knows the circumstances behind it. I believe people other than I are thinking the same thing.” He stared back at Lord Simeon with eyes full of intent.

Was he trying to say that Lord Simeon and Lagrange’s knights attacked the grand duke? *That’s going too far! Even if that is a valid suspicion, you have no right to claim it!*

It was my turn to get angry. I puffed my cheeks out and glared at the viscount. Prince Liberto used his expression and gestures to tell me to stop. *Oh, you! I’ll hold it in, but I’m frustrated!*

He looked a bit puzzled as to what to do about my husband and me, who weren’t bothering to conceal our displeasure. “I see. I accept that opinion, just as one of the possibilities. I’ll also follow your statement that the first witness should be suspected. The ones who actually found the scene of the crime are waiting in another room at the moment.”

I gasped when I realized. *That’s right! I wasn’t the first one to find His Highness. I only saw suspicious shadows—the* soldiers *were the ones to report the grand duke’s state.*

That came as a surprise to the viscount as well. I could tell the words caught in his throat. “Indeed… We’ll have to hear what they have to say as well.” Though he nodded readily, he didn’t seem satisfied. Did he really want to pin me or Lagrange as the culprit that badly? What would be the reason for us attacking the grand duke? How exactly would we benefit from that? The viscount himself seemed much more likely to do this very act. He

was suspected of being involved in several assassination incidents. He'd killed many people after hiring the Scalchi Familia, without ever dirtying his own hands. He should have been the first suspect in tonight's incident.

Although…the viscount doesn't have a reason to attack the grand duke either. In fact, wouldn't he be troubled if anything were to happen to Grand Duke Federico? Perhaps it wouldn't be a problem since he could simply assassinate Prince Liberto as well? I suppose he's already planning to do so, but… He wouldn't go for the grand duke first. It's not like there's any rush to get him out of the way. And if he were *to kill him, the viscount would probably make it appear to be an accident instead of an event that causes an uproar.*

Hmm. The more I try to think about it, the more knots I run into. Why was the grand duke out so late at night by himself in the first place?

By himself…? Was he really alone? Wouldn't it make more sense to think that someone called him out there? That's why he was in such a place… Would we be able to figure out who he was with by investigating it?

I felt like a path had opened up in the labyrinth of my mind. But just as I tried to go down it, the door that connected to the next room opened up, and the doctor walked in. He'd either finished treating His Highness, or… We all stood in unified anxiety.

"Dr. Corsi, how is my father?" the prince asked.

The middle-aged doctor had a slightly awkward smile on his peaceful-looking face—he told us that the worst had been avoided. "He's currently resting. Perhaps he's resting a bit too much, but it doesn't seem that he's going to stop breathing, so please relax."

A huge breath left my body, making me think my chest was going to go empty. *Th-Thank goodness…* I flopped back into my chair, all out of energy.

I was the only one who did so, however. The men in the room still had troubled expressions.

"What do you mean by 'resting a bit too much'?" Prince Liberto didn't ignore that part.

The smile vanished from the doctor's face. "He's in a coma and is not reacting to any physical stimulation. I believe he consumed an opiate."

Restless noises could be heard from outside the window. At

first, it was just light taps, but they gradually became louder. My prayers had been for nothing. Rain painted the night at the grand duke’s palace.

Chapter Nine

His Highness the Grand Duke had allegedly consumed an opiate.

That alone wasn't too surprising. Considering he had drunk it, the substance was most likely laudanum, a drug that could have previously been purchased at any given pharmacy in town. Nowadays, it was harder to obtain due to regulations, so one could only viably purchase some by having a doctor prescribe it for them. The person delivering this news to us was a proper doctor himself, so talk of an opiate wasn't strange.

"Did you ever prescribe one to my father?" Prince Liberto asked.

"No sir, I did not. I determined that it was not necessary for him—I prescribed a different drug for when his symptoms worsened." According to Dr. Corsi, he didn't want to use laudanum very often. He shook his head at the prince and told him that he wouldn't give a patient laudanum for light headaches or coughs. "And typical side effects of laudanum wouldn't cause a person to enter a coma. The person would have to drink a large amount of it at once or drink a more dense version of it."

"In that case, there's a low chance that my father consumed it willingly." Prince Liberto wasn't asking but making a statement.

Perhaps the drug had been mixed with alcohol? But when the grand duke had been found, he'd still been responsive and not in a coma—had we found him just after he'd ingested it? It seemed impossible that he'd been in another location when the drug had been administered.

Had the figures I'd seen forced him to drink it? Those people had moved as one, not individually. Was that because they'd been holding His Highness down? Was that how they'd been able to force the drug into his mouth? I had to shudder at the thought. Chills raced down my spine thinking about how such a horrible thing had been happening in front of me, yet I'd just stood there without realizing it. Would I have been able to save the grand duke had I known? If only I hadn't been so unaware…

I could feel blood draining from my face. I had to put both my

hands on my cheeks as I wobbled.

A worried Lord Simeon put his warm arm around my shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“If only I’d kept running instead of stopping right there. The culprits might have released him and run off…”

“Marielle.”

“I made the wrong decision…”

Lord Simeon vehemently denied this. “No, you were right to stop. You would have only gotten involved with whatever they were up to. Those people wouldn’t have run away once they realized you were a lone woman—they would have tried to seal your mouth shut. Your judgment was correct.”

Prince Liberto confirmed this. “It’s just as the vice captain says. The fact that you didn’t get involved is the silver lining to all this. Had that happened, I wouldn’t be able to make it up to the princess or Angelo. As far as I can tell, the culprits wanted to take my father to a remote place. They didn’t get the chance to, so they ran off without him. They couldn’t tell that you were alone because of the distance at which you’d stopped. In that sense, you saved my father. We *were* able to rescue him, after all.”

I brushed off Lord Simeon’s hand, which had been caressing my cheeks below my glasses. I leaned against him and steadied my breaths. *Calm down, Marielle. There’s nothing you can do about things that have already passed. If you have the energy to be sorry, then you have to think about how to help.*

The prince turned back to Dr. Corsi. “Doctor, will my father recover?”

“At the end of the day, it is only a hypothesis that he consumed an opiate. The probability is high, considering his condition, but what’s worrying is that one tends to stop breathing in such a state. He could very well die that way, and even if he were to awaken, he could have lingering aftereffects. He’s stable for now, but I’ll have to monitor his condition.” The doctor was unable to tell us for certain whether the grand duke would be okay or not. He most likely couldn’t make such a solid determination right now. “If nothing significant happens to him, then he will surely wake up in due time. If he rests and waits until the drug is no longer in effect, then he will be able to return to his daily activities.”

Dr. Corsi told us that he would be wary of the possibility that

something else was causing this. The prince agreed and ordered him to care for the grand duke. I was told to return to my room since it was late, but before I could leave, Viscount Baraldi came at me again.

"Your Highness, won't you at least investigate her belongings?" he demanded.

Prince Liberto scoffed. "So you expect that an opiate she isn't supposed to have will turn up if we inspect her luggage? Indeed, that's a plot point you'll often see in stories."

Perhaps Prince Liberto was irritated at the man's tenacity at this point, but Viscount Baraldi didn't hold back. "Are you accusing me of framing her?"

"Oh? I never implied that it would be *you* doing it. This is an internal affair, so we don't know who's involved. If I'm going to do something of the sort, then I'll have to call for someone I can trust. That's all I was trying to say."

Sparks burst between them as they glared at each other. Out of nowhere, Lutin silently came over and whispered something in His Highness's ear. He'd disappeared earlier, making me wonder what he'd been doing. Dario was currently with him.

The prince narrowed his eyes at whatever he was being told, then looked back at the viscount. "The guard who let Mrs. Flaubert outside recorded the time, then proceeded to monitor her actions after that. That matches with her story. Of course it does, since security wouldn't ignore someone walking around alone at night. He did his job."

Viscount Baraldi was left at a loss for words. *Ah, they went and confirmed it with the night guard.* I was relieved that my innocence had been confirmed, but that wasn't the end of the discussion.

Prince Liberto lowered his voice. "However, it appears the three soldiers I told to wait in another room weren't being watched properly. By the time the interrogator entered that room, all three of them were already dead."

A moment of silence passed before a sound came from my throat. "What…?"

I hadn't processed what he'd said. Goose bumps ran up my arms when I did. *They're all dead…? They were killed? It can't be…*

Lord Simeon put my suspicions into words. "So those soldiers were associated with the culprits." It seemed we all thought they'd been silenced.

The prince sighed. “It appears so. They were a step ahead of us. I didn’t expect they’d move so quickly. There are traces of the three of them having drunk coffee, which was surely poisoned.”

“Who gave them the coffee?”

“There was a samovar in that room, and the soldiers had evidently brewed it themselves. We’re currently investigating where they obtained the poison. There were strange points in their testimonies, so they apparently knew something, but we didn’t get the chance to ask.”

Lutin finally spoke up. “They must have known something they didn’t want anyone to ask about, meaning…they know who the culprits are. Wouldn’t they have helped attack the grand duke? Maybe they ran off from the scene of the crime, then came back as if nothing had happened.” His words were light, but the gaze he shot at the viscount was sharp.

Both the prince and Lutin suspected Viscount Baraldi. But what would his motive have been?

Prince Liberto closed out our discussion. “And with that, Mrs. Flaubert has been cleared of all suspicion, yes? It would be unfortunate if you were to go after her any more than this. You may rest.”

“Understood, sir. I suppose we’ll have to be careful around the grand duke as well.” At last, the viscount gave in.

He tried to say that he would order more security, but the prince stopped him and turned to Dario instead. “Dario, my apologies, but please stay with my father for tonight. I’ll provide more guards for him tomorrow, so watch him for the time being.”

Dario nodded, and Lutin patted his shoulder. The culprits hadn’t managed to kill the grand duke. If he recovered and woke up, we would learn who the culprit was. Surely that person or persons were panicking by now. We needed guards we could fully trust so that we didn’t run into the same issue as we had with the soldiers.

The doctor, nurse, and Dario stayed behind with the grand duke, and guards were stationed in the next room over. With this, even the viscount couldn’t argue, so he took his subordinates and left.

We put the room behind us as well. The grand duke and duchess’s room, as well as Prince Luigi’s room, were on the third floor of the left wing, while Prince Liberto’s was the only one in

the right wing—this was either due to his work or to allow him to get away from his mother.

He and Lutin followed us to the staircase to the second floor. “Terribly sorry about that,” said the prince. “You must be tired.”

I managed a weak smile. “Yes, well… I’ll sleep as soon as I get to my room.”

“That would be best. Things became rather messy, but I’m glad nothing happened to you.”

Usually, I would stay up late or even go without sleeping, but today in particular had been taxing. Both physical and mental stress were weighing on me. Partly because it was the middle of the night, we mostly walked without talking, our footsteps ringing through the hall.

Suddenly, the soft sound of a door opening mixed in with the noise of our footfalls.

“U-Um…”

We’d apparently been passing in front of Prince Luigi’s room. Prince Liberto shot a stern look at his younger brother, who was peering out of his doorway with a frightened expression.

“Children shouldn’t be awake at this hour. Hurry to sleep.”

Though he looked like he had something to say, Prince Luigi shrank back at being scolded. Prince Liberto continued to walk, and just as I was about to feel sorry for the boy, Prince Luigi emerged from the shadow of his door.

“W-Wait. Is it true that father…collapsed?”

Prince Liberto took a short breath before turning to him. “You don’t need to worry about it. He’ll recover if he just rests for a while. You should head to sleep.”

“But…” The young prince seemed like he wanted to press further, but he bit his lip. He only briefly glanced at the rest of us before bitterly averting his eyes. Did he think we were in the way? Perhaps he’d feel more at ease speaking if we weren’t here.

Unfortunately for him, his older brother was not intent on listening—Prince Liberto was trying to convey that he didn’t have time for his little brother. And though Prince Liberto appeared as impassive as ever, he was surely as exhausted as the rest of us. He most likely didn’t have the energy to deal with Prince Luigi.

Unlike at the banquet, Prince Luigi went silent. I approached him, bent down, and spoke softly. “Your father has a doctor with him, so he’ll be fine. He’s sleeping right now. You can go visit him tomorrow after you’ve rested, Your Highness.”

I thought he would bite back at me, but he actually spared a look my way. His eyes, which were the same color as his brother's, were quivering with anxiety.

"Will he really be okay...?" he murmured.

I nodded. "He seems to be sleeping peacefully right now. We'll let you know tomorrow if the doctor says it's okay for you to visit him."

The young prince gulped. "Okay." He seemed to calm down after hearing that his father was only sleeping. I'd phrased it in a deceiving way, but telling him the details would only worry him further.

Prince Liberto told him once again not to worry, then pushed his younger brother back into his room, despite Prince Luigi trying again to say something.

"Brother!"

"Good night. We won't let you visit father if you stay up all night and can't wake up in the morning."

Prince Liberto headed straight for the staircase. Prince Luigi chased him with his eyes, but his face filled with anger after locking eyes with Lutin, who grinned at him. He then slammed his door shut.

I lightly hit Lutin's shoulder. "What are you doing?" He'd clearly done that on purpose.

"Nothing!" Lutin chuckled as he followed his master. "This is nothing out of the ordinary. The boy's just jealous of me."

"Jealous...?"

It was easy to understand once I thought about it. Prince Liberto already treated Lutin and Dario like younger brothers, and he trusted them as his confidants. This probably wasn't a pleasant fact for his actual brother.

We headed straight down the staircase once we reached it. The sounds of our shoes grew louder, and they combined with the sound of the rain to create a strange symphony.

As we maneuvered through the heavy, dark air, I spoke to Lord Simeon. "Maybe Prince Luigi has been so rebellious because he doesn't want his brother taken away from him. Like a certain someone's own brother." The second son of House Flaubert had yelped loudly when he'd found out about me.

Speaking of yelping...we never ended up finding Pearl. I could only hope that she wasn't getting drenched by the rain. And Grand Duchess Arabella hadn't shown herself all day either.

News of the night's incident had surely reached her by now, but her door remained tightly shut, and she hadn't come out. Also, her oldest son was too calm, so it seemed the only person who was truly worried for the father of the household was the youngest child. That made me feel somewhat ambivalent.

We parted ways when we reached the second floor. Just as Prince Liberto and Lutin started making their way to the central tower, Lord Simeon stopped them.

"Please allow me to confirm one thing. Right before the grand duke was taken away, he told you something. Were you able to understand him, Your Highness?"

Prince Liberto shook his head after a short pause, looking rather surprised. "No, I wasn't."

Lutin was exasperated. "As if anyone could've understood him. He wasn't saying real words."

My husband's glasses glinted. "You were too busy looking elsewhere to pay attention."

"I had to watch the crowd. What's with you? If you've noticed something, then spit it out already."

It seemed Lord Simeon had something on his mind. He was only finally able to tell us about it now that everyone else, especially Viscount Baraldi, was out of sight.

"I had to ask since I was too far away to hear the grand duke. Based on the movements of his lips, I thought he could have been saying 'Mercurius.'"

"Mercurius?" Prince Liberto became even more incredulous than before.

Mercurius? Why would the grand duke say the name of a god at that moment? We saw that deity at the park during the afternoon. What a coincidence that would be.

Lutin eyed my husband. "You think? Doesn't make any sense."

We all looked at Lutin. Mercurius was a somewhat strange god who protected travelers, merchants, and even thieves.

"Huh? Why're you all looking at me?"

If the grand duke was bringing up Mercurius, then was he indicating a real thief? But if he wanted to specifically point out Lutin, he wouldn't have to use such a roundabout name for him. Did he even know that Lutin was a thief?

Prince Liberto stopped looking at him. "I don't think that's right." He then began repeating "Mercurius" over and over. Lutin stayed confused.

Lord Simeon put his hands behind his back. “Do you have any idea of why he might have said that?”

“No, I do not. This is all so sudden. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“I see.”

“Did it have a meaning? Or did the drug make him hallucinate? I’ll…remember this for now.” The prince ended the discussion there.

Lord Simeon also backed down since he’d told us what he’d needed to. After we watched the prince and Lutin walk off, my husband brought me to my room.

The knight who was on night watch greeted me, and then I opened my door. A cold breeze brushed my cheek.

“Ah, I left the window open.” I’d rushed out of the room so quickly that I’d left the window completely open. A wet scent filled the space—the wind had carried the rain inside.

“Oh, no!” I hurried over to the window to shut it. *Urgh, it’s all wet over here!*

I peered through the rain and saw that the building in the distance still had lights on. *Are the palace workers investigating throughout the night? Good work.*

The hands of the clock had long drifted past midnight—it was a new day. I flopped onto my bed, exhausted. I knew that was bad manners, but the only other person here was my husband. Lord Simeon gently lowered his saber onto the floor, then sat next to me.

I rolled over. “That was a busy night. I wonder why His Highness was attacked. Have you figured anything out, Lord Simeon?”

“No, nothing yet. It seems Prince Liberto and Lutin suspect Viscount Baraldi.” As expected, even my capable husband hadn’t arrived at the answer yet.

“That would certainly be a more satisfying answer than a third-party culprit, but I can’t figure out a motive.” I clenched and unclenched my fist absently, lost in thought. “I would understand if Prince Liberto had been the one attacked, but… Ah, this must be strange for me to say.”

Normally, one would be able to think of plenty of reasons for the leader of a kingdom to be attacked. Prince Severin of Lagrange often said there were too many known reasons why people would come after him. I’d thought that that was simply

the nature of the beast. Was it a good thing or a bad thing that the leader of Lavia wasn't even competent enough to be targeted? Though, he *did* get attacked in the end.

I twirled a lock of my hair. "I hope His Highness recovers. If he doesn't wake up, will we be lost in a labyrinth with no evidence?"

"That's how past examples have played out, but this time, the incident occurred within the palace grounds, so the chances of the Familia being involved are low. We'd be able to trace it back to them had they used underlings as well."

"The three that could have been traced were killed off immediately..." I sighed and became even more scared. "Will they come after me too?"

Lord Simeon thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Hearing your side of the story in front of the viscount, you proved that you'd only seen the incident from afar. That should have been enough for him to know that you don't need to be silenced."

"I agree." *The viscount hadn't told Prince Liberto to doubt me so harshly because he was trying to pull me apart from Lord Simeon and the others...had he?*

I looked up at my husband. "Could you sleep here tonight?"

His pretty face was troubled for a moment, but he ended up shaking his head. "I cannot."

I'd thought that the conversation had been leading up to his agreement, but that never came to fruition. This wasn't a personal trip of ours, after all. We were in the middle of work, and we had reputations to keep up. That was how it should be.

As I pouted, he picked up the lock of hair I'd been playing with. I rolled over again and nudged my cheek against him like a cat. Him stroking my hair felt so good that I became absorbed in it.

"You don't need to worry," he said. "The night guard is stationed in the hallway. Make sure to lock your window."

"I'm just so worried about everything. We couldn't even find Pearl. I just can't handle the thought of her shivering in the rain."

"She isn't outdoors." He brushed off my worries.

"But I heard her bark. I didn't imagine it. I really heard it!" I raised my head.

"I know. But there's no guarantee that it came from outside just because you heard it from the window. It's possible that it came from a nearby room."

“Nearby? But…”

The rooms in this hall were allocated to the Lagrangian entourage. Pearl would have been found already if she were here.

Hm…? Why does something feel off…?

“I’m sure we’ll find her tomorrow.” Lord Simeon smiled. “We know the general area she’s in.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead between my bangs. My heart leaped out of my chest, so whatever I’d been on the verge of discovering melted away. *I wonder what I was just thinking about… Oh well, I’m sure we’ll find her if my husband says so.*

“I hope the grand duke wakes up,” I whispered.

“As do I.”

“Prince Liberto was acting nonchalant, but he must be worried for his father…right?”

Lord Simeon’s expression became conflicted. It seemed, same as I, he couldn’t say anything for certain.

Prince Liberto cared about other people—he really did. He just wasn’t good at interacting with them. *If he’s this way not only with his fiancée but also his blood family, then…* Knowing how terrible he was at social relationships just filled me with despair. But this wasn’t his problem alone. I was worried about his family’s future.

