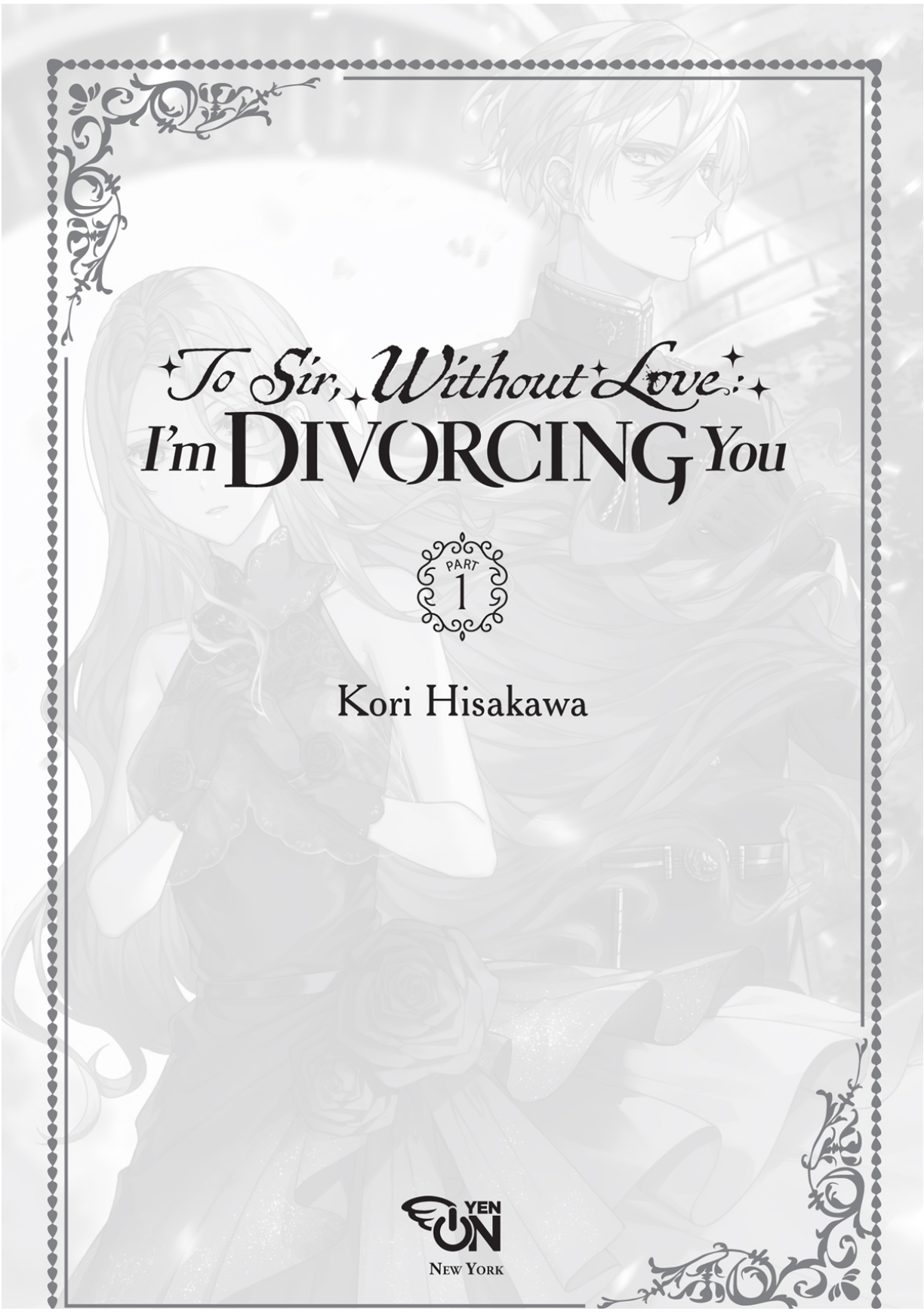

PART 1
Kori Hisakawa
To Sir, Without Love:
I'm DIVORCING You



To Sir, Without Love: I'm DIVORCING You

PART 1

Kori Hisakawa

YEN ON
New York



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PROLOGUE

A Letter from a Stranger of a Wife

On the Gaihandar Empire's southern front, stationed among gently rolling foothills that seemed to carry on forever in every direction, was a garrison. Refreshing winds blew across the scenic plains around it, sending stubby blades of grass swaying. The lush, verdant turf was a rare sight in the imperial capital that lay to the distant north, but it had become all too familiar to those stationed in this particular location.

Eight years.

That was how long war had been raging between the Gaihandar Empire and its neighbor. It was also how long it'd been since a certain man had last departed the imperial capital.

For eight long years, he and his fellow soldiers had been glaring across these scenic plains at invading enemy forces.

But now, finally, after all that time, an armistice had been agreed upon. And in the blink of an eye, news of the pact had begun to sweep through the empire.

It was in the midst of the ensuing commotion that a single letter reached one of the soldiers who had been left behind in the garrison to tie up the remaining loose ends of the war.

The moment the man opened the envelope, the usual pleasant warmth of the plains was superseded by a chill in the air, reminiscent of the snows that usually covered the Mittlehorn mountains that surrounded the capital.

"It's uncommon for you to receive a letter from home."

Arnald Swangan looked up from the letter in his hand to the friend and fellow lieutenant colonel sitting opposite him at the desk.

Arnald's eyes—almond shaped and emerald green—had a coolness to them that complimented his porcelain skin. These features had made him famous for his dashing good looks, and no stranger to the odd love letter, but a missive from his relatives back home was a novelty indeed. As he scanned its contents, the corners of Arnald's lips curled into a faint smile.

Then he passed the letter to his friend without a word.

"What? Does it say something amusing?"

Arnald's friend read through the letter expectantly, waiting for a punch line. Then, out of nowhere, his jaw dropped.

"How can you be so flippant about this…?"

Arnald stroked his chin in an intrigued sort of way while his friend began to fret. A callous light seemed to radiate from Arnald's sharp eyes, as if the cogs of a strategic mind had suddenly begun to grind into motion.

Corner the enemy and force them straight into your trap. Such was the strategy of the Silver Fox of the Battlefield, a moniker Arnald had earned in part due to his ash-colored hair. And yet it seemed this wily man's next adversary would be no political opponent, but strangely enough, the author of the letter—his own wife.

On the tail of one war, the scent of another already lingered in the air.

While Arnald appreciated an opponent who would assail him with everything they had, there was not much to infer from the letter itself.

But it was this element of the unknown that intrigued him most about his new campaign.

"Well, whatever she intends to achieve, devising a way to bring her to heel may be amusing."

"Come, now. You're talking about your wife here."

It seemed his horrified friend was suggesting he should have mercy on his foe. But why should he, when she had brought the fight to him?

The letter itself was written in a feminine hand and elegantly composed. It had been snugly enclosed in its envelope with a wax seal bearing the Swangan family crest and Arnald's father's signature. Which meant even his father was in on this.

A smile spread across Arnald's face as he realized the true depths of his opponent's resolve.

He thought of his wife—a woman he had never so much as seen, yet whose reputation preceded her—and ruminated over the contents of her correspondence.

Even the first line read like a gauntlet thrown: *"Dear husband whom I have never met"…*

> *Dear husband whom I have never met,*
>
> *I hear we have reached an agreement that will bring an effective end to the war. You and I are now eight years wed, but nary has a word passed betwixt us. I know not your face or your voice, nor you mine. I am your wife in name only.*
>
> *Thus, given the circumstances, I would like to request a divorce.*
>
> *Sincerely,*
> *The Wife You Could Never Pick Out in a Crowd*

CHAPTER 1

A Wager and a Wedding Night Come Eight Years Late

Eight years before…

The capital of the Gaihandar Empire was situated near the northern portion of the continent. Though the land it had been built upon was relatively flat, it was surrounded by a mountain range known as the Mittlehorns, a natural fortification that protected both the city and the nation. It was a place where winter brought bitter cold, so the citizens often spent the season hunkered down in their homes next to a warm hearth.

Viscount Holland and his family were no different. Every night after supper they would each retire to their own cozily heated chambers to relax. Or at least, almost every night.

Unfazed by the dark, frigid corridors of her family home, the viscount's daughter, Byletta, burst through the sitting room door and launched into an angry tirade.

"What is the meaning of this, Father?!"

Byletta's parents, who had been enjoying an after-dinner cup of tea, paused to look at their daughter. Unperturbed by the menace in her voice, the pair let out a simultaneous sigh.

"Just as boisterous as ever, I see. Such behavior does not befit a young lady, Byletta."

"Spare me your lecture for now, Mother. My dear brother has brought me woeful tidings. Is he to be believed?"

"He is. We have received a proposal for your hand in marriage from the Swangan family, a distinguished line descended from ancient noble blood. It's quite the honor. Have you seen your

husband-to-be's portrait? Quite the dashing young man, I'm sure you'd agree?"

If he had ancient noble blood, that meant his lineage reached all the way back to the time of the previous empire, which had ruled the land before the current Gaihandar Empire had come to power. But that was neither here nor there. Power meant nothing to Byletta. In fact, she detested it.

"The fireplace will have made short work of his painting by now. How many times must I tell you that I will not be married off?!"

"I'd wager you didn't even spare it a glance before you threw it into the flames… Byletta, you must understand that we cannot allow a woman of your standing to remain unwed. We Hollands have always been a family of knights, and as such we expect you to honor your lineage by taking a proper military man for a husband. The Swangan boy is a fine young man—a lieutenant commander who was recently promoted to lieutenant colonel. And being older than you at twenty-five, perhaps he'll be able to rein you… I mean, p-placate you… Win you over? In any case, he's the perfect age for you."

"Please do not make me repeat myself. And 'family of knights'? We acquired our position no more than sixty years ago through the use of rural thugs—and we were mere commoners before then. If my betrothed is so wonderful, why would he be interested in someone from a family like *that*?"

"You are quick to make a mockery of this house, but a martial line like ours is an impressive—"

"Save your vanity for someone else. What I want to know is, Why me?!"

"Because you were specifically requested."

"No husband of such standing and prestige would specifically request to wed me. Somebody else is behind this match."

"Well… Hm."

Suddenly at a loss for words, her father abashedly scratched his cheek—a telltale sign he was trying to come up with a lie. Byletta's

eyes narrowed.

Beneath the veil of ethereal beauty she'd inherited from her mother, her amethyst gaze blazed with intent. Pushing back her strawberry-blond hair, Byletta scowled at her father. "Don't tell me it was that infernal Lieutenant General Dreslan again!"

Fifteen years ago, when her father had been supporting a regiment at the northern front in his capacity as a colonel of the Imperial Army, he'd gained the favor of his division commander, Lieutenant General Movris Dreslan. The pair had quickly struck up an unlikely friendship. Now, if the lieutenant general had just been a bit of a bad influence, the family would have had no cause for concern —but Movris Dreslan was infamous for his love of liquor, gambling, and womanizing. It was a mystery to Byletta why her earnest, straightforward father got along with the man so well. All she knew was that when he was coerced into gambling with Lieutenant General Dreslan, he always came home far poorer than when he'd left.

The man was a constant thorn in the side of the entire Holland family. But to Byletta, he was the devil.

Taking her father's silence as confirmation, Byletta slammed her fist onto the table so hard that the teaware clinked. She didn't care.

"You *cannot* be serious. Father! What on earth would possess you to force a marriage on your precious, barely sixteen-year-old daughter?!"

"Come now! If you can say such things with a straight face, I believe you will be just fine."

Now on the offensive, Byletta's father set his teacup down on the table and faced her calmly.

"It is as you surmised. The engagement was proposed to me by His Excellency Lieutenant General Dreslan. The Swangan boy is one of his most valued subordinates and was apparently in the business for a wife. Now, we all expect the fighting at the southern front to last for quite a while, do we not? Lieutenant General Dreslan simply wants to set his dear subordinate up with a lovely wife to make fond

memories with before he goes off to war, even if he will only be able to remain by her side for a brief time."

"We are agreed on the fact that I am lovely, but if this man is a favorite of the lieutenant general's, it makes me wonder about his character. He must be quite a dangerous person. Surely there is more to this than simply furnishing such a man with a bride."

"Where in the world did you get all that self-confidence from? I must admit it frightens me at times… But the lieutenant general has been searching for a fearless, courageous, and physically strong individual who can be called a woman. There aren't many girls out there who fit that description, you know. And when he heard the gossip about you from back in your school days, that settled it."

He was most likely referring to her time at Stacia Academy, which she had graduated from the previous year. Admittedly, her tenure as a student there had been far from ordinary, and blood had even been shed. Perhaps that had made the lieutenant general mistake her for a courageous woman somehow?

It seemed like Movris's intuition was as faulty as ever.

"There was nothing lovely about *that*."

"To be honest, your appearance didn't factor into the equation. It was your gumption and strength that were the deciding factors."

"Am I being recruited as a wife or a soldier?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, perhaps he's looking for both! You are a daughter of the prestigious Holland family, after all."

Byletta grinned at her laughing father. "I understand now. Father, you must earnestly wish to be torn limb from limb tonight."

"Just a moment! You look far too serious about that!"

"Why, of course I am. After all, as the daughter of a resolutely honest and straightforward man, I cannot abide by lies and jests," Byletta said with a dry laugh.

The blood drained from her father's face.

"It would give me no greater pleasure than to make that wish of yours come true."

Byletta grabbed a bare sword from the wall and abruptly swung it down at her father, who immediately took hold of another decorative blade and responded in kind.

The sharp clanging of steel filled the sitting room.

"This is why nobody has proposed to you yet! You've been prattling on and on about your future business ventures ever since your time at school, but all you've ever managed to build for yourself are dishonorable rumors and contempt from members of high society. There are certain joys to be had as a woman. Aren't you glad that this settles the matter quickly?"

"But I've always said that I wanted to go into trade! I have told you again and again that I do not wish to marry."

"And *I* have told you that we cannot indulge your whims!"

As father and daughter crossed blades and words alike in the corner of the sitting room, Byletta's mother slowly sipped the rest of her tea.

From that day forward, Byletta's protests were ignored. The preparations for her wedding were set in motion—and before she knew it, two months had passed. The day of her nuptials was upon her.

No matter how she struggled, what threats she uttered, or how far she ran, what was done was done. Now all Byletta could do was resign herself to the worst. As she crammed herself into the extravagant horse-drawn carriage that Count Swangan had provided, it was already clear that the last recourse available to her would be to negotiate with her soon-to-be husband directly. Thus, as the carriage lurched to and fro, she sat silently in her wedding gown beside her father.

They arrived at a house in the center of the imperial capital. Mentally comparing its size and location to her own cozy home on the outskirts of the city, Byletta was stunned.

Attached to the enormous house was an expansive garden. It was hard to believe the estate before her eyes really belonged to the family she was supposed to marry into—something about it was enchanting. Its occupants were indeed descended from the nobility of the former empire. It was clear as day that the Swangans were on a completely different social stratum than her and her parents.

Byletta followed her father inside, where they were greeted by a servant who led them to the reception room in which Count Swangan was waiting.

The count looked to be around fifty years of age. His brown hair was beginning to show flecks of white, but he still had an impressive physique. His pale-blue eyes, however, seemed oddly glazed. Byletta immediately got the impression that there was something slightly off about him, but she didn't have time to dwell much on it before her attention was caught by another.

By the count's side sat a woman with very pale skin. Her hair was tied up, but she didn't look very old. Byletta guessed that she was likely in her mid-thirties, but her face was tired and despondent. It was hard to imagine that a woman that young could have a twenty-five-year-old son, so Byletta surmised that she must be the count's second wife. Byletta frowned. Not just because the woman looked so fragile, but because the scene itself stirred a sense of pity.

Byletta knew that her attention shouldn't be on the other strangers in the room at present, but there was one slight problem: The man that she should have been focusing on wasn't there. He wasn't late because he was having trouble getting dressed, was he? She was beginning to feel keenly aware of just how much she stood out from the crowd.

But she didn't have to wonder where her groom-to-be was for long.

"I'm afraid that my son departed for the front yesterday. It seems that the war effort is not going very well. Therefore, we should leave the matter of the wedding ceremony to be discussed upon his return. That does not mean you are not already my daughter on

paper—it is just that accursed son of mine left immediately upon receiving his promotion."

"Count Swangan, what is the meaning of this?"

"Had you not heard? My son was told that if he wed, he would be given a higher rank. He agreed without a second thought. All I was told was that once the bride arrived, she should be given leave to stay and to do as she sees fit."

It seemed to be her father's first time hearing of this. He'd been aware that her husband-to-be was to receive a promotion, but it was apparent that he had not been informed that said promotion rested on the man's marriage to his daughter. He was just standing there, seemingly unable to respond.

Beside him, however, his daughter's mind had already begun to reframe the situation. Even if her spouse was absent, could she still assume her role as his wife? If so, she could live in this home entirely without the constraints of some good-for-nothing husband. Nor would she have to deal with her family's constant nagging to get married. It sounded perfect.

If her husband did happen to return from the battlefield, she could just make her escape. Luckily, it didn't seem that the man had much interest in her, either, so she doubted he would object to a divorce. Besides, Byletta was more concerned with someone else: her mother-in-law, who had simply looked at the floor without saying a single word throughout the whole conversation.

Count Swangan continued speaking, not paying any heed at all to the woman beside him. "As head of this family, I have no reason to entertain such fancies. Being as my son is not here, it matters not to me if you would prefer to go home and continue living with the viscount. Simply inform me what you plan to do."

Byletta blinked slowly, stunned by the offhand question.

"Dragging you here was a mistake, Byletta. I will understand if you wish to return home."

"No, Father. I would like to stay here and respect my husband's wishes."

Byletta shot her father a resolute look. He nodded, as if he understood the determination in her eyes. As if he knew there was something in this house pulling on the heartstrings of his deeply dutiful and empathetic daughter.

And thus, Byletta became a part of House Swangan.

Before long, Byletta's father was shooed away by the count, who insisted that the lack of a wedding ceremony meant his presence wasn't required. When the viscount left for home, he did so with a worried look in his eyes.

Though he promised Byletta that he would come back to see her, he, too, would be leaving for the front soon as part of the Logistical Support Corps. At that point, he would be in far more danger than she would ever face at the Swangan estate. It wasn't as if her in-laws were after her life. She wished she could tell her father to focus on worrying about himself.

But even as Byletta prayed for her father's safety, he told her in his typical solemn tone that a soldier of the empire should have the courage to rush off to war at any time. Quietly, she reassured herself that he didn't mean he was hurrying off to his death.

Despite her husband's and Count Swangan's differing views on the matter of Byletta's living arrangements, it seemed that a room had been prepared for her anyway. A servant led her there, to the space that would now become hers. It seemed the few possessions she'd brought with her had already been put up, so all there was for her to do was quietly pass the time. What else could she do? She had too little information to make choices one way or the other.

In the end, all she did was sit on the couch in her new room, ruminating over that last conversation with her father, until she was called to the dining room.

Dinner was an extremely tense affair, pierced by the jarring sounds of smashing tableware.

Seated around a long table in the count's dining room were four people: the count, the countess, Byletta, and a young girl. The girl was named Milena, and she had only just turned six years old. She was to be Byletta's new sister.

The child—who had the same blond hair as her mother, but her father's pale-blue eyes—had introduced herself nervously. She was unusually meek for her age and noticeably quieter than her new sister-in-law. The girl's withdrawn nature would be easy to mistake for mere shyness, but Byletta grew secretly thankful at her choice to remain at the Swangan estate when she realized it stemmed from fear. To think that the count wasn't only harming his wife, Cynthia, but their daughter, too. It was unforgivable.

Although, given that the man was currently furiously smashing plates on the floor, it wasn't overly surprising.

"Shut your mouth, woman! How dare you talk back to me?!"

All Cynthia had done was rebuke him, suggesting plainly that he may have had a little too much to drink. But that was all it had taken to enrage the count, to the point that he had struck his wife across the face. Byletta stared at the angry welt beginning to form. She could tell that the count's slap had been so hard that it had injured the inside of Cynthia's mouth. The redness spreading across the woman's skin looked incredibly painful.

And yet not one of the countless butlers, waiters, or maids surrounding them made any attempt to stop the violence.

They all just stared ahead, holding their breaths and trying their best not to let their faces betray whatever they secretly thought about the matter.

"That silly son of mine has left. You will let me do as I see fit."

The count hauled back to strike Cynthia again, but Byletta rushed over and grabbed his hand.

"Retired or not, a soldier who strikes a woman he is meant to protect is an insult to his imperial title."

Count Swangan was an ex-serviceman. Troubled by lung issues, he had retired from the Imperial Army due to the sickness and

apparently now spent his days holed up at home, managing his estate. But something about that seemed suspicious. From what Byletta had heard, the lands he possessed were impeccably managed. In fact, it seemed the count had no significant outstanding debts. But looking at him now, such a thing seemed implausible.

Still, looking into the estate was a matter for later—she needed to get the drunkard in front of her under control.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"I could ask you the same question. Perhaps you have had too much liquor? It might be prudent to heed your wife's words."

"Silence! I will not take orders from a little snot-nosed child begot by some self-important viscount. You are just a girl, a wife in name only to a man who has already abandoned her. How dare you act so high and mighty toward me?!"

"Come now, Father. How absurd. If I am but a little snot-nosed child, how mighty could I possibly be?"

Even as Byletta laughed insincerely, the count's face was flushing a deep red. He roared his next words so angrily that spit came flying out of his mouth.

"Enough with this nonsense! Release my hand this instant!"

"Are you sure you're an ex-soldier of the Imperial Army? How strange… You must be quite intoxicated to be immobilized by a little girl."

"Outside, now! I shall wet my sword with your blood!"

"M-my lord… Please stop!" Cynthia hastily implored her raging husband. Byletta was moved by her kindness.

The whole tableau rather reminded her of her own mother, who was so used to seeing her husband and daughter fight every day that she had learned to ignore it. She never even attempted to stop them anymore.

"Now, don't show me any mercy just because I'm a little girl… I'll show you just how drunk you are!"

"E-excuse me!"

"I accept your challenge. Shall we take this elsewhere?"

Byletta heard gasps come from everyone in the room but the count.

Eventually, the pair found themselves before the house, standing in the lamplight. The count narrowed his eyes.

"Do you intend to fight dressed like that?"

While Byletta had changed out of her wedding gown, she was still wearing quite an elaborate dress. It was a floaty garment with a wide hem, prepared not through the count's assistance, but by the Holland family themselves.

Since her parents had gifted it to her for her wedding day, Byletta had no intention of letting it get dirtied with blood. The material felt pricey—probably in deference to the status of her new in-laws—so there was no way she would ruin it with a stain as stubborn as that.

Perhaps that was why her family had prepared such a luxurious gown for her in the first place: to discourage this exact behavior. But as long as she subdued the count as cleanly as possible, things would be just fine.

"Don't worry, I won't blame it on my skirt if I lose. I'm actually rather used to fighting in dresses."

"Hmph, you cocksure little girl! You may be itching to challenge me now, but when all is said and done, this will amount to no more than a schoolgirl's jape. Young ladies like yourself should be seen and not heard. I'll be taking no more of that lip."

Count Swangan had whipped himself up into quite the rage by now, but it sounded like he hadn't heard the full story of how Byletta and his son had come to be married. His poor relationship with his own child had left him ignorant of the martial conditions on which their match rested. But if he presumed that she was but a silly little girl, that would only work in her favor. His conceit was something she could take advantage of.

"Well, Father, I hope you don't stoop low enough to wave away your own loss using a drunken slip of the hand as an excuse."

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't make me laugh, missy. You think you can best me? Hmph. If you could manage that, I'd give you anything you asked for."

At first, all Byletta had wished for was that the count stop drinking, but now it seemed more could be on the table. If she could ask him for anything…there was a certain prize she wouldn't mind winning.

As Byletta mulled over this new information, the count smirked.

"If you *could* best me. Once you are in the afterlife, I rather think you'll regret making light of a veteran of the Imperial Army."

It appeared the count had no intention of holding back. If he planned to make her rue her actions from beyond the grave, he'd have to place her in one first.

The count punctuated his threat by swinging his blade straight at her. Byletta parried the strike with her own weapon.

Even if Count Swangan was drunk, there was no way her strength could ever rival that of a grown man. All Byletta could do was block and parry, block and parry. Over, and over, and over again. It may not have resulted in the showiest swordplay, but the strategy was effective, and she'd been honing it for a long time—not that the count knew that. He tutted in frustration.

"Another parry? Is running away all you can do?"

"I thought that was what little girls did."

The count's attacks came quicker than Byletta had expected, but the man would've been no match for her colonel father. In fact, his technique was so bad that he would barely be able to rival her paper-pusher brother. Perhaps it was due to the drink? Whatever the case, his movements were easy to predict. Fighting him was like reading an open book.

Byletta abruptly thought back to the terms of her marriage contract. Her husband had been looking for a fearless, courageous, and physically strong individual who could be called a woman. At the time, it had sounded to her like he was looking more for a fellow soldier than a wife. Well, he'd certainly found one.

Byletta grew amused even as the count frowned. She hadn't intended to make fun of him, but perhaps her mirth had shown on her face and given him the wrong impression.

The sound of the count's sword swinging through the air seemed to gain a rougher edge. He was probably becoming more and more frustrated that he couldn't put an end to the fight.

"You—!"

"Hyah!"

The count's frustration had given Byletta an opening. Easily reading the trajectory of his maddened swings, she caught his sideswept sword with her own blade, springing it right out of his grasp. It drew a wide arc as it spun through the air, finally piercing the ground a short distance away.

Byletta's blade glinted as she pressed it against the speechless count's throat. "It looks like I've won, Father. See? We told you that you were drunk."

"Urgh. Who…in the world…are you?!"

"Oh my, are you truly *that* drunk? I'm the blushing bride who arrived today to marry into your family, of course! Have you forgotten already?"

As Byletta smiled brightly, the wide-eyed count curled his lips in disdain.

But it was almost like he was sneering at himself. The desperation present in his mannerisms just a moment before vanished. Perhaps he had some underlying reason for resorting to drink…

Not that anything would excuse him from raising a hand to his wife and daughter.

"I see… So this is the sort of woman my son has chosen to wed. Very well, do as you please. What would you have from me?"

From the way the count was staring at her, it seemed he intended to keep the promise he made only moments ago.

"Let me see. Since you're willing to humor me, I might as well take full advantage. It's nothing special, but there is something trivial that I do wish for."

"Well? Spit it out."

"I would like a divorce. As soon as my husband is given leave to return from the front, I intend to notify him of my intentions. I'd like you to write a letter to be enclosed alongside mine that states your agreement on the matter. The use of your wax family seal would also help immensely."

"What? A divorce…? You dare make light of the Swangan family? Our veins are flush with the blood of the old empire!"

"How strange. I wouldn't expect someone like you, who served in the military, to value their lineage to such a degree."

The Gaihandar Empire had a bloody history, as it was formed by absorbing countless neighboring countries. It had originally been a group of small nations now only known as "the old empire." But the families who had been awarded high status during those days were still around in the form of the noble faction, many of them clinging stubbornly to the same old political beliefs and wishing for the return of the empire's golden days.

Military families, on the other hand, were most often descended from common folk who had been given titles during the empire's many wars. Byletta's family was no different. Despite their rank, most nobles of this sort were considered upstarts with short family histories. This put them—the military faction—directly at odds with the noble faction.

Even though Count Swangan's family was of old noble stock, their history of military service suggested they leaned less toward the noble faction than most.

"Ha-ha-ha! You are a strange one! To think my new daughter-in-law would propose a divorce on the very day she joined my family… I suppose that means you aren't just a social climber?"

"Not at all. I am merely someone who happened to meet the conditions your son laid out—conditions that seemed to seek someone more soldier than wife."

"What do you mean by that…?"

Count Swangan's bewilderment was understandable, but Byletta was even more confused. Why would this husband she had never even seen need his wife to be fearless and courageous? It was a mystery. And she knew that if she answered the count's question straightforwardly, he would only laugh at her.

"In any case, let's return to my original request."

Alas, ordering the count to drink in moderation elicited the laughter Byletta had been trying to avoid. Meanwhile, the servants, housekeeper, and Cynthia—who appeared unsure how to react—looked on like they were all witnessing something earth-shattering.

For a while, all that could be heard were the echoes of the count's roaring laughter.

A few days had passed since the night of Byletta and Count Swangan's battle.

The count's reliance on alcohol seemed to be a thing of the past. After being thoroughly beaten by Byletta in their duel, he hadn't drunk a drop.

Instead, he filled his days with sparring. Seemingly frustrated by his loss to a young woman, he'd taken to training hard. He would approach Byletta for a rematch quite frequently.

Even though the count's technique had dulled somewhat with age, now that he was no longer inebriated, he made a formidable foe. What often began as a war of words soon turned into a clash of swords out in the garden. It seemed, to Byletta's surprise, that she and the count had formed a rather strange connection.

Life was nearly the same as it had been back at home. Shockingly, she found it almost more pleasant. With her husband absent, Byletta could do almost whatever she pleased—and so she did, whiling away the days carefree.

More than anything, she was content there.

Now and then, as Byletta walked the corridors, she would catch a glimpse of a certain young girl timidly peeking out from behind a

door. The fear in her gaze seemed to have been replaced with a childlike curiosity.

"Um, excuse me, Sister…"

Those words were all it took to steal Byletta's heart.

The way the girl spoke was slightly awkward, likely because she wasn't used to holding conversations. She seemed even more childlike than her years would suggest. Regardless, Byletta found that having such a sweet young child call her "sister" while gazing at her so lovingly was a delightful feeling.

"What is it?" Byletta asked in the gentlest tone she could manage. She smiled at the girl.

The child's pale cheeks flushed pink as she looked timidly up through her eyelashes at her new sister-in-law. It seemed Byletta's attempt to look friendly and harmless had been successful.

"Can I call you Letta?"

"Of course! Can I call you Milena?"

"Yes!"

Byletta's heart warmed at the sight of the grin spreading across her new sister's face. So far, married life wasn't half bad. And since her husband wouldn't be returning for the foreseeable future, continuing to live at the Swangan estate seemed quite a viable option.

However, one problem hanging over the household was far more serious than Byletta had ever suspected.

The little girl in front of her was the offspring of the fifty-six-year-old count and Cynthia, who was, as Byletta had assumed, the man's much younger second wife. That Cynthia was a mere thirty years of age meant she was not much older than the count's son, Arnald. And while that was relatively common when it came to arranged marriages among the nobility, this situation had arisen from Count Swangan's habit of doing whatever he wanted. After gaining himself a second bride by force—Cynthia was only twenty at the time and the daughter of a poor baron—the count had then pushed the son he'd had with his first wife out of the family home so that he could

be free to indulge in whatever vices he pleased. Primarily, this had amounted to alcohol and violence.

As for Arnald, he had apparently joined the Officer's Academy at fifteen and now only visited the family residence on rare occasions. Since the academy had dormitories, it hadn't been difficult for him to stay away from home during his time there. And once he'd graduated, Arnald had been granted a space to live in by the military. After that, no one in the family knew where he'd gone, but his absence meant Cynthia and Milena were entirely without protection.

Many of the household staff feared that the count would kill his wife and daughter one day, but none could defy his authority, let alone restrain the man—no matter how rusty he'd become since retiring, he'd still once been an imperial soldier. It had been a tense period for the entire household.

Or at least that was what Byletta had been able to piece together from her conversations with House Swangan's staff and the butler, Donovan.

When Byletta had first admonished and crossed swords with the count in the dining room, the staff had all feared a bloodbath. But now that the matter had been settled peacefully, they had come to be grateful to her. For Byletta, who had grown up being constantly admonished for her uncontrollable tomboy nature and lack of femininity, it was a joyful thing to finally be praised and appreciated for her true nature.

How could it not be? Even though she had intended to play the graceful lady at first, she'd ended up being lauded and treated like a hero just for being herself.

Once my family finds out what happened, I'll most likely be summoned back home immediately. But until that time comes, I will stay here, free, Byletta vowed. She took her new sister's tiny hand in hers.

Nothing brought Byletta more happiness than the knowledge that she'd protected the owner of that dainty hand. The marks on her

mother-in-law were also fading, the life returning to her face as the oppressive atmosphere that had long hung over the count's house finally seemed to lift.

"Shall we play together, Milena? Do you have any favorite games or toys?"

"I always play with my stuffie friends. I like to read, too."

"Wow. I'd love to meet your friends."

"Okay!"

The sight of the young girl's wide grin and rosy cheeks made Byletta's heart feel full to bursting. Having only ever had an older brother, she thought Milena was downright adorable. *I'm glad I came here.*

As the two girls walked down the corridor, side by side, Byletta couldn't help but reflect on how happy she was.

Eight years had passed—an unremarkable eight years, if you were to ask Byletta. Count Swangan, if approached with the same question, would likely grimace and argue the opposite.

At the moment, Byletta was standing in front of a boutique next to a much taller Milena. The girl was more or less the same height as Byletta now, maybe just a smidge shorter, and had blossomed into a wonderful young lady Byletta was proud to call her sister.

As the cool winds of early summer stirred Milena's flowy skirt, Byletta thought fondly about what a picture she made.

The two young women were standing to the southwest of the intersection of Gaidea and Ranx Street, in front of a store that faced the main thoroughfare. It was a small boutique with an unassuming exterior, but the white wooden front door and decorative lace embellishments gave a more glamorous flair to the place.

A bell tinkled clearly as they opened the door and went inside. The store was full of immaculately organized dresses, and the shelves that hung on the walls were neatly lined with accessories.

It was a fashion boutique. Byletta spotted one particular shelf next to a number of mothers and daughters happily picking out dresses, and she walked up to it, beckoning Milena to follow her.

After all, it was *Byletta's* fashion boutique.

She knew exactly what hung where. One particularly colorful corner, in fact, was stocked with the season's latest—all dresses that came highly recommended by the store owner herself. Byletta had known the lovely designs would suit Milena beautifully the moment she'd seen them.

The main line of work at Byletta's boutique was to take dresses that people no longer needed, wash them, and then alter them. As the war had intensified, extravagant clothing had fallen out of vogue to the point that even nobles had grown reluctant to waste money on frivolous attire. Nevertheless, when a lady stepped out, she wanted to look good. That had inspired Byletta to take used clothing items and transform them into entirely new garments. The process was half the price of making a dress from scratch, which had allowed her business to take off nearly right away. Sometimes, she was even commissioned to travel to her clients' houses to modify their dresses by hand at their place of residence. The demand for her services was surprisingly high.

Even nobles, with all the value they placed on appearances, couldn't escape the economic pinch of war. They were also scrimping and saving, which meant less money to spend on trifles like clothing. But Byletta had been one step ahead, and—thanks to her existing customers—she already had the perfect models with which to advertise her services. For she wasn't just in the business of buying and selling secondhand dresses: Byletta was taking once-beloved items of clothing and breathing new life and value into them.

More than anything, her designs were innovative. They always incorporated the latest styles, which was a factor that had contributed to their popularity. And with the dazzling reviews the ladies of the city were giving her, Byletta's profits were steadily rising to greater and greater heights.

However, after hearing that the war might be nearing a close, she'd decided to change tack.

The boutique now primarily sold mass-produced ready-made goods, with a smaller department accepting customized orders for preexisting designs. There, she had introduced a system in which customers could select one of the store's products and customize certain aspects, like the buttons or color of the material. They could also add other embellishments. In addition, Byletta had begun to work with the military, selling them useful standardized goods like shirts and cloaks, which were everyday essentials for the soldiers. In order to meet the demand, she now owned and operated her own sizable textile factory.

For a lady like her to become a successful businesswoman was perhaps unexpected, but Byletta had made little time in her life for anything else. That was the main reason she'd been so determined to avoid things like love and marriage. And though she'd ultimately failed to avoid the latter, now that she'd gotten a taste of married life minus a husband, she was happy to immerse herself in her work.

The shopkeeper, noting Byletta's presence, sent her a nod before quickly turning back to her customers. They knew that when Byletta was here with Milena, she didn't want to be disturbed.

Milena's eyes lit up, and she let out a feminine gasp of wonder as she gazed at the dresses that decorated the store. Byletta's heart warmed.

"Would you like me to have a new dress made for you, Milena?"

"Oh, would you?"

"Of course. We just received some new products, so you can choose whatever design you like. This line is very popular, so I'd love nothing more than to gift one to my darling little sister before it sells out."

"Thank you so much, Letta."

As the pair homed in on a dress, Byletta heard someone chuckle behind them.

"Like two sweet peas in a pod."

"Uncle! You're home!"

"Indeed. And at loose ends, so I thought I would pay my darling niece a visit."

Byletta turned around to find a tall man welcoming her with wide-open arms.

His hair—dark brown, almost black—fluttered about his face, and his jade-green eyes were creased into a smile.

Samus Eteau was a man on the cusp of forty, but he still looked youthful for his age. Despite that, his handsome features lent him a rather distinguished air, which made it difficult to pinpoint exactly how old he was.

He was also the head of the Highrain Association, which operated stores not only in the empire, but all over the continent—and had been the source of the capital Byletta had used to open her first store.

"Welcome home. How have you been?"

Byletta jumped into her uncle's arms; as they exchanged a hug, she took a good look at his face. She was relieved to find that he seemed well.

"I was already happy to return home from such a long business trip out of the country, but my heart is even lighter now that I've seen my lovely niece."

Samus had been in the neighboring kingdom of Naris conducting trade deals for around six months now. Each one had almost certainly been significant, with a lot of money on the line. But though such deals were anxiety-inducing by nature, on the surface it appeared her uncle hadn't faced any issues.

"I'm glad that you feel that way. When did you arrive home?"

"The day before yesterday. Hey, Byletta. Look at me."

"I'm already a big girl. I don't grow and change as much as someone like Milena."

"Now that you mention it, Milena has undeniably bloomed into a fine lady these past six months. But *you*, on the other hand—there's

no telling what you'll get up to if I don't check in on you every now and again. I have to stay vigilant."

Samus knew just how much Byletta doted on her sister, whom she brought to his stores often, and he and Milena had become quite well acquainted. He was of the opinion that anyone would consider Byletta a wild card compared to a girl as mature as Milena.

"How rude, Uncle… I think you'll find that I'm quite a lady myself."

"You got into the best school in the country, but all you did after you arrived was cause chaos. Then, the moment you finally graduated and I thought I could finally let out a sigh of relief, you went and got married while I was away on business. And *then*, just as I thought you'd settled down, you took the liberty of expanding your store and building a textile factory. For the last six months, I've been living in fear of any more updates concerning you."

Faced with his serious green eyes, Byletta found she had to look away.

She'd been twelve years old when she'd first entered Stacia Academy, one of the empire's most prized educational institutions. She had graduated at fifteen, then married at sixteen. The trouble she'd caused during her school years had cast her in a rather unladylike light—Byletta knew that very well. But she'd had her reasons.

Still, because of her behavior, people talked about her in high society as if she were some kind of temptress who liked to toy with the feelings of men. There was always some sort of gossip about her supposed unhealthy relationship with her father-in-law and uncle, or murmurings about how she liked to twist boys around her finger. In fact, among those who envied her beauty, those who competed with her in business, and those who happened to be her husband's ex-lovers, these rumors seemed to prevail above the truth. But Byletta didn't care about the slander. She was so busy with work that she didn't have the headspace for it. In other words, she just left it to fester.

Her uncle, who was aware of the rumors, had long been concerned about Byletta. But he also knew that she utilized those rumors as a means to discourage any unwanted male attention. It was one of the reasons she didn't bother to actively stamp them out.

Samus was Byletta's mother's younger brother. The second son of a merchant, he had at some point absconded from the family home and started his own company, the Highrain Association. For over two decades, it had operated stores not only in the empire, but across the entire continent. It was a big name and was growing further still. Byletta was proud to have a similarly wild and industrious disposition. That's why it stung so much to hear him say that he had to be vigilant.

There were whispers that her uncle was involved in some shady business, but Byletta knew it wasn't true and that such murmurs were likely fueled by jealousy. But just as she did, her uncle used his notoriety to his advantage. She was merely following his lead.

Still, despite her uncle's cool exterior, he was a bit of a firecracker on the inside. Given that, Byletta found it hard to completely deny some of the rumors about him out of hand.

Samus had been raised by Byletta's mother while their parents worked as merchants. As such, he was deeply grateful to her, and he treated her as the utmost authority in their family. Naturally, when Byletta's mother had married her father, it had been her uncle rather than her grandfather who'd opposed the match—and rather nastily, by all accounts. Her father still feared Samus now, as if his very presence conjured up past trauma.

Byletta reminded Samus of her mother—that was why he doted on her so much.

He'd gone so far as to bestow a fifteen-year-old girl with her own boutique just because she'd declared she had no interest in men and wanted to go into business instead. On paper, the store had belonged to its manager, but in reality, Byletta's uncle had supplied her with all the capital she desired to run it. But that boutique had

been the precursor to this one. Now that Byletta had grown up, she finally had one under her own name.

Byletta was well aware that her uncle deeply cared for her—and that he worried for her in equal measure.

"Even though we're married, I never even got a glimpse of my husband's face before he headed out to war. Sometimes I find it hard to convince myself he's actually real. How could I settle down? Especially when the family I married into gives me so much more freedom than Mother and Father did back home."

"You might think you're free, but Father bosses you around a lot. Just this morning at breakfast, he told you to make sure you came back home before it got too late! Does he have some work for you again today?"

"What's this?"

As Milena had frowned and tattled on Byletta, Samus's expression had changed as well.

"Oh, Milena, I keep telling you that's okay! There's nothing for you to worry about, Uncle Samus. He just consults with me sometimes on matters of the family estate. I read the tax reports, he asks about the latest market trends—it's just chitchat. He's also taken me out there from time to time, although not at all lately."

"I see. I'm glad what I taught you all those years ago is coming in useful. You're a sharp one, and adorable to boot. But…something feels strange about all this. I've heard a lot about Swangan's estate lately, and none of it is good."

Byletta had been ready to ignore her uncle's usual platitudes, but she was caught off guard by his disquieting words at the end.

"Where did you hear that? We've only ever received positive reports on the management of the estate. I haven't even heard anything particularly bad within our social circles."

Compared to when Byletta had first joined the count's household, the man had become much more earnest. Back then, he hadn't even cared about the state of his lands and just left everything up to his staff. It'd been several years since he'd even set foot there.

Apparently, he used to boast that since a government tax inspector was periodically dispatched to the lands, all he had to do was read their report. Once Byletta had found out about this, she'd grabbed the count by the scruff of his neck and dragged him all the way there herself. She still remembered that day fondly. As they'd ridden there, side by side in a horse-drawn carriage, all he'd done was complain. There were times he still moaned about it. Still, some might ask why Byletta had bothered to drag a lord all the way to his lands. She wasn't his boss—or so she grumbled to herself.

This belief was belied by the written petitions that were delivered to House Swangan's city residence on occasion, sent from the steward who was stationed out in the country. The communication between the two estates didn't seem particularly strained, but the fact that the correspondence—which should have been going to the house's lord—had been regularly getting addressed to Byletta should have rung some alarm bells. But even if upon reflection she should've had misgivings, she hadn't heard a peep on the subject from the people she mixed with from her social stratum. Any gossip she did hear was very good. Nothing bad reached her ears.

"That's because a certain someone is very good at hiding things. It's so bad that the shrewder merchants are careful not to do a lot of trading there."

"Oh my, that *is* concerning. I'd love to hear more on the topic, if you'd be willing to divulge."

Byletta gazed up at her uncle through her eyelashes. He broke into a wide smile.

"Why, of course I am. But unfortunately, that conversation would take quite some time. That's why I put everything into this report."

Samus held out the envelope in his hand with a wink. Byletta thanked him and took it.

She would have to cross-examine the count when she returned home.

"There's one more thing, but these are happier tidings. It seems that the neighboring countries have accepted counsel to surrender."

"What does that mean, Mr. Eteau?" Milena asked in surprise.

"It means that an armistice has been agreed upon—effectively an end to the war. You'll probably start hearing about it in the news soon. It also means your big brother will be coming home."

"A-Arnald? Wh-what should we do, Letta?"

Byletta was always telling the Swangan household that when the war ended and Arnald was due home, she would divorce him. Her father-in-law was reluctant, but her new mother and sister both understood, probably because they knew how cold Arnald really was. They'd told her straight to her face that she wouldn't be happy if she stayed with him and claimed that he probably wouldn't show any interest in her at all anyway once he was back. Their support in the endeavor only made Byletta want to divorce him more.

Byletta was now twenty-four years old, but she still had so much that she wanted to do. Once the war concluded, the empire would flourish again. Demand would likely rise sky-high. She'd sell so much it would blow all her sales figures up till now out of the water.

The business head on Byletta's shoulders was working so fast she was getting dizzy. There were still so many things that she wanted to sell, so many things that she wanted to purchase. She couldn't let her disinterested husband get in the way of that.

"I heard that they're going to be gradually allowing the soldiers at the southern front to come home, but it will most likely start from the bottom up. Your husband is a field officer, so he's probably still stationed on the front lines to take care of any remaining business."

"I'm going to send him a letter notifying him of my intention to divorce. I have to move quickly."

"I'll be sad when you leave, Letta, but I support you."

"That means a lot to me, Milena. And I am grateful to you, too, Uncle, for all you've told me."

"If it's to officially free my niece, I'll help you with whatever you need. If things go well, perhaps we could take a trip to the southwest to procure some new stock. I've found an extremely interesting crystal there I bet you'd like."

"No need to be hasty, Uncle. I look forward to it, though. Now—I must see my father-in-law."

Byletta flashed a smile, but the aura that emanated from her was different than before, full of even more drive than usual.

As soon as she arrived back at the Swangan residence, Byletta ran to the count's office. The moment she'd heard that bona fide merchants were withdrawing, she'd thought something was suspicious, but as she read her uncle's report on the carriage back home, her breath had caught in her throat.

The report contained details of the grain output of the count's estate. The amount of taxes due—calculated from the size of the actual harvest—differed from what had been reported. In other words, someone was committing embezzlement.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect, as Count Swangan had told her that the tax inspector who'd visited the estate would be stopping by their residence with a report this afternoon. Deciding to put her divorce petition aside for the moment, Byletta decided to join them. *Perhaps I shouldn't have left all the estate management duties to Count Swangan just because it's his job as lord,* she mused. But no—this situation was all down to the count's negligence.

Suppressing the urge to interrogate her father-in-law, Byletta cautiously awaited the arrival of the government tax inspector. He arrived just as they finished eating lunch, like the count said he would.

"And now the people don't have enough food to eat…," he said in a sorrowful tone, his brow furrowed.

The way he sobbed and cast his eyes to his feet was enough to elicit pity.

They were all facing one another over a table sandwiched between a pair of settees. Byletta was lost for words at the vivid performance.

Count Swangan, however, had an indignant look on his face. "Didn't we send you extra supplies?" he asked coldly. "Why were those not enough?"

"Well, we distributed those…but there were so many babies born this year that it wasn't sufficient."

Byletta, who was seated next to her father-in-law, interjected. "Are you telling us that even though we had such a disappointing harvest, we had a bumper year for babies?"

"Er, yes."

"How many stillbirths and deaths have we had?"

"Oh, erm…let me see. Ah, here it is."

Byletta took the documents that the tax inspector produced and combed through them, looking for the population number as well as the live birth, stillbirth, and death statistics for the region. After a quick scan, she couldn't help but frown.

"It appears there was no particular deviation from the average," she commented.

"Yes…that's right."

"So you're telling me that, despite insufficient supplies, there was absolutely no change in the number of people who have died this year?"

The color of the tax inspector's face began to turn. Sadness gave way to a different expression—he looked rather like he was about to vomit or pass out. It was only in that moment that the count seemed to finally catch on to the fact that something wasn't adding up.

"Tell me what is going on."

"My apologies—there seems to be an oversight in the paperwork. Perhaps a mistake was made somewhere in these calculations?"

"Don't you try to pull the wool over my eyes!" the count roared, getting to his feet.

What happened next was a blur. Count Swangan made the tax inspector tell him everything. According to the inspector, he'd simply followed directions from the steward stationed at the family home.

In the end, the tax inspector was handed over to the military police, who were to investigate him for any other potential crimes. Still, when all was said and done, a region's problems fell under the

jurisdiction of its lord—they couldn't expect the officers to provide them with any further information. All the police could do was lock the man up to prevent him from doing further harm.

Once Count Swangan and Byletta were finally alone again in the reception room, Byletta turned her gaze toward her enraged father-in-law.

"No problems with the estate, are there? All I see are problems!" he spat.

"This only happened because you take people at face value. You probably just skimmed the documents and sent the tax inspector on his merry way in the past. If you'd scrutinized the information properly, you would have seen that the annual grain balance didn't add up. I think that what you need to do now is visit your estate in person and properly sort out whatever is going on. I always thought it odd that you only ever spent a few days there at a time. You've failed to ensure proper oversight."

"Ugh, there's no end to your impertinence… Spending more time inspecting my estate wouldn't have changed a thing."

Byletta swallowed her first impulse, which was to shout that he was wrong, and did her best to speak calmly. "It seems someone is making off with your grain, and it's getting sent across the border instead…"

"Where did you hear that?"

"We merchants have our own information networks."

Byletta quickly showed her father-in-law the report Samus had given her. It was met with a snort.

"Then you'll be accompanying me."

"I will?"

"Accounting for travel time, you'll be gone for ten days. Start making arrangements at work to allow it. I suppose we'll have to gather up some documentation, too, so let's plan to leave in about a month."

"That's not fair. I'm expecting to unveil some new dresses soon… And I need to share this season's latest trends!"

"Is that more important than the people of the estate?"

What kind of question is that?! Byletta thought indignantly. The count sounded like a new wife nagging her husband about whether his work was more important to him than she was. She'd never expected to hear such a thing from the mouth of Count Swangan, a man older than her own father. It wasn't cute, and it didn't make her more sympathetic to his cause. That said, given that her husband wasn't present and her father-in-law was a tyrant, it didn't seem she had much of a choice but to humor him.

With that, it was decided that Byletta would accompany Count Swangan to inspect his lands. But there was still yet another matter to attend to.

"Father, did you hear that an armistice has been agreed upon?"

"Yes, I did hear something about that. So it's official. An invitation to attend a formal ceremony *did* arrive addressed to my son… I suppose that would be the victory party."

"It seems that way. Therefore, I would like to send him the notice of my intention to divorce that we previously discussed."

Byletta presented her divorce letter to her father-in-law. He glanced at its contents and snorted.

"It's very cynically written, but I suppose it shows you are serious about this."

Count Swangan may have believed the contents of the letter cynical, but to Byletta, the letter painted an honest truth. It perfectly encapsulated why she wanted to divorce now that she'd heard the war was over. How could she have expressed herself any better?

"I have no qualms about sending a letter, but if he doesn't respond, there's nothing more that I can do."

"That's fine. I won't trouble you any further after this. All I need is one letter."

Byletta's husband had left for war before she ever even saw his face. He certainly had no attachment to her, so he would likely agree to the divorce without any pushback. While she accepted that

nothing in life was guaranteed, this letter would most likely be the end of the matter.

"So you really wish to leave him, then? Have you found someone else you intend to marry?"

"I never had any intention to marry in the first place. I didn't wish to be tied down by a husband."

"I believe my son would carry on letting you do as you wish, in all likelihood."

"Yet, despite that, there are times when a wife must follow her husband's lead. And besides, it isn't as if he wants me as his wife anyway. Do you truly think he would let me go around procuring products abroad?"

"I have no idea how much he would stick his nose in, but I imagine that, yes, it would be more difficult to go abroad."

"And that would be a point of anguish for me. I'm afraid I would miss out on business opportunities. I'm the kind of person who has to go and see the products I'm considering with my own two eyes first."

As Byletta pressed the point, the count sighed in disbelief.

"Ever the consummate businesswoman, you are."

"Thank you for the compliment. That's why I want to be unburdened."

"Do as you like, but you will still accompany me to the estate. I doubt that my son will be returning anytime soon, even if an armistice has been declared."

"You say that, but we don't know when he'll come back. That's why I would like to leave as quickly as possible. And the problem within your lands is your job to fix."

"Hmph. You were the first to recognize the issue, so you should take some responsibility and see the matter through to its end. How can you do so if you refuse to remain here, in this house? Besides, once my son returns from the front, he may not even come here."

Count Swangan's tone was matter-of-fact. It was true that his relationship with his son was strained—no matter which servant

Byletta asked, they'd all affirmed that her husband never showed his face at the house unless it was an emergency.

"Very well, then. I'll accompany you."

The count was right. Her husband would not be returning for a while yet, whether she sent her letter or not. And even if he *were* to come home, he had no reason to see a wife he had no interest in. She was already packed to leave at a moment's notice anyway. What was the harm in staying for one more month?

The realization that she wouldn't be severing her connection to the Swangans just yet somehow left Byletta feeling a bit relieved.

"It's strange… All I've known here is you working me to the bone, but…I still had a lot of fun."

"You don't mince your words. Shouldn't you at least learn how to express your gratitude like a lady?"

"It seems you still have quite the flair for paying compliments, Father. I regret that I was never able to correct my manner of speaking, and I deeply apologize for any consequences of my wrongdoings."

Rendered speechless by Byletta's gracious apology, the count pressed his lips together tightly. It would be dangerous for her if he lost his temper right now. If he didn't write the letter she needed, her entire plan could come crashing down.

"I'll look into the matter of the grain. And you have a letter to write."

As Byletta silently threw out a concession to appease her father-in-law, he wrote the letter she'd requested and sealed it in an envelope with wax bearing the family crest.

Byletta sent it to the front line the next day, but even after half a month had passed, a reply hadn't come. There was no doubt that her husband would be returning—the imperial newspaper had reported that an armistice agreement had officially been signed. *Why is it taking this long?* she found herself wondering. *Even if the postal system has deteriorated, it seems a bit much.*

Even as she began to grow concerned, the day of her and the count's departure for the Swangan family home approached. Byletta became consumed with her daily work.

Count Swangan managed to gather the past estate reports and look through the materials submitted to the imperial capital. He and Byletta were due to depart for the estate in four days, so she had been occupied getting her affairs in order at work in preparation.

It was late at night.

Byletta's eyes suddenly snapped open. It felt like she was being watched. It was dark, and the only source of illumination was a beam of moonlight filtering in through the gap in her curtains.

This was her bedroom. She was supposed to be alone. And yet she could feel the burn of someone's pointed gaze.