“The grand duke’s family is all torn apart emotionally,” I said. “I can tell they don’t understand each other. Will Princess Henriette really be happy in this family? The grand duchess and her eldest son are at odds, and the father has given up on them, which led to all this. Could Grand Duchess Arabella be involved in the attack on him? That would be so sad if it were true.” What if the grand duchess hadn’t run to her fallen husband—or even shown her face—because she’d been the one to order the attack on him? I wouldn’t even know how to react to that fact.

Lord Simeon pushed up his glasses. “She has even less reason to do so than Viscount Baraldi. The Grand Duchess only enjoys her position because of her husband. She would have to give it up to her son’s wife if he takes over. I don’t believe she wishes for that.”

“Indeed.” That was true. Or, at least, I hoped it was. “Is Prince Liberto really going to arrest his mother?”

Lord Simeon adjusted himself—he lay his top half down next

to me as his legs dangled off the bed. “I believe she was instigated by Viscount Baraldi. She wouldn’t need to act directly, and it’s not as if she would have to watch with her own eyes. All she has to do is say the word, and the people in the palace and parliament that are in her way will disappear. She was most likely tempted by such an offer.”

“So you don’t think she knew things would turn out like this?”

“I wonder. But I’m sure she’s learned now. It would have been good if she regretted and repented for her behavior, but as it turns out, she’s searching for the next taste of it. Her crimes are not light ones.”

I nodded. Lutin had told us of this the first night. She’d had more than just one or two people assassinated at her request. *The grand duchess may be family to Prince Liberto, but there are things you can’t forgive even family for—things you can’t forgive* because *they’re family.*

My brows furrowed. “The prince must have thought hard about this decision, and he was surely saddened by it. But this isn’t simply a family issue anymore. He can’t go easy on her just because she’s his mother.”

“Not everything in this world can be solved easily. There are times one has to take on unbearable pain, give up, and choose the best path possible. The grand duke decided that the best path was not to do anything, while Prince Liberto chose another. I support the prince’s decision.”

“Yes…”

Lord Simeon laughed kindly. “Don’t look so sad. Where’s your usual energy? This topic is the human observation you’re always looking for. It should provide good material for your next work.”

Though he was poking fun at me, his gaze was filled with love. It melted away my unsolvable sadness and softened it bit by bit. His love would always be there, protecting my heart and encircling it in a calm warmth.

“This ‘best path’ that the prince has chosen… I wonder what it is,” I mused.

“He may seem like he prioritizes results over anything else, but there are many times he operates based on his emotions, so I don’t feel like this will resolve poorly.”

“His emotions?” I perked up at the unexpected phrase.

Lord Simeon chuckled again. “*You’re* asking *me*? I would have thought you might know better than I.”

And why would that be? That was when I realized: “Lutin and Dario were both rescued by Prince Liberto, right?”

I’d heard that the prince had saved them from harsh lives in the slums. I’d thought several times that Lutin must be working for the prince in order to repay him, but would such a warped man really obey the prince unconditionally just because he owed him? Would he do so just because the prince was his employer? That didn’t seem like the Lutin I knew. He could easily make enough money to live freely on his own with Dario, yet he remained under Prince Liberto and worked for him—despite often complaining about it. Why was that?

My mouth slackened. *Oh, that’s it… It’s because Prince Liberto is human. He can and has shown human compassion.* It was only natural for the prince to sometimes base his actions off of his emotions. He might even search for options regarding his mother. That was what I wanted to believe.

“The best path, hm?” I rolled over again and put my chin in my hands. I’d begun to see hope in those words, which had sounded sad before. “I’ll believe in Prince Liberto, whom Lutin and Dario respect. He’ll surely be fine.”

“I don’t quite like the way you’re phrasing that, but yes.” My husband laughed. “I’m glad you’ve regained your confidence. Now, it’s time for bed. Tomorrow’s going to be another fuss, so you must rest.”

He sat up and stood. I quickly became lonely when the warmth next to me disappeared, so I hugged a pillow, but it wasn’t nearly enough. When I looked at my husband, asking him for more, he turned away, troubled. *Oh, you! It’s times like this that I hate your blockheadedness!*

I squeezed the pillow tight. “The family that the prince will build with Princess Henriette will surely become a warmer one. They’ll grow close, and their feelings will get across to one another.”

“Yes, definitely.”

Lord Simeon returned his saber to his side, leaned down once more, and brought his face close to mine. His kiss consoled me sweetly—it was an apology for not being able to sleep next to me.



Chapter Ten

Considering how late that night the incident had occurred, only a certain number of people were allowed to know about it. I'd jumped out of my room without telling anyone, so Princess Henriette and her maids were shocked to hear about the whole thing the morning after.

The princess cocked her head. "I can't believe something like that happened, and that the *grand duke* was the one targeted—not Prince Liberto."

I checked on how the palace workers were doing as well, and they had the same reactions. Everyone found it strange. The more frank of us openly wondered what the point of attacking the grand duke even was.

"But doesn't this mean he could be replaced sooner than before? It might be better for us if Prince Liberto becomes the grand duke instead."

"Stop that! You're going too far."

"Why? You're thinking the same thing. The prince is a hard worker, capable, takes initiative, and not to mention, beautiful! He's way better than the current grand duke, who just sits around doing nothing."

"Again, you shouldn't say things like that so loudly..."

The workers were making very bold statements, though it wasn't uncommon to hear such whisperings. Still, it wasn't pleasant to hear firsthand how many people had expectations of Prince Liberto. It was the duty of a kingdom's leader to produce results, so nothing could be done about the current grand duke's reputation—he let his wife do as many evildoings as she pleased. It was only natural for the people to disparage him.

Not only were these comments about the Lavian royalty unpleasant, but more bothersome things also followed. The people came up with their own reasoning behind the grand duke's attack. Hardly anyone wholeheartedly believed it, but...

"That girl is a suspect. Why did they even bring her here? It goes against all common sense. Make her leave."

Princess Henriette and I were invited to a tea party, but thorny remarks were shot at us as soon as we showed up. Grand

Duchess Arabella pointed at me as if she were looking at a pest. It would have been impressive had she truly remembered my face, but that wasn't the case. She'd most likely prepared that line beforehand after checking the attendee roster.

This was in one of the salons, where female relatives of the grand ducal family were gathered. The event had been prepared for them to greet Princess Henriette, and the grand duchess was the one hosting it. I was worried that they'd all bully the princess, but the other women in the room all looked uncomfortable with the grand duchess's comments, apparently worried for both her and the princess.

Princess Henriette didn't waver—she simply smiled as she denied the claims. "No, that's wrong. Lady Marielle was only a witness who just happened to be at the scene. People indeed doubted her for a brief moment, but it was revealed to be a pure misunderstanding. In addition to her having no reason to harm the grand duke, it's first and foremost unthinkable for her. There's no need to worry."

Grand Duchess Arabella wasted no time scoffing nasally. "I wonder about that. Many people want Lord Federico to step down, and you know it. How terrifying for you to use your underling to attack him so that you can become the grand duchess faster! I bet you're plotting to eliminate those in your way one by one and take over our family. Liberto has no idea what he's gotten himself into."

Er, is that her way of introducing herself…? It was hard to say whether the grand duchess was saying this just to strike at the princess or because she genuinely thought it. Everyone looked increasingly uncomfortable.

These weren't the types of comments that I could just stay quiet about. If I didn't deny them, I'd be accepting them, and I certainly couldn't turn a blind eye to harmful remarks toward the princess.

"Oh my, this is like a mystery novel!" I clapped my hands together and laughed. "Do you enjoy reading, Your Highness? If so, I have many great works that I'd love to recommend to you. The incidents and romances will make your heart race—you'll surely have a delightful time. There are Easdalian translations of them as well, so if you'd like…"

"Silence! I did not grant you permission to speak." Grand Duchess Arabella flatly shut me down and turned her nose up at

me. There wasn't even a piece of driftwood to latch onto in this conversation, much less an island to be found.

An older lady scolded her in a reserved manner. "Lady Arabella, you're going too far. That one there is the young wife of House Flaubert. She isn't in a position that you can make light of."

"And so what? What's so great about one little girl from some family? Her status and age are far below mine. Who does she think she is, speaking to me so haughtily?" The grand duchess would not give in. An air of exasperation floated throughout the guests.

Princess Henriette spoke up. "If that's how you think, then why did you invite her?" Though she was typically good-natured, Princess Henriette still got angry when someone belittled her friends, like anyone else would. Just as I didn't let comments about her slide, she was fighting back for my sake. "She may be my attendant, but she was called to this tea party as a guest. If that doesn't align with your will, Your Highness, then shouldn't you not have invited her in the first place?" Princess Henriette couldn't freely argue back like she could when fighting with her own brother. She was speaking quietly and holding the anger in with all her might.

Grand Duchess Arabella once again brushed off the princess's efforts with a scoff. "I didn't call her here. Somebody forced her into the roster. I was already displeased with that when last night's incident happened. I couldn't possibly bring myself to be happy about having tea with her. Who knows what she could slip into mine!"

In other words, this whole event was a performance that she'd prepared beforehand. I almost had to sigh learning that she'd invited me just so she could do this. Though she was pretending it was about me, she was actually doing this to attack Princess Henriette. She was trying to make it seem like the princess was the culprit behind the previous night's incident, thereby saying that she wasn't fit to be her son's bride. This wasn't necessarily strange as a type of wife bullying; I'd definitely heard of plots like this before. I wondered how the grand duchess would react if I noted that *she* could very well have had her husband attacked for this reason. And if she really was looking for a fight, I would say so out loud. She hadn't stolen his life away immediately by poisoning him—she'd only put him to sleep with an opiate, which

indicated that he hadn't been her intended target.

Just kidding.

I'm...not correct about that, am I?

"Do you understand now?" The grand duchess sneered. "If you do, then hurry up and leave. Or can Lagrange's princess not sit at a simple tea party without an attendant?"

I was in a dilemma. If I continued to sit here, I would destroy the tea party, but I didn't want to leave the princess by herself since she'd just continue to get harped on for the entire duration of it. There was no telling how much the other women here would aid her.

Princess Henriette whispered behind her fan. "I'm sorry. Go on back."

"But..."

"I'll be fine. I knew this would happen." Her eyes, which were the same shining black color as the rest of her family's, were laughing brightly. "I'm not so weak, you know! I went through a lot in Lagrange. You don't need to worry. Leave this to me. In turn, please search for Pearl."

My only choice was to obey. She was right. I couldn't always be there for her—she had to have the strength to fight on her own. As worried as I was, I decided to trust her.

I stood from my chair, bid farewell to the other guests, and took my leave. The knights were stationed right outside of the door. I was about to explain what had happened to Lord Simeon, but he told me he'd heard everything.

"Princess Henriette told me to search for Pearl."

"Indeed, that would be best." He sighed as he nodded, then left the rest of the work to his subordinates. He exited the area with me since there were lots of eyes on the tea party anyway.

Suddenly, I spotted a figure hiding in the shadow of a pillar.

"Prince Luigi?"

The shadow jumped when I called out to it. The youngest prince emerged, looking rather uncomfortable.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Are you going to the tea party?"

"Of course not. Why would I want to go somewhere boring like that?" He averted his eyes, looking just as rebellious as he had the first time I'd seen him at the banquet. But if he were truly rebellious, he would've been avoiding me entirely and thinking other people were bothersome. Prince Luigi appeared just the opposite—he seemed to be trying to tell us something.

“Um…” I tried to find the words. “Are you going to visit your father? I’m certain he’s still asleep, unfortunately.”

“O-Oh…”

His reaction didn’t help me guess what he was thinking at all, but he must have already known about his father’s current state. *Hmm. Then what does the boy want?*

Lord Simeon spoke up after observing our interaction. “We’re lucky to have met you here, Your Highness. There’s something we’d like to ask you.”

The little prince jolted at my husband’s statement and looked up at him. “Wh-What?”

“Our princess’s beloved puppy has gotten lost. We’ve been searching for her since yesterday. May we ask for your assistance, Your Highness? We offer our utmost gratitude for anything you may know.”

This was a topic that would be easy for a child to latch onto. As I expected, the young prince let the tension out of his shoulders. Right after, however, he suddenly looked displeased. “Why are you asking me? As if I’d know!”

“Is that so?” My husband’s face didn’t change.

“I bet… I bet the dog ran away because she didn’t want to be kept by that princess anymore. I bet she’s never gonna go back! Search all you want. It’s pointless. I pity her—it must’ve been hard for a little puppy to be forced into a foreign kingdom. Your princess really does whatever she wants and doesn’t think about how her actions affect others. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t care when other people hate her. No one here is welcoming her, yet she’s completely fine with it. It’s impressive. She’s as bold as brass.”

And there they were again, the young prince’s insults. Lord Simeon silently looked down at the suddenly talkative prince, who was acting like a small dog barking to threaten a larger one.

“E-Everyone hates her!” Apparently unhappy with the silence, Prince Luigi kept going. “No one wants her here. We just can’t say anything about it because she was forced onto us. The same goes for my brother. You guys tell her to go home already! Tell her that not a single one of us accepts her, so there’s no point in her staying here!”

He didn’t have the malice or brazenness that his mother did. The young prince was merely trying to threaten us with his hairs all standing on end. It was even kind of cute, and I struggled to

hold in my laughter. Lord Simeon wasn't one to be bothered by other people getting upset. His unchanging demeanor only served to further redden Prince Luigi's face. *Well, he is a brutal, blackhearted military officer, after all. He doesn't even have to speak—his demeanor applies pressure all on its own. He's surely plotting something right now. I can't help but think he's a cruel villain filled with idiosyncrasies!* At the moment, he was putting Prince Luigi on edge in anticipation of his counterattack.

That's Lord Simeon for you! Sooo coooool!

Agh, wait! This isn't the time to be enjoying this. He's just bullying a child…

I was about to cut in, but someone else did first.

"Is something the matter?"

The person was approaching us because he thought we were fighting. He called out to us with a body even larger than my husband's.

This was that precious person from Easdale, Duke William. The man who served as his guard, Sir Oliver, accompanied him. These men did not save Prince Luigi from his one-sided glaring contest with Lord Simeon—the prince's expression darkened even more. He must've had a bad impression of Duke William after having been told off by him at the banquet.

"N-Nothing's going on," muttered the young prince. "These people, uh, came at me saying weird things."

"Weird things?" inquired the duke.

My husband explained. "The princess's puppy escaped from her room, so we're searching for her. We were asking His Highness if he's seen her."

Duke William nodded. "I see. It must be difficult searching in such a large palace. What kind of dog is she?"

"A small one, sir, with long, black-and-white fur."

The duke tilted his head a bit and asked Sir Oliver about it, who responded that he didn't know anything. The two of them hadn't had any idea that we were even searching for a dog.

"We'll keep that in mind, though," said the duke. "Why don't you help them out, Prince Luigi? Things will go faster if we tell the workers as well."

He wasn't scolding the young prince this time, but that didn't stop Prince Luigi from biting back. "Th-The workers already know and are… Th-This has nothing to do with me!"

Prince Luigi spun around and ran off in the opposite direction

as fast as a hare.

"Ah—Your Highness?" I mumbled.

Duke William was astonished. "Did I really scold him so harshly that he's this afraid of me? I'd thought him a hard-eyed boy, but perhaps he's more weak-willed than I'd assumed."

The duke appeared very upstanding and dignified, but he sounded like he was playing the fool at the moment. He had deep relations with the royal family of Easdale and was of such high status that he had a personal band of knights that reported to him—these knights were considered to be the strongest military force he could get. His reputation made me picture him as a frightening person, but upon actually meeting him, he was gentle, like a large dog that was bulky in stature yet calm in nature.

He turned back to us after composing himself. "Last night was tiring, wasn't it?"

"Indeed..." I said absently.

"I turned in for the day quite early yesterday, so I only heard about it this morning. His Highness the Grand Duke has not yet awakened, and his condition is apparently critical. I'm worried." I didn't hear any sarcasm in his words—no trace of insinuations like when Grand Duchess Arabella spoke. He truly looked surprised. "I knew that there were many problems in Lavia, but I didn't think an incident like this would occur. The culprit seems to be quite skilled, since they silenced those soldiers posthaste. I can only wonder how many accomplices they have here within the palace grounds."

I hadn't heard that the Easdale faction had been told of Prince Liberto's plan. I let Lord Simeon handle the talking so that I wouldn't let anything slip. "Have you heard anything from Prince Liberto?" my husband asked.

"No, he seems to be busy today, so I haven't met with him. I'm worried about him too."

"Is that so?"

The atmosphere was on the verge of growing darker. The duke changed the subject with a brighter tone. "By the way, I'll ask since we've met, but may I have some time to speak longer with you two? I would like to invite both you and your wife."

"Us? Not the princess?" Lord Simeon raised his eyebrows.

"I was telling the truth when I said that I was excited to meet the two of you. I would greatly appreciate it if you two would

agree, for the sake of Easdale and Lagrange's relationship as well." There wasn't any negative feeling from his words and expression that would make me want to dig deeper. His resemblance to Lord Nigel made me want to give in, and I could only see him as someone who was pleasant to talk to.

My husband bowed. "Thank you very much. We will gladly oblige. Please allow us to consult with Her Highness the Princess first, and then we will discuss the timing with you."

"Wonderful. Please let me know when you've obtained permission." The duke knew we were busy, so he didn't pressure us. He magnanimously agreed with us and bid his farewell. He might have been Grand Duchess Arabella's cousin, but I felt we could trust him. I wouldn't have been able to believe anyone anymore if he turned out to be on the side of evil.

After we watched him go, Lord Simeon took me immediately back to my room.

"What about Pearl, Lord Simeon?" I pushed him back as he ushered me into my room.

"I've already figured out where she is."

I'd asked because I wasn't satisfied with this turn of events, but his statement was clean-cut. *Excuse me?!*

"What...? Where is she?!"

"Don't you find it strange that no one has seen her?"

Lord Simeon answered my question with a question. I thought about it and recalled someone's words from the day before. "Is this about Pearl being kidnapped instead of having run away?"

"Pearl probably left the room on her own, but had she wandered around outside after that, someone would have seen her. It's hard to think that no one would have found her with all the workers around."

"That's true..." In other words, a person had found and caught her *right after* she'd left the room.

I said as much to Lord Simeon, who nodded. "After asking around, I only found one person who saw her. They spotted her going up the staircase."

This was apparently the staircase closest to Princess Henriette's room, meaning Pearl had gone up to the third floor, where the grand ducal family's private rooms were.

"So that means the bark I heard last night came from the upper floor?" *Aaah, so that's it! That's why Lord Simeon had said*

that Pearl could have been heard from a nearby room.

"The worker who saw her chased after her, but once they got to the third floor, she wasn't there anymore. They gave up, thinking they hadn't actually seen her and were just imagining things."

So Pearl had disappeared as soon as she'd reached the third floor. *Someone on that floor found and caught her.*

I put my hand to my chin. "Um, Prince Luigi's room is right near the staircase, yes? So that's where Pearl would have arrived first?"

"Yes, I believe the possibility is high. That fact, coupled with the prince's demeanor earlier, is more than enough for me to confirm my theory."

"Really?" We'd indeed spoken of the puppy with the young prince, but had he really acted in a way that made it certain he'd taken her?

Lord Simeon pushed up his glasses. "All we asked of him was information on her, nothing else, yet he had quite a bit to say about it, didn't he?"

"I suppose..." I'd thought Prince Luigi had been boldly threatening Lord Simeon because he was afraid of my husband, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

When I said so to Lord Simeon, he had to laugh. "I see, so that's how you interpreted the situation. To me, he was acting like a person who had something to hide."

"That's your opinion as an expert on interrogating people?!"

"I'm not an *expert*, per se..." He coughed lightly, then fully adjusted his glasses. "He was a picture-perfect example of a person who prattles on and on to satisfy their opponent without having been prompted. It's typical of a person who feels guilty and wants to steer the conversation away from important things."

This was what Lord Simeon had been observing while he'd silently let Prince Luigi rant at him. *As expected! One can't let their guard down around my husband! He makes you think he's overly serious, but he has solid, brutal, blackhearted military officer-ness to him! The demon vice captain would never let lies slip under his nose! He's so cool that it sets my heart aflame!*

I whipped out my notebook as my heart and mind sparkled. I had to preserve the words he'd just told me. "I wonder why Prince Luigi is hiding it, though? Is he trying to bother the

princess?”