When Byletta finally moved her head, her eyes landed on a man by her bedside. Only able to make out his silhouette and some vague details of his expression, Byletta swallowed a cry and slowly sat up.

Her vision was still blurry, but from the relatively clear-cut outline of the intruder, she could make out that he had a face full of refined features. From his almond eyes and high-bridged nose to his thin lips, every part of him looked terrifyingly perfect.

"A pleasure to meet you, Husband. I can only apologize for the state you currently find me in."

"Heh, the pleasure is all mine. At this hour, it is only natural that you are dressed for bed. But how did you know that I am your husband?"

The way his low voice reverberated in Byletta's ears was surprisingly agreeable. His pleasant laugh was also appealing—and despite all the accusations of ruthlessness and cold-bloodedness, his expression was soft. Unexpectedly so. *I should have known not to trust all the rumors.*

Still, the man gave off an aura of hostility, as though a rage was simmering away underneath the surface. It was like he was suppressing his distaste at something that displeased him.

The hair on Byletta's arms stood on end.

Be on your guard, her body was telling her. She'd get the same feeling when she had a troublesome customer at work or when her father-in-law harassed her with additional duties.

"I was told that this bedroom belonged only to me and my husband. Who else would dare to waltz in so boldly as I slept? But when did you get back?"

When Byletta had first married into House Swangan, she'd learned the history of the bedroom she'd been given. It had belonged to her husband's mother, but since it was sandwiched between Arnald's room and the room designated for Byletta, it had been turned into a shared bedroom for the two of them. All three rooms were connected, with the central room for sleeping.

"I only just arrived here."

Despite that, her husband was wearing a simple shirt and slacks. It seemed strange to Byletta that he would be in civilian clothing rather than his uniform. Not to mention, for someone who had just returned from the front lines, he was awfully calm… Byletta decided to forgo mentioning that and instead attempted to placate him.

"Thank you for all your service these past few years. Please enjoy a nice rest."

"It is certainly my intention to do so, but before that, I have something that I must discuss with you."

He held up a letter. It was the notice of divorce that Byletta had sent to the southern front a month earlier. It had apparently found its destination, but she was far from relieved to discover this.

What did his actions mean? She had originally anticipated that they would be in agreement and a divorce would soon follow, but that wasn't the impression she was getting now.

Byletta spoke deliberately and slowly, ignoring the cold sweat trickling down her back. "And what could that be at this hour?"

"Certainly nothing as outlandish as talk of divorce the second the war has ended."

He was angry.

Furious, perhaps.

But his quiet voice was calm. It was so calm that it seemed almost upbeat, but somehow still had a bitter edge to it.

Byletta could have kicked herself. She'd never wanted to meet her husband. That's why she had planned to leave him after only sending a letter. She'd never anticipated that the man himself would act to stop her—she'd always assumed that he would be more than happy to oblige.

It seemed that she had miscalculated. Now she would need to actually get to know her husband better to understand what was going on in his head.

"My apologies, dear husband. I only wished to reduce the burden on a man so busy he had to head to the front without even meeting his wife. I presume that you will remain busy with work now that you have returned, and I hope not to trouble you further."

"You're right. I *do* have a lot of work and very limited amounts of free time. Although I must admit, I was quite excited to receive a letter from my wife for the first time since I left for the battlefield. Imagine my shock to realize that it contained a request for divorce. I was quite nonplussed."

Arnald spoke in a quiet tone that didn't sound nonplussed at all. He paused for a moment, then forged ahead.

"Do you still wish to divorce me?"

"Yes…of course."

"If your desire for a divorce was solely fueled by the fact that we had never met, then this discussion we're having right now, face-to-face, renders that reason invalid. Is there another reason you do not wish to remain married?"

"I think being ignored for eight years is more than enough grounds for a divorce."

"I see. But our homeland was at war. Many other couples found themselves in the same situation, did they not? How little you must appreciate a husband who went to battle to broach the subject of a divorce as soon as the conflict is over."

Byletta was, of course, grateful for her husband's sacrifices for the war effort, but at the same time, she couldn't help but wonder why she needed to be the one to comfort him. With his famous good looks, she was sure that many other women would gladly fill that role. Even in the dark of the bedroom, it was obvious that her husband was just as handsome as the rumors suggested. The numerous women who wished Byletta gone so they could marry him instead had ensured she was subjected to considerable envy and pointed gossip in polite society. Was it really so bad for her to want to leave the comforting to them—to the people who actually wanted to do it?

Why did it have to be her?

"And why would you need a wife you've never even seen?"

"It's generally better for a man in my position to be married. Having my wife accompany me to military functions could help to diffuse needlessly volatile situations."

Byletta breathed an internal sigh of relief. So that was what he wanted.

With a wife on his arm, it *would* likely make his work environment a little easier to deal with. But in that case, he should let someone who wanted to do that take up the task. It wasn't Byletta's job.

In fact, the very knowledge that she would be expected to play such a role had driven her to devise a way out of the situation before he could return. *Since he has no interest in me, why wouldn't he agree to a divorce and just marry someone else?* she'd thought. But the reality she was now being confronted with was far different from what she had envisioned.

How could I be so careless…?

He was basically telling her that he didn't want to sacrifice his time looking for a new wife.

Byletta hadn’t heard that he was so lazy.

“That said, it is true that I never sent you any letters. Nor did I ever come and see you at any point during the past eight years. That’s why I cannot simply reject your divorce proposal out of hand. So why don’t we make a wager?”

Byletta knew that he was being snide about the divorce letter, but this new suggestion seemed totally outlandish.

“A wager?” she asked, confused.

Arnald nodded. “Yes. If you win, I’ll agree to the divorce. But if I win, you have to remain my wife in perpetuity.”

“Gentlemen really like to gamble, don’t they? To determine something so permanent based on the whims of a game…”

“Do you intend to decline, then? And remain my caged bird?”

Why did men always think they were the ones in control? Byletta was stunned at his arrogance. It was as if, in her position as the woman, she had no choice at all.

Byletta’s pride, which she had built up all on her own over the past few years, had been pricked. A fire lit up under her feet.

“If neither option leads to my freedom, then I’d rather just struggle.”

“Hmph. I thought you might say that.”

Even though it was only the first time they’d met, her husband was speaking as if he knew her. As if Byletta was nothing more than what she seemed.

Concealing her irritation, Byletta tilted her head to the side questioningly. “And what are the terms of this wager?”

“With the stakes so high, the rewards should be proportional. How about you lie with me for one month and see if you are with child by the end of it?”

“Wha—?!”

Byletta could find no words.

It wasn’t as if she was clinging to her virginity for dear life—rather, she’d simply had no interest in ridding herself of it thus far. Granted, she was an older-than-usual virgin, but that didn’t change the fact of

it. Anyway, there was no world in which she would give herself to a man who didn't even love her, much less for a bet.

Not to mention the repercussions for the child itself.

How could this man treat the life that could result from such a deal so carelessly? In war, combatants were regarded as numbers rather than people; perhaps Arnald's prolonged time at the front had desensitized him to the value of human life? Or maybe this was just how he'd always been.

Still, Byletta couldn't silence the voice in the back of her head that whispered, *If you can just survive one month, you'll be free.* The odds seemed stacked in her favor—was a single month even long enough to induce pregnancy?

Byletta had heard couples here and there lamenting about how much they wanted children.

Perhaps this was the greatest concession her husband could make? But no. It felt more like he was just playing with her. *What have I done to be met with such scorn?*

When she'd first become a wife, Byletta had been prepared to lose her virginity to her husband, even though she'd always planned to leave. She had already relinquished it in her mind.

There was just one thing she could not relinquish.

She wanted to be free.

"Have you come to a decision? We don't have to wager if you'll just agree to remain my wife."

"You don't have any plans to reconsider these terms, do you?"

"Aren't you prepared to take on your fair share of risk?"

"Why are you asking your wife to take risks?"

"I know that I was in the wrong leaving you here while I was on the front lines. But if I'm going to indulge your selfishness, I think it's only fair that we both have something at stake."

My selfishness, hmm?

She'd take the wager. She was a businesswoman, after all.

In business, risk was something Byletta was always prepared for, though those truly talented in the art would arrange things so they

could avoid it altogether. But that didn't seem to be an option in this case. Despite the lack of time to weigh up her options, Byletta could tell that her husband would not change his mind.

"Fine. You have one month. Please make sure to honor your promise."

"I will. I'll even write up a contract, if you wish."

"May I take you up on that offer, then?"

"Yes. I'll take that as your acceptance."

Arnald immediately climbed on top of Byletta.

"Wh-what are you—?"

"Our wager has already begun. Shall we move on to our wedding night?"

"W-wedding night?! But what about the contract?!"

"You accepted my offer. It doesn't make a difference if we do it now or later."

"D-do what, exac—? Argh!"

Before Byletta could protest, Arnald had pulled open her nightgown.

Her face immediately began to burn red as her breasts came spilling out of it.

Eight years had passed since she'd last prepared herself to sleep with a man. She would never have predicted that her husband would demand it so soon after returning.

Her confusion was replaced by humiliation.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just seeing what you look like. Your body is lovelier than I thought it would be. Come on, don't try to hide it."

Arnald grabbed her arms, which she'd wrapped around her chest, and pinned them above her head. It was still dark, but the moonlight filtering in from beyond the curtain and the light from the corridor were more than enough to see by. Unable to hide a thing, Byletta's shame only increased as Arnald looked her up and down.

"You have an ample bosom for such a slender waist. I wonder how many men you've seduced with these…"

Without even sparing a moment for Byletta to ask what he meant, Arnald pressed a hand to one of her breasts. The touch elicited a sweet moan from her lips and sent a shiver running down her spine.

Confused by this unfamiliar form of pleasure, Byletta tried and failed to resist the sensation.

"Wait, no… Something's wrong."

"You're just feeling pleasure. Let yourself enjoy it."

Byletta's entire body trembled as Arnald's hand slowly brushed lower. All he was doing was touching her, but she could no longer hold back the sweet sounds that rose to her lips.

Even though this was the first time she was being touched in this manner, Byletta couldn't bring herself to put up any kind of genuine resistance. Her fear of the unknown gave way to a strange sensation akin to an itch that needed to be scratched.

Her mind dulled; her flustered thoughts became foggier and foggier. The last thing she perceived before she fell into complete disarray was the shock of being betrayed by her own body. Her husband's hands and tongue felt incredible. A shivery pleasure began to run through her body.

Arnald's hands lifted her slender legs, leaving her to lie dreamily at his mercy.

"Good girl. Now lick."

He held his long fingers out before Byletta's mouth.

As if in a trance, she did what he asked and began to lap at his fingers. Even that set her heart to racing until, suddenly, Arnald pulled his hand away.

"Mn…"

"You don't have to sound so needy. I'll sate that hunger of yours right now… See? Isn't that better?"

His fingers made sparks fly inside her, so intense that she clung to Arnald's body.

"Aaah, mmm… What are yo—?!"

"You don't have to play innocent with me. I'll make sure you get exactly what you want. You like that, don't you?"

The heat his fingers were stirring up inside of her continued to build, sending indescribable pleasure coursing through Byletta's veins. Her expression crumpled and her voice cracked as she came undone.

"Aaah…"

"This body of yours is so erotic it's obscene. Don't look at me like you need more. Do you want it deeper?"

As Arnald toyed with her, Byletta could no longer suppress her moans. The incessant cascade of sweet noises brought a smile to Arnald's lips.

"Moan as loud as you want—I don't mind. I want to learn you, my wife."

And thus slowly unfolded a wedding night, come eight years too late.

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Arnald left Byletta asleep in bed, exhausted from the night before, and put on a robe while he considered whether or not to take a bath.

The dawn light was dim, but he could still make out where things were. He went about his morning routine as usual, as if nothing had happened—as he always did after a liaison.

Still, perhaps he *had* gone too far the previous night. Arnald hadn't felt such an intense anger-like passion in a long time. And never had he slept with a woman while possessed with such rage. He had ways to relieve himself even without a partner, and he had done so without difficulty even during the war. He could perhaps be called a puritan that way.

Arnald had been unsure that he would be capable of bullying a woman he didn't know by getting her into bed, but he'd been caught off guard by how easy it'd been. The girl had wavered a bit and offered a little resistance, but in the end, she'd certainly seemed to enjoy herself. He hadn't actually intended to allow her to have such

a good time, and he'd found himself provoked to the point of being angry. As a result, he'd been quite rough with her.

His marriage had been the result of an order from the higher-ups. Arnald hadn't been interested in finding a wife at all, so he'd given them an absurd wish list. He'd laughed about it at first, but everything had started when he carelessly accepted an offer to a partner.

Arnald had wrongly believed that going to war would make life more interesting. Yet, as the war drew to a close, he'd begun to feel empty. It had at least provided him with *some* stimulation, it seemed, but that was all. There probably wouldn't be another major conflict for a while. Perhaps some internal strife or a skirmish or two? Even those would likely be quite infrequent.

But just as Arnald had begun to lose heart, a letter from his stranger of a wife had reached him on the battlefield.

Vaguely remembering that he did indeed have a spouse, he'd gotten his hopes up, then immediately kicked himself for it. However, the contents of the letter *had* been decidedly provocative, and the woman who'd written it certainly did appear courageous. It was only then that the wife whom he'd almost forgotten even existed, and whose face he'd never even seen, had begun to pique his interest.

After receiving his orders, he had returned to the capital just over a week ago. Opting not to go back to his family home, he had quietly returned instead to a room assigned by the army and begun to gather information on his wife, only to find that she was even more diabolical than he'd imagined.

Rumor had it that she had a sordid relationship with her uncle, a famous business magnate; that she'd gotten into a bloody altercation with a classmate at Stacia Academy, the best school in the city; and that she'd even cozied up with his father, Wynald, after she was married. The count had even taken her to the Swangan estate three separate times, where many had become fond of her. While Arnald didn't think all of these people were sharing her bed,

he still felt a murderous rage toward the man who'd recommended such a woman to him. The feeling was so intense that it made him dizzy. Yes, the girl was fearless and courageous. Yes, she ticked every one of his boxes. But she was still truly awful.

So why was a woman of her sort asking him for a divorce? Had she found a more convenient potential husband, or did she simply want to cut ties with his father? Whatever the case, an intense feeling had begun to bubble up inside Arnald—toward his wife, who was intending to leave him through no fault of his own.

He was almost astonished that she could make him seethe so.

"I may have ended up with an impressive bride, but perhaps I'm just too spiteful to let her have her way so easily…"

He would divorce her. But he'd give her a taste of her own medicine first.

Arnald had come up with countless strategies in his head, eventually arriving at a certain "wager."

After gathering information and making his preparations, he'd sneaked into his wife's bedroom at night while she slept.

As he'd approached with silent footsteps, the form of a soundly sleeping girl had become visible under the moonlight.

Well, she's clearly not sleeping with my father.

Under such low light, it had been impossible to make out details like the color of the woman's hair, but what he'd seen had been enough for Arnald to conclude that she was beautiful. She had curled lashes so long they cast shadows on her face, an upturned nose, and a pair of sensual, pillowy lips. Below, her gentle curves had been concealed by the bedspread. Still, the sight had been more than enough to thoroughly seduce a man.

As Arnald had stared, taking in the fact that this woman was his wife, her eyelids had suddenly begun to flutter open.

But upon finding Arnald by her bedside, the woman hadn't even let out so much as an alarmed squeak—she'd merely sat up and quietly begun to question him. A fearless woman she was, indeed.

And to so calmly discern who she was talking to… Had she truly been asleep at all?

Perhaps she'd just grown accustomed to having strange men in her room after all the wandering she'd done from lover to lover.

As Arnald had scrutinized her, trying to decide the best way to broach the subject of his wager, his wife had started saying things that signified her intent to go straight back to sleep. But as soon as he'd begun to sense that he was being shooed away, he'd dug his heels in.

She wasn't going to comfort her husband, who was freshly back from the battlefield, was she? Her only intention had been to use him. Use him and leave.

Arnald knew it was foolish to have even expected that much, but no matter how many times he reminded himself of that, he couldn't stop a dark feeling from welling up deep inside him.

Even an uncomplicated man like Arnald, unfamiliar with the inner workings of the heart, wasn't so insensitive as to be unaffected by her treatment.

After the woman got over her surprise and accepted his wager, Arnald had pushed her down onto the bed. It wasn't as if he truly wanted a child—he just wanted to make a fool of his wife. To see the look on her face when, after her countless trysts, he was the one who successfully impregnated her.

Of course, he had no plans to spend the rest of his life with her. Once he'd evened the score between them, he would set her aside. He had his own work to attend to, and no time to be preoccupied with a spouse. He'd only chosen the one-month time frame because that was the amount of leave he'd been assigned. It actually seemed silly to use it all just for this.

In the end, he found he wished his wife hadn't accepted. Were the odds of her winning that much in her favor? It hadn't even crossed his mind that she might not be able to have children. Could that be the reason she hadn't wanted to be a wife? It was a possibility he hadn't considered at all.

Yet he would still force himself on her.

How many men had she led astray? Arnald was but one. That fact didn't particularly disgust him, but when he thought of lying with the same person as his father, his feelings grew a bit more complicated.

But the emotion was fleeting. Just a minor flicker.

Arnald had never been with a virgin. He'd always chosen to sleep with the women least likely to cause him headaches further down the line, which certainly didn't include women with no experience. So when he'd felt the tightness of his wife's body, he hadn't thought much of it. She'd been wet enough that he encountered no difficulty.

Analyze information, then scrutinize it in detail.

That was what Arland had been taught to always do in his line of work. So why hadn't he done so on his wedding night?

The right path had been directly in front of him, as had the truth. Looking back, he was struck with an indescribable feeling. But no matter how many times he brooded over it, he always arrived at the same conclusion: that he should've known better.

Then had come that heart-stopping morning.

Standing beside his wife, who was slumbering in the bright morning light, Arnald had been stricken by despair.

He couldn't make sense of any of it. His mind had gone completely blank. It was not that he couldn't understand the situation—he just couldn't accept it.

He'd been returning from his bath, debating whether or not to go back to sleep, when he'd offhandedly traced the edge of the duvet with his eyes. They'd landed on the white sheets underneath. Or rather, the stain atop them.

The *blood*stain.

It was around the same size as the medals that usually adorned his chest. Not likely to be from any fatal wound.

Arnald was used to seeing blood on the battlefield—not in his own home. The only time he'd experience such a thing was if he accidentally cut his own finger with some sort of blade. *But what does a tiny bloodstain matter?* he asked himself.

And yet, something about it disturbed him. Because that insignificant little stain was enough to turn his whole life upside down.

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When Byletta opened her eyes, there was no sign of her husband.

The bedding beside her was already cold, so he'd probably gotten up some time ago. Perhaps he hadn't even slept beside her at all. The sheets certainly didn't seem messy enough to suggest such a thing.

At some point, it seemed she'd been changed into nightclothes and cleaned up. Perhaps Arnald had done it? Maybe he regretted the enraged state in which he'd spent their wedding night after all. Personally, Byletta didn't think him so commendable, but he was the only other person around.

Still, even if the sheets had been neatened as if nothing had happened the previous night, she was unfortunately not under the delusion that what she'd experienced had just been a dream. Her throat hurt from all the moaning, and there was a foreign sensation between her legs. The feeling of being betrayed by her own body also lingered. Losing herself to his touch—and losing most of her memory of the event—was a blow to Byletta's self-esteem.

But the wager meant that she would have to spend a full month with the man. And while Byletta was uncomfortable with the fact that she'd fallen for her husband's smooth words, it was too late to regret anything now.

No matter how many times he asked, she would give herself to him. That was how much she longed for a divorce and her freedom. Her heart screamed at the thought of living life bound by a husband.

Whatever she did, though, the situation she'd found herself in was an uncomfortable one. It was going to be awkward to face her father and sister-in-law. After all that ruckus she'd made about leaving as soon as her husband returned, how was she supposed to explain that she was extending her stay by another month? Her heart was full of anguish just at the thought. Byletta sat up, her mind feeling even more exhausted than her body. That's when she locked eyes with her husband, who was entering the room.

In the soft morning light, there was something particularly lascivious about him. He was wearing the same simple shirt and slacks as the night before, but now that she could see all the details, they made his good looks even more prominent.

Byletta had always believed herself to be uninterested in appearances, but as she gazed at her husband's face, she couldn't deny that she found him attractive. One would never guess that he was in his thirties.

His fine, silky, ash-gray hair was paired with a set of almond-shaped emerald-green eyes that shone with a beguiling light.

His porcelain skin was clear and pale with nary a blemish.

"O-oh, you're awake."

"Yes. I overslept. My apologies."

"N-not to worry. I…may have gone too far last night. How are you feeling?"

His newly polite demeanor was very different from what Byletta had encountered the night before. It seemed an especially odd choice for someone who'd had his way with an inexperienced girl until the sun came up.

As a Little Miss Know-It-All, Byletta knew the different terminology and techniques that encompassed making love. How could she not, when she served ladies at her shop? But while Byletta recognized that the way he'd spoken to her last night had been abusive, she didn't quite understand why his words had left her feeling so ashamed. And regardless, such treatment was not an appropriate lead-in to a wedding night. It was just the work of a bully.

Since that was the kind of man she was dealing with, Byletta knew that she shouldn't just take his words at face value. This new demeanor could simply be a fresh angle of attack.

But even if Arnald were to try and pick a fight now, with her still-groggy mind, Byletta was in no shape to form a decent reply.

"Thank you for your concern. And also for dressing me, it seems…"

Byletta wasn't entirely happy with the situation, but she decided it would be more troublesome to speak out about it. But then Arnald hastily responded to her evasiveness with an explanation.

"You're welcome. I would have felt extremely guilty leaving you as you were… I'm sorry."

What was he apologizing for? His expression was very stern, almost bitter. His words might be contrite, but the look on his face didn't match.

Byletta couldn't understand why he would ask for her forgiveness in the first place. Where had the selfish man from the previous night gone?

"You're probably hungry. Breakfast is ready downstairs, but Milena and the others have already started eating. Shall I bring something up?"

At Milena's name, Byletta thought of her kind sister. She was probably worried that her big sis hadn't shown up for breakfast. Knowing how sensitive Milena was, Byletta couldn't help but worry that she'd managed to guess what happened—though if she had at her young age, then that was a whole other problem.

"Did Milena say anything?"

"She both scolded me and told me to keep myself in check… I never realized before how fearsome sisters can be."

"Huh? Are we talking about the same sweet Milena?"

"All I remember of my sister is that she's an only child."

How could he call a girl as lovely and delicate as a flower "fearsome"?

Byletta was tempted to believe that he was mistaking Milena for somebody else. She'd hardly ever even seen her little sister angry.

"I think I'll go down and eat breakfast with the others. Do you mind if I change?"

"Be my guest."

"Thank you. Then, if you will allow me to get dressed…?"

"……"

Byletta glanced at her husband, who seemed to be waiting for her to make a move. Why was he staring at her like that? His emerald-green eyes seemed suspicious, but they were wavering, as if he was confused. The cold-blooded fox she'd heard so much about was nowhere to be seen.

"Um, I'd like to change, so can you please leave the room?"

"Oh, right. Of course. I'll be waiting downstairs. Please call for me if you need anything…" Arnald turned away and left the bedroom, muttering to himself. "The way she's acting… She's definitely trying to trick me."

"What was all that about?"

Byletta had been led to believe that her husband was smarter than this, but perhaps the rumors had been wrong? He was acting so flustered that she had to wonder if he was a little dense.

Still unsure of what to believe, Byletta endured the pain she felt and got out of bed to dress.

After dinner, Byletta was poring over some work documents in her room when Arnald entered.

She had spent the entire day taking it easy at home, mostly because of the night before. Unable to go to the boutique, she'd spent her time going through some paperwork instead.

Even though she was sitting at her writing desk, trying to read through the papers in front of her, nothing was clicking in her brain. All she could think about was the door to her room. It wasn't as if she could avoid her husband for an entire month. She would need to endure a little bit if she was to secure her freedom.

Byletta was silently repeating that to herself when Arnald came in.

She turned her paperwork over and got up from the desk to receive him.

As soon as Arnald entered the room, he handed Byletta a sheet of paper to read.

"I've brought the contract. Please read it, and if you have no major complaints, sign it as well."

1. The signatories will live as husband and wife for the duration of the contract.

2. The duration of the contract will be one month.

3. Should the wife conceive prior to the expiration of the contract, the marriage will continue until death. In the event she does not, a divorce will be granted.

Byletta reviewed the terms. She had no issues, so she placed the document on the desk and signed her name.

"With that, we're agreed. Do you wish to be the retainer of the document?"

"Yes, I do."

Byletta silently decided that she would keep it in her safe alongside the deeds to her boutique and important business agreements. For now, however, her desk drawer would do. She couldn't stash it away in her secret spot with Arnald still standing there.

"Is there anything else?"

"I thought we might turn to more couple-like endeavors."

Arnald smiled and slid an arm around Byletta's waist.

When had he gotten that close? Byletta was stunned by the speed of it all.

That morning, the Arnald who appeared before her had seemed rather out of sorts. Like something had fazed him. But he appeared

to be recovered now. At the moment, his gaze was filled with pure curiosity.

"Wh-what are you…"

Was he going to ravish her again like he had the previous night?

Still frustrated at being toyed with last time, Byletta pushed back against Arnald's chest. But he was undaunted.

"The contract is signed. That means you've agreed to this, have you not?"

"Yes, but…"

With him pouncing on her so suddenly, Byletta couldn't stop her heart from racing. She'd already bathed, so she was prepared for him. If she hadn't been, perhaps she could have used that to buy herself a bit of time.

"Don't you think it's still too early for sleep…?"

"Hm? Too early…? Eight o'clock certainly *is* quite early for bed. But I thought we wanted to give ourselves some extra time to prepare."

How long was this man intending to take? Byletta desperately wanted to avoid another till-dawn affair. She wanted to go to her factory the next day.

"There's a commemoration celebration later this month. If we're to join the party afterward, you'll need time to get ready, won't you?"

"Huh?"

A commemoration celebration?

She no longer knew what that word was supposed to mean.

"I'm not well versed in how long it takes a woman to get ready, but I do know that you cannot simply throw on a uniform like us men and be done with it. From what I hear, it's an entire process—putting on fine apparel, selecting jewelry, applying skin care and the like."

"What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you heard? There will be a formal ceremony to commemorate the current armistice at the end of this month. The initial celebration will be held earlier in the day, with army personnel and their families being invited to a victory banquet in the evening. I

believe the invitations have already been sent. Perhaps mine has been sent to my army-issued residence."

"Oh, no, it hasn't. I heard all about this from your father."

This was probably the same invitation that Count Swangan had mentioned to her before.

So a party under the guise of a victory celebration would be held during the late afternoon. But if it was at the end of the month, that meant…

"One of the conditions of attendance is the accompaniment of a partner. I would be very pleased if you would join me."

Arnald sent her a devilish grin. For as much as he was maintaining a cool demeanor, there was a viciousness underneath. Byletta felt a rush of shame. She'd let the man fool her once again.

Her face was getting warm now, but Byletta did her best to keep her cool. She mobilized all the willpower she had to keep her voice steady.

She hadn't expected "living as husband and wife" to include things of that nature. She should have made sure he worded it better. She just hadn't expected him to apply that particular clause such a wide breadth of activities.

"Fine, I will."

"Thank you."

Byletta didn't have any dresses that would complement a military uniform. And even if she ordered one, the days she had until the event were limited. She happened to know where she could obtain some jewelry, but if she didn't request a set at the store tomorrow, it wouldn't arrive in time for the event.

As Byletta tried to settle her mind—still dizzyingly flipping between shame and dress planning—a pair of thin, shapely lips, a whisper of gratitude still upon them, drew ever closer. Before she could fully realize what was happening, she'd been drawn into a deep kiss that took her breath away.

Her bewildered heart found itself captured just like her lips.

"Huh…? Wh-what…"

"We're living as husband and wife. Just as we agreed."

Byletta was shocked by the way her body seemed to submit to her husband's kiss. Unable to resist, her body trembled in anticipation of receiving the same pleasure it had the night before.

Despite her confusion, Byletta couldn't help but want to admonish her body for betraying her rational mind.

"It still hurts."

"I see. I'll be gentle this time."

"May I just choose to decline instead?"

"This is a part of our wager. I'm not going to do anything that increases the odds in your favor. Besides, I want to get to know you better, my wife."

Byletta had heard Arnald was a heartless and tyrannical man who prioritized strategy. It seemed he lived up to that reputation. Winning their wager would always come before caring for her. Byletta desperately tried to push down a feeling of defeat. Was this truly her future?

Without sparing a thought to how she might be feeling, Arnald picked Byletta up and carried her to their bedroom next door. He handled her like a piece of furniture, but his grip was unexpectedly gentle. Delicately lowering her down onto the bed, he placed one hand on the edge of the mattress while the other got to work undoing the buttons on her nightgown. A smoldering heat ignited inside Byletta at the kisses he gently traced over her open neckline and the teasing movements of his hands.

His caresses were completely different from those of the night before. It was like she was making love to another person entirely.

"What has changed?" Byletta asked.

Her husband let out a pained sigh as she hazily looked up at him from the bed, but that was his only reply. To avoid answering the question, he initiated another deep kiss. Entwining their tongues, he teased the inside of her mouth as if to placate her.

The heat in her body heightened, taking control of her. All her thoughts melted away. While the sensations themselves were gentle,

the pleasure they imparted was intense.

When she let out a long exhalation in an attempt to escape the fever her husband was creating within her, Byletta was surprised to hear a long, sweet moan escape in its place.

From there, a gentle night unfolded. It couldn’t have been more different than the last.

CHAPTER 2

An Estate Inspection and a Husband's Intentions

Three days after Arnald approached Byletta with his strange wager, the time came for her to depart the Swangan's city home to accompany the count on his inspection of their country estate.

Their intent was to investigate the actual yield of the harvest that had been reported deficient, secure evidence of embezzlement, and attempt to get a confession to the crime from the masterminds behind it. It was a terrifying amount to achieve in a single week, but Count Swangan insisted it could be done. Byletta's head hurt just thinking about how much of the work was going to end up dumped in her lap.

The eastern side of the empire was mostly made up of the mountains that stretched out from the imperial capital, and thus sat at quite a high altitude. While the area did have a few roads left over from the development that had taken place there, making it simple enough to come and go, the journey to the Swangan's property still took two entire days. With the victory celebration coming in but a few weeks' time, they'd planned to depart the capital before dawn, forgo the use of inns, and only stop to change out the horses to ensure they'd be home in time. That way, they would be able to reach the Swangan estate by afternoon the following day.

It was colder in the east than it had been in the imperial capital. Even though it was high summer, Byletta didn't feel warm at all.

Generally, that would make travel more bearable, but in this case, it meant that there was a chill inside the carriage.

Byletta secretly wanted to tear her hair out at the situation she'd found herself in.

Never once in all the times her father-in-law had previously taken her to the estate had she felt this gloomy.

"Why is he here?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him?"

Sitting across from each other in the confines of the cramped carriage, Count Swangan and Byletta exchanged frowns and whispers.

Beside Byletta sat a peaceful Arnald, his eyes closed in slumber. His sculpted features were just as handsome as usual. With his eyes closed, he reminded Byletta of a delicate, carefully crafted doll. His striking form was truly impressive, but Byletta was trying her hardest not to look. The mere sight of him infuriated her.

Byletta hadn't been informed that he was due to accompany them on the trip. He'd said nothing about it.

Byletta had told him the night before that she was needed at the Swangan estate and would be away from the capital for a few days. Still, Arnald had only nodded in understanding.

It had been a relief to know that she would receive a brief respite from her wifely duties. In total, she'd be staying at the estate for around a week, giving her just enough travel time to return for the victory celebration at the end of the month. It would mean being separated from her husband for an entire third of the remaining duration of their contract, but their agreement had never stated that they had to always be together. She wouldn't be breaking any pledges, per se.

Despite that, when she walked out of the house the following morning, she'd been shocked to see a bored-looking Arnald loitering in the doorway. At first, she'd wondered whether he had come to escort her to the carriage and see her off, but when he'd climbed in beside her, she'd been at a loss for words.

Apparently, Arnald had interpreted her explanation the previous night as an instruction to come along. The last one to enter the carriage had been Count Swangan, whose expression had begun to sour the moment he spotted Arnald sitting inside. Normally, Byletta

would have ridiculed him for being so awkward with his own son, but she hadn't felt particularly inclined at that moment.

Arnald, meanwhile, had ignored the odd looks on Byletta and his father's faces and quickly gone to sleep.

Since then, the carriage had been filled with tension.

"Listen, I hope you understand that you're the one who will be looking after him," snapped the count.

"You can't just force this on me. If you do, I won't help with the inspection."

"Don't be absurd… The tenants are the ones who'll suffer! Is that the choice you want to make?"

"You speak of morals, but I don't find your argument very ethical. With all you've given me to do, now you'd also like me to babysit your son?"

"He's your husband."

"He's a *stranger*. After eight years of neglect, I'm a wife in name only. How could I possibly have any authority over him?"

"It's not as if the boy ever spends time at home, either. I don't know that we've ever had a proper conversation. You two decided to spend another month as husband and wife, did you not? Then you've definitely exchanged more words with him than I ever have."

"Doesn't it make you sad to hear yourself say such things, Father?"

Byletta had heard that the father and son didn't get along, but she hadn't known that things were *this* acrimonious. But despite the pity in her voice, the count simply snorted.

"Well, aren't you two close?" a quiet voice chimed in, making Byletta turn to the side in fright. A pair of serene green eyes met hers.

How long had he been awake?

"We're not close! Are you blind?! Have you seen how brazen she is?! This impudent woman doesn't respect me at all. You should give her a stern talking-to."

"Come now, Father, I'm sorry. Would you prefer that I alight from this carriage?"

"You certainly are fond of making threats while using my estate as a shield. If you leave now, who will do the inspection? Do you *enjoy* capitalizing on my tenants' predicaments?"

"How very mature you are, shutting your eyes to your own inadequacies and taking them out on others. I see I could learn much from you."

"You little…!" spat the count.

As Byletta laughed, she could see Count Swangan's expression contort.

Arnald let out a small snort that indicated he wasn't quite sure what was happening. "You two really are on good terms."

Byletta had no idea what her husband's true intentions were. It was difficult to parse any emotion from his apathetic face. All she could tell was that he was deep in thought.

All of a sudden, Arnald gently took Byletta by the hand and gazed at her. When she felt his fingers lightly stroking her skin, the sensation made her heart skip a beat. His rough, calloused hands didn't seem to belong to a man with such refined features, but the long digits attached to them were both handsome and artistic.

Byletta felt strangely impressed that a man with such a fine face would also have such fine hands.

But then she remembered what those fingers had done to her body. A blush began to creep up her cheeks, and without even thinking, she pulled her hand away.

"Wh-what is it?" she asked.

"I was just thinking that your hands are rather calloused…"

Byletta suppressed a scream. *Oh, please accept my apologies for daring not to have the hands of a sheltered maiden!*

The calluses had developed through her practice with a sword. She knew that they weren't the usual soft and pristine hands of a lady.

"I'm sure holding them must be quite unpleasant for you, then," Byletta said. "Perhaps you should keep your hands to yourself."

Arnald looked puzzled by her refusal. But what was there to be confused over?

Did he have something to say about Byletta's lack of appreciation for sudden hand-holding?

In the end, Arnald said nothing and simply looked out the window. She wanted nothing more than to ask him what exactly his problem was, but at the same time, something told Byletta it was better to leave it alone.

She just couldn't understand her husband's behavior. Never had she wished for the carriage to arrive at House Swangan's country estate so quickly.

Alas, it was only after spending a very uncomfortable day and half in the carriage that they finally reached their destination: a village they were due to inspect the next day.

It was a small village in a tranquil farmland where grain was grown.

The count rather liked imposing work on others, but he seemed to be overcome with enthusiasm for once…is what Byletta wished she could have said. Instead, his secret plot to work her to the bone was plain for all to see.

All he did was grumble that his back hurt. Even though it was the count himself who'd determined the speed of their itinerary, he began to complain about the upcoming victory celebration besides.

In any case, the three of them—Byletta, a reluctant Count Swangan, and a silent, mysteriously present Arnald—began to observe the village.

It appeared the villagers had been notified of the inspection, as the party received a warm welcome from the village steward before they all set off to take a look around.

Byletta casually split away from the group to approach one of the villagers who was working.

The man, who had just been plowing the fields, stared at her with his mouth agape. Presently, many men were returning from the war, but Byletta wasn't sure if this particular gentleman had been in the military or not. She spoke to him regardless.

"Has there been much rain recently?"

"N-not much…uh, my lady."

Noticing how the man was trying his best to speak to her politely, Byletta felt a bit guilty as she continued her line of questioning.

"I see. Has that affected the crops?"

"Not really. The harvest was actually quite good this year. There wasn't very much flooding, so we didn't lose many crops to that, either, my lady!"

"Have you seen anyone strange around here recently?"

"Nah. We'd know a stranger if we saw one. We know everyone 'round 'ere."

The man's way of speaking suddenly switched back to normal—as if the question rattled him.

"If you do see something suspicious, could you please report it to the staff at the manor? We're going to dispatch soldiers from the capital as well, but that could take some time."

"Should we be worried about bandits? That would be a massive problem, m-my lady."

"Reports of such have reached our ears, so the count would like to increase the number of patrols."

"Ah, I was wondering what a nobleman like the count was doing here."

Even though they were speaking about Count Swangan, the man showed no signs of anger or resentment. Landowners who did nothing were usually despised. *Could he have taken some kind of action to mollify the estate's residents without my knowledge?* Byletta wondered.

More likely, there was little for the man to be upset about because all the other staff at the estate had been working so hard.

Otherwise, the count wouldn't have been able to ignore his lands for so long.

"If you have any other requests, please speak to the village steward as usual."

Byletta had begun to ask the same questions of some other villagers when Arnald reappeared. There was a dangerous light in his eyes, as though he wanted to demand something from her. Had something happened to put him in a bad mood?

"What are you doing, getting so cozy with the villagers? Are you scouting out a bedmate for tonight?"

"What nonsense…"

What on earth was he talking about?

Just because he wasn't making his usual advances, that didn't mean her body ached so much for him that she couldn't sleep. In fact, she'd slept plenty well without him the previous night. Now that she knew how good it felt to sleep alone again, why would she go out and seduce a villager? Granted, sleeping in the carriage the previous night hadn't been a very comfortable alternative, but still…

An annoyed Byletta glared at her husband.

"I was just asking them a few questions. They told me there wasn't much rain this year, but it was a good harvest. That leads me to believe that quite a lot of the harvest is going missing. I was also laying out some bait. Now we just have to hope somebody bites."

"Bait?"

Quickly putting some distance between them and the villagers, Byletta leaned in and quietly whispered something into her husband's ear that made his eyes grow wide.

She giggled triumphantly.

"If no one bites, we'll have to think of something else, but this ploy is usually quite effective. And your presence only lends more legitimacy to it."

"Me? I should like to know what you are using me for."

"Patience, husband. All shall be revealed once our quarry takes the bait," Byletta said bitingly over her shoulder as she walked toward a

bridge that spanned a stream.

Count Swangan and several others were gathered on the other side. But before she could take a single step onto the bridge, a pair of arms suddenly grabbed her securely around the waist from behind.

"Aaah!"

Her husband held her back tightly, leaving her with one foot dangling in the air.

What kind of game could he possibly be playing this time?! Byletta thought furiously, but the sensation of his musculature pressing against her back had left her quite speechless. The man looked slim, but he had the build of a soldier. It was probably that physique that allowed him to possess so much beauty without looking at all feminine. When they had first arrived at the village, all eyes had been on him. He had not reacted at all, however, as though the attention was a common occurrence.

"What was that for?"

"This bridge is falling apart. I've heard that it's going to be replaced with a new one soon. Apparently, they're bringing some workmen in to fix it tomorrow."

With every word, his breath tickled the nape of Byletta's neck. It sent chills down her spine and made her struggle against her husband. *Why must my body revel in remembering what he does to me at night?* she lamented. She was perfectly happy sleeping alone —indeed, the previous night, she'd been ecstatic. If she perceived even a hint of loneliness in herself, well…it was surely all in her head.

"All right, I understand. Now let me go."

Byletta squirmed inside her husband's arms, but it didn't feel like Arnald had any intention of releasing his viselike grip.

"You really will get hurt if you keep struggling like that."

"Ah… N-not there!"

Unable to escape the warm brush of Arnald's breaths over her skin, Byletta could feel heat beginning to spread through her body.

But even though he could clearly see the blush dusting her cheeks, he continued talking regardless.

"There's another way over there."

Arnald was right in that the wooden bridge in front of her did look quite old and decrepit. With her foot still floating there, ready to carry her forward, Byletta shifted her gaze in the direction that Arnald indicated. There was a plank of wood bridging the banks of the stream.

"Thank you for your assistance. You can let go of me now."

Why must he try to humiliate her so? And somewhere so public?

Byletta was so embarrassed she could feel tears starting to well in her eyes.

She might no longer be a virgin, but the fact remained that Byletta had little to no experience with members of the opposite sex. She had never, to her memory, been held so tightly in a man's arms—not even by her father. She'd had no idea it would make her feel so self-conscious.

But Arnald seemed uninterested in her turmoil. He let out a deep sigh.

"That would be very difficult for me."

"It's simple. All you have to do is loosen your arms!" Byletta shouted in a burst of fury.

That was when she felt Arnald's tongue at the nape of her neck.

The warm, wet sensation sent a heat throughout her body that grew with every passing second.

"You just look so delectable."

"If you're that hungry, go and find something to eat."

He was ridiculing her! Toying with her!

Finally managing to tear herself from his grip, Byletta clutched the back of her neck and wailed in shame.

With the inspection of the first village complete, the party headed to the Swangan manor house at dusk. Byletta felt a sense of relief

wash over her.

Passing through a gate surrounded by high walls and emerging from a cluster of trees, they arrived at the estate's front garden. Before them, Byletta could see a residence even older and more enormous than the manor she'd shared with the count and his family in the capital. While it was certainly old-fashioned, it was so well cared for that it still looked beautiful. Even in the nighttime, the torches here and there lit it up. Further in, there were steeples and several storehouses. That alone told Byletta that finances were doing well.

The head steward, Bardu, reverently bowed his head in greeting.

"Welcome back, my lord."

"Thank you. We'll be staying here for a while."

With the count now out of the carriage, Byletta and Arnald were not far behind. Bardu's eyes grew wide in shock upon seeing them.

"Young master?"

"Yes, it's been quite a while."

It was a casual greeting for a man Arnald couldn't have seen for ten years, but the head steward had gotten his job for a reason. His smile widened regardless.

"I'm very glad to see that you've returned from the battlefield unscathed."

"Thanks."

"No doubt your young wife is relieved as well."

"Quite," interjected Byletta.

Worried that she might let something slip, she'd done her best to keep her answer as brief as possible. Bardu didn't seem to think anything of it and nodded along calmly.

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe the tax inspector returned to the capital just the other day. Is something amiss?"

"We simply wish to check on a few things," Count Swangan explained. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"As you wish."

Without saying another word, Bardu led them into the house.

The tax inspector had already told the count and Byletta that the grain embezzlement had been done at the instruction of the head steward, but all Bardu had offered by way of a reaction to their sudden appearance was a dubious look. Was he just extremely confident that he wouldn't be found out? Or perhaps he worried that he would look suspicious if he probed too much…?

It was also possible he *did* want to ask something but was trying to find the correct words to broach the subject with the unapproachable count.

Byletta stared at Count Swangan, who was acting his usual haughty self as he followed after Bardu. He must have been fretting somewhat, but it didn't appear that way. Whatever was in his heart, on the outside, he didn't seem upset in the slightest.

What if he told her he didn't care about the embezzlement after all? What would she do?

"My lady, we prepared the same room for you as usual. However, given that the bed is so small, you won't be able to share with your husband. Shall we prepare a room for the young lord next door instead?"

"Yes, that would be lovely."

That no room had been readied for her husband was his fault entirely—how could Bardu do his job when his young master had decided to accompany his wife and the count so suddenly? And even beyond that, Byletta had absolutely no issue with separate rooms. In fact, she was relieved to hear it. She nodded before he could protest, but his quiet voice soon found her ear.

"Separate rooms won't do."

Byletta glanced over at her husband as a maid showed them to their rooms, but his expressionless face was as unreadable as ever. He didn't look at all troubled. Incidentally, they'd spent the journey to the estate in the carriage, so he hadn't made any more outrageous advances. Instead, he'd just opted to hold Byletta's hand. That was unsurprising, given his father had been with them.

"Oh, but won't you be happy to get a good night's rest?" Byletta murmured back to her husband.

She was exhausted after being stuck inside a swaying carriage with barely any breaks all the way from the capital. All she wanted was her bed.

"I absolutely will…but I can no longer sleep a wink without you. I'm addicted to your warmth."

"Oh? Perhaps you should find yourself a stuffed toy to snuggle with instead."

Arnald's phrasing was so ambiguous that Byletta wasn't sure what he meant. *What is he actually feeling?* she wondered. Was he trying to say he didn't feel at ease unless she was there? Or perhaps he was just trying to start an argument…

Incensed, Byletta continued on toward her allotted room with heavy footsteps.

And yet, as soon as night fell, there was Arnald, even though his room was next door.

Byletta had been reading through some documents on the sofa in her room after dinner when she'd glanced up and found her husband standing in the doorway. He still wore an apathetic expression, and she didn't sense the lust of a man who would have snuck into his wife's room in the middle of the night for one express purpose.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Have you really come here often?"

There was a curious note in Arnald's voice. Likely, he'd heard something from the servants. *This would be a good opportunity to tell him everything*, Byletta thought, nodding at him. She sat up straight and stared at her husband. So the question was: Why exactly had she been to the manor house so regularly despite not being the wife of its lord?

Even if Arnald hadn't asked, she found the situation a bit strange, herself.

But there were reasons.

"Well, your father always whines about having to come, so he drags me along with him. And everyone is always very grateful."

"Huh?"

"It's all your father's fault."

Byletta brought Arnald up to speed on everything that had happened.

Count Swangan had only ever really shown his face at the estate when he'd first inherited his title. Arnald's mother, meanwhile, had remained there and jumped headlong into having and rearing a child, which was how Arnald had come to spend time at the estate after his birth. Being a military man, Count Swangan was often away, but he'd at the very least made sporadic visits back then.

Once his first wife had died, however, the count had stopped coming altogether, and that was more than twenty years ago. It was very unusual for a lord to act in such a manner; Byletta had been rendered speechless when she'd first found out.

The death of the count's wife had apparently happened around the same time he'd retired from the military due to his lung problems. That was also when his drinking had started.

As time went on, the requests he received to visit his estate—which the count had gotten regularly at the beginning of his tenure—began to come fewer and farther between, as had the petitions from the people there. He'd continued to send a tax inspector twice a year, but when the reports showed no issues, he'd apparently been led to believe that everything was going just fine under Bardu's leadership. If any problems did arise, he dealt with them by simply sending money or goods, just as he had recently. In the end, he'd gotten to the point where he approved all requests he received without so much as a second glance. He couldn't have been more neglectful if he'd tried.

As such, it was obvious why the tax inspector hadn't even bothered to hide anything on the reports he'd brought—given Count Swangan's attitude and disinclination to check the numbers, the culprit just stopped bothering to fudge them.

That said, the region had still passed government inspections year after year, so the blame couldn't entirely be left at the count's door. Byletta had an endless list of questions about why it hadn't failed, but right then, the estate itself had to be prioritized.

Byletta believed that the count had become even more dependent on alcohol once he'd found that things could run just fine without him.

When she'd first entered the picture and made him give up drinking, she'd also hauled him right out to the estate when she'd discovered that he'd been neglecting his work there. Bardu and the other servants had been astonished. It was like they'd seen a ghost. It turned out that the count hadn't even bothered to inform the estate of their imminent arrival. He'd deflected and said he hadn't bothered, thinking that they wouldn't actually get that far. Byletta had gone so far as to try to beat some sense back into him through sword practice.

That was how both the servants and those who lived on the estate had come to admire her. It'd actually made her a little uncomfortable—after she'd become aware of it, Byletta had started to visit less often and send her father-in-law on his own instead. Perhaps that had been the wrong move.

And then there was the discovery of all the grain going missing.

Frankly, it wasn't Byletta's job to deal with it. The count's carelessness was what had started all this. That was why she'd promised herself she would investigate the mess and make him rue the consequences of his inaction.

"…And that's why I would appreciate your assistance. I need you to persuade your father to take his job more seriously."

"I see. So that's why they meant by 'sympathizers.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, I was just talking to myself. So what's that you were reading?"

"The estate's tax revenue ledger. It includes reports on disasters like flooding around the property, and some repair logs as well. Your

father just dumped it on me, but it's all right. I'll get him back for this."

Byletta smiled daringly, causing Arnald's eyes to widen and his lips to curl into the faintest of smiles before his face quickly returned to its apathetic expression.

"I look forward to seeing what you can do. What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"There are a few places I intend to visit, but you don't need to accompany me."

Shifting her gaze up, Byletta's eyes were met with the emerald green of her husband's looking down upon her. He kissed her.

It was the lightest of gestures, almost like a peck.

"I'll still be there. Till tomorrow, then."

Arnald casually sauntered back out of the room, leaving a flushed Byletta sitting alone and trembling.

This was the same selfish man who'd returned as she slept, only to propose a strange wager and help himself to a wedding night. The same insufferable man who wanted to quibble over everything and clip her wings. And…the same man who'd spent their next night enjoying her so gently, only to vanish for a while and then suddenly turn up in her room again before leaving with nothing but a kiss.

It wasn't that she *wanted* to sleep with him. She just wanted to win their bet. And thankfully, the less they made love, the better her chances. So…why did she feel so frustrated?

Had he begun to lose interest now that he'd had her twice?

Her husband had much more experience with the opposite sex than she. Byletta could just tell. He was skillful and composed, whereas she was an unpracticed twenty-four-year-old, left at a disadvantage due to her—up till recently—virginal state.

She didn't care how Arnald had learned his tricks. At least, she shouldn't care. Yet, for some reason, she found herself feeling a bit sad. Maybe it was because the thought of being trifled with made her balk. Or maybe it was because she couldn't stand to think that she would never be more than a plaything to him.

She hated the feeling that Arnald had all the control.

So why was she lamenting that he seemed to have grown tired of her body? There was no need!

Or at least that was what Byletta desperately tried to convince herself as she slammed a fist down onto a pile of paperwork.

Byletta departed the manor house the next day after breakfast to go and inspect some more nearby villages. As both the count and Arnald were now accompanying her, the atmosphere within the carriage was heavy despite the cheerful weather outside.

They traveled along gravel paths that made the carriage rattle, ramping up the discomfort within. But, in a way, Byletta was grateful for that, as it meant no one was in the mood to talk.

As they surveyed several villages, Byletta realized that a part of the region under the count's management was experiencing issues with flood damage. The costs associated with these damages had been documented over several years, but when she had casually asked Count Swangan about it, the situation became clear. The area had suffered from flooding for a long time, but he hadn't thought of any way to alleviate it.

There was nothing else for it. Byletta had everyone halt their inspections and stop by a place where they could look out over a nearby lake.

She wasn't just blindly adding more things to their inspection schedule to chase away thoughts of her husband's past indiscretions —or that's what she kept telling herself. But despite that, she couldn't seem to stop coming up with more things to do in an effort to keep her brain occupied and rid herself of the shame she felt.

But she *was* supposed to be focusing on the estate, anyway.

As Byletta explained what they were doing, the count stared at her with a dubious expression, but she knew that once she started fully illustrating to him what she meant, his feelings would likely change.

"Did you have a reason for bringing us here?"

“When the river floods, the crops become submerged and the grain harvest dwindles. The floodwater also deposits dead fish and other animal carcasses, which can cause disease. You don’t want your tenants to die from sickness on top of a bad crop, do you? Don’t you think we should do something about it?”

After listening to Byletta talk about the extent of the damage flooding could do, a grumbling Count Swangan stared open-mouthed at the lake before him.

“So what would you have me do?” he asked.

Now that he understood the importance of maintaining the lake, his cantankerous attitude all but disappeared.

From there on, her father-in-law dragged her around, requesting she come up with various improvement plans. He was finally starting to act like a lord. Still, she wished she could just tell him to do it himself or hire an expert.

But, alas, he was motivated now, and doing anything to ruin his momentum would only be detrimental to the people who called the estate home.

“I know that you have a penchant for avoiding these kinds of things, Father, but this time you’ll participate, won’t you? As a kindness to your oh-so-helpful daughter-in-law? I think we should build a canal here and extend it all the way up to that village there. That should somewhat reduce the flood damage caused by rain and mud.”

The tranquil village situated near the lake was always deluged whenever there was a long period of heavy rain.

The rainwater easily exceeded the volume that the lake could handle, and all the excess would flow toward the village. That meant they needed to redirect it somewhere, but doing so would prevent the overflowing water from introducing nutrient-rich soil as well as disease. That was why it was so crucial for them to come up with the right plan.

In Byletta’s opinion, the solution was to build a canal. That would allow the villagers to manage the water volume and protect their

homes from damage at the same time.

"Plenty of men are returning from the war, so now would be the perfect time to build it, but we'll need to make sure the foundations are solid or we could face issues later down the line. In that respect, I think it would be a good idea to ask an expert to check things over. As long as the foundations are strong, we shouldn't have that hard of a time finishing up the rest. Plus, just getting that first bit into place should cut the water damage in half."

"Where did you learn all these things?" Arnald asked curiously, gazing out at the view beside Byletta.

"This one's a businesswoman," said the count. "She's always on top of anything that could make her a tidy sum."

"Which is precisely why I'm able to offer all this advice," said Byletta. "Feel free to compliment me more if you'd like."

"Nothing good would come from letting you get too cocky."

"I'm but a fragile young lady. I long for nothing more than to be treated with a little kindness."

Byletta let out a high-pitched giggle, and the count snorted and turned away.

Whenever he was losing a war of words, he soon resorted to sulking.

"Hmph. What unpleasant task have you thought up now?"

"Come, Father, I've done nothing of the sort. I was just thinking of how grateful I am that you brought me to a place as wonderful as this. Now I have a clear picture of the estate's situation."

"Unfortunately for you, I know that you're being sarcastic when you call me 'Father' unnecessarily."

"Oh, come now, Father. I'm not *only* being sarcastic. You really ought not think so badly of me."