“I’m not sure about that. Our only option is to ask him about it, but at least we know Pearl’s whereabouts. We can now move on to figuring out how to get her back.”

Hmm. Prince Luigi will only feign ignorance if we ask him, but we can’t simply take Pearl back by force.

While my husband and I discussed the possible methods, a small noise erupted. Lord Simeon signaled for me to hush and turned to the doorway of my room. It was still shut, and no one was knocking on it. I thought perhaps someone had only been passing by, but then I noticed something had been pushed through the crack beneath the door.

Lord Simeon went to pick it up from the floor—it was an envelope. He let me read the contents after he’d cut open the envelope and read them himself. My heart started thumping as I read the letter, which had been written cleanly in obviously masculine handwriting.

The sender had signed it with an L, meaning it was from Prince Liberto.

Chapter Eleven

A tea party was also held the next day, and out of the Lagrangians, only Lord Simeon and I were invited—Princess Henriette had gone exploring with Prince Liberto. That afternoon, my husband and I headed to Duke William's room.

"Welcome! I've been waiting." The duke greeted us with a smile as bright as the sun.

"Good afternoon." I curtsied. "Thank you very much for inviting us."

"Pardon the intrusion." Lord Simeon bowed. We were allowed inside after we all finished our greetings.

A high-pitched voice rejected our entrance. "What is the meaning of this?! Why are people from Lagrange here?!"

Grand Duchess Arabella half stood from her chair at the tea table when she realized who we were. She wasn't even trying to hide her malice. Next to her, Prince Luigi also looked shocked.

"Of course they're here." Duke William didn't stop smiling. "I invited them, after all. Do not yell—it's improper."

He was speaking as if this turn of events were completely natural, and he didn't seem to care about the grand duchess's menacing glare as he ushered us in.

"William!" Her Highness yelled angrily. "I came here because you said you would apologize for the banquet! You tricked me!"

"That's quite the accusation. I never said I would apologize, only that we should start anew. We weren't able to speak calmly that night, so I believe I'd like to reset and deepen our relationship."

"And why would we need to call Lagrangians here in order to achieve that?"

"Because we're repairing all relationships here, of course. These two are friends of my nephew. Nigel, if you remember. I had you meet him on your way back from Ashley's. He's all grown up now and has been assigned to work in Lagrange as an ambassador. He's turning thirty this year! Can you believe it? His looks make him seem like an adult, but he's still a little too carefree. I'm going to have to ask the knights if he's really doing his job…"

The duke chatted away cheerfully, intentionally ignoring the atmosphere.

A brusque noise cut him off. Grand Duchess Arabella rose from her seat with her now-closed fan in hand. “Enough. You’ve made it clear that there’s no need for me to be here.”

“Arabella.”

“Lord Federico hasn’t recovered and won’t even open his eyes, much less talk. I can’t believe you can speak so easily to the culprits who put him in that state.”

“You know that’s not true. They didn’t cause this incident.”

“There’s no proof to back up your words. They made their escape like professionals. I don’t believe them.” Her blue eyes glared coldly at us, making me wonder if she truly did suspect us. But if that were the case, then she wouldn’t have worked with the culprit herself.

She turned her back to the table and began walking off, but then, she glanced at her youngest son, who was still sitting. “Luigi.”

The young prince visibly flinched at being called, then hurriedly stood up.

Duke William tried to stop him. “Arabella, I don’t believe it’s good for you to leave a place of exchange, but there’s nothing I can do about it if you won’t listen. However, you shouldn’t push your views onto your child. One day, this child will debut at official events representing this kingdom. He won’t be able to choose whether he wants to or not—he needs to become a person that can converse with anyone. This is the time when he should acquire that skill, so why are you, as his parent, obstructing him? If you’re going to leave, do it by yourself.”

The grand duchess ground her teeth. “You wish for me to leave my child in the midst of our enemies?”

The duke sighed, fed up with her. “So you don’t trust me? I can guarantee you that I will protect him, as his relative.”

Grand Duchess Arabella continued to glare reproachfully at Duke William, but she directed her next question at her son. “Choose. Will you leave? Or will you not?”

Prince Luigi’s eyes swam. His gaze really was different from his mother’s. Despite his words, it seemed he didn’t truly hate Lagrange. He even appeared to want to stay. He didn’t meet the grand duchess’s eyes as he whispered. “U-Um… I want to stay here, just for a bit.”

Her Highness narrowed her eyes for a few moments. “Fine. Do as you please.” She left after those icy words.

Once we couldn’t hear her footsteps anymore, Duke William let out a huge sigh and laughed. “Honestly… Well, she finally left. Now we can talk without censoring ourselves.”

“My husband and I very much appreciate the assistance,” I said.

We’d had the duke prepare this meeting in advance so that we could speak with Prince Luigi. Because he wouldn’t have come had we called for him alone, we’d also invited his mother. That had been Duke William’s idea—he’d known that she would leave as soon as we walked in. He was her cousin, so he understood precisely how to deal with her. And as he’d predicted, we were rid of her immediately.

“We’re terribly sorry for making you fight with your cousin, Your Excellency.”

“No, no! No need to worry. My apologies for making you listen to her rude remarks.” He once again motioned for us to take our seats.

I curtsied to Prince Luigi and sat down. “Her Highness really does hate Lagrange from the bottom of her heart.”

“Indeed,” said the duke. “Though her reasoning is shallow.”

The young prince looked at him, surprised.

Duke William continued playfully. “Many years ago, she visited Lagrange when she was still a young princess. She didn’t like the way she was treated there and has harbored a grudge ever since.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Did we do something rude to her?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. Lagrange did nothing wrong. Arabella was just a fool. She was quite beautiful—and a princess—so she’d been popular on her first trip to Lavia. At the time, no engagement had been decided for her yet, so she’d had many suitors at her fingertips. That was why she was so full of herself.”

“I see…?”

“The prince she was certain would propose to her at first sight already had a lover, so he didn’t show Arabella any more affection than necessary. All of the other young men also only offered her average politeness. None of them fell in love. Why? Because there were similar beauties all around them in Lagrange, some even more beautiful, and they were all refined. Sans-Terre is where all of the trends start, so a princess didn’t

stand out, even if she hailed from Easdale."

I exchanged glances with Lord Simeon. The king of Lagrange, who'd been a prince at the time the grand duchess had visited, must've already fallen in love at first sight with the current queen.

Shaking his head, Duke William chuckled. "Arabella couldn't accept this truth, which she only learned after leaving her own kingdom for the first time. During those years, I'd assumed that the people around her were at fault for raising her to be like that, but it's been thirty years since then, and she still hasn't changed. I have no sympathy for her anymore." He then spoke to Prince Luigi. "Your mother only speaks badly of Lagrange because of her personal vendetta. Her worldview won't be changing in the future, but there's no need for you to mimic her. Parents and children are two separate beings. Children have a right to develop their own values. You're allowed to choose who you associate with."

The young prince nodded sincerely at the duke's kind teaching. "Right..."

It seemed Prince Luigi wasn't inherently warped. He'd spewed venom with all his might, but that most likely hadn't been his choice. He was looking our way uncomfortably, meaning he knew he needed to apologize for his comments, but I could practically feel how hard that was for him.

We weren't meeting with him to scold him or have him apologize. I changed the subject so that it wouldn't seem like we were forcing him to. "Then let us start again. Here, have some of these." I offered a basket of sweets to the young prince. "I brought these as a gift for you, Your Highness."

He fidgeted for a moment. "Thank you..."

Lord Simeon held out a bottle of wine to Duke William. "And for you, Your Excellency. We make this at our estate."

"Oh!" The duke's smile became even brighter upon inspecting the label. "A wine from Lagrange! How wonderful. Thank you. Oh my, it's a ten-year vintage! Incredible!" He could tell when and where it had been produced.

The four of us had a pleasant conversation as we enjoyed our tea. I kept my expression nonchalant, but I was calculating when to bring up the main topic for discussion. It seemed I didn't need to, however, since Prince Luigi was visibly anxious to speak on it himself.

He opened his mouth when he apparently couldn't take it anymore. "Um… You said you were searching for that dog. Did you find her?"

"Oh, yes!" I smiled as if I hadn't noticed. "Thanks to you, we found her safe and sound."

"Huh?"

"We're terribly sorry for the trouble."

Mouth agape, the young prince stared at me. "You're kidding, right…?" he whispered, probably without realizing it.

"No, I'm very serious."

"But you…!" He cut himself off once he came to his senses. Once he caught sight of the duke and Lord Simeon, he figured out that he'd made a mistake he couldn't take back. None of us were glaring at him, but he must have felt like we were. His face grew pale as he turned his eyes to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness." I mustered up as kind a voice as I could. "I told a little white lie. We didn't necessarily find her—we simply realized where she was."

Prince Luigi didn't raise his head—he just tensed up as he prepared for a scolding. *He isn't the type of child to become defiant. He really is different from his mother.*

I tilted my head. "You looked like you wanted to say something quite badly. Did you wish to tell us about Pearl? Or is there something else you're worried about? Won't you tell us? We had His Excellency prepare this space for us to talk to you. My husband and I are not your enemies. You're going to become Princess Henriette's brother-in-law, and we promise we won't do anything bad to you."

The young prince finally looked up, still nervous. He searched my face for reassurance, then turned to Duke William for some reason.

The duke laughed. "Could it be you're wary of me? I have no reason to be your enemy, Your Highness."

Prince Luigi muttered. "But…Easdale backs my mother…"

"So you have something to say that goes against your mother? I don't mind hearing it."

"Huh?" The young prince's eyes were wide and round at the duke's prompt response.

Duke William cackled. "I am not on your mother's side unconditionally. Easdale is on the path to forging a good relationship with Lagrange. In that sense, I'm already at odds

with Arabella.”

Prince Luigi became even more shocked, and I felt the same way. *I suppose our kingdoms* have *formed an alliance and aren’t opposing each other like they were in the past.*

The duke looked to Lord Simeon, who nodded and took over. “In recent years, kingdoms to the east have been moving suspiciously, so those of us to the west are growing ever more cautious of them. I’m sure you’re aware of the war between Orta and Smerda last year. War could be triggered between certain others as well, so we’re all in a rather tense situation at the moment.”

“What…?” asked Prince Luigi.

“Should even one war break out between any of us, those who are already at odds will become even more tense with one another. The relationships between our kingdoms are intertwined in a very complicated manner, so this isn’t an issue between only two kingdoms.”

“O-Oh…”

This wasn’t a simple topic, so I wondered whether the young prince was keeping up. He was surely being taught on the subject during his lessons. Still, it was too late to stop the explanation—Lord Simeon was on a roll. “The more tense our relationships are, the more likely a large-scale war involving every single kingdom becomes. At present, that likelihood is not low. That is why, in order to avoid that worst-case scenario, as well as to prepare for it, we are working to quietly strengthen our bonds.”

“Right…”

“Little by little, we are exchanging opinions and information with both Easdale and Lavia to align our views with theirs. In current times, we are not dragging the past with us and harboring grudges.”

Duke William agreed. “Indeed. We need to acknowledge that we were at odds in the past and then leave it there. I can say for certain that Easdale is genuinely celebrating the upcoming marriage between Prince Liberto and Princess Henriette. We had no intention of competing with Lagrange and sending our own bride.”

I hadn’t heard that before, so I asked, “Really?” Because of what the grand duchess had said, I’d assumed that our nations had fought over who was to be Prince Liberto’s bride.

“Arabella is already married to a Lavian, so many of our people believed it would be ridiculous for us to send anyone else. In addition, Arabella’s relationship with her son isn’t good. We would only be widening the gap between Prince Liberto and Easdale if we forced someone upon him merely to satisfy his mother. Our decision was to prioritize our relationship with the next grand duke instead of the current grand duchess. So please, do not worry. Tell me anything you need. Let’s put our heads together and try to resolve this matter.”

Duke William gave a satisfactory explanation. Prince Luigi nodded despite his surprise. The duke’s dignified, kind, and firm words softened the young prince’s expression. It must have been very reassuring to have the duke’s guarantee; an undeniable relief welled up in Prince Luigi because he knew the duke was on his side. Lord Nigel made those around him feel similarly. Though he played around and slacked off from work, he could be relied on in times of need. *Being dependable must run in their family.*

Prince Luigi’s face, which had been colored with anxiety, was now filled with courage after being comforted. He looked down once more, but this time, it wasn’t because he was afraid. He took a deep breath, then raised his head again, determined.

“Um—!”

“Please excuse me!”

Right as the young prince spoke, another voice interrupted him. *Oh, you!* I whipped around, brows furrowed, to look at the source of the noise. *Why would you enter at this very moment?!*

Sir Oliver had stepped into the room. Nervousness was plastered on his gentle face. We could tell just by looking at him that something was wrong.

Duke William addressed him. “What’s the matter, Oliver? Did something happen?”

“Yes, sir!” Sir Oliver took long strides toward us, then bowed next to the duke. “We received a report a few moments ago—His Highness Prince Liberto was attacked by something during his excursion and has gone missing!”

A thin noise rang out. I rushed to stand from my chair and support Prince Luigi, who was wobbling. He clung to me with trembling hands and desperately stared at Sir Oliver.

“Missing?” Duke William was alarmed. “He surely had many guards with him—what happened to them?”

“We don’t know, sir. The person who alerted us doesn’t know the details either. His Highness was apparently injured, but we don’t know the severity.”

“Hm…”

When the duke looked at us, I hugged Prince Luigi tighter. “This is horrible… Princess Henriette was with him. Do you know what happened to her?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but we still don’t yet know anything definitive,” Sir Oliver answered apologetically despite having nothing to be sorry about.

Lord Simeon stood up with force. “The first thing we must do is confirm the status of the situation. We won’t learn anything by talking here. We have to go to the scene.”

“I’ll accompany you,” said Duke William. “Grand Duke Federico is currently immobile, so there’s no one else who can direct the troops. Things will only become more complicated if Arabella goes into the field. I may just be a third party, but I should be able to accomplish something as Prince Liberto’s relative.”

“Please do.” Lord Simeon nodded at the duke and then turned back to me. “Marielle, please take Prince Luigi back to his room. The palace is sure to become a fiasco soon, so don’t roam around. Stay by his side.”

“I will.” I stroked Prince Luigi’s back.

“Your Highness, it pains me to say this, but we’ll have to hear your story another time.”

My husband and Duke William left the room quickly—there was no time to listen to the young prince’s response.

I helped him stand. “Let’s go back to your room.”

He was shaking. The courage he’d gained just moments before had now dispersed, and his face was pale. He seemed like he could faint any second now, so I supported him as we walked into the hallway.

I kept my ears peeled as we slowly made our way through the palace. This area, which was completely quiet, held the nobles’ private rooms. I could hear a bit of bustling from far away, though even that noise soon disappeared. In due time, news would spread through the palace and cause everyone to panic. Not only had the grand duke been attacked, but so had his heir, and Prince Liberto had gone missing. We couldn’t ignore it this time—this was the beginning of a nightmare that would drench everyone in anxiety. Prince Luigi looked to be on the verge of

tears. He was absently whispering, “What should I do?” over and over.

Once we reached his room, several maids and servants were waiting. They hurried over to aid their master once they saw how pale he was. Some of them glared at me, thinking I’d caused this. I sent all of the workers away from the young prince’s room and told them not to let anyone near for the time being. After they left, only he and I remained. He seemed to have calmed down slightly after our trek, so he was able to move without me supporting him anymore.

“Many different rumors will go around during times like this, but most of them will be unfounded. I know this is very nerve-racking, but let’s wait for real information.”

Prince Luigi kept his head down in thought. And just as I was wondering what to do, I heard a high-pitched bark from the next room over.

“Ah…” The sound brought the young prince back to his senses. “Please wait here.”

He went into the neighboring room, and after a brief moment, he returned with Pearl in his arms. Her fluffy tail was wagging, and she barked happily when she saw me.

“My, don’t you look happy!” I managed a smile. “You must have been well taken care of.” I petted the puppy in the young prince’s arms, relieved at the feeling of her soft head and her warmth.

“I’m sorry…” Prince Luigi apologized as he pushed Pearl into my arms.

I held her close. She tried to lick my mouth, but I stopped her. *I’m sorry, I have makeup on, so you can’t.* “Thank you very much for protecting her.”

“You aren’t mad…?”

“She doesn’t look hungry, and she isn’t afraid of you. You doted on her quite a bit, didn’t you, Your Highness?”

Pearl was looking lovingly at the young prince. He obviously hadn’t done anything bad to her.

“Do you like dogs?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.” He reached out to pet Pearl’s head as he nodded. “I’ve asked mother many times to let me have one, but she hates animals, so she won’t let me.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry… I found her right after she escaped. She was in the

hallway all by herself. I hid her in my room as fast as I could, because mother would have thrown her out if she'd found her. That's when I heard that that princess had lost her puppy...and it's why I didn't give her back."

I motioned for Prince Luigi to take a seat. Pearl was fidgeting in my arms, so I let her down onto the floor. Now free, she walked back and forth between me and the young prince.

"So you kept Pearl because she belongs to Princess Henriette? Not because you wanted your own dog? Did you do that out of spite?"

He nodded, embarrassed. Unlike when he'd been yelling rude remarks, he didn't argue vigorously—he seemed to be genuinely accepting his wrongdoings. "I thought that if I killed this dog and showed the princess the body, she would cancel her marriage with my brother... But I couldn't do it. I couldn't just give her back either, so I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry..."

Pearl was nudging the young prince's leg. It seemed Prince Luigi couldn't even bully Pearl. He had given her lots of love and certainly hadn't come close to killing her.

I spoke softly. "Could you tell me why you're against your brother's marriage, Prince Luigi?" Though it was impudent of me, I decided to call the young prince by his name to make him feel more comfortable. "Do you hate Lagrange?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I don't like or dislike you guys, but mother hates you. She always talks bad about Lagrange. I didn't know her reason was something like *that*...but I don't think she'll ever come to accept your kingdom."

"Indeed." No matter how foolish the reason was to others, if the grand duchess herself couldn't come around, then there was no hope. "So you're against the marriage for your mother's sake?"

Another head shake. "No... It's for my brother."

"Your brother?"

Prince Luigi's cute face, which resembled Prince Liberto's, was tight with unease. He laid out a confession, all the while fighting back tears. "I want to stop him from getting married. He's going to die if I don't. He can't go against mother."

I couldn't think of a response. I wasn't quite sure what Prince Luigi thought of my silence, but he was apparently unable to take it anymore—he spilled everything he'd been holding in until that point. "Brother and mother are always fighting, and father

and my sisters have already given up on them. Mother hates my brother because he doesn't cater to her like other people do, and now she won't stop at just arguing with him."

Ah... Th-That's true.

"Mother has that man with her... Viscount Baraldi." Prince Luigi shuddered harshly when he said the name. He must have been remembering the viscount's figure. "Because of him, she's... That man is so scary. He's always smiling and speaks kindly, but a lot of people who were on bad terms with him have disappeared. They died in accidents, or their whole families were killed by thieves who broke into their homes... It's happened so many times. There's no proof, but lots of people think the viscount did it. And no one can say anything about it because they're all afraid he'll kill them too."

"Is that so...?"

"It's...my fault that father got attacked. It's because I talked badly about the viscount!"

That was shocking to hear. I'd known the viscount had been involved in the attack on the grand duke, but I hadn't predicted Prince Luigi being involved. "What did you say about him?"

"I saw him go into the auxiliary building in the middle of the night... At first, it was only a coincidence that I saw him, but it bothered me, so I kept watching every night...and he kept doing it. People only go into that building during the day. It's supposed to be locked at night. But even when he went in there, the lights never came on. I wanted to know what he was doing, so I tried to follow him inside, but father found me and stopped me."

I was finally beginning to see the truth behind the attack on the grand duke and why he'd gone to that building.

Prince Luigi's breathing was ragged. "He told me he'd investigate it himself and that I shouldn't do anything no matter what, so I gave up and went back to my room. Father never actually does anything himself, so I figured he was lying to me. I was going to discuss it with my brother, but then father got attacked..."