"I see," murmured an impressed Arnald. "So I've misunderstood you, hmm…?"

What does that mean, exactly? Byletta wondered. But before she could ask, he began speaking about something entirely different.

"Look at the land over there and over there. Doesn't the bedrock seem weaker in those areas? Here, it looks harder, so I don't think we'll be able to do anything with it. It would likely be best if we built our channel from there to here."

As Arnald traced the ridgeline with his finger to show Byletta, he looked quite dignified. All that time he'd been standing there silently, he must have been looking at the terrain and musing over different options. He'd appeared completely uninterested, but his suggestion was spot-on.

"How do you know that?"

"The colors of the rocks vary. The striated areas and the rusty-brown areas are different types. When I was fighting in the east, we often had to dig through mountains, so I know firsthand."

"Did you hear that, Father? Now you've just got to get us an expert to work with."

"I've heard that you two have some kind of strange wager going on between you…but you're actually perfect for each other."

The only thing Byletta had told the count was that she was delaying her divorce by a month. Where had he heard about the wager? She'd never once witnessed a conversation between him and Arnald…but she *had* told Milena. Perhaps he'd heard it from her.

More importantly, what on earth did the count mean, they were perfect for each other?

"Oh, Father, you must be growing senile. As someone who's deeply concerned about this estate's future, I rather think it's time you handed off a venture as large as this to a successor."

Thoroughly scolded by his daughter-in-law, a red-faced Count Swangan began to make his way down the low hill.

It was early afternoon on the third day of the estate inspection, and Byletta had just requested Arnald come along.

Her husband considered it for a moment before nodding expressionlessly and climbing aboard the carriage with her. Byletta

had already informed the driver of their destination, so now all they had to do was sit back and relax until they arrived.

"It's refreshing to have my wife request my presence for once."

"Please stop fooling around. I need you to take a serious look at something for me."

"You do? I wonder what it could be…"

"You'll see when we arrive. If we talk too much in here, one of us will end up biting their tongue."

As the carriage rattled along the dirt roads, which were of poor quality as usual, Byletta maintained a complete and utter silence. The pair enjoyed a brief, silent respite before the carriage arrived at its destination. Upon stepping outside, Arnald blinked.

"Isn't this the village we came to the other day?"

"It's the first village we visited. Do you remember?"

"Of course I do. What are we doing here?"

Byletta had instructed the carriage to stop at the top of a small hill a short distance from the village. As expected, she had a good view of the entire settlement from there.

"There! Do you see it?"

Byletta held her arm out straight and pointed.

She was indicating the small bridge that Arnald had mentioned would be receiving repairs when they had last been there. A small number of men had indeed gathered to fix it, and a tall man with reddish-brown hair stood in the middle of the group. From his spot at the base of the old bridge, he appeared to be issuing orders to the muscular workers as they assembled the new one.

Even from a distance, the workers seemed to be getting things done rather quickly.

"I see. Well, that *is* strange."

"It's obvious at a glance, isn't it?"

"Yes. When they said workers would be coming to fix the bridge, they gave me the impression that those men would be from nearby villages. But these workers look too strong for that, and their actions

are far too coordinated. I haven't heard of a single platoon sent home from the war that was from the Swangan lands."

Arnald's gaze was focused on the movements of the workers. He'd been able to guess exactly what Byletta wanted him to do without her even having to tell him. Her husband was smart.

Byletta nodded in satisfaction at Arnald's reply.

"So I was right."

"Now I'm even more curious about what scheme you have in mind."

"I'm not intending to start a war here, I'll have you know. I just want to see the estate protected."

"Don't worry. If I felt that you were stirring up a rebellion, I'd have commanded the army to seize you already. More importantly, what exactly are you planning?"

"As I told you before, I've laid some bait."

Byletta flashed a smile at her husband, who let out a short, beleaguered sigh.

"Now I know why my father warned me not to underestimate that smile."

"Oh, been speaking with your father, have you? I thought you hated him. He's suspicious of every single thing I do, so perhaps it's best not to take his words at face value."

"I've never really hated him."

Though the count often ridiculed Byletta by calling her wily and saying that she wasn't to be trusted, she had never seen him converse with his son. She found herself truly surprised at what Arnald had just said. It appeared that her husband did indeed speak with his father sometimes, just perhaps only when they were alone.

But though his answer had clearly shocked his wife, Arnald's face remained apathetic. Perhaps he didn't much care about his father one way or the other.

"We're going to get spotted if we keep loitering here, so let's leave now."

Without even waiting for a response, Byletta pushed her husband back toward the carriage.

Upon her return to the manor house, Byletta exhaled deeply.

Every day was a hectic mess, a far cry from peace and tranquility, and all she wanted to do was scream that none of it was her job. She had not married the lord of these lands, but his son—at least on paper. Speaking of which, while she was happy that the actual lord had begun to gather documents and consider countermeasures, she still didn't quite understand what on earth his son was doing here. Why had he decided to accompany them on this journey? Byletta couldn't be sure and was thus still uncertain of his intentions.

Since Arnald had been following her and the count around as they completed their inspections, they'd been spending quite a lot of time together. Sometimes he impressed Byletta with his ability to consider various subjects from a military perspective, but his penchant for making a nuisance of himself by teasing her made her angry.

His presence alone was a problem. She couldn't ignore him. It wasn't as if they exchanged that many words or were joined at the hip day and night, but she found herself captured whenever her husband appeared and began talking. His calm tone was dignified and pleasant to listen to, so whenever his words graced her ear, she always ended up listening. And given almost all of what he said was designed to infuriate her, he'd left a lasting impression.

Whenever Byletta was alone in her room, unwanted thoughts always seemed to make their way into her head. Since she had a bit of time before dinner, she decided to put on a gown and go for a stroll in the garden instead. Usually, her stay at the Swangan estate only lasted for two to three days before she returned to the capital, so this was the first time she'd gotten the chance to properly explore the manor house.

Within the courtyard, away from the geometrically shaped lawns, was a small flower bed. As Byletta gazed at it, Bardu and the gardener approached.

"Lady Conia planted these flowers herself and took tender care of them right until the day she became sick. The species planted here now are the same as those she planted back then."

"Indeed they are. That woman certainly knew her plants."

Byletta was impressed by all the different kinds of flowers. They were small, well suited to the climate of the Swangan estate, and apparently bloomed throughout the changing of the seasons.

"You can just tell, can't you, my lady?" Bardu asked. "How caring she was and how deep her love for the natural world ran."

The gardener wrinkled his brow and nodded while the steward stared at the flower bed with a fond look on his face.

"It was unusual for the time, but she and the count married for love. They were a very happy family."

"Really?"

I never would have guessed, Byletta mused, thinking of Count Swangan as she knew him now.

The gardener let out a merry laugh at Byletta's surprise. "The younger servants always react that way, too. I suppose if you didn't know him before, you wouldn't be able to imagine it, either. The young lord is the spitting image of Lady Conia. Now that he's grown, I can't tell you how happy it makes us to see him. But it must be difficult for his father. He probably reminds the count of Her Ladyship."

That the servants still called Arnald's mother "Her Ladyship" was notable. It looked like they didn't acknowledge Milena's mother, who spent all her time back at the capital, as the current countess. It wasn't really an issue since she didn't come and visit the country estate, but the realization still made Byletta uncomfortable.

"Arnald stayed here when he was little, didn't he?"

"That's right. He was brought up in the manor from the day he was born, though he never returned here after he left to go to school in the capital. Actually, after Her Ladyship collapsed, he took over tending this flower bed. He often brought the flowers to his mother's bedside."

"He was a kind boy who loved his mother. It beggared belief when he became a soldier…," the gardener said with a quivering voice, casting his eyes downward.

Byletta only knew her husband as a military man, so she found it unsurprising when others described him as cold or unfeeling. Even the way he'd abandoned her for eight years, only to pop back up with a strange wager and force her to consummate their marriage, felt like actions rooted in the rationalism of a soldier.

But to the servants who'd known him before, it seemed he was still the sweet young boy who'd taken care of his ailing mother. There was no way they could imagine that child going to war.

"People used to call him the Angel of Swangan Manor."

"Ack…!"

Byletta choked, even though she wasn't drinking anything.

A-an angel?

But Byletta did understand where the moniker could have come from. It wasn't such an outrageous nickname for a beautiful little boy who brought flowers to his mother's sickbed. Even now, if all you knew of him was his face, you might think him an angelic creature.

Byletta struggled not to laugh at the thought. The gardener and Bardu were being serious.

She decided to change the subject instead.

"B-by the way, about that letter I received a short while ago…"

Bardu sometimes sent reports on the estate to Byletta instead of the count. The reason for doing so was simple: Likely, if he *did* send a written petition to Count Swangan, it would simply go unread. As such, the steward and Byletta had essentially become pen pals. If there was something that she could help with, she typically did. But given that it was the count's job to care for the estate and not hers, she tried to get involved as little as possible.

The letter that had arrived before the tax inspector's visit had inquired about the possibility of purchasing sandbags to use in case the river overflowed. The request had made clear that even though

there had been little rainfall and thus barely any flooding that year, it would be preferable if they took this opportunity to shore up the estate's sandbag supplies while they could.

"Are the count and young lord here on a different matter?"

"Partly, although Arnald is here for something else. Something between a preliminary investigation and a reconnaissance mission. We've heard reports that suspicious groups of men have taken up residence on the Swangan estate, so we plan to dispatch soldiers from the capital. Arnald is here to determine whether we need to send a troop or a platoon."

"Suspicious groups of men?"

"Yes, we've heard the same thing in multiple villages. The plan is to deploy the military quite soon."

"That's a rather disturbing tale…"

"I haven't heard anything of the sort."

Bardu groaned, looking to be a bit dazed, while the gardener muttered a few words under his breath.

"If you take the reports and the results of our inspection into account, five years' worth of our grain has disappeared to who knows where. Obviously, it's been stolen in small increments, but the amount as a whole is substantial."

Sat at his work desk in the manor house, Count Swangan gritted his teeth. Byletta was standing across the desk, looking down at him and staring at the documents he'd gathered. Arnald, meanwhile, was sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed.

For the past five days, they had been comparing the amount of grain taken from each farming village in the region with the historical records of how much had been stored at the manor house. The time limit the count had set for their visit was now up, and after all the hustle and bustle of the trip, Byletta was feeling the weight.

Count Swangan, however, was enraged now that he'd seen the results.

The culprit would have had a hard time falsifying the data for each village. The risks involved in asking dozens of stewards—who ran the villages littered over the Swangan estate—to all take part in the scheme would have been far too great. Especially considering that they'd have to inform the people recording the data of what they were up to.

Someone, somewhere, would have reported things to the government. Thus, it was likely that only a small number of villages had falsified their data, and it was easy to determine which ones based on the reasons given for why their yield had decreased. All they had to do to expose what information was untrue was check with the villagers about whether the fires or sudden population booms listed in the records had actually occurred.

In the end, it came to light that over the past fifteen years, five years' worth of grain had gone unreported. Even though there had been three plentiful harvests, they had been recorded as disastrous failures.

"A quarter of all produce is always presented to the state. This is then added to the country's stockpiles and also sent to the front line in the form of supplies. But what we've sent for all these years is far below what we should have, now that we have accurate numbers. We won't be able to escape a penalty for underreporting."

"Your point?"

Peeking over at the count, Byletta found him sitting as still as a statue, arms crossed in front of him.

Arnald, meanwhile, just wordlessly took a sip of tea from his seat on the sofa. Apparently, he found this current predicament no concern of his. He probably didn't even intend to inherit these lands. Still, one would've thought that the carelessness of the count's land management being brought to light by this affair would have shaken Arnald a little, but he seemed entirely unbothered.

Byletta let out a heavy sigh.

"You should be more upset, missy. You do realize that we all are going to suffer if I lose my title, don't you?"

"Since when have I had an interest in your title? I didn't even want to get married. My only desire is to live peacefully on my own, so please don't go worrying on my behalf."

"You really are a… Well, in any case, tell me what you know. At this rate, we'll be so poor that even your darling Milena will struggle to eat."

"Then Milena and I can just set up shop somewhere else together. No one would be able to stop talking about the boutique staffed by two beautiful sisters."

"Grr, why, you…!"

"If you simply must insist on my helping, Father, I have one simple request."

Byletta shot her father-in-law a sweet smile, and the count shuddered. It seemed a bit silly for a man like him to turn pale and tremble at a cheerful grin from a beautiful girl—perhaps he was in awe of her splendor? Byletta could concede that point, if that was the case.

"A request from you? It depends on what kind of request."

"Nothing major."

"That's what you said last time, and look what happened then."

Count Swangan sighed, throwing a glance at Arnald as if to highlight what had happened the last time he did her a favor.

"Those are two separate matters. I have one document that I would like you to draw up."

"Again with the documents? Are you intending on launching some sort of scam?"

"That's very insulting to say to a businesswoman as honest as I, but I think you'll find this a mutually beneficial transaction. Does that put your mind at ease?"

"If it was mutually beneficial, then why bother asking me in this way? I would simply grant your request. Which means that this is something that only benefits you."

"What did you mean by 'again'? Have you asked him to draft something for you before?" Arnald, who had remained silent the

whole time, suddenly asked.

Byletta's stomach fell. She'd kicked a hornet's nest.

If she told Arnald that the letter from his father that had been included in her divorce petition was the result of her beating a drunk Count Swangan in combat, the illusion that the count supported her separation from his son would crumble. How that would affect the outcome of her and Arnald's wager, Byletta didn't know, but since she'd worked so hard to get the count on her side, she didn't want to jeopardize that now.

Feigning composure, Byletta turned to face her father-in-law.

"It was just something I needed a favor for. This time, it's not entirely unrelated to your estate, but… Father, there are many ways of looking at things. If you look at this request from a certain angle, you'll see how it may end up benefiting us both."

"You sound like a true fraudster…but fine. Present me with a way to settle this matter and have done with it."

Had she managed to successfully dodge Arnald's question? Puffing up her chest, Byletta carefully composed her expression.

"There are few lords in this day and age who honestly report their crop yields. They know that the more they report, the more will be taken away. Now, we've already completed our reports for our harvests up to this year, but we're talking about grain, right? The grain that was harvested two years ago or more no longer exists, so there's no way the outstanding amount can be collected. They can fine us, but they can't get that grain back."

"So you're saying we shouldn't say anything?"

"It's the empire's fault that they didn't notice the errors. We should just feign ignorance. Since we didn't know what was happening until now, we only have to maintain the act. Then it's nothing more than a minor crime. You'll probably still be reprimanded for not keeping a close enough eye on your estate, but now that we understand what went on this year, all we have to do is send in accurate reports from here on out. The only problem is that we've already submitted the

first report for this year, and it claimed we had a bad harvest. It would be suspicious for us to suddenly report a good one."

"What is the difference between the real and false figures this year?" Arnald asked, deep in thought.

"Since we've been sending the estate extra grain already, even if the people here consumed it all, we'd still be looking at an amount equivalent to eight months' worth."

"That much?"

When Byletta looked at Arnald, he had a strange expression on his face. Though the amount seemed larger than he'd expected, he didn't appear to be about to raise any objections to her plan of action, so she simply ignored him.

The government reports were sent every year, once after the harvest and again in the spring. The first was a rough report, and the second contained the actual figures.

It was currently summer, so they were in the midst of creating the report for the fall. In other words, they were at the point where they were laying the groundwork for the rough estimates.

"Then what is your strategy to manage the difference?" Count Swangan asked tiredly.

Byletta smiled.

"We'll have it stolen by thieves."

At the furious ringing of the bell, Byletta jumped up from her bed and grabbed the sword she'd left leaning against the bed post.

Opening the door and exiting into the hall, she saw Arnald was already there, standing at the ready. Even though it was nighttime, he was wearing his usual daytime outfit of a shirt and slacks. Like Byletta, he also had a sword in his hand.

"Do you really mean to face them?"

Arnald's voice was clear. It was so calm, it sounded like he'd been awake the whole time. Byletta had heard that soldiers often

participated in nighttime drills and midnight marches, so perhaps he was used to being awake this late.

"Not someone to hide away meekly at times like this, are you?" he asked.

"If that's what you'd rather do, why don't you go and cower in your room?" Byletta remarked over her shoulder.

She ran away without waiting for a reply and headed toward her father-in-law's room on the second floor of the opposite end of the manor.

Instead of wearing nightclothes, she was in a simple dress. It would've been nice to have a pair of pants like a typical soldier, but there was nowhere for her to get any. Still, after wearing the simplest clothes she could for the last few nights in preparation for this moment, knowing she could go back to her usual nighttime wear was a relief.

It must have been the dead of night. The only illumination to be found as Byletta advanced through the familiar corridor came from faint beams of moonlight. Here and there throughout the manor and courtyard, she could hear scuffles erupting.

"I'm not concerned about *me*. I was just looking after your safety, my wife."

"If you wanted a meek wife, you should have looked elsewhere."

Byletta dodged the strike of a strange man who suddenly lunged at her from the staircase landing, only for Arnald to pounce on him from behind and cut him down. Ever the soldier, he looked at home handling a sword.

Byletta knew that despite Arnald's slim appearance, his body was quite well muscled. She'd been forced to know—it would have been hard to miss, given she'd lain with him.

Still, she didn't like the thought of complimenting the man. She wasn't sure why, but she simply could not bring herself to praise him.

In the madness, Byletta and Arnald encountered an enemy emerging from the direction of her father-in-law's bedroom. Perhaps

he had heard them arguing. Regardless, she found herself rather glad of the timing, as it saved her from having to speak any further with her husband.

By the time the man brandished his sword, Byletta had already found an opening and shot forward to cut him down. Her sword was lightweight, so her fighting style was focused on speed. She knew the easiest way for her to deal with an opponent was to incapacitate him in a single blow.

"That was well fought."

"I'm honored by the compliment," Byletta said.

But in truth, she was not pleased at all. Perhaps it was guilt over not complimenting him for his own proficient fighting mere moments before, or perhaps she just knew her husband's condescending nature far too well.

When she came to a standstill, Byletta could see flames engulfing the storehouse at the rear of the manor.

"It's begun."

"They're attacking just as we anticipated, but there are more assailants than we expected. Be careful."

Byletta glanced at her husband out of the corner of her eye while watching the flames. His shoulders seemed to shrink in a little, almost like he was embarrassed. It had been his idea to herd the enemy in a certain direction by restricting the paths of attack they could take—a cunning strategy that only he would have thought of. It looked like he wasn't only known as the Silver Fox of the Battlefield for his hair.

Back when Byletta had expressed her desire to burn the storeroom, Arnald had been the one to speak up and point out an additional point of penetration from the courtyard that they needed to block off. The gardener had also been reluctant to the idea of setting the storehouse ablaze in the night, but her husband had been able to talk him around. Byletta watched the flames, designed to inflict as little damage as possible, as she ran all the way to her father-in-law's room.

They needed to wrap things up before the flames had time to spread to the manor house, which meant they were in a race against time. As Byletta made her way forward, another man came out to meet her, but she cut him down without skipping a beat. Then she dived straight into the count's bedroom.

"Are you hurt, Father?"

"How valiant. Do you intend on joining the military?"

"Now, now. I came all the way here to save you, my dear damsel in distress. But since you still have it in you to say things like that, I suppose you're fine."

Beside Count Swangan himself, the count's room contained two incapacitated enemies and a third who was cowering with his head in his hands.

"Wh-what's happening? The count wasn't supposed to be this skilled…"

"I guess word of your freewheeling life in the capital spread all the way back here," Byletta commented, not sure if the man was referring to the count's penchant for drunken violence or his utter neglect of the management of his estate. Regardless, it seemed that tales of him sparring with his daughter-in-law had yet to reach the manor.

"Could you please pipe down? Bardu—do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Count Swangan thrust the tip of his blade toward the head steward's neck and glared at him.

The man raged back as hard as he could despite his quivering throat.

"You only have yourself to blame! It didn't matter whether we had a bad harvest, if our bridges collapsed, a village was deluged by floods, or our crops were stolen… You only ever told us to deal with it ourselves! I did what I *had* to do!"

"And that included joining forces with scoundrels, did it?"

"If we hadn't, our grain would have been taken anyway. They have to live, too. Plus, striking a deal with them meant that they didn't do

anything outrageous to the people of the estate. I have no regrets."

Byletta could sympathize with the resolute Bardu.

"Whichever way you look at it, you're the one in the wrong, Father. I'd actually say that he's done his job quite well, wouldn't you?"

"What does that matter when he joined forces with the riffraff who came to kill me? He's not worth saving."

"I only did that because you said you would dispatch the Imperial Army, my lord! They came here to talk since they would have nowhere to run. They had no intention of hurting you!"

"Oh, that army stuff was made up. It was all a ploy to lure you to the manor."

As Byletta laughed, Bardu turned to look at her with a dumbfounded expression.

When Byletta had interviewed villagers during the course of their inspection, she'd been given many accounts of a group of men who'd been fixing various roads and bridges. Witnesses had also reported seeing them repel groups of bandits at night. When she'd taken Arnald along to look into the matter further, she'd been able to observe that, just as she'd heard, the group working on the bridge in the village weren't ordinary workmen.

That's why she had fed people the story that the Imperial Army would soon be on their way to deal with them.

They'd also told Bardu the same lie. Given his probable involvement in the matter of the grain theft, they'd been confident that feeding him the information would mean his accomplices would catch wind of the rumors soon enough.

He'd probably understood that if elite imperial forces did come, it would be exceedingly difficult for his partners to escape unharmed. From what Byletta had managed to gather, the group was likely only as large as a single platoon. When they heard what was coming, it hadn't been hard to predict that they'd panic and act out in desperation.

Count Swangan's brow furrowed even deeper as he began to speak again.

"You fool. You fell right for it. And to think, if your lot hadn't shown up, I would've been able to settle this matter without needing to write up those strange documents…"

"Come now, Father. I kept my end of our bargain, so you have a duty to uphold yours. I've explained to you that there's benefit to maintaining your lands properly from now on. And you *did* promise to do so."

"E-erm… This plan… Do you mean to say that the dispatch of troops from the capital was merely a ruse…? And the young lord wasn't here running reconnaissance…?"

"I'm here on a separate matter," Arnald said flatly, ignoring the desperate gaze of the head steward. Byletta wasn't sure what this separate matter exactly was, but her husband didn't seem to be making it up.

"That's why I said having you come with us would increase the investigation's legitimacy," Byletta pointed out.

"You have keen insight."

Byletta grinned at her shrugging husband.

For once, it felt like she'd gotten one over on him.

But apart from that, she was also proud that he'd commended her so genuinely. He hadn't added "for a girl" or any other qualifiers or criticisms to the mix.

"So…what does that mean?"

"That the army will not be coming, of course. Did you really think someone as proud as my father-in-law would let his dirty little secrets be aired in public? Not that I think he should be proud after neglecting his tenants for so long, but I believe he'd prefer to come to an arrangement that keeps this all between us."

Bardu blinked and looked up at Count Swangan. The head steward's face was whiter than a sheet.

"M-my lord…who on earth is this young lady? She cannot possibly be any ordinary young woman, can she?"

"She is my son's bride. A woman who managed to take you in completely with her facade of innocence and who wields such

cunning that it brings me needless shame. Look at Bardu's face, girl. He looks like he's seen a ghost. Perhaps you should be more forthcoming with your impudence in the future. Or, preferably, rid yourself of it altogether."

"Ha-ha-ha, oh, Father. You jape. You call a sweet girl like me 'cunning'? Perhaps you should choose your words more carefully when complimenting me. Your unique sense in these things always leaves a lady unsure of what to say."

"How very impudent," Count Swangan muttered.

Byletta looked questioningly at Count Swangan, only to find he'd taken on the expression of a man chewing a wasp.

"Stop nitpicking and go! We don't have much time!"

"Oh dear, someone's in a bad mood. I'll do my best not to anger you any further. Now then, we have three demands: Tell us where the stolen grain is going; reveal the identity of the thieves; and lastly, could you please put out the fire? The last point should be your first priority, so I'll speak with you and the thieves in question about the other two when you're done with that."

"Wh-what? Err…"

"Are you stupid?! Hurry up and go and put out the fire!" an impatient Count Swangan barked at the confused steward.

Before long, the fire had been extinguished with the help of the house staff.

No one told them what Bardu had done, so they still followed his orders unquestioningly. Upon hearing that the thieves had run away after setting fire to the storehouse, they all breathed a sigh of relief. They had been doubly reassured upon learning that the only party injured during the little skirmish had been the intruders, and that the count and Arnald had eliminated a great many of them.

The night couldn't be deemed a complete success, however—not with the furious looks the count continued to throw at his head steward.

By the time things settled, it had grown very late. It was decided that talks were to be temporarily postponed.

The bandits had been locked up in the dungeon under the manor. It was a place usually reserved for village criminals, so it wasn't very big. After fifteen of the assailants were squeezed in there, it rather resembled a can of sardines.

Of those fifteen, Byletta had subdued three, while the count had taken down two. The remaining ten had been captured by Arnald. He was quite a remarkable soldier, despite his slim physique. The ease with which he'd moved had felt almost like an illusion at first glance.

Byletta left everything else to the count and excused herself to her room. As she left, she heard Count Swangan and Bardu finally begin speaking about the questions she had put forward. But she was a young lady in need of beauty sleep, so she didn't waver in her decision to take her leave.

Just as she changed into her nightclothes and climbed into bed, Byletta was overtaken by a deeply pleasant feeling: drowsiness. She hadn't been able to fall into a deep sleep for days now, so it was a relief that matters had been taken care of so quickly.

She still didn't get the best rest that night, but she managed to get some winks in before she woke up the following morning. That's when she found out that her father-in-law had summoned her.

It was time for the talking to begin in earnest. Byletta had a rough idea about how things would unfold, but it was still difficult to predict how those on the opposite side would react.

By the time she arrived at the reception room, the other parties had already gathered. Count Swangan, Arnald, Bardu, and the apparent leader of the band of burglars were waiting for her.

The leader of the bandits had reddish-brown hair and sharp eyes, which gleamed with a light that seemed out of place in a mere thug down on his luck.

Presumably, this was the same man she and Arnald had seen giving orders when she'd dragged him out to observe the workmen

fixing the bridge.

As soon as Byletta entered the room, all eyes were on her. She carried on walking, trying her best to pay her audience no mind.

"My apologies for the delay."

Bardu showed her to a seat beside her father-in-law, although he remained standing.

"We've already gotten the answers to the questions you asked yesterday, but an inquiry has been lodged as to why you thought the thieves were connected to a neighboring country," said the count.

"Oh, so you've already told them?"

"If we hadn't, this man wouldn't have agreed to come to the negotiating table."

"My name is Gail Adaltine. Ex-head of the Kingdom of Naris's Artillery Regiment Supply Corps," said the bandit leader. "Those down in your dungeons are my former subordinates."

The Kingdom of Naris lay to the east of the Swangan's country estate. War had raged between the people of Naris and the people of Gaihandar thirty or so years ago, but the relationship had become more cordial once a peace agreement was in place. That treaty was also one of the reasons Count Swangan had been able to neglect his estate in favor of pickling himself in alcohol in the capital for as long as he had with so few consequences.

Just like the Gaihandar Empire, the Kingdom of Naris had been busy fighting a war against one of its neighbors for the past ten years: the Yahawelba Empire to the north. The conflict took up all the Narisians' energy and time, meaning they hadn't had the opportunity to turn their attention back toward the Gaihandar Empire since the war had begun. Embroiled in trouble as they were in the south, the Gaihandar Empire had been more than happy to leave them to it. However, while Gaihandar's war was premised on false accusations spread by an enemy that had unilaterally invaded their southern border, the Kingdom of Naris was fighting for a different reason.

A daughter of the Yahawelba Empire, who had become a princess of Naris through a wedding to Narisian royalty, had been poisoned and died. The war was retaliation—at least on the record.

The reddish-brown hair and tawny eyes of Gail Adaltine were common enough in the empire, so his appearance alone didn't give away that he was from a different country. And his subordinates looked much the same.

If Byletta hadn't known the surrounding circumstances, this incident would likely have been handled as a simple case of grain theft. She could understand why Gail had grown curious as to how she'd learned foreign actors were involved.

"Well, where should I begin? I know all about Targitte's disease."

"How on earth do you know about that…?!"

Gail's expression changed in an instant. Everyone from the Gaihandar Empire, on the other hand, looked confused. Bardu was the only exception—he turned his eyes downward with a meek look on his face, like he'd heard about it all before.

Byletta wasn't surprised that Gail was taken aback. The existence of Targitte's disease was a secret that the Kingdom of Naris and the Yahawelba Empire were both desperately trying to keep under wraps. In fact, that the man knew about it at all proved he must have been someone of decent standing. The disease was something only those close to the royal family were supposed to know about—a state secret.

Even Arnald appeared to have never heard of it before, but that was only natural, given he'd been in the south fighting a war. It was the fact that Count Swangan, the lord of these lands, hadn't had enough of an interest in his neighbors to have an inkling of what she was talking about that Byletta found extremely regrettable. Concluding that she would have to bring him up to speed, Byletta launched into an explanation of what she knew.

"Targitte's disease is named after a Yahawelba princess who married into Narisian royalty to ensure peace between the two nations. Its symptoms include fever, diarrhea, and bloody stools. In

rare instances, the disease is also accompanied by certain neurological disorders, and if allowed to progress, the risk of death is high. It's ravaging the Kingdom of Naris right now, but it's usually endemic to the Yahawelba Empire."

"That's correct. The princess came to our country already infected and died there. People were told that she had been poisoned, but in reality, she was sick," Gail managed to squeeze out.

His voice trembled, seemingly with anger. It appeared he'd been bottling up his feelings to the point that they'd become too much to bear. He didn't come across as very old, but his appearance aged him somewhat, perhaps because of all the hardship he had endured.

"If the princess had died of any other illness so quickly after arriving in Naris," Byletta continued, "I doubt the situation would have turned so sharply for the worse. It would have been put down to a simple series of unfortunate events. That things have escalated to a war shows how terrifying the disease truly is. It's alarmingly easy to spread, as it can be caught from consuming contaminated food and drinking water. Given that, I assume the contagion grew from just inside the castle to the capital as well, and then to the rest of the towns in the kingdom?"

Gail nodded in affirmation. When he spoke next, his voice quivered.

"There's no way to treat it. People just keel over one day and die. And it spreads like wildfire. It was ravaging the entire country before we even had a chance to do anything about it, but we couldn't say that it was because of the princess. If people were told that the very marriage intended to cement peace between our two nations had brought disease with it, Naris would have been plunged into even more chaos. We had no choice but to keep even the name of the sickness a secret. The shameless Yahawelba Empire, however, started claiming that the princess had been poisoned."

In the end, a marriage that had been meant to make peace had instead led the country straight into the quagmires of war.

"Yet it doesn't spread within the Yahawelba Empire," Byletta added.

"What do you mean? Didn't you say that it was endemic there?" asked Gail.

"Yes, but since it is well-known in the region, people in Yahawelba are supplied with treatment before they can die or spread the disease. It isn't considered a serious illness there. That's why the people of Yahawelba believe their princess was poisoned. If a healthy young woman suddenly dies, what else could it be?"

"There's a way to treat it?!"

Gail jumped up, pitching his body forward. He'd always believed Targitte's disease was incurable, so he was still a bit skeptical, but he was also desperate for Byletta's words to be true.

"There is. We also border the Yahawelba Empire, but have you ever heard of such a disease spreading here?"

"I've heard of people getting upset stomachs, but I've never heard of anyone dying," the count said, inclining his head in thought.

"There's something we and the Yahawelba Empire eat that the Kingdom of Naris does not. That's the reason it never becomes serious here."

"So…fish?" Gail asked, dumbstruck.

Byletta nodded.

Both the Gaihandar and Yahawelba Empires faced the sea, but the Kingdom of Naris was landlocked and mountainous. Perhaps they would eat seafood if they had a coastline, but fish weren't readily available in the mountain-enclosed capital.

"There's a sauce prevalent in Gaihandar made from a certain type of fish that helps provide immunity against the disease. The people of Naris rarely eat fish, so they are still vulnerable to contaminated grain. But as long as the grain hasn't been contaminated, it's perfectly safe."

"How could that be…?"

Gail was shocked. Beside him, Count Swangan looked around the room quizzically.

"What are you getting at?"

"You left Bardu to handle things on his own for the first ten years, didn't you?" Byletta pointed out. "He was probably stealing the grain to stock up on supplies so he could more readily provide aid to disaster-stricken areas. This region is already prone to abnormal levels of flooding, yet you sat back and did nothing. A crime is still a crime, but I think it was originally perpetrated out of desperation."

Byletta glared at the count, then continued to speak.

"I came to that conclusion because the amounts taken in the beginning were so small compared to recent years. It's only been in the last few harvests that the amount of disappearing grain has risen to unusual numbers. Since there's no way to easily trade that much grain, they would have needed connections, just like in business. But there are also limits to the amount of trade a single person can afford to do. The amount of grain that was stolen far exceeded what a lone trading partner could feasibly purchase. The culprits probably saw that they could get away with the theft during the first few years and realized they could probably take more without being caught, and that's when they started heavily raising the amount they stole."

It had been twenty or more years since the count had visited his estate, yet the majority of the theft had occurred within the past three years. From that information, Byletta had concluded that Gail and the others must have become involved a year or two back. Ironically, the amount of grain stolen had peaked around the same time she'd forced Count Swangan to start going back to his estate again.

"But why was all that grain going to another country? I thought it rather strange. After all, the Kingdom of Naris produces its own grain. By all rights, it shouldn't have needed any of ours. On top of that, it wasn't sold—it was taken. I'm presuming that is because the populace in Naris distrusts their own food sources due to the spreading disease?"

"Exactly. It spreads via food, so there's a deep distrust of our country's crops… As a result, no one wanted to consume our domestically grown products. But if we imported crops from other nations despite having an excess of our own, people would get suspicious and find out about the disease. Left with no other choice, the royals forced their own people to eat Narisian grain to hide the outbreaks. Even knowing that we might get infected, we had to consume potentially contaminated grain… It led to countless deaths. The men you have locked up down below all lost family members to the sickness. We were unable to stomach the way Naris was handling the issue, so we started to travel to other countries to acquire what little grain we could and distribute it back home."

That must have been why they'd appeared on Count Swangan's estate.

These were the thieves' true motives.

"How did you know that we weren't local?"

Gail fixed Byletta with a stare. She had no problem with being at the center of attention, but the strained atmosphere made her chest go a little tight.

"When we asked the villagers for information about the burglaries in the region, they had very little to say. But what we did sometimes hear were reports of a group of unknown men turning up in flood-damaged areas at Bardu's instruction. Since those men hadn't come from the estate, they had to have traveled from across the border. At first, I suspected they were deserters or those returning home from the war, but I also heard that their movements were very well-coordinated and the bridges were getting fixed in no time at all. I then had Arnald accompany me to observe them in person, and he was convinced that there was a commanding officer there."

"But the presence of a commanding officer doesn't mean they were from another land… And how did you know about Targitte's disease?"

"You're correct. But to let you in on a secret, I happen to have connections to the Highrain Association."

“What?! The Highrain Association…!” Gail’s eyes opened wide in shock.

It looked like he’d heard of the Highrain Association before. That was unsurprising, as they had been providing the Kingdom of Naris with aid for the past six months. It was something her uncle had been very eager to do. Byletta had seen him just before he’d departed the capital, and he’d been in a very good mood after shifting a bunch of money around.

“Even though the association knew we were suffering from disease, they very kindly imported foreign foods for us to eat. I heard that made the people back home very happy.”

“The head of the association had been having various foodstuffs manufactured and was looking for a new market for them. It just so happens that one of their products mitigates the effects of the disease.”

“The one mentioned earlier?”

“The head of the association received a direct request from the king to look into any potential medicines. People who aren’t used to eating fish sauce can have an aversion to it, so he decided to turn the ingredient that grants immunity into a paste by grinding it into a powder and mixing it in with other food products. It can be used as a staple food as well, so hopefully, in time, its popularity will grow enough that the epidemic should die down.”

“So…he distributed it in anticipation that it would cure the illness…?”

“As a fellow businessperson, I can tell you it wasn’t just out of the goodness of his heart. That said, the king and the head of the association are apparently old acquaintances, so he decided to act after hearing that the kingdom was in trouble. I’m also well-versed on the conditions in Naris, so it was easy to figure out who you people were and where the grain was going.”

Truthfully, Byletta’s uncle was not so altruistic. He simply had a keen nose for making money. Still, she didn’t want to spread

anything negative about him, as admitting his faults would only invite shame on her relatives. Nothing good would come of it.

"Thank you so much. I cannot tell you how grateful I am…!"

Gail pressed his hands together in thanks, tears in his eyes. Byletta could only send him a wry smile as he appeared to worship her.

Reputation was everything for businesspeople like her, and there was no one more revered than her Uncle Samus. Yet, because she knew he was two-faced and held ulterior motives, her feelings were complicated. Not to mention, all she had done was reveal the truth—she hadn't been involved with the actual product at all. Gail was probably just a very good person. She knew that the disease had caused him much strife, but it would be better if he learned how to read between the lines.

Her uncle might have sold Naris the product they so desperately needed, but he had ways of making sure he got something back beyond the country's good favor. He'd only acted as he had because he was getting a foothold out of it. It seemed that even though he'd only just returned to the empire, he was already making plans to go abroad again.

"It's the head of the association you ought to be thanking, so if you're that grateful, you can show it by working with them again. But, before that, how about you make a deal with us?"

"A…deal?"

"Yes. Father, do you have the documents I asked for?"

Count Swangan nodded and placed three sheets of paper that had been lying on the writing desk in front of Gail.

They were Byletta's price for helping him falsify the grain reporting.

"These are the trends in grain yield over the past few years on the Swangan estate, while these figures are what was reported to the government. You can see that low yields were reported for a number of years, so we didn't pay much tax. My father-in-law has been

sending additional supplies, but there's still a shortfall. Where has the grain gone?"

"Some of it has already been transported to Naris and consumed. The rest is still stored on the estate," Gail explained.

"There's an old fort along the eastern border," Bardu added. "There are still a few soldiers stationed there, but we've been keeping the stolen grain in that storehouse. We said it was sandbags for the rainy season, so we're the only ones who know it's there."

All lords who held land maintained private armies. The fort along the border of the Swangan estate would be crucial if Gaihandar's relations with the Kingdom of Naris ever deteriorated and soldiers needed to be dispatched here from the capital, but in times of peace, like now, its upkeep fell entirely to its lord.

Up till recently, the Gaihandar Empire had been pouring all its energy into the war in the south, so that particular fort had made the perfect storage place.

"That's where you can usually find us," Gail added apologetically.

Byletta had assumed the grain was hidden somewhere on the estate, but not a place as brazen as one of their own forts along the border.

Count Swangan looked incensed, but this was what happened when you neglected your estate for two whole decades. That was why Byletta had continuously nagged him to buckle down and visit more often. If the Gaihandar Empire found out that foreigners had snuck in, taken over a border fortress, and pilfered their grain, his life would not be worth living afterward. He was completely hopeless.

Byletta was glad that Gail had committed his crimes only out of a sense of duty. If he had been stealing purely for profit, her father-in-law's neglect would have seen him branded a national traitor. And if the Swangans had been really unlucky, penalties would have been levied against the whole family and estate. Even if they were ever found out, the fact that the grain had gone to a good cause would

no doubt mitigate much of the trouble they'd get into. It was a good thing that Naris and Gaihandar were on friendly terms now.

"How fortunate you ended up providing them with humanitarian aid, Father…"

"Why are you never happy unless you interrupt with uncalled-for comments?"

"I just can't seem to help myself… Perhaps it's due to the sleep deprivation."

"Hmph. Once we are done here, you may rest as much as you please."

"How very kind of you! Now then, Mr. Adaltine. I would like to inquire as to your future plans. Do you intend to go back to your homeland?"

"I have no family to speak of there. And even if I did, a soldier who deserted in the middle of the war cannot just shamelessly waltz back home. Plus, though I know now that the royals and aristocracy are distributing medicine, I still hate them for covering up the existence of the disease and allowing it to spread in the first place. If at all possible, I'd like to remain here fixing bridges and things… although that might be a lofty dream for a thief."

"Don't worry about that. In fact, I'm just happy to know you have fond feelings for the Gaihandar Empire. We will leave the grain stockpiled in the storehouse as it is. Now that there's a solution to your disease issue, there shouldn't be any need to take more, should there? Although mistrust of local crops may persist for a time, the dust will eventually settle as people realize that they do not become ill from eating them."

Byletta paused for a moment and smiled at the bewildered, wavering eyes of the man before her.

"To move on to the next topic at hand: With the exception of the period we believe Bardu was acting on his own, we have lost three years' worth of grain in total."

Byletta showed Gail the precise numbers on the second piece of paper, and the color drained from his face. She knew she was pulling

his emotions in many different directions, but he was a thief whichever way you looked at it, so she wanted him to see the true amount of damage he'd done.

Luckily, the Swangan lands didn't depend on their grain for income, so even though three years' worth had been spirited away, the loss had not deprived the estate of a third of its profit. But though the theft hadn't resulted in significant difficulties in maintaining the Swangan estate, Byletta certainly wasn't going to tell Gail that.

Bardu had probably seen fit to continue siphoning the grain away for much the same reason. It was also why her father-in-law had been able to prepare supplemental supplies despite the "poor harvest."

"Now, let's negotiate. We would like you, Mr. Adaltine, to carry on living at the fort. You may be our prisoner now, but that is going to change."

"What do you mean?" Gail asked suspiciously as Byletta presented the third and final document to him.

The last paper contained blueprints that Byletta had asked her father-in-law to draw up. There hadn't been much time to prepare them, so they weren't very detailed—more like conceptual drawings—but a passing glance was enough to tell you what they represented.

"We are planning to build a canal on the Swangan estate in preparation for any future natural disasters. We need men to accomplish this, and while we're able to secure the manpower from those returning from the war with our neighbor to the south, we don't have enough people to lead them. Therefore, we'll hire you—our new friends from Naris."

"Are you…sure about this? I'm a criminal…"

"It's my father-in-law who is ultimately at fault, always leaving the maintenance of his estate to his subordinates. He failed in his duties, and I wouldn't oppose his estate being stripped from him entirely. By all rights, his people should have already rebelled and chased him

away by now. The only person preventing that from happening was Bardu. I have nothing but gratitude toward your efforts to repair our bridges and other infrastructure. I refuse to admonish you for it." Hearing a growl of irritation, Byletta glanced questioningly at her father-in-law. "And what is that look supposed to mean, Father?"

Even back when she'd first guessed the identity of the culprits and explained the whole story to the count, she had taken the opportunity to criticize him. But back then, he had admitted he was at fault and hadn't bothered raising any counterarguments.

He had no other choice than to accept her censure—though Byletta would admit that part of the reason she was being so hard on him was as revenge for his forcing her to come all this way and putting her to work. Now that she'd been given the chance to lord over him, she was going to make the most of it.

"We didn't have a bad harvest this year, but with the fire last night, the only portion that hadn't been stolen was unfortunately lost. Given that, we can only supply the amount stated in the reports to the empire."

"But what about the grain that we were to receive?" asked Gail.

"There's no need to worry about that. We will hand over the rest of the stolen grain to you as payment for repairing the bridges and such. Oh, and by the way, Mr. Adaltine, don't work yourself up over the loss of the storehouse. It was empty, and we were planning to renovate it soon anyway. All you did was shift the timeline forward slightly. In any case, that is the deal I put before you. How will you proceed?"

"Does this mean we can turn you down?"

"Of course. Consider it a courtesy from my father-in-law. Although, if you don't take us up on our offer, we *will* imprison you as a thief and send you back home, so I don't recommend that option. If it suits you to remain here, the lord will fill you in on any further details you may require. If you wish to consider your options after hearing what he has to say, that's fine, too. And if the terms aren't to your liking, you can always press for more."

"Stop saying such needless things!" the count interjected.

"Come, now. If you don't acknowledge the rights of your partner when proposing a deal, no one will ever put their trust in you when it comes to business, especially if you want them to work for you for a long time. Now, if it's all right with you, that will be all from me."

Conceding that Byletta had wrapped up everything neatly, the count nodded weakly. It seemed he had lost all his will to fight. Arnald, meanwhile, looked as apathetic as ever.

Byletta took that as permission to leave.

"Now, if you will please excuse me."

She gave a gracious bow and swiftly left the room.

If she stayed, her father-in-law would keep getting angrier and angrier. Unfortunately for Bardu, the count would likely take out his anger on him instead, but he *had* committed a crime, after all. She was confident he could hang in there.

She silently wished him luck and stifled a yawn.

It was difficult not to just crawl back into bed, but she was hungry. A nap after getting a small bite to eat sounded wonderful. Thinking back on how busy she'd been over the past few days, she couldn't help but think that much of it had been a colossal waste of time. The amount of work had truly been excessive. Even worse, she would have to head back to the capital with Arnald the next day, which meant another long day with him in that horrible carriage. There wasn't much time left until the victory celebration, either. They were on a tight schedule.

Byletta did her best to chase the depressing thoughts of tomorrow out of her head by planning the rest of her day. As she headed toward the dining room, there was a spring in her step.

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Once Byletta left the room, silence lingered.

Everyone was exchanging looks, undefinable expressions on their faces. An air of total bewilderment sat over the group.

"Did I not tell you that your wife was something else?"

Count Swangan looked at his son with a smile that contained more than a hint of mockery.

"As you just saw, that one's mind moves frighteningly fast. She also managed to extract a lot of information from her uncle at the Highrain Association. In that respect, she's very well connected. And with her experience in business, she knows how to maneuver with money."

"What about those sword skills of hers? I'm sure you weren't the one to train her."

Byletta had been masterful at driving back the enemy the previous night. She was evidently very talented in combat.

The first time Arnald had accompanied Byletta in the carriage, he'd felt that something was off about the way her hands felt. As he'd observed them on the way to the estate, he'd noticed that they were quite rough. They weren't the hands of a noblewoman, but of someone who had trained with a sword over many years. There was no way the talent she displayed could have been cultivated overnight.

But where on earth would a lady learn such abilities? Even though he had seen her swordplay with his own two eyes, Arnald couldn't help but find it strange.

"She's been that way ever since she married into our household. She defeated me in a duel quite early on as well. She's the child of a viscount renowned for his martial prowess, so perhaps it was part of her upbringing, although I've never bothered to ask. Perhaps she insisted on it, given her penchant for belligerence and unruliness. As much as she pretends to be a lady, it's quite difficult to control her."

Arnald's father, who always looked upon his own wife with exceeding bitterness, chuckled as if something was funny. He certainly seemed to be in a good mood.

Soon after Arnald had moved back to the capital to gather information on his bride, he'd visited the Swangan's city estate to confront his father. Having heard rumors, he'd gone with the express

purpose of demanding his father take responsibility for his mistress, but his father had refused and warned him not to divorce Byletta. Arnald had been angry at first, thinking his father was using him to keep his lover within easy reach, but that hadn't turned out to be the case at all. It seemed the count simply relied on her skills.

"I would've appreciated knowing that sooner."

"You didn't want to hear it. You just turned up all of a sudden, told me to deal with my mistress myself, and stormed off without listening to a word of what I had to say. I am grateful you convinced her not to leave with that wager of yours. You have to hold on tight to that one."

Arnald had spoken to his father about their month long wager the day after their wedding night. His father was taken aback by its strange terms, but he had smiled meanly all the same when he'd thought about how the unconventional woman would react to such an outrageous offer.

"My lady not only forced the count to return to the estate, but she's also been a great help in other ways, too," said Bardu. "She still asks if there's anything she can assist with, even though she considers maintaining things here the count's job… And when almost all of my petitions to the count went unanswered, I was able to send them to her instead."

"You were?"

It looked like the count had been completely unaware. He tutted in annoyance.

"And she gave instructions accordingly?"

"If my lord has no knowledge of it, then yes, I suppose so. From all she said and did last night, it seems to me that she had everyone playing into her hands, including you, my lord."

Bardu's expression at that moment seemed to transcend respect—rather, he appeared overcome with adoration. There also seemed to be an air of relief about him; rather than a heavy burden, he seemed free of an evil spirit. He had the relaxed look of someone who now had something to rely on.

It had been a long time since Arnald last set foot on the Swangan country estate. When he'd alighted the carriage and gazed at the servants lined up in front of the manor house, he'd seen a few familiar faces—albeit more lined and wrinkled than before. Arnald had grown from a child into a man long ago, so it was only natural for those around him to have aged, too, but the sight had underscored the passage of time for him all the same.

Even the manor house, which had once looked enormous to him, now appeared smaller. It had been a strange feeling. But Bardu was just as hale and hearty as he remembered.

Arnald had found it hard to believe that Bardu, a man who loved the Swangan estate and manor house more than anyone, could be capable of embezzlement. He was sure there had been some kind of mistake. That's why he'd taken it upon himself to ask the servants about his wife and Bardu's recent behavior, but no one had had a bad word to say about either of them. Bardu had been described the exact same way that Arnald remembered him, and Byletta had appeared well liked, too. He'd been surprised by how friendly she was with them all. After reading the estate reports, he knew that his father had brought her here on several occasions, but he'd had no idea that she was on such good terms with the staff.

Arnald couldn't help but smile to himself when he remembered the reports he'd received about her "devotees."

"Were they precise instructions?"

"Yes. Originally, I believed she was consulting with experts before replying to my letters, but from what I just saw, many of the ideas were probably her own. If so, she has a very open mind and is well versed in many subjects. She's well suited to managing these lands. She also has a strong sense of justice, is quite straightforward, and is a very caring person. Even though it's not her job to manage the estate of the family she married into, she couldn't ignore the suffering of the tenants. Her efforts are the only reason that these lands have managed to hold on for the past few years."

"I see. It appears my wife knows exactly how to handle you," Arnald commented to his father.

"A good-for-nothing son whose bride keeps trying to run away from him has no room to criticize me."

The count snorted, then frowned. Whenever he was losing a battle of words, he always tried to shut down the conversation. It seemed that over the years, he'd remained just as shallow a person as he'd been before.

"She's like the guardian spirit of my kingdom. Beautiful, graceful, and wise beyond belief. I'm envious that you are able to call her your wife."

Gail, who had remained silent, sounded overcome with emotion. Arnald could see both adoration and zeal in his eyes.

So this is how men come to worship her. Arnald was both exasperated and impressed. It was obvious now that the whispers about his wife entrapping men and dominating them like a siren were nothing more than rumors. In fact, it seemed they were chasing after her without any encouragement at all.

Byletta had a strong sense of justice. She did all she could to help those in need, never spoke as if the achievements of others were her own, and worked hard to support the estate with her business skills. Men might worship her, but it was because of her accomplishments.

He had an impressive wife indeed. It seemed he'd made some mistakes in how he'd chosen to initiate their relationship.

"That girl is such a hassle," said the count. "She knows that she's beautiful and she's confident in both her brains and strength. Although I will say, I think she has one weakness."

"A weakness? Even though she's in possession of so many talents?"

"It's strange, but she seems indifferent to her own worth. Terrifyingly so. Take her appearance, for instance. She must have had a falling-out with the idiots spreading rumors about her, because she loathes that her appearance entices men. It's as if she believes

that her face is only a source of trouble. Not only is she unused to men—she hates them. She seems to believe that any man who is attracted to her or tries to get closer to her is only doing so because they've swallowed the rumors. That's why she leans into them instead of bothering to correct them."

"She leans into them…?"

"Yes, she's misled many among our social circle. Believe it or not, she even uses our bickering to lower other people's opinions of her. And once sentiment has built up against her, she uses that to intensify the rumors. She goes around saying things like 'Father, you must be so happy that people think a lovely young girl such as myself is your lover.' It's truly wretched. I implore you, rectify this slander against me at your next soiree."

"She had me fooled as well…"

Arnald wanted to sigh in regret.

It was those rumors that had made her the target of his irrational anger.

"She may be your wife, but you foisted her on me. Now you need to take responsibility. Then you'll see what a nuisance she really is! She never stops talking, and then when she finally backs off, it's just a ruse to get you to agree to do whatever she wants! Every other word is some snide comment. She's always scheming to get me right where she wants, that impudent brat! It's been years and years, and her attitude has never wavered. Teach her to respect her elders. Tell her to treat her father-in-law with the respect he deserves! That girl is—!"

Even though it was Arnald who should have been angry, at some point, his father had usurped him.

The count had been in such a good mood talking about Byletta until now, so Arnald couldn't understand the sudden change. Perhaps the count had held on to a lot of frustration concerning his daughter-in-law's behavior and had simply snapped. He seemed to

grow more and more enraged, ranting and raving about one thing after the other. *Are these really things I need to hear* right *now?* Arnald wondered.

Despite the early hour, it seemed he'd found himself at the mercy of his father's endless lecturing. Even as a child, he had never suffered anything like this.

SPECIAL CHAPTER

A Wicked Wife's True Form

Arland wasn't quite sure when he'd first realized that he lacked emotions.

"Lacked" was perhaps an exaggeration, but at the very least, he was very unfeeling. He had only two emotional states: normal and uncomfortable.

Born on his father's estate and raised there, Arnald had been an expressionless child of few words. Perhaps he had a vague awareness of it even back then.

He'd felt it more keenly once he'd begun to care for his sick mother while his father was still away at war. He didn't seem to experience many emotional highs or lows. It was obvious because, even though both his mother and the servants worried for him, he didn't seem capable of returning the same feelings.

His sick mother especially had spent her days in tears, agonizing over the future of the son she would leave behind. Somehow, she'd seemed to sense that her end was drawing near. Seeing her in such a state had made the young boy realize something needed to change, so he'd begun to study the expressions of those around him and the way they spoke to one another to actively incorporate their behavior into his interactions with his mother.

One of the things he'd done for her was pick flowers from the flower bed she had so diligently tended. That had at least evoked sympathy from servants like Bardu and the gardener, which he'd been grateful for.

Still, keeping up the facade had been surprisingly taxing. Once his mother had passed away and he'd dropped the act, the servants

who looked after him in her stead seemed to mistake his continual state of quiet apathy as a symptom of his grief for her loss. All that had happened after that was the passing of monotonous day after monotonous day, just like always. He'd felt neither high nor low.

The days had simply continued to roll on by.