"So the grand duke chased after the viscount himself?"

He nodded. "I think so. I should have told my brother first... I bet the viscount had plans to attack brother anyway, since mother always says that she doesn't want him to become the grand duke. She says he's not fit for the position because he doesn't listen to her. What should I do? The people working with

the viscount attacked my brother! They got both him and my father because I didn't tell him fast enough... What should I do?! Do you think they already killed him? No... What should I do...? Brother..."

Prince Luigi covered his face with both hands and sobbed. Pearl sat at his feet and looked up at him, worried.

I didn't know what to tell him. *I feel...so guilty! I'm sorry, but I know why your brother was attacked! He's fine—don't worry!*

Prince Liberto had actually set up this act—he would get attacked while out on the town and go missing. He'd planned to lure the enemy into targeting him, but he didn't know when they would actually go through with it. It would have been terrible for them to do so during his wedding ceremony, as that would've invited casualties. Due to that, he'd had no intention of waiting for the enemy to move first. Prince Liberto had decided to take the initiative and draw them in before they could decide the time and place of their action.

When the viscount heard about the attack, he would surely assume it'd been the work of the Familia and would rush to cover it up, all without knowing that it was all the prince's ploy. Prince Liberto would then use the viscount's actions as proof of his crime. That had been the prince's plan from the very beginning, but he'd had to put it into action a bit earlier than expected due to the grand duke being attacked.

Viscount Baraldi, who was the culprit, had most likely planned to assassinate the grand duke after taking him somewhere. He'd had to abandon that plan since I'd witnessed them in action, but he couldn't just sit around doing nothing—after all, the grand duke was now on the path to recovery. The viscount had to do something before Prince Liberto learned of the truth. His options were to either silence the grand duke for good or assassinate the prince.

It was in Prince Liberto's nature to use such a dangerous situation to his advantage. He'd informed Lord Simeon and me about how he would be accelerating his plan through his letter the previous night. At this very moment, a firefight with guns was surely occurring in the city. Both sides were actually allies with one another, and therefore, no casualties would arise. Still, someone not in the know would most likely see it as the Familia rampaging. In due time, news of the incident would reach us, and more details would emerge. The report would say that a few

guards protected the prince and princess from the battle and helped them escape. Prince Liberto would have sustained a few injuries, but he was well enough to move on his own. This report would serve to further rush Viscount Baraldi and his lackeys, but he would also assume he could let his guard down a little and make larger movements.

I knew the truth behind this facade, so I couldn't help but feel guilty about Prince Luigi's raw fear. It pained me to no end that I couldn't tell him the truth—he was so worried for his older brother. *I can't pull back the curtain now, though! I can't let anyone know that it's all an act yet. I have to pretend like I know absolutely nothing. I'm so, so sorry!*

My only option was to console the young prince with words that wouldn't be strange to say in a situation like this. "We still don't know anything for sure, so please do not fret. Your brother and Princess Henriette had guards with them, so they were surely protected. I bet they're fine. Your brother will return in due time—let's believe in him."

"I want him back…" Prince Luigi sniffled. "But then mother might get attacked next… I hate this! I don't know what to do!" His sobs became even louder. "Why do they have to fight?! They're family! I don't want anyone to disappear!"

I was at a loss. *What should I say to him?* The young prince wasn't as vicious as his mother but also not as calm and collected as Prince Liberto. This situation was too harsh for a child with normal emotions. He just wanted to protect his entire family, as was natural.

I was beginning to feel angry. *Prince Liberto! I know you're in a tough spot, but think of your younger brother a little more! He's still a child! Yet you… Urgh! Honestly!* I got up from my chair and went to Prince Luigi's side to hug him. *I'm sorry. This is as much as I can do.*

Pearl whined and put her front paws on the young prince's trousers, then did her best to stretch up.

"Look, Pearl is worried about you too." I held the weeping prince tightly. "She must like you a lot. She's asking you what's wrong since you're crying."

Prince Luigi gazed at Pearl as he continued to sniffle. She licked his face, which managed to stop his tears. "What…should I do?" He pressed his cheek to the puppy's soft fur and whispered. "I could leave and stop associating with our family like my sisters

did, but I can't bring myself to do that. I don't want brother to die, but I also don't want mother to get arrested… What should I do?"

While the father and sisters had long since decided to turn their eyes from the issue, the younger brother alone was in pain and doing his best to resolve the situation. I wanted to help him, but there were things in life that could never be solved.

"Lord Luigi, I apologize in advance for saying something blunt—please forgive me. You cannot save both of them."

He stared straight at me with tears still lining his eyes, telling me that he didn't want to accept any more pain. I wanted more than anything to apologize to him, but the boy was thirteen years old—old enough to understand. I steeled my heart and told him what he needed to hear.

"I know you don't want any of your family to be punished. I would also want to defend a family member, even if they've committed a crime. That's a natural feeling for anyone, but there's a limit to how much you can forgive a person for. Are your mother's crimes so light that they can be easily forgiven?"

The young prince bit his lip and shook his head. He knew how grave his mother's sins were.

"Would it really be in your mother's best interest for you to pretend like you don't know anything and let her continue to do these things? *She* may be satisfied with that, but do *you* want to see her commit more crimes?"

"No…" He answered immediately. Signs of hatred showed through the sadness in his face. He didn't want to see someone important to him commit any more crimes—he had a healthy heart that couldn't just ignore something like that.

"That's right. I believe your brother feels the same way."

"He does…?"

"Yes. I have a suspicion that he acted even earlier than this. He may have done something. He must have worked hard to admonish the grand duchess and get her to stop doing these awful things. But he couldn't put the final nail in the coffin… And wouldn't that be because he loves his family and couldn't remain calm enough to do so?"

Prince Luigi stayed silent.

I placed my hand on his. "Prince Liberto seems like the type of person who would become ruthless once he sets his mind to it, but I don't think that means that he never wavers on anything.

He surely worries, becomes lost, and even gives up at times."

"Yeah..." The young prince took a lonely breath and nodded.

"There is no outcome in which no one gets hurt. You have to accept that, Lord Luigi."

Tears welled up in his eyes again, but this time, he said nothing. It seemed he deeply understood and agreed with me. There was no doubt that he'd known the truth, but he hadn't wanted to accept it. Logic hadn't been involved—he simply hated how things had unfolded. It was a completely natural reaction.

I looked up at the ceiling and contemplated. What Prince Liberto was doing was correct and necessary, and no one could tell him to stop. His plan was already in motion, and I wasn't in a position to protest. But what could I do under circumstances like these? At the very least, I wanted to provide some sort of aid to Prince Luigi, who was crying out of love for his family. And after the reveal of all the corruption, even Prince Liberto would surely come to harbor a wound that would linger within him until the day he died. Was there anything I could do to lighten that, even just a little? Maybe no one wanted me to do so, but I felt like I would regret it if I didn't take action.

I brought my gaze back down to Pearl and Prince Luigi and did my best to convey my feelings. "I don't know if this will work...but would you like to lighten your mother's punishment, even if just a bit?"

The young prince quickly raised his head. "We can help mother?!"

"We can't stop her punishment completely, but we can ask your brother to make it a little less severe."

"Brother...? But that's impossible. He'll never listen."

"It would indeed be impossible for us...so why not have someone else tell him? Someone he *has* to listen to."

"But who...? Your princess?"

I laughed bitterly. "It would be impossible even for Princess Henriette, unfortunately. But Prince Liberto can't ignore Duke William."

"The duke..." Prince Luigi thought hard about this.

Considering Grand Duchess Arabella's crimes, a heavy sentence was perfectly conceivable. The most we could do was negotiate to give her a bit of leeway. But Prince Liberto wouldn't budge if we appealed only with our emotions. A significant reason for leniency would have to be provided to him—one that

would be more beneficial to him, or at the very least, something to convince him that her penalty should be lessened a bit. That was why I thought Duke William would be the most suited for this role. An official from Easdale would be the only person who could have a say in Grand Duchess Arabella's punishment. Prince Liberto wouldn't be able to evade their input.

I nodded, satisfied. "Lord Luigi, let's consult with Duke William."

"Will he really listen to us? Doesn't he hate mother?"

"I got the impression that he is only exasperated with her. I doubt he outright *hates* her. I believe he will consider this from the position of an Easdalian official and not let his feelings get in the way. Please don't worry. He will surely agree with us."

"All right..." Though he still looked worried, the young prince nodded. He must have wanted to cling onto any bit of hope that came his way. "But we still don't know if brother is even okay. I want to check that first."

"My husband went to the scene of the incident, so let's wait for him. I'm sure Prince Liberto is fine. So long as Lagrange's knights are on the case, they won't miss anything. And do you really think your brother, of all people, would go down without a fight?"

"No." Prince Luigi didn't hesitate to answer, which made me chuckle.

"Indeed! I think he's the type of person who wouldn't die even if you killed him. He's fine, without a doubt. Let's believe in him."

After a pause, color came back to the young prince's complexion. "Okay." He picked Pearl up and pushed her back into my arms. "Mother might find her here, so put her back in the princess's room."

"Thank you very much. I'll be right back, all right?"

It would be difficult for us to do anything with Pearl in our care. I didn't want to leave Prince Luigi by himself, so I stood up with the intention of going as fast as I could.

But at that moment, a sharp rap on the door shocked us both. The door swung open immediately—the person outside did not wait for either of us to answer.

"Pardon me. Prince Luigi, may I have a moment?"

The young prince and I both gulped when we saw the person who'd entered.

"Oh, it's you again," commented the person ironically. *You*

knew I was in here!

My first thought was to worry that we'd been heard or monitored, and I had to wonder who'd alerted this person. They'd entered knowing full well that the two of us were in this room.

Prince Luigi began shuddering again. I hid my nervousness as I faced Viscount Baraldi.

Chapter Twelve

“What are you doing with Prince Luigi?” asked the viscount, despite the fact that he’d rudely forced his way in.

I pretended I didn’t know anything and raised Pearl up to show him. “I came to get this little one. She’s Princess Henriette’s dog—the one I told you about before. His Highness Luigi found her and kept her in his care.”

“Is that so?” Viscount Baraldi nodded as if he were satisfied with that answer, but a nasty spark of something glinted deep in his eyes. He probably wasn’t happy that Prince Luigi was with a person from Lagrange.

The young prince was now hiding behind me. I wasn’t sure what to do. I wanted to at least put Pearl back in the princess’s room.

“Do you have business with His Highness as well, Viscount? If so, I’ll take my leave. Thank you for your time, Prince Luigi. Princess Henriette will surely thank you herself later on, so I will put Pearl back in her room for now.”

“Huh…? Ah, o-okay.” Prince Luigi was surprised for a moment—his expression seemed to ask me if I was really going to leave—but he knew I couldn’t say anything in front of the viscount. He played along.

I bowed, Pearl in hand, and headed toward the door. Viscount Baraldi blocked my path, holding an arm out to stop me.

“There’s no need to rush. I didn’t mean to force you out. Please, relax.”

“Thank you very much, but I have to return this girl quickly.”

“There’s something I would like to ask before you do. I’ll even have the dog delivered for you, so won’t you stay?” He glanced behind him at a man who didn’t seem to be one of the palace workers.

I clutched Pearl to my chest and took several steps back. “What would you like to discuss?”

“Oh, you don’t want the dog taken? Then…”

“V-Viscount.” Prince Luigi mustered up his courage and cut in. “You can’t just barge in here and do as you please. Th-This is my room. I didn’t allow you to come in.”

“My apologies. I’m in a bit of a hurry. Please pardon the intrusion.” The viscount gave a meaningless apology, as if he were only listening to a small dog bark. He remained in front of us, blocking our path. “Then may I have permission to be here? There’s something I would like to ask both you and the lady here.”

“I need to go somewhere. Can’t it wait until afterward?” the prince asked.

“And where are you going?”

“It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t have anything to do with you!”

“Is that so?” Viscount Baraldi laughed loudly.

His lackeys behind him forced their way into the room and stood in front of the door to pressure us. We had no way of escaping. Prince Luigi’s courage seemed crushed by them.

The viscount sighed. “We just have no way of knowing what you were talking about with a Lagrangian. You understand, don’t you?”

I gave up on taking Pearl back to her room. “What about you?” I asked. “What are *you* doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Prince Liberto was attacked and went missing. Collecting the details about that situation should be the most pressing matter right now, yes? You’re the head of the Department of the Interior, so why are you so calm? Shouldn’t you be ordering your subordinates to help resolve the matter?”

“I’ve already done so.”

“In that case, you should be waiting for their reports. Even if you have a reason for being here, it’s strange that you’re so nonchalant.”

It was clear as day that he wouldn’t let us—me in particular—escape, especially since he suspected me. Rather than keep pretending like I didn’t know anything, it was time I broached the main subject.

Keeping Prince Luigi behind me, I glared at the viscount. “You’ve attacked the prince and princess. Now what? What else are you planning?”

The young prince grabbed my arm after my blunt statement, trying to stop me from revealing too much. *I’m sorry, but I have to.*

The viscount examined me for more inconsistencies. Prince Liberto’s plan would all be for naught if it got revealed here. I

had to play the part of someone who was only worried about the news of the attack. That was why I had to do something foolish like accuse him of being the culprit. I needed to act like a woman who had been forced into a corner and had accidentally let slip that she suspected him.

The viscount didn't change his tone. "*I* attacked them? What are you saying?"

"Don't play dumb! Prince Luigi told me everything. You're involved with the Scalchi Familia, aren't you? You asked them to erase your political rivals, didn't you? The grand duke was attacked because of you. Prince Liberto must have found that out, so you went and had him attacked too."

The viscount's laugh became even higher-pitched. "You're making yet another ridiculous accusation. You really believe I'm doing something so dastardly? Your imagination knows no bounds, madam."

"Stop with the hollow act! Your words and demeanor are all full of lies. If I'm wrong, then why are you worried that Prince Luigi and I were talking with each other? And why are you standing in front of us with so many people behind you? Do you mean to threaten us?"

"I'm the one who's shocked. I've only come here to ask you if you know anything."

"You're still trying to use that excuse? Fine, then. If you really aren't involved, then you should have no reason to get in my way. Move. Let me through."

I took a strong step forward, but of course, the viscount and his lackeys didn't budge.

"You're also pretending like you don't know anything." Viscount Baraldi's voice dropped below freezing.

Does he know? I continued to act, concealing my true thoughts and trying not to react unconsciously. "What?"

"You're quite close with that man Prince Liberto likes."

"Man?" I raised an eyebrow and pretended to think. "Who are you talking about?"

"You know very well who. Now *you're* the one playing dumb. You were with him just the other day."

"Are you talking about Earl Cialdini?" I made it seem like I'd finally realized. *I know about Lutin too, you know!* I'd met with him several times since we'd entered Latiry, so of course the viscount knew about our relationship. That was why I had no reason to

hide it. Lutin was Earl Emidio Cialdini, a diplomat who had visited Lagrange several times since his master's marriage negotiations had begun. He'd even spoken with Princess Henriette. That was the man I knew. "I've met the earl several times now and have become acquainted with him. What about it?"

"The 'earl,' hm...?" The viscount repeated that title, as if to mock it. It seemed he knew of Lutin's true identity and that the name "Emidio Cialdini" was nothing more than one of convenience—one of many.

I kept my mouth closed so that I wouldn't spill too much and waited for the viscount to make the next move. I hadn't forgotten Lord Simeon's teaching that the more someone wanted to trick you, the more they would talk. A person who truly didn't know anything would take their time to think cautiously.

Would the viscount suspect me if I wondered aloud what he was trying to say? Perhaps I should pretend like I'm just now hearing that Lut—I mean, Earl Cialdini *has some sort of secret.* I fretted, since a single mistake would cost me the whole battle. Viscount Baraldi and I were having a full-on game of wits. Was this what an intelligence operative did on the regular? I couldn't stop myself from thinking thoughts unbefitting the situation. I'd always admired the profession in a carefree sort of way, but perhaps I wasn't fit for it. The emotional stress was far too much. I found myself with a little more respect for Lutin, who was aloof at all times.

"Are you really just a girl...?" Viscount Baraldi whispered. "Hm. It seems you truly don't know. My apologies—I must have gotten ahead of myself."

Oh, wonderful! Now I'll be relieved that you're backing down... Not! That's exactly what you want, isn't it? I made my face look even more puzzled. *I have no idea what you're talking about.*

Seeing me in such a state, the viscount finally stopped prying into me with his gaze. *Did I do it?* I seemed to have won the game of pretend. *Th-Thank goodness! I'm exhausted! So much stress!*

"I don't know what's going on here, but may I finally leave? Please, get out of my way!"

Viscount Baraldi chuckled and shook his head at me trying to end the argument. "It's unfortunate, but I cannot let you go. I wouldn't do anything if you really were just a girl who knew

nothing, but you've heard far too much at this point."

The men behind him moved. Prince Luigi and I both almost screamed, but the dark gray muzzles of guns were thrust in our faces.

"You're going to come with me. It won't take too much time, so won't you follow along?"

He wasn't acting anymore—the only polite thing about him was his tone. He was now relentlessly threatening not only me but also Prince Luigi. His cold eyes behind the smile plastered to his face indicated that he was intent on shutting up all who knew the truth.

We were surrounded by them. They forced us out of the room and pressed their handguns into our bodies at an angle where outsiders couldn't see. We were told that they'd shoot if we tried anything. Prince Luigi and I were left to follow the viscount's orders with no way to resist.

The inside of the palace was much more boisterous than it'd been before. News of the incident had finally reached everyone, so the planners and workers were all in disarray. Everyone was rushing about, so even when they caught sight of our party, they couldn't tell what was actually happening to us.

I could only wonder where we were being led. Viscount Baraldi and his lackeys took us down the stairs to the edge of the building, then outside toward the auxiliary building. *That* building. We entered it as if it were nothing special, and no one seemed suspicious of us. That probably wasn't saying much though, since everyone in the palace was very frantic.

There seemed to be people on the upper floor of the auxiliary building, but the first floor was empty—it was filled with storage space. We went farther in and took a staircase to the basement floor. Halfway down, they lit a lantern to guide us along the dark path. The atmosphere here was completely different from the floors above. It was old and decrepit, and the path was so narrow that shadows from the lantern, cast upon the wall, looked like monsters dancing.

I held Pearl close to me so she wouldn't jump out of my arms. Thankfully, she was sitting quietly, perhaps feeling the same fear that Lord Luigi and I shared. She wasn't the noisy type, and her calmness in this dire situation didn't set off the viscount or any of his lackeys.

"How far are we going to go?" I asked Viscount Baraldi. I was

trying to keep my voice low, but the sound was loud as it reverberated off the walls.

"We'll be there soon enough. Look, we'll enter through there."

He pointed to a plain door. There was no keyhole, but a latch instead, as was common in older buildings. The door was most likely usually bound with chains and a padlock, but the latch had been undone, so the door could be opened. When the viscount pulled at it, light flowed from inside.

A high-pitched voice greeted us. "Where in the world have you been? You're late!"

Prince Luigi looked up with an expression of half hope and half despair.

Surrounded by maids and guards, Grand Duchess Arabella waited for us in a gorgeous dress that didn't suit the gloomy underground setting. "Why did you tell me to wait in a place like this? And why is Luigi here?"

The rectangular space appeared to be a storage room at first glance. There was nothing stored here though, so there was still plenty of space left over, even after dozens of people were inside. The walls and ceiling were made of the same material as the path we'd just walked, and the floor was reinforced with mortar. Several lights hung on the walls, making everything easier to see. A separate door stood at the other end of the room.

"What's going on here, Viscount? Why did you bring Luigi here? And this girl..." Her Highness raised an eyebrow, trying to remember who I was.

Have you forgotten?! Even after you cursed at me that much?! Perhaps my appearance was elusive depending on the lighting. She'd seen me in the afternoon sunlight, but now I was only illuminated by lanterns. My existence truly did not leave an impression on anyone.

Viscount Baraldi explained. "She's the princess's attendant. You met her at the tea party."

The grand duchess finally looked like she understood. "Aaah... But why? You brought a girl like *her* here? What exactly are you going to do? She's even holding a dog! Get away from me! Don't come near!"