When Arnald's father returned from the battlefield after the death of his wife, he'd sought solace only in drink. His lung condition had forced him to retire early from the military, so from that point on, he'd remained at his residence in the capital. He'd visited his estate only once before returning to the city. Arnald would have eventually been called to the capital, too, but seeing his father's fall into drunkenness had made him uncomfortable with the thought. Eventually, he'd enrolled at an imperial school at his father's behest, but the dormitories on the grounds had eliminated the need for Arnald to return home and watch his father drink himself to death.

He'd only become a military man at the suggestion of his current superior, Movris Dreslan.

Movris had saved Arnald from being ravished by a lady he'd never even met at the first soiree he'd ever attended. Arnald had no interest in anyone, so he hadn't known who Movris was at first—just that he was a bit eccentric.

"I can't believe I'm rescuing a man. Whatever has gotten into me…?" Movris had muttered, exasperated.

He was wandering around a back garden under the moonlight. There was no sign of the consternation he'd displayed when he'd barged into the room where the lady had been assaulting Arnald and torn him away from her.

Still fixing his clothes, Arnald stared at the brown-haired man.

"You could have just let things play out."

"And let you end her there and then? You must not have heard about Countess Rydewall. Even a wicked woman like her has her uses—not that you have a care for anyone, including yourself, as far as I can tell."

No matter how uninterested in the woman he was, once things had crossed into physical harm, that had been enough to make Arnald feel something.

He'd never been particularly interested in the opposite sex, and now, after being assaulted and robbed of his virginity, all he could feel was disgust. That his body had betrayed him by reacting of its own accord only made him angrier.

Above all, that day had made him start to hate women. He'd never been able to get over the fact that he'd found something akin to a weakness within himself.

"That does not mean I cannot feel disturbed. But what's done is done, and today has taught me a valuable lesson. I'll be sure to push back next time."

Turning toward the expressionless and indifferent Arnald, Movris's crimson eyes had lit up.

"Now that you mention it, your father, Count Swangan, is of the same social status as Count Rydewall, is he not? It seems his heir has quite a unique way of thinking. Swangan is an ex-military man, if I'm correct? Yet he's not necessarily a part of the military faction."

Two major forces were at odds in the Gaihandar Empire.

They were the imperial noble faction, comprised of the nobility from the old empire, and the military faction, which was formed of military men of both commoner and noble status. The nobles in the latter, however, were of a comparatively shorter lineage than the former.

Now that the country had been at war for so long, the military faction held greater sway. It was a fact that was abhorred by the other side.

Judging by his lineage, most would expect Count Swangan to be a member of the imperial faction. His family was old, and he owned a large estate. When he was invited to soirees, he would attend without considering any higher agenda, but perhaps the noble faction did covet his loyalty.

Frankly, Arnald didn't care about any of that.

"I'm not interested."

His drunken father was probably of the same opinion.

Arnald didn't know why his father had joined the military, but he was sure it wasn't because of factional strife.

"That woman probably came on to you to recruit you. But since you rejected her, perhaps you'll let me take a stab at persuading you instead?"

"Persuading me?"

"To be a part of the military faction."

"You're one of them, yet you're unapologetically attending a function backed by the nobles?"

"They know who I am. I'm not trying to hide anything. I know coming to these events irritates them."

"Do you?"

Arnald thought it a bit odd, but he accepted that different people experienced fun in different ways. It wasn't something for him to criticize.

Movris nodded.

"You're more doll than human, aren't you? Life must be an unending bore for you."

"You certainly appear to be having a lot more fun."

"Heh-heh, that's the first time anyone's ever said that to me so dispassionately. Usually, they're envious, amused, or disgusted. You're a curious one. You ever consider becoming a soldier? You'd be good at it."

The function had eventually run its course, but the next day, admission papers from the Officer's Academy turned up at Arnald's dorm. He hadn't even taken the exam to get in, so he wasn't sure how he could've been accepted.

Not that there was anything else he was particularly interested in doing. He hadn't seen any reason not to enroll, so he had. And soon after graduation, he'd met the strange man again. He turned out to be the superior officer of Arnald's assigned unit.

“Well, well, don’t you look bored as ever?” Movris had greeted Arnald on his first day with an amicable smile.

But Arnald already knew that the man in front of him was a demon with a friendly face.

Movris loved nothing more than drinking, women, and gambling. Even while waging war, he still made sure to enjoy life to the fullest. He was more morally bankrupt than Arnald had ever been.

“Life is about enjoying yourself. Now, how about we have a bit of fun?” Movris asked.

It appeared his idea of fun was a battle in the middle of a marsh.

Back then, the Gaihandar Empire had been allowed to intervene in a conflict that began between a few small tribes. Arnald had no idea what the higher-ups were thinking, but he knew it wasn’t a significant enough problem to require Gaihandar to butt in. Yet Movris had gotten stuck in it like it was all just a game.

“Our enemy only has farming tools, so they might as well be lunging at us unarmed. It’s our job to drive them away with our superior military strength.”

They’d had plenty of swords, guns, and other supplies—they’d even had leave to use explosives, if they needed to—meaning that the other side was hopelessly outmanned. They hadn’t truly been there to fight—they’d been there to suppress.

Arnald hadn’t been sure exactly what was so fun about a fight like that, but Movris had worn a smile on his face right up until the end. After that, he’d spent a few years fighting side by side with Movris on the battlefield. It was only then that Arnald finally tried confronting Movris about some of the things he’d heard.

“Sir, did you know they call you ‘the Brunet Demon’?”

It was a name that had already been widely known through the empire by the time Arnald had been assigned to Movris’s unit. To his surprise, however, Movris was considered so demonic that the name had begun to stick in other countries as well.

Yet, somehow, the man in question showed no sign of devilishness as he smiled.

"Yep. And you're the 'Silver Fox of the Battlefield.' Perhaps an imaginary creature sounds better than a living one, though. What do you think?"

"I don't really care. Although I suppose it's nicer to be thought of as a living, breathing creature."

His superiors treated Arnald like a puppet. At least his enemies saw him as a living thing.

"You're also rumored to be coolheaded and ruthless. Do you care about that? In any case, I just find it curious that even though people think foxes resemble cats, they're actually related to dogs. They're cautious and alert, but extremely curious as well."

"And?"

"They're just like you. You're the type of person to devote yourself to something wholeheartedly if it catches your interest."

No one had ever said anything like that to Arnald before.

That aside, he couldn't think of anything that had ever caught his interest enough for him to devote himself to it. He wasn't familiar with feeling curiosity, either.

"In other news, have you been back home recently?"

"No. I haven't returned to the estate even once since I graduated from the Officer's Academy."

"Yes, I'd heard that. Hmm… So what should we do…?"

The demonic man looked to be deep in thought for once, but the expression was soon replaced with another smile.

Arnald knew that smile. He prepared himself for what was to come next.

"I'm sure you've heard that we're getting dispatched to the south next. From what I've been told, we're going to be gone for a nice long while. I'd like you to take on a unit of your own, so I was planning to promote you…but there's one more condition you'll need to meet for that to happen."

"Which is?"

"You'll need to get married. It'll spice your life up a bit, eh?"

Arnald didn’t have the words to ask him how on earth he’d reached that conclusion.

“So? What’s your type? Cute? Pretty? Affectionate? Gentle? Maybe you’ll catch me off guard and tell me you want a sadist…”

Arnald wasn’t sure if Movris had misjudged him as lonely or whether he just wanted to stick his nose in Arnald’s business. Maybe he wanted Arnald to suffer through the same strife with women that he did? Though God knew Movris was always bringing that trouble on himself.

Regardless, it didn’t matter what he was after—Arnald knew that Movris wouldn’t take no for an answer. Still, the man’s condition was not something he could easily accept.

“Don’t you remember me telling you that I hate women, sir?”

“Yes, well, it was me who swooped in to save you after you lost your virginity. I’ve also seen that you’ve been able to keep that hatred in check enough to have a few amorous encounters, though I have noticed you’ve been finding such things a chore lately. You don’t approach anyone, and you avoid anyone who comes to you. Understandable behavior for a man who hates women, but life is long—why not try having some fun for once, my dear subordinate? You may feel drained of all carnal desire, but being with a wife will be an entirely different beast from being with anyone else you’ve had before.”

“I believe that most arranged marriages don’t work out very well in the end. And hearing this suggestion from you, sir, who are yourself unmarried, is not doing much to persuade me otherwise.”

“I just love the thrill of the chase. A wife would make that difficult. Anyway, what you said may be true, but what’s important right now is the matter of your promotion. When you inevitably attain a higher rank, more of those ladies you claim to despise will begin to circle. Having a wife will nip that issue in the bud.”

While Arnald was incredulous at how his superior was trying to sell marriage to him, he decided that it would indeed be better to deal with the matter now.

"Fine. If you want to hear my requirements, I would like a woman who is fearless, courageous, and physically strong."

"Huh? Are you sure you're describing a woman?"

"Of course. Beyond that, I don't have any concrete preferences when it comes to the opposite sex."

"Are you sure you want a bride like that? Why marry someone who could walk all over you? Would that make you happy? Who could have imagined that'd be what you're really into!"

Movris clapped his hands, evidently in high spirits. He was finding this whole situation very funny indeed.

Arnald was relieved that he had managed to stupefy his superior. All he had done was recount the qualities that were expected of new military recruits. He doubted that Movris would be able to find such a woman. At the very least, it should shut down any talk of marriage for a while.

"Oh my, I don't think there are many people like that even in the military, are there? So to ask that of a woma— Wait. Hold on a minute. There might be one from a family I know."

The words spilling from Arnald's superior's mouth boded ill. And indeed, he'd struck upon just such a woman within seconds.

"Yes, there is! A bride who matches every single one of your requirements!"

Arnald was so surprised that he nearly gave a retort, but he was impressed by his own restraint.

In the end, he'd left for war without so much as seeing the face of the woman Movris had set him up with. And then, eight years later, he'd been confronted with a provocative letter demanding a divorce without ever meeting her. She'd sounded fearless and courageous indeed, though he didn't know whether she was actually strong or not.

Regardless, she had piqued his interest, so he'd headed back to the capital to find out more about her and, once he did, had quickly come up with a plan to punish her for her wicked ways. Once she

had merged in his mind with the witch who'd assaulted him all those years ago, he'd felt as if he could finally seek his revenge.

It was only after he'd lost his head during their wedding night that he'd realized he had been wrong about her. But at that point, what was done was done.

Once dawn broke, he'd left his wife fast asleep to go down for breakfast. There, he'd found himself face-to-face with a stepmother and half sister he barely knew.

He'd had almost no contact with his father's second wife. Both she, Cynthia, and his half sister, Milena, were already eating breakfast at the table by the time he arrived in the dining room. His father, on the other hand, had finished eating and had moved on to enjoying a post-breakfast cup of tea. When he'd looked up to find Arnald, he'd almost choked on his drink.

Donovan, the butler, must have informed his father of his arrival the previous night. So why was he so flustered? Had he not expected him to come down for breakfast?

Arnald ignored his father and stared at his stepmother and half sister, who were seated opposite him. Both of them had gone stiff as boards as soon as they saw Arnald. Their faces were identically pale, as if they'd seen a ghost.

"Good morning."

"Y-yes, good morning. So you've returned, Arnald."

"I arrived late last night, so forgive me for skipping the pleasantries. I intend to stay here for a while."

As he sat down to eat, Arnald's stepmother smiled at him awkwardly.

"I see. Since you've done us the pleasure of returning from the war in one piece, I hope that you can enjoy a good rest here."

"Thank you."

Arnald was irritated by that twitching smile of hers. He hated women, and the ones that were drawn to him only made him more uncomfortable.

Though Arnald felt the same repugnance toward the opposite sex as always, he suddenly realized that the hatred he'd felt for his wife until the previous night had vanished entirely. Come to think of it, she'd seemed a rather strange woman. Honestly, the fact he'd had an interest in her in the first place was quite odd.

As Arnald chewed on a piece of soft bread, he absentmindedly watched the two women in front of him. They appeared to think he was imposing somehow, but on what? He'd read reports that the pair were close to Byletta. Were they attempting to chase him back out of the house for her sake?

"Umm… Have you spoken to my sister-in-law yet?"

Arnald turned his attention to his half sister, who had raised the inquiry in a rather hesitant voice. She had the blond hair of her mother, but the pale-blue eyes of their father. He met her quiet gaze. He could see both fear and anger etched onto her face.

Arnald had no memories of ever conversing with Milena. This was probably the first time she'd ever spoken a single word to him. But when he looked at her faintly trembling hands, he could tell that she feared him. Yet she'd still taken the initiative to ask a question, so despite her terror of her brother, her love for Byletta seemed to win out. That meant she was truly the ally of hers and may well want to chase him out of the manor.

She might be an ally with little power, given her age, but Arnald knew from experience how much trouble someone like her could be.

I shouldn't take her lightly or let my guard down.

Arnald nodded at Milena. "We just spoke about the present situation and what her plans were for the future."

"Okay."

Her probing gaze appeared to be trying to ascertain what attitude Arnald was going to adopt. It seemed to him that if he did anything to harm Byletta, he would also have Milena to answer to. And even if he tried to exclude Milena from the situation, his wife would learn of it immediately. They would put up a united front.

His potential ally, on the other hand, would probably be his father —and no one else.

"You've become quite attached to her, haven't you?" Arnald asked Milena.

"I owe my sister so much. She saved me once and has treated me with such love and affection ever since. She's wonderful, one of the kindest people I know. So please don't hurt her. And never, ever make her cry."

Arnald no longer had any intention of doing that. He wouldn't have cared about hurting her if she was the vixen the rumors would have had him believe, but after meeting her last night, he knew he needed to gather more information. What he had learned through others just didn't seem credible.

But it was a bit late to make his half sister a promise now. He'd already made Byletta cry just last night.

Milena had an accusing look in her eye. She probably believed getting away from him would be the best thing for Byletta. Arnald knew that, as a man, he truly wouldn't be good for her, so Milena wasn't entirely wrong. Still, he couldn't let Byletta just escape from under his nose like that.

Even if Arnald was indifferent to women, he had a feeling he was going to have a hard time letting Byletta go. He couldn't seem to think of a clear reason why—it was just a hunger within him. An impatience. It made him uncomfortable, but at the same time, it made him feel like he'd made a huge mistake.

Ill at ease with his own thoughts, Arnald ate the rest of his breakfast.

Later on, he revealed to his father the wager he'd agreed upon with Byletta the night before. The count had simply told him to do what he wanted but warned him not to let Byletta go. That somehow had whipped up an indescribable feeling within Arnald. Apparently, he was incapable of accepting his father's guidance when it came to his own wife.

Unable to quell the emotion he was feeling, Arnald had gone to his old room. It had been eight years since he'd stepped foot inside, but the space felt unchanged, like it had been quietly awaiting his return ever since he'd left for war. There was no dust to speak of, indicating it was still regularly cleaned, but everything was as he had left it when he'd departed. The only thing out of place was the stuffiness in the air that indicated just how long he had been away.

Once Arnald opened the window at the front of the room, a refreshing morning breeze filled the space.

His attention was suddenly drawn to the desk. There lay a luxurious-looking folder with a faded white cover, filled with the personal details and family charts of his match. It had originally been a brilliant white, so its current shade betrayed just how much time it had been sitting there.

"So this is where it was."

Arnald had never so much as looked inside. He'd long forgotten even receiving the folder. But since it was in this room, he must have received it before he'd left for the front. For the first time in eight years, Arnald took it in his hands and flipped open the cover.

Looking back at him was the portrait of a young woman sitting in a chair wearing a feminine pale-blue dress. She had fierce amethyst eyes and a spirited smile on her face, which was framed by cascades of long strawberry-blond hair that looked soft to the touch. Her smile was quite daring for a portrait intended for an arranged marriage.

Arnald couldn't help giving a wry smile himself.

Just from her portrait, he could tell that the wife whose face he'd never seen before the previous night appeared to fill all the requirements he'd so casually come up with.

The voluptuous body she'd revealed to him under the moonlight was a far cry from the one in the portrait, but perhaps that impression would change once he saw her in the light of day?

He wished that he had looked at the portrait and met the real Byletta sooner, but he could easily imagine that it wouldn't have

changed the feelings of the man he'd been back then. He'd never had the slightest bit of interest in anyone before.

"What else are you hiding from me?" Arnald murmured at the portrait absentmindedly. His impression of Byletta had changed so many times in just one night. Where he thought he'd find a temptress, he'd found chastity. Where he thought he'd find willfulness, he'd found submission. It was only natural that she let him lead for her first time, but since he'd believed it all to be an act, he'd been impressed with how skillfully she'd portrayed apprehension. Now, he felt pathetic.

His entire family seemed to treasure Byletta. His father was hoping that Arnald could get her to stay. His sister was devoted to her. And Cynthia seemed to truly care about her.

What kind of person is my wife…? Arnald wondered. Even he was taken aback by the feelings stirring within him.

That's when he decided he would need to revise his plan. At first, he thought he'd be satisfied by slowly taking revenge on her over a whole month, but now he knew it would be impossible to get to know everything he wanted to about her in such a short time frame. The thought of letting her go only filled him with regret, so an overhaul of his entire scheme would be necessary. The intended outcome was now the opposite of his original intention, so he needed to ensure he got the result he wanted.

Arnald had never been close to anyone before, so the inner workings of people's emotions were still a mystery to him. Given that he was so out of tune with his own emotions, that was only natural.

Honestly, he found it much easier to read the thoughts of an enemy combatant, but that was only because he'd memorized how the events of past battles had unfolded. The only things that ever changed were times and locations—they always tended to play out the same. Arnald was excellent at absorbing such information from books, and he'd used the knowledge he'd gained to analyze the actions of his enemies and predict their next moves. He was also

quite good at observing the people around him and drawing information from that.

It was a skill he'd cultivated back when he'd been doing his best to care for his dying mother when he was a boy.

"This will be just like quashing a riot. Or perhaps more like launching a siege."

Arnald was fully mobilizing all of his experience.

When trying to lay a siege, you wanted three times more military might than the enemy. You also needed to cut supply lines and prevent reinforcements from attacking you from behind.

How much military might did Byletta have? Who would be her reinforcements?

As Arnald mulled over tactics, he realized that he had no direct knowledge of the woman. He'd need to gather information about her upbringing and past actions himself, as a number of the reports he'd received appeared to consist of nothing more than falsehoods or conjecture, sprinkled with tidbits of gossip. Before he began anything else, he would have to get to know her.

"And even before that, I have to write a contract… Now, how do I make it most advantageous to me?"

Arnald had then drawn up the contract and gotten his wife to sign it, but he'd wanted to make sure she stuck to her end of the agreement. The timing happened to coincide with when she'd informed him of her upcoming trip to inspect the Swangan estate. It had been the perfect opportunity, so he'd decided to accompany her in an attempt to uncover more about her true self.

What was the true personality of this woman who was rumored to be a ruthless seductress?

And why was she being dragged on inspections of the estate in the first place? At first, he'd believed it was a romantic getaway for her and his father. All he could think was that they'd been busy indulging in sex and other vulgarities away from the prying eyes of

his father's wife in the capital. But when he'd accompanied her, he'd been shocked to find that she acted more like the lord than his father did.

She'd devoured the estate reports, inspected the local landscape, and set future countermeasures in place.

It wouldn't have been going too far to say that if she hadn't been there, the Swangan's country estate would have fallen into ruin. Arnald had had no idea that his father had abandoned his duties to such a degree. He'd also had no idea how cunning his wife was.

Her skills were incredible.

To turn the tables in your favor on the battlefield, information was crucial. And not just basic information like the size of your opponent's army—your knowledge needed to encompass a whole host of topics, including the geography of the region, its climate, and how the current situation had come to be. You needed to scrutinize the thinking of the enemy commander and their favorite battle strategies. Only then was it time to assemble information like puzzle pieces to derive the optimal solution. Arnald had a very good memory. He'd memorized battle strategies and tactics recorded throughout history. His tactical nature was another reason they called him a fox.

And despite that, his wife's analytical mind and talent for accumulating information still astounded him.

She was so capable that she'd make a great addition to his unit.

At the end of the estate inspection, they'd planned to neutralize the thieves who had been stealing their grain. Yet for something that had appeared to be simple tax evasion or theft on the surface, it had been a far more complex situation, even involving neighboring countries. When Arnald had first heard that Bardu was involved, something hadn't sat right with him. But upon hearing of his father's indifference to the estate's troubles, he'd understood. And he hadn't been able to stop himself from sympathizing with the leader of the thieves after hearing more about their circumstances.

But what left the largest impression on him was the depth of Byletta's ingenuity.

Even if her uncle had given her some of the information, she'd still been able to deduce a fair amount by questioning the local villagers —enough, at least, to drive the thieves into launching a surprise attack. It was like everyone was under her spell, dancing in the palm of her hand like marionettes, but the way it all worked was actually very clever.

Now, his need to find out more about her had become insatiable.

The only thing she'd ever been careless about was the letter she'd sent him notifying him of her intention to divorce, which meant that she couldn't have placed that much importance on it.

If that was because she had nothing but scorn for him, he could capitalize on that. But if it had been because she truly didn't care about Arnald, he had the feeling that would upset him a little.

Arnald had no intention of letting a wife like Byletta go. How could he, when she'd made a man infamous for his cold-bloodedness and hard-heartedness feel so much? His whole body was buzzing with emotion. That was the only solid hard fact he knew.

Discovering the truth about his supposed harlot of a wife didn't necessarily make him want to correct his own behavior, but it *did* set fire to his fighting spirit. He wanted to make her his.

As he thought smugly of the wife he'd obtained, Movris's comment about how getting married would add spice to his life seemed to ring true after all.

"I bet you think this victory celebration is a hassle, don't you?"

As soon as he and Byletta returned from the Swangan estate, Arnald had been summoned by the military to attend a meeting about the victory celebration. Having to attend a meeting for an event that was due to take place in three days was annoying, but the only people summoned were those due to receive medals. It was to inform everyone of who would be called in to the hall and when,

and how they would move through the room, so it ended quite quickly. So quickly, in fact, that Arnald found himself wondering why they couldn't have just practiced on the day of the celebration instead.

As he was about to leave, he heard the familiar voice of Movris Dreslan, who, for some reason, had requested Arnald join him in his office. Arnald seemed to be the only person to have received such an invite, as the pair were now alone.

Arnald had a bad feeling about the whole thing but continued to stare at Movris apathetically all the same.

Movris flashed Arnald a genial smile from behind his desk.

"You might think certain things are meaningless or bothersome, but there's still a point behind them. We have to reward those who distinguish themselves, or it could come back to bite us later. Especially in an authoritarian society like ours."

"I've heard that bonuses are going to be delayed."

"That's the courts butting in for you. They've made things complicated and found the perfect excuse to kick up a fuss."

"I see."

"I know, I know, you've never been one to care about political disputes. You don't have to hide it."

It wasn't as though Arnald was completely uninterested. He had a feeling that the next opponent they would face after finishing up on the southern front would be a political one, but now that he was in the middle of a wager with his wife, Arnald fancied that he'd found a much worthier adversary.

Even if she wasn't technically an enemy, she was still a very interesting opponent.

"Well, I'm sure that no matter what happens, none of it will come back to bite *you*," Arnald noted.

"Bold as ever, I see. Have you driven your wife away with that mouth of yours yet? Knowing you, I bet you haven't even bothered to deal with her at all. Why mess with something so irksome when you're on leave? If you tell me that you've just been whiling your

time away asleep in your military accommodations without going back to the count's mansion, I'll be most annoyed."

"I don't know why you would need to admonish me about that, but it's a moot point anyway. I've been spending my time at home."

"Oh, I see. That's a first. I assumed that you would just ignore your wife and start on your next job. Well, I no longer have a reason to keep you here, then. Enjoy the rest of your leave."

"Understood."

Arnald nodded and had already turned to leave the room when he suddenly stopped in his tracks and looked back at his superior.

"By the way, I have something I'd like to say to you, sir."

"Well, isn't this a surprise. You've never had anything to say to me before. Speak."

Movris fiddled with the documents on his desk, then looked back up at Arnald with interest.

"The example you set was entirely unhelpful," Arnald pronounced.

"Huh? This sounds intriguing. What example are you referring to, exactly?"

"Your example on how to seduce women."

At Arnald's matter-of-fact statement, Movris burst out laughing.

"Pfft! You? Who would you be trying to seduce?"

"My wife."

"Your wife? You mean Byletta?"

"Of course. You were the one who ordered me to marry her, so don't forget about her now. Anyway, I tried complimenting her appearance, but her response was quite chilly."

"Ah, well… Byletta is a tough nut to crack. I don't think she enjoys that approach… Although, somehow, it feels like I'm the one being rejected by proxy here. Hmm… Byletta… Why don't you try complimenting something about her other than how she appears on the outside?" Arnald's experienced superior grinned.

"And what could you mean by that?"

"Girls like her tend to detest compliments about their appearance, so it's more effective to say something nice about their personalities

or practical skills.”

For some reason, both Movris and Arnald’s father seemed to understand Byletta well.

But why did that make him feel so uncomfortable?

Arnald nodded, an unpleasant feeling taking root in the back of his head.

“I see. Then I’ll bear that in mind.”

“So? How do you intend to put that advice to use on your and Byletta’s wedding night?”

“Oh, we already had our wedding night.”

“What?! You did? That’s unexpected. You’re not exactly the most forward man in that department. You just let them push you down without so much as a word. I bet it was Byletta’s first time as well. Poor girl.”

“I followed your example for that, too.”

“Huh?”

“When was it again? You started right here…and again quite recently, actually. You were with an aide from the administrative department, and then the daughter of someone from military headquarters, wasn’t it?”

“This office just stirs the passions in some people… I see. So those are the examples you’re talking about. So, how was it?”

Movris asked the question without a hint of shame. In his case, it wasn’t just the office where he got hot and bothered. Whether it was an official residence or a meeting room, during a military party or a drill, the time and place didn’t matter. In fact, it was probably accurate to say it was more likely than not that Arnald would stumble upon him in the throes of passion.

That was another reason there were whispers that he was a demon.

Arnald thought for a moment.

That night, Byletta had been extremely alluring and sensual. But she’d also clung to him affectionately.

He would say that she’d enjoyed herself more than not.

In fact, given how she'd driven his indifferent self wild with pleasure, he'd say that they'd both had a good time indeed. Still, he wasn't in the mood to give away any gory details, so he just continued to look expressionlessly into his superior's eyes.

"Oh, that's right," Arnald said flatly. "I heard that you've been promoted. Congratulations, General. How does it feel?"

"You're such a tease… Come on, at least let me hear some of the juicy details. You're so possessive."

What exactly does it feel like to be possessive? Arnald wondered for an instant. Then he saw the look in Movris's eyes—the man was clearly ready to mock him again—and decided against asking.

"That's no fault of mine. My wife is simply too attractive. She's downright lovely, and she has a delightful sense of integrity."

As much as Arnald had tried to avoid the subject, it seemed he'd accidentally struck it right in the heart instead.

"Pfft! H-hang on a second… Stop making me laugh. I'm dying here! I can feel my sides actually splitting…!"

"I'm not joking around."

"Oh, you were being serious? I'm sorry, it's just too funny… Just how far have you fallen with her?"

"Fallen?"

"Here I was, worried that you were simply ravenous after starving for so long on the battlefield—but that doesn't seem to be the case at all! You, complimenting someone with lines like 'downright lovely' and 'delightful sense of integrity'? I'm not convinced I'm not hearing things. It seems you've actually come to have affection for someone."