"Please, calm down."

"How can I calm down?! Has there been any news about Liberto?"

"We're still investigating, but information is hard to come by

due to all the confusion. It seems there really was a shoot-out in the city, and he was attacked."

"No... That's..." Grand Duchess Arabella trailed off as she looked our way. It seemed there were still things she couldn't say in front of us.

The viscount obliterated her need to be cautious. "It must have been the Familia. They either misunderstood our orders or took action on their own."

"What are you doing?!" Her Highness's voice grew higher-pitched as she tried to stop him.

He raised his hand to quiet her. "We don't need to hide it anymore. Prince Luigi knows it all already."

"Wha...?"

"He knew that I was associated with the Familia, so of course he knows about you as well. Just look at him shivering. He's in front of his own mother, yet he isn't looking to you as a source of respite."

The grand duchess stared at Prince Luigi. I could only wonder what her expression was conveying. Maybe she was thinking that she hadn't wanted him to find out.

Prince Luigi was pulling back the more she looked at him. He brought his body close to mine, as if to run away from her eyes. The grand duchess furrowed her brows deeply. To me, it appeared that she was both angry and overcoming pain.

"I see..." she said. "So you know. Did you tell that girl?"

The one to answer her wasn't her son, who stayed silent, but Viscount Baraldi. "That's right. He went and told a Lagrangian. That's why I had to bring him here instead of leaving him be."

"Stupid child." Grand Duchess Arabella huffed roughly. "Then we'll have to silence the girl as well."

"Mother!" Prince Luigi cried out.

She turned her eyes away and addressed her guards. "Bring Luigi this way."

The viscount stopped her as she made her way to the exit. "Wait. We're still not finished here yet."

"I'll deal with Luigi and tell him off. You take the girl. Finish her off as you please."

"No, it can't just be her. Prince Luigi needs to be silenced as well."

"I told you—" In the middle of her arguing back to him, her expression suddenly changed. She looked at the viscount in

disbelief. “What did you just say…? Are you going to…?”

“There’s nothing else I can do. Just telling him off won’t solve the problem.”

The grand duchess’s mouth quivered. “Luigi wouldn’t go against my word! All I have to do is sternly tell him to keep quiet.”

“I’m not so sure about that. He’s already run his mouth.”

“But… Luigi! You haven’t seen anything, and you don’t know anything! Isn’t that right?! You can promise that no one will find out, can’t you?!”

“M-Mother…” The young prince was trembling.

“Tell me you can! Or else, you’ll… Not just Liberto, but you too…!”

The more desperate her words grew, the less I thought she was only trying to preserve herself. She was trying to protect Prince Luigi, naturally, but I felt she also had regrets regarding Prince Liberto as well. Did she have doubt? Was she wavering because she hadn’t wanted him to die? Still, it now seemed that the Familia had taken matters into their own hands…

This was the first time I was registering her as a proper mother. She was haughty, selfish, and didn’t hesitate to dye her own hands with evildoings for her own benefit, yet the woman in front of me was no more than a simple mother. A foolish one who tried to solve matters through underhanded methods, but still… She was a mother desperately trying to protect her children.

I quietly observed the others in the room. Aside from Viscount Baraldi’s lackeys, there were two maids and two guards for the grand duchess. None of them appeared to have been moved by this pathetic display between mother and child—they were all staring with no trace of emotion. They all had most likely known of Grand Duchess Arabella’s actions beforehand, and they hadn’t pledged allegiance to her. Their true master was the viscount.

I glanced at the viscount, and he already had his eyes on me. I shuddered. His face had the manly allure native to Lavians, and he was grinning. “Why don’t we do this? Let’s have Prince Luigi kill this girl with his own hands.”

“Huh…?” A frail voice came from beside me. Prince Luigi’s face made it clear that he hadn’t understood what he’d just been told.

“If you attack her yourself, you won’t have a choice but to keep quiet afterward. All we need to do is make you bear a

secret of your own. How about it?”

“Luigi.” Grand Duchess Arabella’s voice took on an authoritative tone.

Prince Luigi fervently shook his head and backed up. “N-No… I couldn’t…”

“Do it. We have no other option.”

The viscount ordered one of his lackeys to hand Prince Luigi a gun.

The young prince screamed, as if that gun were already pointed at him. “N-No! I can’t do it! I don’t want to!”

“Luigi!” yelled the grand duchess.

“Stop it! Mother, stop this already! You can’t do this! You have to stop!”

“It’s too late! I can’t take any of it back now. You need to obey if you don’t want to die here. It will be fine… I’ll take care of everything after.”

“Mother!”

I panicked and turned to the door behind me. The viscount interpreted that action as me trying to run away, so he reached out and roughly grabbed my arm.

“Ow…!” The pain made me yelp. *Wh-Why are men so strong? I might get a bruise from this alone!*

The viscount sighed. “It seems the boy can’t do it after all. Indeed, I knew he couldn’t.”

“Stop!” bellowed the grand duchess. “He’s just not prepared because it’s too sudden. Give him a bit more time, and…”

“We don’t have that kind of time. Even if he did manage to kill her, I don’t think such a naive boy would be able to handle the weight of the secret. He’d spill it eventually, or people would figure it out from his demeanor. It’s impossible, no matter what he does.”

“If you kill him, I won’t forgive you! Just who do you think gave you your position in the first place? You seem to be getting ahead of yourself now that you have power, but don’t forget that I can take it from you whenever I want!”

But the viscount had an easy reply to Grand Duchess Arabella’s trump card. “You don’t have to worry about that. You can’t do anything anymore.”

She tried to berate him for that but stopped when the barrel of a gun was pointed at her. “Wha?” The viscount’s lackey took aim. The maids left her side immediately and ran to the walls.

“I wish the Familia would have finished Prince Liberto off, but they unfortunately let him go. Honestly… They do things without listening to my orders, and that’s why things like this happen. Those buffoons can only think of rampaging. Knowing him, Prince Liberto is sure to use this to his advantage to track us down. So before then, I’ll prepare a script. This boy here was so afraid of his mother being punished that he leaked the information to this girl from Lagrange, who was then silenced. In despair, Prince Luigi shot his mother, then took his own life. The soldiers rushed over after the maids alerted them, but by then it was too late.”

Another gun was pointed at Prince Luigi’s right temple by the lackey near him—the shot was angled to look like a suicide.

The young prince was so scared that he couldn’t move. “N-No… Stop…”

“Don’t worry—your father and brother will soon be joining you. Hopefully, your family will finally get along.”

“So you were the one who attacked Grand Duke Federico?” I whispered. “But why…?”

The viscount scoffed nasally and didn’t answer. He jutted his chin to his lackeys to give them the orders.

“No! Luigi!” Ignoring the gun at her own head, Grand Duchess Arabella tried to move.



Seeing the lackey's finger on the trigger, I couldn't bear to just watch. I tried to struggle out of the viscount's grasp, but I couldn't. Thanks to my thrashing, however, the lackeys were sufficiently distracted by me.

"If you flail about like that, they'll end up aiming at you," said Viscount Baraldi. "Just stay still, and it'll all be over in a moment... Ah!"

Pearl barked in my arms, then jumped out and bit the viscount's hand. This surprised me too, since she was usually so quiet—she hadn't reacted at all during this ordeal. This was the first time I'd ever heard her truly bark, and I hadn't expected her to bite anyone. She'd recognized the viscount as an enemy and had tried to protect me.

Thanks to her, I was freed. Pearl was now dangling from the viscount's hand.

"Y-You...!" He was wildly throwing his arm about. Pearl hit the ground and yelped.

"Pearl!"

Blood dripped from Viscount Baraldi's hand. He undid his tie and pressed the fabric to his injury. The puppy had bitten quite deeply, so the tie was further and further dyed red. "Damn it! Kill that dog too!" He'd given up on his shallow smile by then, and his voice was filled with hatred as he gave his order.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I yelled out. "Just how long are you going to wait, Lord Simeon?!"

"You're calling for him first? How boring."

Right after my outburst, a languid voice responded. I looked toward the person who'd spoken, and the lackey who had his gun pointed at Prince Luigi was grinning. I almost yelled again when I saw the man's blue eyes.

The door to the room opened, and people swarmed in.

"What?!" screeched the viscount.

They aimed for the lackeys with guns first—these men were punched and sent flying. The others were kicked immediately after and similarly sent flying. The maids screamed. The lackeys tried to get up and retaliate, but attacks came from other directions as well. The man they'd thought was their ally swung at them, making the guns in their hands fall to the ground. One skittered near my feet, so I hurriedly grabbed my skirt. I'd been told many times not to ever grab a gun, so I didn't pick it up. I kicked it over to a wall where no one was fighting. It fired with a

deafening noise when it struck the wall. I jumped, then covered my head and crouched down. *Oh no! It exploded on impact!*

"Whew. Come on, Marielle—no friendly fire," the lackey with the blue eyes complained. The bullet had whizzed past rather close to him.

"I didn't do it on purpose! I'm sorry! But you need to hurry… Oh."

When I looked around, the battle had already ended. All of the men in this underground room were haphazardly strewn across the ground. The maids and Viscount Baraldi were the only ones standing. Searching for Prince Luigi, I found him in the arms of the grand duchess, who was curled up on the ground.

She really is a mother after all.

After confirming their safety, I next looked for Pearl. She was so small that I was worried she'd gotten stepped on in the chaos, but she'd escaped to a corner of the room. I hurried over to her and checked for injuries. She wasn't bleeding, she didn't seem to be in pain, and she didn't resist me picking her up. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness… Thank you for saving me." I petted her little head, and she wagged her tail happily.

"Are you hurt, Marielle?"

I could hear Lord Simeon's voice. I stood, Pearl in my arms. "I'm fine. I was on edge since you took so much time to enter."

A person—clad in Lavia's fancy black military uniform with red accents—was confiscating weapons from the men on the floor. His pale blond hair shone in the light, and glasses were perched upon the fair skin of his nose. My beloved husband gave a swift kick to a man who rustled, keeping him on the floor.

"*That* man was here, so I waited until the last moment."

"That man" was currently pulling off his wig and wiping his face. Lutin's normal face was revealed shortly, since he hadn't put too much effort into this disguise.

Viscount Baraldi groaned. "You're…"

Lutin turned to him and laughed with his usual sardonic expression. "Good work. Looks like it hurts. Even small dogs can have big bites, huh?"

"Damn it… This was a trap…"

Lord Simeon approached the viscount. Several footsteps followed behind him. Prince Liberto appeared, accompanied by real Lavian soldiers. Despite the reports, he didn't seem to be

injured at all. Of course he wasn't—he'd set up this whole farce himself.

He glanced around the room. When his eyes landed on his mother and brother, he said nothing and immediately turned to the viscount.

Two more large people entered the room. Duke William and Sir Oliver hadn't been informed of anything earlier, but it seemed they were now aware of the situation.

"Capture them all, including those two." Prince Liberto gave his orders to the soldiers. They took the viscount's lackeys, as well as the grand duchess and the young prince.

"Prince Luigi didn't do anything," I protested.

"I know. I'm protecting him to prevent any more confusion—just in case." He barely turned to look at me. He was only focused on the viscount and seemed satisfied at having finally cornered his enemy.

The viscount grimaced. "I see. So all that information about you having been attacked... This was your plan all along."

"Indeed it was. Wasn't it realistic? It was difficult not to make it obvious. I'm very grateful for Mrs. Flaubert's wonderful acting prowess."

"I can't believe such a young girl deceived me..." Viscount Baraldi laughed wryly. He was even mocking Grand Duchess Arabella, with whom he'd worked so many years. He'd assumed that women's thought processes were shallow and emotion-based, and that they couldn't unravel a man's planning. *That just depends on the person, sir. There are all kinds of men and women out there.*

When Lord Simeon had gone off to "check the scene of the attack," he'd actually gone to change into the Lavian uniform—his knight's uniform stood out too much. He'd then quietly observed the viscount's actions. So even when the viscount had captured us in Prince Luigi's room, I'd known that Lord Simeon had been nearby, so I'd been able to stay calm. That had also been part of the plan.

Most of the knights had gone out with Princess Henriette, Lord Simeon had left after news of the attack, and I was by myself... These events had all lined up for the viscount, so he'd believed them and acted accordingly, falling right into Prince Liberto's trap. I was worried when Prince Liberto told me that the viscount was more likely to approach if I was with Lord Luigi, but

everything had gone exactly as he'd planned. I understood why the viscount had wanted to assassinate him. I would be too scared to relax knowing that a person like Prince Liberto was my enemy.

The soldiers took the viscount's lackeys, Grand Duchess Arabella, and Prince Luigi outside. The grand duchess didn't seem intent on resisting anymore. She was just limp. Duke William watched her be taken away. His brows were slightly furrowed, so perhaps he was angry, or perhaps he was pitying his cousin. He didn't offer her any words, just simply watched her go.

Prince Luigi looked this way, seemingly wanting to say something, but his brother didn't spare him even a glance. The soldiers ushered him along, so he dropped his shoulders and followed them.

All of those footsteps faded, leaving only the viscount with the four of us and the two Easdalians in the room. Left by himself, the viscount didn't try to resist anymore. He cradled his injured hand and rounded out his back. "I've been had... Just how much of this was your plan?"

Prince Liberto did not intend to play with the viscount any longer. He answered in a cold voice. "Viscount Baraldi. Your goal was to assassinate both me and Luigi, then plant another person as the heir to the grand duchy. You would cut off the grand duchess, who'd become a liability to you, invite a new cohort, then effectively overtake the grand duchy itself. However, I've already talked to your next cohort. I told him that if he was plotting something with you, I would consider him an accomplice, and he would be punished alongside you. He forfeited his claim to the throne after that. It seems he wasn't as bold as you. It took a lot of time, but you've lost this battle."

The viscount didn't respond. He only looked down, still clutching his hand.

For some reason, I was worried about the door behind him on the other side of the room. *What's beyond it? Another room? Or...* Lord Simeon and Lutin were here, so they'd catch the viscount if he tried to run. He couldn't struggle against Prince Liberto anymore, but for some reason, I had a bad feeling. Did he have more lackeys behind that door? Lord Simeon would have noticed if that were the case.

I looked at my husband, then had to gulp. I'd only been

wondering if he’d noticed anything, but his face was much tighter than I’d expected.

“Lord—”

“Everyone evacuate! Leave this room!”

The harried voice merged with frantic footsteps.

Huge explosions resounded throughout the underground floor.

Chapter Thirteen

Lord Simeon yelled and kicked off the floor with me in his arms. I didn't understand what was happening. I could see in the corner of my eye that Lutin was pulling Prince Liberto. What about Duke William and Sir Oliver? I was ripped out of the room without being able to check.

I cowered in Lord Simeon's embrace along the wall away from the door. Right after that, the floor and walls shook with the thunderous roar. Fragments of rock fell from the ceiling. *Is it going to collapse?!* I was overtaken by the fear of being buried alive. I desperately clutched Pearl to my chest. The air was filled with the smell of dirt and dust.

Thankfully, the impact wasn't enough to make the whole area cave in. The quaking calmed after a while, and we all looked up. It was dark around us, with only a faint light coming through. Though it wasn't completely dark, it was just bright enough for us to vaguely make out each other's forms.

When I moved slightly, small bits of debris fluttered from my hand and shoulders. Dust and small rocks must have fallen on me. Lord Simeon likely took the brunt of the impact since he was covering me. I brushed the pieces from his head. Lord Simeon removed his glasses, cleaned them, then put them back on. I then checked on Pearl. She was only shaking a bit, but she wasn't hurt. *Thank goodness.*

"Is everyone all right?" Lord Simeon called to the others.

Duke William's voice responded back. "Yes, no issues here. Are you all right, Your Highness?"

I was relieved to see two large shadows a bit away. Prince Liberto and Lutin also appeared to be unscathed. "I'm fine. We were saved thanks to the vice captain."

"That was rough!" Lutin brushed the dust off of his head. "I can't believe that old guy hid a hand grenade. He was acting kinda sneaky, so I knew something was up."

"So he tried to take us with him in retaliation."

Lord Simeon stood up. "No, I'm not so sure about that. I'm going to investigate."

Sir Oliver moved toward us, leaving Duke William behind. He

and Lord Simeon walked to the place where the door had been—it was now just a hole. Light was coming through it, apparently enough that one could amply see. There was rubble all around the hole. The door, which had been blasted off, had slammed against the wall and been crushed. The sheer force of the explosion could be seen with the naked eye, sending chills down my spine. Lord Simeon and Sir Oliver carefully avoided the rubble and peered inside the underground room.

Any human being in the middle of that explosion would have been blasted to smithereens. The thought was so scary that I couldn't even look. Imagining the horrible sight made me not want to go in with them.

Lord Simeon entered, followed by Sir Oliver. They called for us shortly after. Lutin headed straight in, and I frightfully looked inside. A small fire had broken out. Wood planks were sticking out of the broken wall, some having caught fire. Evidently, I was the only one who was afraid, as Lord Simeon had no issue searching for a lantern among the rubble. He pulled out something he could use, then lit it with one of the surrounding flames. *I-Is it really all right for you to be so easygoing?*

More sounds reached us—footsteps and voices. As you'd expect, the explosion had been heard from the upper floors, and soldiers had come down to see what had happened.

"Your Highness, are you safe?!"

"I'm fine. There's a fire, so bring water," Prince Liberto ordered. It was relieving to know that the fire would be put out. It wasn't a large one, so it would be gone without much effort.

Thanks to the sturdy build of the room, the collapse hadn't become a cave-in. There was a mountain of rubble at our feet, but it was clear enough that we would be able to see a person on the floor if they were there. Viscount Baraldi's body was nowhere to be found.

The door on the other side of the room was open, and beyond it was nothing but darkness.

"What's over there?" I asked Lutin.

"It's a staircase. There was a bit of time before the explosion, so the old guy probably ran down there."

"He escaped?!"

"He should have, if he didn't die."

Lord Simeon and Sir Oliver both had lanterns and were peering through the door. It appeared there wasn't a staircase

leading up, only one leading down.

"What's below here?" asked Lord Simeon.

Lutin didn't answer and turned to his master. "He ran into a tricky place. What should we do?"

"I'm not sure." Prince Liberto tilted his head. "We could block off this entrance and wait for him to shrivel up, or... This is bothersome. It will take time to search, and it'll be bad if there's an exit in there that we aren't aware of."

"We don't have a way to chase after him, though."

What are they talking about? Is there a path for him to escape below here? Are there multiple exits?

Lord Simeon was the first to notice. "Are these the underground ruins?"

That was when I remembered. Lutin had said there was one under the palace.

Prince Liberto nodded. "That's right. This palace is built atop an older one. Many areas are dilapidated and can't be entered, but some can be traversed."

Duke William was inspecting our surroundings. "If the viscount ran there, then shouldn't we give chase?"

The prince looked back with a difficult expression. "I would like to, but there isn't only one path and one entrance. We can't proceed without knowing where he went. It would be better if we waited for him here, but it isn't as if we know all of the places in the ruins..."

That caught my attention. "Um, so can someone get lost in there?" I felt I'd been told something similar when the underground ruins had been explained to me.

"Indeed. Someone not familiar with them is sure to get lost. As I mentioned, some areas have collapsed, so there are dead ends, as well as holes that have opened up. Ancient buildings and cities remain in parts, so the construction of such places is very complicated. And of course, outside light doesn't reach down there, so you can't walk through without a light source."

Would the viscount really be all right in a place like that? He couldn't have jumped down there as a last resort. He'd gone into this building several times, surely aiming for this underground space. What was he doing in the underground ruins?

We all contemplated what to do. If we wasted too much time, the viscount would have time to escape. Someone suggested we do both—chase him underground and scan the palace in case he

tried to exit. Though that seemed like the most effective plan, there was no guarantee that we would actually capture him.

Pearl fidgeted in my arms, so I pet her. *I'm sorry. Please hang on a bit longer.* It would be terrible if I let her down now and she got lost again. The fire was still burning nearby, and the soldiers who had found us were working to put it out. This wasn't a situation in which you could let a dog run free.

I felt I wouldn't be able to contribute anything, and I just seemed to be in the way, so I considered returning to the surface. However, I was curious about how things would turn out. Just as I was looking around to try and find a place where I could let Pearl walk around, I noticed something among the rubble. Drawing close to it, I saw that it was a cloth covered in blood... Viscount Baraldi's tie.

Oh, this... Just as I was about to lose interest, I gasped and looked back at it. *This! Can't we use this?!*

"Lord Simeon!"

My husband jogged over as soon as I called for him. "What's the matter?"

"This is Viscount Baraldi's tie. Right here."

He looked confused. "What about it?"

"It should carry his scent on it. There's blood all over it, so I believe we can use it."

"His scent?" He tilted his head, then dropped his eyes to Pearl in my arms. "Do you intend to track him?"

"It's Pearl's specialty. Princess Henriette had her trained with the military dogs for fun."

Everyone's eyes were on Pearl. Lutin's face said he didn't believe it. "Can that little thing really do it?"

"Her size doesn't matter!"

"But military dogs are—"

"No, wait." Prince Liberto cut him off. He walked over to look at the dog and tie. "How precisely can she find things?"

"Princess Henriette called it a treasure hunt. She would have Pearl remember a scent, then hide the item and have her find it. I only saw it a few times, but she found the items every time. True dog trainers taught her how to do it, so she should ostensibly have the same training as military dogs."

"Hm..." He nodded, then turned to Lutin. "Bambino, I'll leave the underground tracking to you. Have the dog guide you."

"What?! The dog, guide *me*?!" Lutin blurted out.

“I’ll go as well.” Of course, Lord Simeon volunteered. He picked up the tie before I could say anything.

I readjusted Pearl in my arms. “If I don’t go, then Pearl will be afraid of all the men around and won’t perform at full capacity. Is it all right if I go as well?”

It was written all over my husband’s face that it most certainly was *not* okay. I offered Pearl to him, challenging him to try it himself.

“Look at that—she doesn’t want to.”

Though Pearl was usually quiet, she didn’t like to be held by people she didn’t know, especially not adult men. I felt sorry for her, so I pulled her back. My husband deflated at being rejected by this dog, since he was already regularly rejected by my cat.

Duke William volunteered as well. “We’ll go too. With four of us, we’ll be able to protect the madam.” *Wait, you’re a* duke*. Aren’t you supposed to be more protected than I?*

Sir Oliver scolded him. “This again? Please recognize how old you are!”

“I’m not going to be jumping or running. We’ll only be tracking down one man, so there shouldn’t be a problem. Let us go! Be sure to bring a light!”

“Don’t just go ahead!” Sir Oliver hastily followed after Duke William, who was already making his way to the staircase.

Lutin and Lord Simeon ended up taking the lead, with me in tow—Duke William and Sir Oliver brought up the rear. The staircase, unlike the ruins, had been made in a later era, so though we were hurrying down it, we weren’t worried that it would collapse. It wasn’t wide enough for us to walk down side by side, so we formed a line. I wondered how far it would take us, but we reached the end fairly quickly.

There was another door, this one also locked with a latch. It was slightly ajar, leading us to think someone had passed through hastily.

Lutin turned around in front of this door and issued a warning, lantern in hand. “Past here, everything is mostly as it was all those years ago. Be very cautious of where you’re walking. Don’t trip and fall, Marielle.”

“Why are you only telling *me* that?”

“Because you’re the one most likely to do it.” He cackled at me pouting, then opened the door.

Light shone on the stone inner walls. It really did seem to be

an old castle. The upper parts of the pillars were arches, and they greatly resembled the ancient shrine aboveground.

A pathway stretched in front of us. I couldn't tell what lay ahead, since our light didn't reach there. The pure darkness seemed like it would swallow me. Though I was scared, I was also excited. *No, wait, this isn't the time to enjoy this!*

I set Pearl down and held Viscount Baraldi's tie near her nose. "Now, Pearl, remember this scent. I want you to find the owner."

She put her nose to the tie and began sniffing it, probably intrigued by the scent of blood. I smiled at her. With this, we could chase after the viscount.

Or at least, that's what I'd thought...but Pearl sat down in that spot and didn't move. *It's very cute when you sit and look up at me politely like that, but right now, we're toast if you don't help.*

"Oh? What's wrong? Go chase after him!" I pointed deeper into the passage, but she wouldn't even look that way and was seemingly unaware of why I was pointing. *Well, I suppose she is a dog. Hmm. This is troubling.*

Lutin rocked on his heels. "Are you sure this is going to work?"

"It's supposed to! What's wrong? Why won't you trace the scent?"

Pearl didn't react—she just continued to curiously look up at me. Did she not listen to people other than her owner? We didn't have time to call for Princess Henriette.

Duke William chuckled. "Seems she doesn't understand. Are you giving her the wrong instructions?"

Lutin grinned at my husband. "Vice Captain, can't you use your dog telepathy with her, as a fellow canine? Tell her what to do."

Lord Simeon scoffed. "If I'm a dog, then you're Prince Liberto's dog as well."

"I mean, it's weird for me to say this, but I think I'm more of a cat. I'll listen to my employer's orders, but not as a dog would."

I'd had enough. "It doesn't matter! More than that... Oh, Pearl, please!"

What could I do to get her to follow my orders? I was at a loss. *What should I do about this unmoving puppy?*

Lord Simeon reasoned with me. "Marielle, please try to remember what Her Highness did. If you do the same thing, then Pearl is sure to understand."

"Hmm..." I hurriedly sifted through my memories. How had

Princess Henriette ordered Pearl during the treasure hunt? *Remember, Marielle! Copy her movements!* "Hmm..." I gasped, then clapped my hands together. "Ah, maybe like this?" *That's right! Princess Henriette did this first!*

Pearl's ears perked up, paying attention to me. *That's right, this is it! Then...*

"Ready? Go search!" I used the same words as Her Highness. I hadn't thought those words had a deeper meaning, but Pearl probably took them as the sign to start, since the princess used them every time.

As I'd expected, Pearl stood up, put her nose to the ground, and began walking, following the scent. *Yes!* I stopped myself from shouting out, then nodded at Lord Simeon. He nodded back at me and offered his arm so I wouldn't fall. I gratefully took it and began following Pearl.

Lutin was impressed. "Oh wow... She really did start looking for him."

"I told you! She may be small, but she's smart and has a great nose."

"Quiet," Lord Simeon warned us. "Please proceed under the assumption that the viscount is up ahead."

I closed my mouth. Viscount Baraldi could hide if he heard us. We had to stay as quiet as possible. Well, that was what we wanted, but noise rang out no matter what. Our footsteps, the sounds of our clothing, the sounds of sabers clinking... The viscount was sure to hear us if he was nearby.

I whispered to my husband. "I don't think we can chase after him without being noticed."

"We know he'll notice us. I don't want to miss any noises *he* may make."

Ah, so that was it. Lutin muttered something about Lord Simeon really being a dog. *Cats have better ears than dogs, you know. You called yourself a cat, so you do your best as well.*

As I thought about those pointless things, Pearl proceeded even farther ahead. Splits in the path and entrances to rooms came up one after the other, but she kept going, mostly without pausing.

Even without having used this passage as an escape route, Viscount Baraldi had been here many times before. He knew this place was constructed like a labyrinth, and he was confident that he could lose anyone on his trail. Just the four of us weren't

enough to chase him. In such a complicated place, if we even separated from each other a little bit, the light wouldn't reach us. I understood why Lutin called the ruins troublesome. But thanks to our trusty Pearl, we were able to trace the viscount's steps. Surely he hadn't thought he'd be tracked by a dog.

Led by her unwavering steps, we continued through the underground labyrinth. It wasn't entirely flat—there were staircases as well. Though we were underground at the moment, this place was most likely a two- or three-story building. The farther down we went, the more collapsed places we found. What did the path ahead look like? The longer we followed Pearl, the more worried I became. *I've only just noticed…but if Pearl gives up halfway through, then we'll have to go back. Will we be able to go back the way we came?* Turning around, everything behind us was dark. Our lantern only illuminated the area directly around us. *How much longer will this light last? Are we really all right?*

I became more and more anxious. I shouldn't have been so excited to explore the underground. Lord Simeon suddenly bent down and brought his face close to my ear, probably having sensed it from my arm. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm sorry. It's nothing." I was the one who'd forced them to take me along, so the last thing I wanted to do was hold them back. I straightened up and stood tall. "I was just wondering if we'll be able to find our way back when the time comes."

"Oh, that. I remember the path, so there's no issue there."

"You remember?"

"Yes," he said nonchalantly. "There's always a chance we'll run into dead ends, after all."

Duke William also sounded leisurely. "I see. I thought we'd find an exit if we kept going, but that isn't always the case, is it?"

Did the duke not often think very deeply about things like this? Had he developed the musclehead blood of the count's family he'd married into, rather than the Shannon dukedom's blood?

Sir Oliver addressed Lutin. "This is starting to get a little scary. Do you know the structure of this place?"

Lutin shrugged. "Somewhat. I don't know it from top to bottom, but I know the path we've walked so far. You don't have to worry, Marielle."

"I-I see…" I was still unsure. "Does that go for the members of the grand duke's family as well?" My question was met with a

puzzled look, so I continued. “Prince Luigi saw Viscount Baraldi go in and out of here several times. The grand duke stopped him from following, saying he would investigate it himself.”

“Meaning he came down here, then. Huh. I’m surprised that the old man had that much will left in him.”

I rebuked him. That wasn’t what I was getting at, and he shouldn’t call the grand duke an old man. “The grand duke must have seen something here. That’s why he was attacked after Viscount Baraldi found out.”

“I’m sure he explored this place when he was a kid, so he ought to know a bit. He didn’t need to investigate, though. Instead of focusing his courage here, I wish he would’ve tried harder in other aspects of his life.”

Lutin was blunt with his words. *He could stand to approve of the grand duke a bit more.* I gave up and changed the subject. “How long will our lanterns last?”

“About an hour,” answered Lord Simeon after checking the lantern in his right hand.

Lutin raised his own. “This one’s got about that long too.”

Duke William traced his hand along the wall. “Then we’ll have to end this within that time frame. We’ll have to act, leaving enough time for us to escape.”

“From here, it would be faster for us to head for the exit rather than retrace our steps. The old viscount might have already left.”

I was relieved to hear that there was a proper exit. I had to focus on walking carefully so I wouldn’t hold the others back. As I walked, I kept my eyes on the ground.

Lord Simeon stopped out of the blue. My reaction was a bit delayed since I’d only been looking at the ground. The path was split. Pearl, who’d been moving forward without hesitating, had stopped for the first time. She tried going down one tunnel, returned, then tried the other one, only to go back and forth.

“What’s wrong?” I wondered.

“The scent is probably on both paths,” said Lord Simeon as he watched her.

The other men were stumped as well. Duke William knelt down next to Pearl. “This is bad. I didn’t expect this to happen…”

Lutin inspected the walls and floor. “The old guy was injured, right? Are there any bloodstains around?”

Sir Oliver inspected with him. “I would think the dog would be

able to track him if that were the case."

Though they were searching, Duke William had evidently already given up. I looked up at the walls and pillars, trying to find any kind of clue. This building didn't have decorations like sculptures in general, but there were reliefs on a portion of the wall. Was this place special somehow? Was this an engraving of a goddess? Or just a regular woman? This wasn't the time for me to be investigating things like that, but it would have been fun for me if this were a normal stroll through the ruins. *We're tracking the viscount right now! Tracking! In a mystery novel, we'd be able to find traces of blood, but I don't see any.* We found several works of art that the ancient people had left, but nothing of importance.

Pearl then began investigating the room in front of us. She was completely lost, but it seemed the scent of the viscount's blood was here and there. Had he been doing something here? Had he predicted that we'd use a dog to find him, so he'd purposefully spread his scent everywhere? Even past the arch-shaped entrance, the only thing we found was an empty space. Someone must have lived here a long time ago, but now it didn't receive light and was completely silent. Was there an exit somewhere in here? *Is there any spot that looks like it could be one?*

Lord Simeon pulled me back. "Marielle, don't wander around so much. It's dangerous."

"If there's really that much of a scent around here, then the viscount couldn't have just passed through. He did something here, right? I was thinking there could be an exit."

Lutin scratched his head. "There isn't supposed to be one here."

Everyone had entered the room after Pearl, but we couldn't find any footprints or bloodstains, much less an exit. Eventually, Pearl sat down. Was she telling us that she wouldn't go any further? *If* you *give up, then the rest of us won't be able to do anything!* I knelt down next to her and petted her as I sighed. The oil in our lanterns had depleted quite a bit, so there wasn't much time left. Was our only choice to give up?

Pearl whined. Maybe she was sad that she couldn't find the treasure.

"It's all right. You did your best, Pearl."

I kept petting her as I looked up at the wall next to me. There

was a relief on this one too. Had this room been used for celebratory purposes? The engravings here and there on the walls seemed to depict a legendary deity.

Ancient art… Treasure, in other words. Isn't the thing in front of me something incredibly precious? Lavia had places like these everywhere, so it really was an amazing country. Had the viscount stolen these works of art and sold them? A normal criminal would do something like that, but would someone of his status do so as well?

Why did the ancient artists depict their people naked, anyway? The people in the engravings wore capes and helmets, but their most secretive parts were on display. It made me unsure of where to look.

"Hm…?"

Something tugged at me as I gazed absently at the reliefs. *This deity…* I stood and brought my face close to one. I couldn't see it well through the darkness. *Light… I need light.*

"Marielle?" Lord Simeon called out.

"Give me a light! Shine it on here!"

The men gathered round at my call. With the lanterns shining on it, I could see the whole engraving. The person had a helmet with wings on it, as well as wings sprouting from his feet. He carried a staff in hand. *A staff and wings…and is this a snake? It really is…!*

"Mercurius?" whispered Lord Simeon.

That's right, this is Mercurius. He has the same features as the statue we saw in the park atop the hill. The mischievous god who protects merchants, travelers, and thieves—like a certain someone we know!

I pointed at the deity. "You said you thought the grand duke had said that name before, right?"

"Was he talking about this?"

Lutin inspected the wall despite sounding suspicious. "Maybe that was just a coincidence."

The two of them meticulously combed it from top to bottom. Lord Simeon paused at some point.

"There's blood here."

"Huh?" Looking at his hand, there was a small stain on it. It was hard to see its color in the lantern light, but I felt like it was red.

"So the old guy put his hand here?" Lutin placed his hand

where Lord Simeon had, right about at the height of the chest of an adult man. “Would you look at that? The little puppy wasn’t lost at all. She really did find it.” He looked down at Pearl, impressed.

That’s right! I rushed to praise her. “I’m sorry, you were actually telling us it was right here, weren’t you? Thank you! Amazing, great job!” I ruffled her fur, to which she happily wagged her tail in response. She hadn’t sat down because she’d given up or was tired, but because she was signaling to us that she’d found the treasure. Such a smart girl!

“But even if we’ve found traces here, how do we proceed?” Duke William peered over.

Lord Simeon placed his hand on the same area of the wall and pushed. For a moment, nothing happened. But then, it began to move. I gasped at the sight. *I’ve seen this in adventure novels! It’s a secret passage!*

The stones made noise as they rubbed against each other, and the section with the relief rotated. Beyond the newly opened space was a room.

Lutin whistled rudely. “Good job. You hit the jackpot.”

Lord Simeon stepped into the passage. “Let us go.”

The space was just wide enough for a large man to maneuver through sideways. My own father would’ve gotten his big belly caught in it. Lord Simeon and Lutin slipped through, and I grabbed my skirt and pushed through. It seemed to be a bit hard for Duke William, as Sir Oliver had to shove him from the back.

We came out the other side, not in another passage, but in a room, which was brighter than the one before. We continued on into another room farther in, and light was flowing in from there. Lord Simeon gestured for me to stand back while the men went to the front. I picked Pearl up and followed after them. We’d come quite far down, so sunlight wouldn’t reach us. Since the place was so bright, someone had lit a light. Was the viscount beyond here…?

Lord Simeon and Lutin put their backs to the wall on either side of the entrance, wary of a counterattack. They left the lanterns at their feet and carefully watched the other side. After ensuring that nothing was happening, they finally went in. Duke William stopped me at the entrance, so I peered between him and Sir Oliver.

The room was a wide one, with many lamps on the walls. I

could see several large pieces of machinery within. Why were there machines here? I felt I'd seen them before. *And this scent…*

Lord Simeon and Lutin examined the machines. There was seemingly no one else in the room. Had the viscount passed through here?

Duke William whispered, "What are these machines?"

Sir Oliver's voice was low. "I'm not sure. They aren't looms, are they?"

I understood why he'd guessed that. They seemed to fit the profiles of midsize looms. But these were no looms, because what went into them wasn't thread, but paper.

"These are printing presses," I answered.

That was it. Printing presses. There was no doubt about it. The familiar smell of ink floated through the air. These were much smaller than those in factories that printed newspapers or books, and they had hand-sized handles on them. That didn't mean they were old printing presses, however—they were built like modern ones. Whoever had brought these here had likely not been able to bring large steam-powered ones, and they were perhaps cautious of making too much noise, so these had been brought instead.

Lutin pulled a large piece of paper from the stand next to one of the machines. "This is a hundred algier bill."

"Huh?" I didn't register what he meant at first. Why was I hearing about Lagrange's currency in Lavia?

What he was holding was far larger than the typical banknote. If it really was money, then it hadn't been cut yet.

He then went around to the other machines and pulled the papers from them. "This one's errey, this one's blums… Ha ha, it's a treasure trove."

Linden's and Vissel's currencies were here too. My mouth fell open.

"They were making counterfeit notes underneath the grand duke's palace?" Duke William's voice was filled with exasperation and anger.

The counterfeits! I hadn't expected to hear about them here. Lord Simeon was also surprised. Of course he would be. We'd unexpectedly solved the counterfeit note issue that had been plaguing Lagrange recently. *So this was all Viscount Baraldi's doing. Even Prince Liberto couldn't have predicted this. He's sure to be angry. It will be quite the impact to his pride that something like*

this slipped under his nose.

"I see," I said. "You can still print a lot of bills, even with small machines."

When it came to printing, I mostly thought of books and newspapers, but other things could be printed too. Advertisements, candy wrappers, stationery... Handheld machines were more than enough to make small amounts of small papers.

Perhaps the reason only foreign currency was being printed here was to prevent Lavia's economy from being thrown into disarray. Once counterfeits were put into the mix, trust in paper notes went down. Indeed, it had been affecting Lagrange quite a bit. The people in government were the ones to deal with it. If only the viscount had used his brains in more ethical ways.

Though this counterfeit factory was a big discovery, we still hadn't found the man himself. No one seemed to be in this room, and there was another door in the back. No doubt the viscount had escaped through there.

After confirming that there were no enemies around, Duke William and Sir Oliver moved forward. I reached out and grabbed the backs of their clothes.

"What's the matter?" asked the duke.

There wasn't anyone around, indeed. But there were so many lights around, piles of blank and printed papers sat around the machines, and I spotted tableware and empty bottles strewn in the corner. It was obvious that someone had been here just recently. They'd been right in the middle of making more counterfeit notes. Who had done it? Where had they gone? Had they only run because the viscount had told them to?

I was about to tell everyone that it was dangerous to enter without preparation, but a high-pitched bursting sound rang out.

This was followed by several gunshots in this underground space. Duke William moved swiftly to cover me and retreated from the door. Were Lord Simeon and Lutin safe? *What happened?!*

"Stay here! Don't move!" Leaving me by the wall, Duke William went back to the entrance. "Move in, Oliver!"

"Wait!" Sir Oliver was not ready yet. "Ah, darn you musclehead geezer!"

Your Excellency! You're an important figure for Easdale! You're

related to their royalty! Also, you're elderly!

The person who needed to be protected most jumped into the fray, chased by an angry Sir Oliver. Beyond the wall, I could hear sounds of scuffling, shouts, screams, and occasional gunshots. After a while, I crawled along the ground to peer in, just enough to see. *I won't get shot if I'm this low to the ground, right…?*

"Whoa…" Finally able to see the situation, I let out a gasp.

Enemies really *had* been waiting beyond the door. Men that were most likely members of the Familia had waited for a moment to leap in. Unfortunately for them, they had attacked Lord Simeon and Lutin. I'd predicted as much. Those two didn't falter, didn't get hit by bullets, and retaliated without pause. Their disadvantage in numbers meant nothing. Lord Simeon had tossed an empty bottle at the enemy, knocking the gun from their hand, while Lutin had leaped over the machines and started running amok.

On top of that, Duke William had veered in and outdone even them. He attacked the enemies with movements that weren't typical of a man in his sixties, knocking them down one after the other. After the enemy would fall and spin around, Sir Oliver would come in and deliver the final blow, making them faint—Duke William would move on to the next enemy in the meantime. It reminded me of plowing through snow. I could see the scene of people gathering up snow to use in fights during festivals. Or would this be more like harvesting wheat? Everyone was attacking all at once.



They were all very to-the-point. Our side was so strong that the entire ordeal wasn't really a battle, but rather, one-sided violence. We were supposedly up against evil criminals, but you couldn't really tell which side was the evil one.

The battle was over in no time at all—the last ones standing were the four on my side. As I stood up and walked to the middle of the room, I felt a bit sorry for the men strewn haphazardly on the floor. They'd chosen the wrong opponents.

So where is the viscount? We still hadn't found him. Lord Simeon headed to the far door, and the rest of us followed along. I was worried we would have to continue trailing him, but we came to a dead end. There was no other exit to this farthest room.

A middle-aged man was plastered to the back wall in fear, cornered.

"*Ciao*, you mole of a viscount." Lutin's voice echoed around the room. He and Duke William flanked Lord Simeon. "Good work giving us the runaround in these underground ruins. I'll let you choose which one you like in the end, old man. Lavia, Easdale, or Lagrange. Which would you prefer?"

A wonderful selection of choices, I must say!

But to the viscount, these words weren't harbingers of joy at all. He didn't answer, as he had neither a method nor the energy to resist anymore. In the end, Lord Simeon arrested him, and our underground labyrinth chase came to a safe close.

Chapter Fourteen

On a sunny afternoon about a week after the confusion subsided, voices of celebration rose up all around the capital. The citizens of Lavia crowded around the cathedral, desperate to catch a glimpse of a rare, auspicious event: their prince's wedding ceremony. The soldiers guarding the scene were struggling to keep them from jumping over the barriers—they had their backs to the fanciful ceremony and stood facing the crowd. *I'm sorry, good soldiers, but the people will be getting special gifts afterward, so please keep them at bay until then.*

Lagrange's Royal Order of Knights were in charge of the cathedral itself, and they'd donned their ceremonial uniforms. Their gorgeous elegance didn't lose out, even to Lavia's own honor guard, and Lagrange's top brass was a step above the rest in terms of raw beauty. All the young women attending the ceremony were whispering among themselves and commenting on the sight of the handsome soldiers.

Indeed! Wonderful and dashing, aren't they?! The white uniform really does suit Lord Simeon the best. With his saber resting at the side of his ceremonial uniform, he truly looks like a prince who just leaped out of a fairytale.

Yet even with all the hunky soldiers and guards around, the bride and groom stole the show. Beautiful, lovely, and lavish, Princess Henriette, wrapped in her bridal outfit, blushed more than anyone else at the sight of the person waiting for her in front of the altar. Though she didn't have the elegance or strength of the knights, she was undoubtedly the most refined figure in attendance. And Prince Liberto, who took his bride's hand with a kind smile, appeared to be the perfect groom—to those unaware, at least.

A lot happened leading up to today, you know.

It had been decided that those who'd been arrested would be interrogated one by one and then punished according to their crimes. Grand Duchess Arabella, of course, was no exception. She was considered to be the prime instigator, and everyone involved was worried about what punishment she'd be sentenced to.

I'd promised Prince Luigi that I would check and see whether we could lighten her sentence. I had even consulted with Duke William on the matter—though he was her relative, it would be considered meddling in domestic affairs for him to speak on a Lavian issue. Still, even if the duke himself couldn't readily reply, he'd appeared to understand my and Prince Luigi's feelings on the matter, and he'd said he would consider it. Lord Simeon, on the other hand, hadn't seemed pleased when I'd requested leniency.

No one knew how Duke William's meetings with Prince Liberto had gone after that. Had the duke convinced him to lighten the grand duchess's punishment? Or did Prince Liberto have her sentence set in stone from the very start? The fact that Grand Duchess Arabella had colluded with the Familia and instigated murders was not made public, as that information would've given the grand duke's family too much of a dour reputation. It was, however, announced that the grand duchess was under mental duress and would be recuperating in a small castle in Easdale.

In reality, she was under house arrest. She would not be permitted outside for the rest of her life, nor allowed to come in contact with any outsiders. Though she would be living in a castle, she would have no luxuries and would most likely be forced to live a lifestyle more frugal than that of commoners. She would then be cut off and forgotten by the world, merely left to languish as the days went by... Though this was better than capital punishment, it was still a very harsh sentencing.

Upon being informed of this decision, Grand Duchess Arabella had made her displeasure known. "You're going to confine your own mother to a prison for life? You couldn't possibly..."

Alas, Prince Liberto hadn't budged. "If you're not satisfied with this outcome, then we can end your life immediately. That may even be kinder to you. If you choose to live, you'll grow old with all of your luxuries stolen and no one to pay attention to you. You will be completely forgotten. Such a lifestyle is surely most humiliating for you, and you'll hardly be able to bear it. That is why I've decided on that for your punishment. I don't believe you have any room to dispute it, considering all that you've done, but if you truly cannot accept, we have the ability to conclude your life at the present moment."

The grand duchess's lips had quivered. She'd been at a loss for words under the icy gaze of her firstborn son. Her face, which looked like it had aged quite a bit in a short amount of time, had taken on more of a puzzled expression, rather than one of anger.

"But…why? Everyone exterminates their political enemies. They assassinate them again and again… Why must *I* be the only one punished for it?"

"It could be considered a sort of justice if you had truly done it for our country. If only you hadn't joined forces with criminals for your personal gain. You took the wrong path, and it led to your defeat." Prince Liberto had hammered the final nail in the coffin quietly, yet ruthlessly. "As you said, it is not strange for bloodshed to occur during struggles for power. That's even more reason for you to understand—those who lose must pay with the lives they bet. In a past era, you would have been sentenced to public execution on the scaffold. That doesn't apply in this day and age. Therefore, we opted for the more calm punishment of house arrest, with a separate explanation for the public, of course. If you truly have the heart of a mother somewhere in you, even if just a smidge of one, then please accept your punishment with grace. I don't want to burden my younger brother and sisters with the unhappiness of their mother being given the death penalty."

Those final words had made Grand Duchess Arabella break down in tears in lieu of a rebuttal. Whether they'd been tears of discouragement and despondency or those of remorse, no one would ever know.

From here on out, she would spend much time confronting her own heart. Sending her to Easdale might have been a form of kindness from Prince Liberto. With her political power gone, the ill-intentioned would no longer approach her. The prince must have thought that if she was going to be sealed away as a punishment, then at the very least, it should be in her homeland…or perhaps that had been Duke William's idea.

There was a chance that some would be allowed to visit her one day. Prince Luigi had sadly accepted it.

As for the grand duke, he made a full recovery. It had actually been a lie that his condition had been critical—the truth was, he'd already regained consciousness by the time the grand duchess had revealed her hand. He hadn't been in a state to undergo questioning, but he'd been well enough for the doctor

to guarantee his safety. This fact had been hidden from Viscount Baraldi to prevent another possible attack.

Once conscious, Grand Duke Federico had recounted the incident, and that had been more or less precisely what we'd predicted had occurred. The viscount and his lackeys had chased after the grand duke after he'd left the auxiliary building and then put him to sleep with their drug. They'd tried to take him to the underground ruins to finish him off where no one could see, so if I hadn't coincidentally been there to witness them, he would have ended up missing. This had been unfortunate for the viscount, but lucky for us.

After recovering and being informed of the situation, Grand Duke Federico had stated that he would retire from his position and go to the same place as his wife.

"*This* was the final straw that made you have a change of heart? After you continued to cling to your title of grand duke all these years?"

Prince Liberto's response to his father had been quite harsh, but the grand duke hadn't gotten angry. "I believe this situation was enough to bring about a change. I do not have any particular attachments to the title—I was merely waiting for you to gain experience."

"I've assisted you since I was fourteen years old, and nowadays most of your work is put on my shoulders. Yet these factors *still* weren't enough for you?"

The prince had seemed to be at his wit's end, yet the grand duke had gazed at him with an expression full of love. "You realize as you get older that young people filled with confidence and half-hearted capability are dangerous. For as long as I stayed the grand duke, you had the opportunity to push anything difficult onto me if needed. I thought that even a useless man like me was worth that much."

Prince Liberto hadn't seemed able to respond, so his father had continued.

"But enough is enough. The time for your father to butt in has long passed. I will retire. The least I can do now is stay by your mother's side. Though I wasn't directly involved, in a way, I was her accomplice. If Arabella is to be punished, then I will take on the same punishment."

The prince didn't deny this. The grand duke had committed a rather serious crime by proxy—he'd given up and pretended not

to see all of the wrongdoings he'd known about. As he'd said, it was only right for him to be sentenced.

Much preparation was needed to carry out the various punishments, and there simply wasn't enough manpower to go around. The grand duke's retirement and passing of the throne would be officially announced after the prince's marriage ceremony. At the moment, Grand Duchess Arabella was still in Casterna Palace, being monitored in her own room.

And in the midst of us all still dealing with the aftermath of the incident, representatives from each kingdom had begun arriving one after the other. The king and queen of Lagrange, as well as Duke Chalier and his wife, had entered Lavia. Princess Henriette, having reunited with her parents and older sister, had lively talks with them about their eldest brother, who had been left in their home country by himself. Apparently, Prince Severin had complained to his fiancée Julianne so much that she'd become irritated and was currently refusing to meet with him. *That seems pretty typical of Julianne.* Lord Simeon had laughed wryly at the thought of his best friend having to work all alone. *Let's be sure to bring many souvenirs back for him.*

And so, the wedding ceremony had finally commenced. It proceeded in the most gorgeous and serious way, and the new couple was born. These two, who would become the new grand duke and duchess of Lavia, sparkled under the dazzling light of celebration.

On the way back to the palace from the cathedral, a parade was held. The newlyweds were meant to ride in a special carriage where they could be seen from all angles—though this was most pleasing to the citizens, it was a massive headache for the guards. Soldiers on horses surrounded the carriage to protect it, their eyes glinting sharply, keeping watch for any suspicious movements from those along the path. There were enough guards to make one wonder if the entire military had been deployed.

This fact underscored how dangerous Lavia still was at the moment. We'd only unmasked a small portion of the criminals—the Familia itself remained unscathed. Since Viscount Baraldi had been arrested, they would most likely lay low for the time being, but in time, they would move again. It was well-known that Prince Liberto intended to strengthen his watch even further, so he was surely at the top of the Familia's to-be-assassinated list.

The one to claim this was none other than the prince himself.

"I was the one who wanted to do this in the first place, so I don't mind the danger," he told Princess Henriette. "That being said, I do not mean to involve you. If this situation is frightening for you, then you may live in another place with a body double of mine, and we'll only meet when necessary."

Princess Henriette responded with exasperation. We all understood that this was his way of being considerate, but why was *that* his conclusion?

The princess had a few words to say to this. "Unfortunately for you, I am not as unwilling a person as you are making me out to be. Since the day it was decided that I would marry you, I have learned many things about Lavia—and not just about the language and customs. My father and brother told me many a time that if I wanted to reconsider the marriage, I could cancel the engagement. I refused every time. I am now standing in front of you, so I am going to take pride in my role and work hard as your grand duchess. If you truly deem this situation dangerous, then please protect me. Protect yourself as well—live a long life, and please do not leave me a widow!"

Just as Lord Simeon had said, Prince Liberto did not truly understand how to interact with others. He was very diplomatic when it came to politics, so why was he so bad at personal relationships? Were those things not related? He dealt with other people either way... Perhaps he didn't quite have feelings like pure affection or thoughtfulness. Did he only consider such interactions in terms of gains and losses?

"Has he always been like this?" I whispered to Lutin. "His relationship with *you* is different, right?" The prince demonstrated something that resembled love toward Lutin and Dario, which led me to think that he wasn't entirely incapable of having personal relationships.

"It's different with the princess," Lutin responded, not in a cold way. "We're his subordinates—like his younger brothers—so we can't be his lovers."

"Do you *want* to be his lover?" I asked.

"No. Not even on threat of death. That's not what I mean. He tries to play the older brother and take care of everyone, but he's the most inexperienced of us all. He never had the leeway to take an interest in women up until now, and he seemingly had no interest. This is the first time in his life that he's been with a

girl, and he has no idea how to deal with it—since it is a political marriage, he went about it like a negotiation. The princess, however, responded with romantic feelings instead of logic and merit. He figured he could please her if he gave her generic love, but ultimately, she just told him that she couldn't understand what his real feelings were. Through that, he learned that it would be best for him to approach her honestly, so he did, but as you can see, his personality isn't one that would be favored by women. Nothing about him is fit for romance. It's impressive that the princess continues to love him without that love running short."

I glanced over at Dario. He wasn't saying anything, but his expression was the same as Lutin's. I could only laugh. *Honestly, Prince Liberto is hopeless!*

Farther away from us, Princess Henriette was still complaining. Prince Liberto appeared to be letting her words wash over him with a cool face, though on the inside, he must have been wavering. *But it's not just my imagination that he looks a little bit happy, right?*

I turned to Prince Luigi, who was gazing at his brother with a complicated expression, and whispered, "Your brother is rather dense, isn't he?"

"Brother is very smart."

"A very smart, *dense* person."

The young prince shot a confused look my way, so I explained. "Your father said that capable, confident young people are dangerous, and I agree. Prince Liberto could be called a genius, but it seems that in turn, he doesn't understand normal people's feelings."

Prince Liberto had used his younger brother in his plan—the young prince had been in pain and crying by himself, and Prince Liberto had used that to his advantage. Prince Luigi had been utterly shocked upon learning the truth, but Prince Liberto had taken no notice. He'd fully intended to protect his brother, making it clear that his warped forms of love weren't exclusive to Princess Henriette. We could all laugh it off for now, but I couldn't help but feel that his emotionally stunted nature would cause grave problems down the line.

"It will be hard for Princess Henriette to deal with him by herself, so please help her, Prince Luigi. Teach your brother what feelings normal people have."

“I can’t teach my brother anything!”

“You can.” I could say this for sure. “No matter how capable someone may be, no one is perfect. There are things even your brother doesn’t know, so he needs people to teach him. Don’t be afraid. Please face Princess Henriette head-on alongside him. Show him how humans really are. Your feelings may not be aligned now, but if you can work with him, those feelings may one day cross paths.”

Prince Luigi listened with a face that was half trusting and half doubting. *Don’t worry—you’re going to grow from here on out. You’ll become an adult who can support your brother.*

I turned to Lutin. “You do your best for your master as well, Angelo. Even if you’re not related by blood, you’re his family.”

His face scrunched up, displeased. “You’re calling me by *that* name?”

“What about it? I gave it to you because you wanted it. If you don’t like it, then shall I take a page out of your master’s book and call you ‘Bambino’?”

“It wouldn’t mean much coming from a *pulcina*.”

He left after his decidedly not-cute words. Dario waved a hand and followed him, and I waved back with a smile.

The carriage with the newlyweds proceeded onward, showered in praise. The line of knights following them was resplendent—they acted as a congratulatory bouquet for the wedding party. Lord Simeon rode right next to the carriage and protected it as his final duty to Princess Henriette. He’d known her since her birth, so she was like a younger sister to him. Occasionally, he would smile kindly down on her, and it made me *just* a bit jealous. It was fine, though—there was only a bit more time left in our roles, and once we were finished, I would have my husband spoil me greatly.

He’d promised me. *We’re going to go out together before we return home!*

Flowers bloomed. The bright sunlight and refreshing wind felt lovely. This season brought promises of happiness to girls everywhere, and this city, which breathed dreams of ancient times, was flourishing with joy and celebration. The bride waved at the crowd, often exchanging glances with her beloved and smiling. Even the hopeless groom looked genuinely happy.

I celebrated this couple—two people who were very precious

to me—from the bottom of my heart.

I hope that both my and my friends' futures will shine even brighter. May the two of them have a long, joyous future. May they overcome their many trials and lead fun, fruitful lives.



The Destination of Marielle Clarac

This happened a bit before we left for Lavia.

Lord Simeon had promised that he would take me on vacation for my birthday. He'd sent me gifts every day leading up to my birthday, but the main gift was this trip! *I'm going to enjoy my alone time with Lord Simeon to the fullest!*

"Wow, it's beautiful!"

I gasped in wonder at the sights I saw outside of the carriage window. Surrounded by several green mountains, a large lake spread out across the landscape. Its lovely blue color, deep and jewellike, reflected the sky and mountains. This region was higher in elevation than Sans-Terre, so the wind that brushed my cheek was chilly. It felt as if we'd slipped back a season.

I'd been raised in a city filled with buildings everywhere you looked, so I couldn't help but be overjoyed just at the sight of the natural scenery. This was a popular sightseeing spot—the beautiful scenery was captivating, and the town was apparently imbued with an essence of times past, making it rather fun to walk through. My heart was already aflutter, even before we arrived.

"Look at that boat! I can't believe there's such a huge ship on a lake."

"It must be a tourist boat for sightseers."

Lord Simeon gazed at the lake from beside me. Our bodies touched naturally when I leaned toward the window, so his breath drew closer. Though we'd been married for quite a while, my heart still raced, and my cheeks still flushed.

"Does it go around the lake? I'd like to ride it."

"It does, and we can if you like," he said. "There are also small boats for rent that we can steer ourselves. Would you prefer the tourist ship?"

"Hmm... Both!"

We both laughed as we made exciting plans. *Ah, what a happy time! No one's interrupting us and work isn't getting in the way... We can freely think of playing around as we wish! I can't believe I get Lord Simeon all to myself from morning until night!*

This was the greatest birthday celebration ever! I figured that

we might as well schedule vacations for every one of my birthdays from now on. I was grateful for the wonderful gifts, but in the end, the best thing I could ask for was time spent with my husband.

We weren't even bored during our time in the carriage. I shared the space with my husband to the fullest, and soon enough, the lakefront town came into view. The season's flowers neatly decorated the garden of the small, cute house we arrived at.

"We've been waiting. We hope you had a pleasant trip."

When we disembarked from the carriage, a young couple greeted us. This was Mr. Clement and Mrs. Clara, who were both a bit younger than Lord Simeon.

This house had been built as a vacation home for House Flaubert, but they didn't use it more than maybe once every few years, so it mostly belonged to the house managers. The son of a distant relative of House Flaubert had gotten married at around the same time the house had been acquired—at the time, he had been searching for a new place to live. The man worked at the public office in this town and had asked the Flauberts if they could rent out this house. That request had come at the perfect time for House Flaubert, so the couple now rented it on the condition that members of House Flaubert could stay over once in a while.

The couple warmly greeted us. They had a single maid employed, so she and Mrs. Clara managed the house together. We enjoyed a pleasant conversation with the couple as we ate the meal they'd kindly prepared for us. That night, we rested easy, and the next day we set off on a stroll.

"I didn't know lakes had beaches as well!"

A bit away from the house was the lake. White sand flanked one side of it. I'd thought that waves crashing on a beach was the territory of the ocean, but I was shocked to learn that water behaved this way on lakeshores as well. I ran toward the crashing waves, but my feet got caught in the sand, and I almost fell.

Lord Simeon caught me without missing a beat and pulled me close. He'd predicted I'd do that. "Don't run. You'll get covered in sand if you fall here."

"Fine... I want to take off my shoes as we walk. It would feel so good to play in the water over there."

The waves here weren't as large as the ones on the ocean shore, but the water was rhythmically surging in and out, probably carried by the wind. It was a fascinating sight. I gathered up my hopes and let my eyes sparkle at my husband, but his face took on a rather mean expression.

"Try touching the water with your hand. If you still want to play in it after that, I won't stop you."

He guided me to the edge of the water. I pulled up my skirt with one hand and bent down, reaching out with my other hand. The water I scooped up was shockingly cold.

"It's like ice water…"

"This water flows down from the mountains and gushes out from the bottom of the lake. You can only really swim in it during the summer. No one would do it during this season."

Still crouching by the water, I pouted at his know-it-all tone. He pulled me up and whispered in my ear, "Please only show your bare feet in the bedroom. As your husband, I cannot allow other men to see them. If you want to show them that badly, then shall we go to the bedroom right now?"

My cheeks flared red. "I didn't mean it like that! Put me down! Others are watching!"

Lord Simeon laughed as he gently set me down. I hurried the two of us away from the shore—it felt like passersby and sightseers were rolling their eyes at us. *I have socks on, you know! Even* I *wouldn't dream of pulling up my skirt and drawers and removing my socks. I wasn't trying to be indecent! I just wanted to enjoy the water a little bit!*

I wouldn't have been able to handle the water at that temperature. I knew my husband was only telling me that my feet would grow numb and my socks would get wet. *But you didn't have to say it like that! Why do you have to be so alluring* here*?! Don't encourage such an erotic atmosphere while the sun is still out!*

My heart couldn't calm down once I recalled the night before. *It's strange. It's been a whole year since we got married. When in the world am I going to get used to my own husband? I may never get used to him. My love will sparkle forever, I'll fangirl forever, and I will enjoy our marriage forever!*

I regained my composure and continued sightseeing. A nearby canal drew water from the lake, and carriages were forbidden from going in and out of the surrounding older parts

of the city. People came and went, enjoying slow walks through the town. Fresh green leaves shone on the branches of the roadside trees, and cute, pastel buildings were festooned with flowers on their windowsills. The scenery was like that of a fairytale. How I wished someone would preserve it in a painting!

We browsed through shops and picked out souvenirs, had lunch at a local eatery, and enjoyed the scenery on the lake from the sightseeing ship in the afternoon. We made merry the whole day, then returned to the vacation home, promising each other that we'd go see the castle the next day.

There was a slightly elevated place atop a hill near an older part of the city. Upon that hill sat a castle built by a feudal lord in an age long past. Mrs. Clara had told us that the view from that spot was marvelous—you could see both the lake and the town, all at once. There was also a building that used to be a courthouse. With the surprising number of places to see, even in such a small town, I couldn't help but be excited for the next day.

But come that evening, once we returned to the house, Mr. Clement forwarded us a request that would have us change our plans. "I'm terribly sorry, but the town mayor heard that the son of this house's master is here. He wants to visit with you no matter what..."

Apparently, this mayor had plans to build roads connecting his town with other cities, thereby encouraging more travel and sightseers. When he found out that Lord Simeon was here, he jumped at the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have House Flaubert sponsor this plan. He strictly ordered Mr. Clement to get him an audience with Lord Simeon no matter what. Mr. Clement himself apologized profusely.

"I told him over and over that you were here to enjoy a vacation with your wife and that his barging in would be a bother, but he argued that I needed to do my utmost as a government official for the development of our town... I'm so sorry."

Lord Simeon glanced at me. I smiled back at him. "I don't mind. It's not like it's going to take you all day, and we'll be here until the day after tomorrow. Why don't you hear the mayor out?"

He sighed. "I suppose I don't mind either, if you're all right with it."

I felt sorry for Mr. Clement, who was stuck between a rock and

a hard place. This deal could also yield good results for House Flaubert. Lord Simeon agreed on the condition that the meeting should take place in the afternoon.

The next day, after we went to see the castle in the morning, we went to the hotel designated as the meeting place.

"Are you sure you don't want me to accompany you?" I asked.

"You'd just be bored listening to work discussions."

He didn't try to take me with him. I sat at the café on the first floor of the hotel and drank tea as I watched him go. This café had a nice view of the lake, and there was a small garden on the outside terrace. It was a warm day with pleasant weather, so there were other people sitting on the terrace as well. Women were chatting cheerfully, and a man was staring off into the distance. I decided to take a seat as well.

But as I pulled out the chair, one of the chatting women called out to me.

"Oh, are you alone? Why don't you come sit with us?"

There were four of them, all seemingly young wives. They must have thought that I was lonely by myself.

"Thank you very much," I said. "But you all seem to be having so much fun together. Is it really all right for me to join?"

"Yes, go right ahead. We've all only just met each other, since we happened to be staying at this hotel. Please come join us!"

The oldest-looking of the bunch invited me in. *I see—so they all hit it off as fellow hotel guests. I may as well take them up on their offer.*

"I see that you're married." The same woman took notice of the ring on my left hand. She looked to be in her mid-thirties and was named Diane. She was also from Sans-Terre, but I'd never met her before.

"Yes, I got married last year."

"What does your husband do?"

These women seemed to be nobles of a mid- to high rank. If they were commoners, then they were well-off.

"Um, he's a member of the military."

"Oh... I see. The military."

Hm...?

"He must have a lot of time on his hands!" she exclaimed. "Getting married, even though he only just enlisted..."

"Oh, no," I corrected her. "He's been in it for several years now. Ah, I should mention—he's quite a bit older than me."

“Aaah. I see.”

Hmm?

There was something strange about the way the women were reacting. I hadn’t really explained anything, but all of them were nodding, satisfied.

“I feel bad for you, having to be married off to a person like that.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

They were now offering me pitying platitudes. They didn’t appear to be laughing at me, but their eyes said they felt some clear sense of superiority over me.

“Your parents must have searched very hard for a husband for you. It’s nice that he had the time to take you on a vacation.”

Another woman spoke up. “Your dress isn’t too bad either, so he’s clearly spending money on you.”

“It’s best for a husband to be rich and lenient toward his wife’s actions, after all.”

The women were clearly misunderstanding something. As they continued to chat like chirping birds, I gradually began to understand what they were all thinking.

This was probably their train of thought: Because of my meager status and average looks, I’d had no luck with engagement talks (this part was true), so my parents had married me off to a much older soldier (this might have been true if one solely looked from the outside). If my husband was a soldier, then that meant he was a second son or lower, not one eligible to inherit his family’s title. He also had had no luck with women and was growing older, so he’d bought a young wife (this part was not at all true, but… Oh well).

This was a plot featured in many stories. The wife who’d been bought would typically spend her days empty and gloomy. One day, she would meet a charming man and instantly fall in love, but she would have no choice but to conceal her infatuation and give up, since a man like him would never look her way.

However, that man would somehow also be charmed by her. The two of them, burning with immoral love, would confirm each other’s feelings after missing each other several times. Their only choice would be to elope to be with one another. This would cause trouble for their families…and that would be when the girl’s husband would finally notice her secret relationship. Enveloped in jealousy, this husband would pull out a gun and

attempt to shoot the charming man. After a fight, an unforeseen accident would end with the husband losing his life. In order to save the charming man, arrested under suspicion of murder, the wife would—

"Mrs. Marielle? Mrs. Marielle?"

The volume of these calls forced me back into reality. *Oh no! My mind was completely in the story realm!*

I pretended to giggle and glossed over it. *Hmm. That story isn't necessarily boring, but it's nothing new. If I were to write it, perhaps I would focus more on the mystery aspect rather than the romance. Should I make the main character a detective instead of a young wife? What role would Lord Simeon play? Position-wise, he'd be the husband, but feeling-wise he's the charming man. Oooh, but he'd be so good as the detective as well!*

As I sat there thinking by myself, the young women lost interest in me and returned to their chatter. At first glance, they seemed to be having fun, but when I listened carefully, I found that their words were mostly complaints and competing to see who had the best life. A scene like this occurred everywhere nobles gathered.

This had unexpectedly become a good chance for me to gather intel, so I focused on smiling and listening intently. I was grateful that I didn't have to suppress my presence on purpose. Mrs. Diane complained about her husband and in-laws and bragged about her children and luxuries—all without pause.

The women turned their attention back to me, a woman half forgotten, when a slightly strong wind blew from the direction of the lake. All of the ladies pressed their hands to their hair and to the tablecloth as the wind whipped by. I brushed the hair out of my face, but my wide sleeve was pushed up to my elbow by the gust, exposing my arm.

"Oh my! That's…"

Someone blurted out in surprise, causing the rest of them to look at me.

"Huh?" I held up my arm and realized what I'd done.

Just a bit below my left wrist, halfway to my elbow, was a large scar—several stitches had been used to close the wound.

I pulled my sleeve back down with a bitter smile. "I'm sorry for showing you such a thing." *Oh no, I didn't bring my gloves today. They're must-haves for noblewomen, but I just find them so bothersome.*

“My… You were *that* upset,” said one of the women.

I tilted my head. “Huh?”

“Poor thing. Is your husband truly so cruel?”

“Huh? No, not at all.”

“Or is it a wound from before your marriage? Ah, that’s why…”

No, no, no! The women were misunderstanding again—they thought I’d inflicted the wound myself. Did they believe I’d been trying to take my own life? *Now that they mention it, I suppose it does… Actually, it does* not *look like that. It’s too far from my vitals. I wouldn’t die from cutting this spot.*

But the women had invented another story: My parents had abandoned me after my failed suicide and married me off to be rid of me.

“This injury is from an accident,” I explained. “My husband was so worried for me that he took time off work to be with me.”

It’s not Lord Simeon’s fault! Please let me deny that part, at least!

It hadn’t been an accident, but rather, an *incident*, and my husband had indeed taken time off. He’d actually been suspended from work. *But the part about him worrying for me is true!*

“It’s all right. You don’t have to lie.”

One woman sighed. “Many things happen in life. We’ll listen to you if you’d like. Go on, spill your heart out here.”

They don’t believe me at all! I really should have worn my gloves.

I managed to somewhat avoid the topic and vaguely hand-wave away my scar. After a while, I made the excuse that it was time for me to go, and I left. The women whispered and laughed among themselves as they watched me go. They must have thought that I was running because I didn’t want them to ask about it. *Well, that’s fine.*

I went back to the lobby of the hotel, but Lord Simeon still wasn’t there—he was evidently still speaking with the mayor. I headed to the reception area, planning to take a walk through the nearby park. Lord Simeon would understand if I left a message with the receptionist.

Once I started making my way to the exit, I bumped into another patron. Their luggage spilled out onto the floor with a loud noise.

I hurriedly bent down to help pick the items up. “I’m so sorry!”

“No, it’s fine. Please don’t worry about it,” a young voice responded.

The person gathered their things up faster than I could. I handed over what I'd picked up. Art tools, a sketchbook, pencils… Was this person an artist?

He was a man around Lord Simeon's age. He had brown hair that grew in soft waves, and his locks were tied behind his head. He was quite the looker—the man would certainly pull people's eyes. His clothes weren't of high quality, but they were clean, and his sleeves weren't wrinkled. His shoes were neatly polished as well.

"Do you draw?" I asked him.

His hand, which had taken the pencils from me, was pale and a bit bony, so he likely wasn't a physical worker. He seemed to be a young artist, and he smiled and nodded at me.

"I'm just some unknown, sellout artist. This place is known for its scenery, so I thought I could draw a nice picture."

"I see. This town is so wonderful—any of the sights here would make a fine painting."

After making sure there wasn't anything else on the ground, I stood and nodded at the man. I tried to leave, but he stopped me.

"Um…! I'm sorry to ask a rude question out of the blue, but if you have the time, would you model for me?"

"Me?" I opened my eyes wide at the unexpected request. Did he really want such an unremarkable, plain woman as his model? Or was it *because* I didn't have any defining features that he wanted me?

"This town is indeed very pretty, but I feel that scenery alone wouldn't complete the picture. But when I saw you, I thought you'd be perfect for it."

"Oh…"

"You don't have to do anything special. Just stand up and sit down at your leisure." He took my hand and asked fervently, "Won't you do this for me?"

I cocked my head. "Hmm… Is this really for your art?"

"Yes!"

"How many years have you been drawing, by the way?"

"Ever since I was a child, I've always drawn whenever I had time."

I gave him a bright smile. "I'm sorry, but I can't do anything for people who lie."

"Huh?" The man's smile froze on his face. He rushed to deny it.

“No, no! I’m not lying!”

“I suppose you may have some experience with art, but you aren’t drawing these days, are you? Your fingers are much too clean, with no dents from pens.”

He let go of my hands as I stared straight into his eyes. “No, I…”

“You claim to be an unpopular artist, but your clothes are far too nice for that. The fees for this hotel are quite pricey, and you don’t look like someone who’s strapped for money. I considered that you may be the son of an affluent household, but your clothes are rather plain for that. Nothing about your story makes sense.”

“I’m just wearing clothes that I’m fine with dirtying. The ink from my tools gets on them…”

“Indeed. An artist’s hands should have ink stains on them. A person who draws regularly wouldn’t have such clean hands. If you have clothes you’re willing to dirty, then they would already feature stains you couldn’t remove.”

“No…”

I couldn’t say anything for sure. If he was a clean freak, he likely washed his hands thoroughly after every drawing session. His clothes could be explained with some effort as well. But there was indeed a reason I was claiming these things.

“You were on the terrace earlier,” I said. “You heard my conversation with the ladies, didn’t you? You left as soon as you saw me exit the terrace. Did you think I was an unhappy woman unsatisfied with her marriage, despite having money? Did you think that such an unpopular-looking, plain woman would fall for you as soon as you approached me kindly?”

The smile had vanished from the man’s face. His eyes, which had looked down on me, turned cold. I’d said all this with the intention of sending him on his way, but it seemed things wouldn’t go that easily.

Just as I began to get nervous, a high-pitched voice rang out across the lobby.

“It’s him! That’s the man—the faker! Get him!”

A young woman had come in through the front entrance. She had a police officer behind her and was pointing this way. The man in front of me turned around as soon as he saw her and shoved me out of the way, onto the ground. He ran as fast as he could to the back area, probably attempting to escape through

the rear entrance.

But someone tripped him from the side. His body floated through the air for a moment before slamming into the ground at an intense speed. The person got on top of him, pressed their knee into his back to prevent him from moving, and wrenched the man's arm aside.

The man let out an even bigger scream than before. "Aaagh! Ow, ow, ow! It's going to break!"

Cold eyes, glinting behind glasses, glared down at the crying man. The person holding him didn't seem to want to let up on the con man. I was worried that he really might break the man's arm.

The police officer caught up to them right at that moment, so the person left the faker to him, then jogged over to me.

"Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

I'd finally gotten myself off of the ground. I casually brushed the dust off of my skirt. "No, I just fell on the ground. You came at the perfect time."

"Why did something like this have to happen even in the middle of a hotel?"

Lord Simeon sighed as he pulled me close. *Wait, it's not my fault! I didn't do anything or go poking around in other people's business! The faker was the one who approached me first!*

"My lord! A-Are you okay?!"

Down the stairs rushed an older man with a prominent belly. *He would make a good opponent for my own father.* Right behind this man was Mr. Clement, which told me that the portly man must have been the town mayor. It seemed Lord Simeon had jumped straight down from the landing of the staircase.

"Is this your wife?" asked the mayor as he turned to me. "Are you hurt...?"

I curtsied to him. "I'm fine, thank you."

"Er, what exactly happened here? Who was that man?"

Lord Simeon pushed up his glasses. "That woman called him a faker, yes?"

All three men were asking me questions, but I wasn't sure how to answer them. *If you want to know the details, ask that woman from earlier. I don't know anything!*

People had gathered around us because of the fuss—both hotel patrons and workers alike. The women from the terrace were among them, so I hid behind Lord Simeon. *I know they just*

misunderstood me and that I didn't lie about anything, but this situation is still uncomfortable.

"That was surprising! Thank goodness Sir Flaubert was here." The mayor wiped sweat from his forehead and laughed after the police officer informed him of what happened. "This feels somewhat like fate! He punishes the wicked and even aids our town's development. He's a hero! A savior!"

My husband shook his head, exasperated. "What exactly am I saving? I'll dispatch a professional regarding the work plans. Discuss the matters with them at a later date."

After parting ways with the elated mayor and Mr. Clement, we headed outside. I raised my eyebrows. "Oh, you decided to sponsor them?"

"The plan itself didn't seem too bad. I'll let the relevant department know once we return to Sans-Terre. I can leave it to them."

"What about your father?"

"I'll let him know as well, but he's primarily a scholar at his core."

I wrapped myself around the arm of my husband. He was the pinnacle of capability, a soldier at his core, and yet he could take care of business work too. Distracted as I was, I was able to walk alongside him to the park.

"You really are a fine husband, Lord Simeon." I nodded to myself. "Rather than an inexperienced, gentle man, a precise husband is better. Indeed!"

"I 'really am' a fine husband? What exactly did you think I was up until now?"

"The bride was bought with money by the older man, but she would learn of her husband's clumsy, kind nature the longer she lived with him," I recited.

"Bought…? No, I didn't do such a thing…"

"Alas, her heart would be swayed by a charming man who barged his way in between her and her husband!"

"Who?! Don't tell me it's that conniving thief…?!"

"That becomes the catalyst for her coming to realize her true feelings. She'd long fallen deeply in love with her husband at that point, and what made it even better was that he'd forced her to marry him in order to save her! Yes! He actually loved her from the start! Yet he was prepared to pull back and let her go if she truly loved that charming man. That's when they would

encounter another roadblock... Aaah, I have to write this down! I'm going to write about this!"

I pulled out my notebook and began cramming every idea I had into it.

Lord Simeon let out a huge breath. "You're talking about a novel..."

After taking my time writing, I snuggled up against my husband and began walking again—I was now in an even better mood. The surface of the lake was shining beautifully. I giggled. "There were some strange misunderstandings along the way, but thanks to you, I was able to arrive at a great idea. It was time well spent!"

"As always, nothing can bring you down, can it? You're invincible."

"You're the invincible one, Lord Simeon! You were so cool earlier."

He gazed at me softly, filling my world with happiness. The two of us leaned on each other, saw the same things, became surprised at the same things, and laughed at the same things. Today was yet another wonderful day, and there were still many things I wanted to see.

The two of us set off to find the next piece of excitement while the sun was still high.

Afterword

While I was working on the script, winter ended—the cherry blossoms were blooming before I knew it! I'm Haruka Momo, and one-fourth of my year disappeared into thin air. Hello.

Terrible things have been happening since the beginning of the year. My heart goes out to those in areas that were struck by disaster and those involved in accidents.

Volume one, *The Engagement of Marielle Clarac*, was published in March of 2017. This spring marks seven years since then, and we've made it to volume twelve. The series was able to make it so far entirely thanks to the readers' support. Thank you very much.

The setting this time was Lagrange's neighboring country, the Grand Duchy of Lavia. Despite the length of the series, Marielle has never actually gone outside of Lagrange. This marks her first foreign trip. Lutin is always in Lagrange for work, but this time, Marielle and the others go to *his* homeland. Naturally, that meant that the notorious "last boss" prince had to appear too, and boy did I struggle to handle him.

In the first draft, Liberto was a completely dislikable minor character. Many revisions were made, since that was, as you'd expect, not favorable. I'm very sorry to my editor for causing so much trouble with my initial failure.

In this volume, a character who had only been mentioned by name made an appearance. He is Nigel's uncle, a relative of the royal family, and he holds immense political power... These were the only things that made up my blurry image of him, but thanks to that, when it came time to write him, I remembered his and his nephew's ancestors. *He's a descendant of Cecil, so that should be the base for his character... But he's also a descendant of Melody...* With those things in mind, I made him into a musclehead old man. Where in the world did my original image of him go?

The story in which his ancestors appear is on the website Shousetsuka ni Narou. I started to write *The Tales of Marielle Clarac* in the middle of serializing it and haven't gotten to it since, so it's currently incomplete on the site. But each chapter is its

own individual short story, so please check it out if you're interested.

I thank Maro-sensei for the very bright, refreshing color illustrations, as well as for the usual dramatic insert illustrations that liven up each volume. I gave them the bothersome request of having the cover emit the same vibe as the model image but not be an exact copy, which they executed perfectly. It's too bad the title logo blocks it. Can you tell what the model was?

Lastly, from the bottom of my heart, I thank everyone who worked hard to help me publish yet another volume. I pray that you, the readers, enjoyed it, and I'll take my leave here!







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by Haruka Momo

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