"Affection? I just said the same phrases you use when you're seducing women."

When Arnald attended functions with Movris, he at times couldn't believe some of the sweet nothings that poured out of the man's mouth. Arnald had tried to express himself modestly. There was no reason for his superior to be so amused.

"What? Did you not realize you were gushing about her? I'm still getting over the shock that *those* words were the ones you came up with while imitating me. Just be honest with yourself already and start treating your wife with care. She's probably quite sweet to you, eh?"

Arnald mulled over Movris's words.

It was true. He didn't usually describe people this way.

Put more simply, he'd been saying that Byletta was a sweet, honest, and bold partner. That made her an enigma to him.

Movris was implying that those kinds of words could lead to feelings of love.

"My wife hates being complimented on her appearance, though…"

"Hmm, that *is* quite the quandary. Then, why not try starting with the physical?"

"The physical? I already made a mess of our wedding night, so I'm trying to show some self-control around her… I think she might already hate me."

"B-b-b-bwa-ha-ha! I-I'm sorry…I can't! My stomach… My God, it hurts…! This is all your fault!"

"I don't understand. I haven't said anything funny."

"I understand. I understand that you're being serious, just give me a moment… Ha-ha-ha— Aaah…!"

After Movris spent an age rolling around in laughter and pounding on his desk, he turned to Arnald with tear-stained eyes and left him with one piece of advice: "Try telling her exactly how you feel with your touch."

CHAPTER 3

Trust and Betrayal

Once Byletta returned from the Swangan country estate, the next order of business was the victory party. Since only she and Arnald were due to attend, Count Swangan had chosen to remain in the country for a while longer. Not that he had a choice—Bardu had assured Byletta he wouldn't allow the count to run back to the capital early.

They had only been away for ten days, so the weather in the capital was much the same as it had been before they left. The only difference was that the sun's rays had decreased slightly in intensity. The temperature was higher than it had been at the Swangan country estate, which made it feel extra hot to the returnees.

But even in the summer heat, the military uniforms to be worn to the victory party seemed to remain thick.

Byletta had checked in with Arnald about it, but he'd been distinctly unfazed. He was the type of person who didn't let the heat get to him. He must have a unique constitution for it.

Many of the dresses that had been made to pair with the warm military uniforms were also made out of thicker fabrics.

Even though they were party dresses, they were completely different than the attire for a normal, everyday party. The stars of the show were meant to be the uniform-clad men, while the guests on their arms were mere window dressing. Arnald had made it clear that he wanted Byletta to attend with him, but really, there wasn't that much a soldier's wife was usually required to do at events such as these. Typically, their duties were to look after their husbands and take care of the home while they were away. That was it. And since

this party would be solely in her husband's domain, Byletta didn't see the point of attending at all.

Thinking of her mother back home, she sipped on a post-breakfast cup of tea. The rest of the family had already finished eating, which was only natural given that it was already ten o'clock. *Have I ever slept in this late before?* Byletta wondered. Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her, but she felt lightheaded.

Whatever sluggishness she felt, it certainly wasn't from her journey back to the estate.

Arnald had appeared in her room the previous night, wanting. He hadn't touched her at all while they were inspecting the estate, but as soon as they'd returned, he'd insisted on having her. The deed made her question her own senses. He'd seemed like a different person yet again. Still, it was too mortifying to ask him if he'd gotten bored with her yet.

It might have been to increase his chances of winning the bet, but she found his treatment cruel. She had no right to refuse his advances. All she could do was react to what he wanted her to do. She deeply regretted the fact that she hadn't added any provisions to their contract that gave her room to do otherwise.

The root of all the evil in her life was currently sitting beside her, elegantly sipping tea. His face was the very picture of innocence.

Arnald's mornings started early, and yet he had still appeared in the dining room for breakfast at the same time as Byletta. This had resulted in the two of them eating alone together. Even worse, he'd chosen to sit right next to her.

It was inexplicable why he had to sit so close to her when there was an entire dining room to take advantage of. She was pained by the expressions on the faces of the servants who'd been waiting on them. They kept shooting Byletta smiles and complimenting her and Arnald on how friendly they seemed with each other, not knowing that she was going to win the bet between them and divorce him in half a month. She wanted to scream that they were severely mistaken.

"There are plenty of empty seats. Do you have to sit right next to me?"

"I feel out of sorts if I don't sit where I usually do. Please, keep eating," Arnald responded calmly.

Byletta hated this man from the bottom of her heart.

Up until now, his seat had been Byletta's. But now, she'd been displaced to Milena's typical seat. *I suppose he used to sit there before I came to this house,* Byletta thought with annoyance. It seemed childish to assert that it had been *her* seat while he was away. In any case, it wasn't the seating arrangements that were truly bothering her—it was his attitude.

"Your staring is going to burn a hole right through me." Byletta shot Arnald a glare, and he slowly blinked.

Was he not aware of how stupid he looked? He was always pulling the same face, whether they were at the estate, traveling, or eating together. What did it mean? Every time he looked at her like that, she always wanted to ask him if he was trying to pick a fight. And that morning, she finally snapped.

"I'm sorry," Arnald said. "I was just inspecting your appearance."

"You don't have to stare at me day after day. I'm not suddenly going to turn into somebody else. Anyway, it's a bit late to care about my appearance now. You were the one who went off to war without ever seeing my face. Most people are more curious about what their wife looks like."

"I'm not staring because of that. I just received a portrait of you from when we were first matched, and I was thinking that you appear to have softened up a lot since then."

Byletta was about to ask him what he meant by that when she found a completely different string of words tumbling out of her mouth.

"You looked at my portrait?"

"Of course I did. It's only natural that I'm curious about my wife, isn't it? Do you feel I have changed as well?"

Byletta was taken aback by the reversal of the question. She, too, had received a portrait of her intended when the match was made, but she had thrown hers in the fireplace without so much as a passing glance. They had never met, but her husband at least seemed to have looked at her picture. Byletta couldn't believe it.

"Umm… I can't be sure, as something happened and yours was burned to a crisp before I had the chance to open it."

Byletta couldn't bring herself to tell him that she'd burned it on purpose in a fit of rage. Instead, she tried to obscure the facts a bit, but she could already see that Arnald was stiffening up. Granted, no one would like to hear that someone had set their picture on fire.

Byletta began to wonder if she should apologize, but then she realized there wasn't much point anymore. It was all in the past.

"Pfft!"

Hearing the dry snort from beside her, Byletta turned and stared at her husband.

He had a hand to his mouth, and his shoulders were shaking with laughter. His default apathetic expression had crumpled, and his eyes were so crinkled that the emerald-green pupils were almost lost in between.

She'd never expected him to find it amusing!

Now it was Byletta's turn to freeze up.

"I'm sorry," Arnald said. "I just never expected you to tell me that it burned up before you even looked at it. To be honest with you, my superior sent the portrait to you without even telling me, so I have no idea how I looked in it, either. I'm somewhat relieved. You can look at me in the flesh now instead."

"Meanwhile, I'm wondering if you're the same man at all."

"Hmm. I don't know how much you've heard about me, but I'm glad to know you're taking any interest."

Taking in the calm smile on her husband's face as he watched her, Byletta was struck with the suspicion that he was in a good mood.

He was a womanizer. And Byletta felt like she was being seduced.

She decided to change the subject. If she continued down this line of conversation, she could be tempted into a sticky swamp indeed.

"I know you're taking it easy presently, but how is work going?"

"I thought I told you that I have a month's leave? There's plenty left. Thank you for asking, though. What are your plans for today?"

"I'm just going to go out for a bit."

"Where to?"

"Town, but…"

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Wh-what?"

What did he mean, 'join her'? They'd been practically attached at the hip during their time at the country estate. Now that she was back in the capital, she wanted the freedom to spread her wings a bit and take a break.

Byletta's brain ran at a mile a minute, searching for a way to brush him off, but she could think of nothing.

"Um, there's something I want to buy. Won't shopping with the fairer sex bore you? I think you should stay home."

"It's true, it would be my first time shopping with a woman. There are still a few areas where I'm lacking in that department, I'm sure. But if I can come to understand what my wife likes, then I think the outing would be a productive use of my time. Take me with you—I insist."

Arnald may have been making his request in a gentlemanly manner, but, though he'd rather upended her understanding of his taciturn nature with his talkativeness, that could not erase his stubborn obsession with forcibly injecting himself into her life.

She needed to put her foot down, or she would end up being pushed around like she had been when they'd gone to the countryside estate.

It seemed Arnald and his father were alike in this: Once either of them made their mind up, they were not inclined to alter their conclusion. The term "gentle tyrant" may have sounded

contradictory at first, but it seemed to perfectly describe her husband.

Where was that coldhearted, emotionless husband that her mother-in-law had warned her about? Was the man sitting next to her truly him? Although, even if he wasn't, how would she, of all people, be able to tell?

Unable to find a nice-sounding excuse with which to refuse him, Byletta ended up agreeing to head into town with her husband.

By the time they had finished breakfast and gotten dressed, it was already midday.

They had agreed to meet in the entrance hall, and as Byletta descended the stairs, she found that Arnald was already loitering there. He was wearing a simple outfit of a light-gray jacket, a pale-blue shirt, and black slacks. That said, no matter what the man wore, he always looked stylish. How could he not, with such a well-proportioned body, tall, slim figure, and long limbs?

His polished look likely had a good amount to do with his tailor as well, but regardless, all it took was a single glance at the man for Byletta to understand why the ladies flocked to him. There was no doubt that he'd be excellent advertising material if she could convince him to wear some of her boutique's pieces. But before her business brain could fully rear its head, Byletta quashed it back down.

Originally, her plan had been to take a detour from her shopping trip to poke around her textile factory and test out some new dyes, but with Arnald in tow, she found she had to rethink.

What a hassle my day is turning into, she thought as she reached the bottom of the stairs. Then, out of nowhere, she tripped and went catapulting forward.

Thankfully, Arnald immediately stepped in to break her fall.

As always, his clothes made him look quite slim, but Byletta could feel the strong musculature of his arms underneath the fabric. Still, though he was acting kind and had been quick to rescue her, this

behavior was the exact reason she'd been so off-kilter in the first place.

"Don't overexert yourself, now."

"This is all your fault! If you'd just been able to control yourself last night…"

Byletta's face flushed red with embarrassment. Even though she was still a beginner, Arnald still did whatever he pleased in the bedroom. She didn't know what he'd done once she'd passed out from pure exhaustion, but it felt like he'd toyed with her body all night long. Although Byletta didn't know the normal amount of lovemaking that went on between a man and his wife, she had to assume from her body's complaints that what she'd experienced was excessive.

"Maybe it's your fault for being so attractive," Arnald suggested.

"Maybe *you* should rethink your reasoning before blaming others…"

"It's very strange. I'm not the kind of person to have such strong urges. For me to have such trouble suppressing myself, you must be quite talented in the art of seduction."

"What about me is so seductive?"

Byletta threw a suspicious glance at Arnald, who was smiling like he wasn't, in fact, troubled at all.

It was rare to find someone who displayed such a large gap between what they said and how they acted. Watching her husband feign innocence, she felt a strong impulse to break his nose, but she pushed it back down.

"It's terrifying that you are so unaware of your allure. But I think the more we sleep together, the more I'll be able to calm myself—why don't you just submit and play along for now? Especially as our wager still stands."

Have we not had sex enough already? Byletta silently wondered. How many more times would it take to satisfy the man?

She had a lot of questions, but, unable to bring herself to tell her husband to do as he liked, Byletta ended up swallowing them all.

It seemed as if he planned on taking her as much as he liked every night for the rest of the month, only to throw her away once he became sick of her. *He really is the worst kind of man.*

Byletta tried gently pushing Arnald's arm away, but he didn't budge. If anything, he tightened his grip around her waist.

"Could you please unhand me?"

"Oh, my apologies. I was just admiring you. You look lovely in that dress. The light purple complements you perfectly…but I think you've been lucky thus far, looking as defenseless as you do."

What did he mean, "lucky"? The only one to leave her with memories of being defenseless was him.

A bitter memory entered Byletta's head for a split second, but she quickly reminded herself that it didn't hold a candle to her husband's actions.

"I wish I could pour water on your head and make you come to your senses!"

"Ha-ha, that sounds like fun, but we're currently making the carriage outside wait for us. It's a shame, but let's go."

What's a shame? Byletta wondered.

Perhaps she should douse him with water after all.

Given what was happening, she couldn't help but sincerely wish for the return of the cold-blooded, apathetic husband she'd known before.

Arnald had been acting strangely ever since they'd gotten back from the countryside estate. Even at night, he would gaze at her with an oddly sweet look in his eyes. Byletta had never seen such an emotion in him before. It almost felt like he was trying to show her affection. It was probably just her imagination as someone who was still naive on the subject of love, but it made her feel uncomfortable nevertheless.

Shaking off the tingling feeling budding inside her, Byletta exited the front door to find a carriage waiting, just like her husband said there would be. Once the vehicle had begun to sway its way to one

of the most luxurious shopping districts in the city, Arnald cheerfully asked her a question.

"Where are we headed today?"

"Well, let's see…"

Byletta had ordered a dress for the victory celebration before she left for the Swangan country estate. She'd asked for it to be delivered to her boutique, but if they went there, she knew she would be interrogated by her staff, who knew her circumstances. She couldn't face that. And besides, she didn't want to show Arnald her world. Tamping down the words she'd been about to say, Byletta desperately set her mind to work.

If possible, she wanted to make it so that Arnald never wanted to go shopping with a woman again in his life. But what shop would bore him the most? Byletta couldn't think of anywhere to go at all. No matter how long and hard she pondered, as someone with little courting experience, she had no expertise to draw upon.

As she searched for an answer, she happened to look out of the carriage window.

Once upon a time, she had come to town with her father-in-law on some business and shown him to her boutique. He'd been deeply uncomfortable and ill-tempered at finding himself so surrounded by dresses and jewels.

Arnald and his father weren't that close, but they shared the same blood. Surely, her husband would hate the experience just as much. Coupled with the fact that this was his first time shopping with a woman, she figured he would probably tire of things quite quickly upon experiencing what they were like for real.

Byletta couldn't exactly enter other clothing boutiques with ease, as they were her competitors, so she decided to go to a jewelry store instead. She had just ordered some items that had seemed perfect for the fast-approaching victory celebration. Arnald probably looked down on people who spent money frivolously, so perhaps she could put on enough of a show to make him start to hate her. If she

kept it up, the chances of her getting the divorce she craved would grow in her favor.

Steeling her resolve, Byletta smiled.

"Could you take us to Biamonte Jewels?" she asked the carriage driver.

But as soon as she arrived in front of the store, she instantly regretted her decision.

"Why, Lady Byletta, you came at just the right time!"

The moment that Arnald opened the stylish door for Byletta, the owner of Biamonte Jewels came running over, rubbing his hands together. He was the third-generation manager of the store and approximately the same age as Byletta's uncle, but his excitability suddenly made that doubtful.

"My, my, what's the big hurry?" Byletta asked.

"My people just returned from an outsourcing trip yesterday. They were able to get hold of some quality gems from out east, just like you said. Here, take a look!"

"Wow, you certainly brought in a lot of the gems I ordered. I'm very grateful."

Byletta spoke loudly before the store owner could say anything more. *Why did I bring Arnald to a store I am so familiar with?* she thought regretfully, but it was too late now. She really should have remembered that she'd spoken with the store owner about management before. It was partly thanks to her advice that the shop was doing as well as it was.

She really should have opted for somewhere she didn't frequent. But there was nothing that could be done about it now.

Arnald, who had been listening attentively, looked puzzled.

"She gives you purchasing advice?"

"Now why would I—"

"Of course! All the things she recommends turn out to be incredibly popular. And her advice about going east was spot-on. We had no idea we'd find so much gold, silver, and other gemstones in the mountains out there. Especially heliodor—and of such quality!

The only problem was that, if we don't have the correct processing technology out there, we have to leave it as scrap rock. But anyway, I'd love to ask your advice on some designs. I've got a lot of drawings and a few prototypes made for orders I've already received, and I would love to hear your opinion."

"You want…her advice?"

Byletta wanted to groan.

"Byletta's jewelry designs are simply gorgeous. Delicate, yet original. Bold, yet elegant. They take my breath away just looking at them and— Who might you be, by the way? Byletta rarely drops by alongside a male acquaintance."

"Do I not?"

"Well, I suppose that's only natural, as you've been waiting so dutifully for your husband to return from battle…"

He's saying too much!

He'd made it sound like Byletta had been spending the past eight years saving herself for Arnald. She wished she could say he had it wrong, but the store owner never stopped talking. This was why she was worried about the management of this shop. For someone in the jewelry business, it was important to be able to read a customer's expression and subtly tailor your response.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for always showing such kindness to my wife. I'm her husband, Arnald."

"Wife… Husband… *Husband?!* Then you're Arnald! So you're not here on business, Byletta? You're shopping with your spouse? I'm so very sorry for imposing myself on you, then. Oh, but I'm so pleased that you've returned from the front safely! Byletta here is such a beauty that she was forced to let down a number of suitors when she told them she was awaiting the return of her beloved husband. I hope you make her very happy!"

The store owner grinned, but Byletta was at a loss for words. It didn't seem like the right time to tell him that she was thinking of divorcing the man. She hadn't been saving herself for Arnald at all— she'd merely wished to dedicate herself to her work and was

therefore uninterested in getting tangled up in a messy love affair. She was far more suited to business than romance.

"Thank you. I intend to treasure her," Arnald said.

The words were spoken so affectionately that Byletta found herself taken aback.

What had happened to the infamously coldhearted lieutenant colonel? If she knew where to find that man again, she wouldn't hesitate to go out and get him back.

Why did I have to go and choose this jewelry store…?

Internally, Byletta crouched down in a corner, holding her head in despair.

Excusing herself from the boutique with the claim that she needed some fresh air, she stepped outside and immediately crumpled into herself. Arnald remained inside, apparently having something he wanted to buy. Unlike her father-in-law, he seemed to feel no sort of aversion to these kinds of shops at all and had been happy to engage the owner in conversation.

Byletta's strategy had failed. And it was all because she didn't understand her husband enough. Even worse, her little scheme had done more damage to her in the long run than she had expected. She already felt mentally exhausted by it all.

As she let out a deep sigh, the sound of a scream pierced her ears from down the street.

"Please, stop!"

Looking around to find the source of the disturbance, Byletta's eyes fell upon a sweet-looking young girl flanked by two men. Given their uniforms, the pair were unmistakably from the military, but it seemed like they were intimidating the girl rather than protecting her.

The situation reminded Byletta of when she'd first met her father-in-law.

With over a month having passed since the armistice was agreed upon, more and more ex-soldiers like him had begun to appear around the capital city.

"Why don't you spend a little time with us, huh?"

"I don't want to. Please, let me go!"

"You might want to rethink that answer while I'm still in the mood to play nice."

"What a shame to see such behavior from imperial soldiers," said Byletta.

"Huh?"

One of the soldiers looked back, then fell silent. The other simply smiled and tapped his friend on the shoulder.

"You take that one. I'll have this one."

"Wow, you're a mighty fine woman. Why don't you spend some time with me instead of all on your lonesome?"

"No thanks. I'm waiting on my companion."

While she had the men's attention, Byletta shot the girl they'd been hassling a look indicating she should run away as fast as she could. But the young woman was pale and frightened, glancing from one person to the next to see how things would develop. And even if she had tried to escape, one of the soldiers was keeping her in his sights. He didn't seem to plan on letting her get away so easily.

What can I do to get that man to let her go?

"You've got a companion? Can't be a very good one if he's keeping you waiting out here all by yourself. Why don't you ditch him and have some fun with us instead?"

They were right that her husband was being inconsiderate by staying inside even after she couldn't stand to be in the boutique any longer, but she had chosen to leave of her own volition. It wasn't Arnald's fault.

Because the carriage had been parked a little ways away, she would appear to be alone. And besides, Byletta knew full well that the pair of soldiers weren't commenting on her companion's actions out of a place of concern.

"But aren't you on duty?"

It was a natural assumption to make based on the men's uniformed appearance, but the two soldiers simply smirked.

“We led the empire to glory. Don’t we deserve a reward?”

“That’s right. We toiled away all those years so people like you could be safe.”

In Byletta’s opinion, the enormous victory celebration would more than suffice as their reward. She’d heard there was even a parade planned.

If they wanted to be celebrated, why did it have to be like this? Forcing people to do as they pleased wasn’t right, either, and trying to chat up girls in an upmarket area like this was ridiculous.

“This isn’t fitting behavior for two military men. Have at least a little pride in your station.”

“What did you just say?”

“We’re not the kind to go easy on you just because you’re a woman.”

The pair suddenly bristled, and Byletta was left unsure of what to do next. They both had swords attached to their belts, which would make for trouble if drawn. Even if she’d wanted to fight them, she was unarmed.

The only thing she had that could possibly be fashioned into a weapon was her tiny handbag.

As Byletta subtly started glancing around her surroundings, looking for anything she could wield as a weapon, she heard a soft-spoken voice from behind her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Byletta. Oh, what’s going on here?”

“These two gentlemen were just checking that I was all right, given that I was standing out here all alone.”

Byletta looked back to find Arnald standing there, nonplussed. When had he come out of the store? It seemed like he wasn’t interested in the situation before him. He wasn’t looking at the men, or even the young woman. Instead, he was sliding an arm around Byletta’s waist, and she raised an eyebrow at the move.

“I see. Thank you two for taking care of my wife, then. Shall we go?”

“Hey. Wait.”

"We can't let you get away that easily after insulting us like that."

Byletta had done her best to defuse the situation, but the men still seemed displeased. It was clear that they would not just let the conversation end on that note. But did they seriously not realize that this wasn't going to end well for them?

Byletta may have looked like a civilian, but her husband was a lieutenant commander. The two men were obviously of lower rank and therefore no match for him. Perhaps it was because Arnald looked so slender and gentle? It seemed these harassers had yet to learn not to judge a book by its cover.

Byletta glanced at Arnald and saw a smile on his face.

Her instincts immediately screamed a warning.

A tingle raced down the back of her neck. She wanted to run away right then and there, but the arm around her waist prevented her from making an escape.

Byletta could sense the same anger in Arnald that she'd sensed on their wedding night, the memories of which remained vividly in her brain. How could those two men see that look on her husband's face and possibly think they were at an advantage? Byletta was Arnald's wife, and even she wanted to get away.

"Do you still have some business with her?"

"Your companion there insulted us. She obviously has no appreciation for all the military does for her. We want her to apologize."

"Exactly. And you have to mean it."

"I suppose her appreciation for the military does run rather thin… What is your unit and rank?"

"What?"

"It looks as if you need more training if you're here harassing civilians. Now, unit and rank."

Arnald fixed them in place with a sharp glare. It was clear he was used to giving orders.

"Hey, don't tell me you're in the military, too…?"

"This is bad. Let's hurry up and get out of here."

The men, now white as sheets, quickly scampered away. It was a relief that they'd realized the difference in rank before the situation had escalated any further.

Turning back to the young girl, Byletta found her gazing at Arnald in admiration.

"It's all right now. I think you should go and find your family before anyone bothers you again."

"Th-thank you so much!"

Snapping back to her senses, the girl bowed her head quickly and disappeared into the bustle of the streets.

"I suppose this is why Milena and the others are so attached to you," said Arnald.

Byletta was surprised by the sudden mention of her sister-in-law.

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"I've heard some stories from Donovan as well. It appears you've been involved in a number of heroic exploits since you married into my family. Like saving my stepmother, looking after my lonely little sister, and helping the servants who used to cower before my father's violence. They all love and praise you like devotees. The same thing happened back at the estate the other day. You're the kind of person who seduces others quickly."

"I'm not seducing anyone!"

What kinds of things were the servants telling him?

As Byletta turned red, trying to deny his words, Arnald chuckled. It seemed something had amused him.

"Now I have seen the reason for that adoration myself. It's no surprise that others feel grateful upon receiving a helping hand."

"You were the one who saved that girl. You saw the way she looked at you, did you not?"

"I…honestly did not."

Arnald seemed genuinely surprised at the question. Byletta could only stare at him, quietly questioning his intelligence.

The girl's cheeks had been bright red as she'd gazed at him with a passionate stare. Although…this was Arnald. He didn't take an

interest in other people.

"I'm sorry for making you wait, by the way. Are you hurt?"

"I'd only just intervened, so I'm fine. And you came as quick as you could."

"I'm glad I arrived in time. I've heard some troubling tales concerning the behavior of some of the returning soldiers. Hopefully it's just those two."

"That won't put you in any danger, will it?"

Byletta had read in the imperial newspaper that lately some of the returnees from the war had been starting trouble with civilians. Despite the victorious mood that surrounded the capital, there seemed to be an invisible discontent simmering away underneath.

Arnald simply blinked at her absent-minded question.

"Wh-what…?" Byletta stammered.

"It's not a bad thing to have your wife worry about you. I actually thought you resented me."

"'Resent'…is a strong word…"

If asked whether she loved or hated Arnald, Byletta wouldn't choose hate. Her feelings of resentment weren't that strong.

Even though he'd abandoned her for eight years, trampled over her rights, and proposed that ludicrous wager before taking her body for himself, for some reason, her emotions had never run as dark as resentment or hatred.

But then again, Byletta had never resented or hated anyone before.

"Where are we headed next, then?" Arnald asked with a smile.

Byletta froze. What did he mean "next"?!

Oh, come now. She was done. She'd had enough.

Still, despite her vigorous internal protests, outwardly, all Byletta could manage was a feeble smile.

Upon arriving back at the Swangan residence, Byletta was so exhausted she felt dizzy. In the end, after leaving the jewelers, they'd wandered around the shopping district before partaking in a late lunch. It was only then that Arnald had seemed satisfied and

agreed to head home. Why had she even needed his permission to return to the manor anyway? *She* was supposed to be the one dragging *him* along.

By the time they had arrived back home, the sun was already hanging low in the sky.

Unlike the tired-looking Byletta, Arnald had kept a smile on his face the entire time. She'd thought he was just keeping it up for appearances' sake, but when they ran into the butler, Donovan, his reaction suggested that might not be the case.

"Y-young lord… H-has something happened…?"

"What do you mean?"

"The corners of your mouth are turned upward. I've never seen you make such an expression, even as a child…"

His reluctance to use the word "smile" made Arnald's usual apathy seem even more apparent. She understood what was happening was an anomaly, but she wished that her husband would take his grinning face somewhere else. Always having something to say but never being able to say it out loud had just added to her exhaustion.

"Oh. You're back…together."

Byletta's mother-in-law, Cynthia, wore an awkward smile as she approached the front door.

She gave Byletta a sympathetic look. Cynthia had known from the beginning just how much Byletta wanted to divorce Arnald and leave the Swangan manor and had been very supportive of her. She was an extremely dutiful woman who seemed grateful that Byletta had saved her from the count's tyranny. She'd even been helping to persuade Count Swangan into letting Byletta leave. Yet all that effort had been for naught.

Byletta felt apologetic that, in half a month, everything would be resolved and she'd be able to depart without any further ado.

"We just arrived home, Mother. Is Milena back yet?"

"Yes, she's in her room."

"Husband, I must go and see Milena immediately. Thank you very much for accompanying me today."

"Did you at least enjoy yourself somewhat?"

"Of course I did."

As if I could enjoy nervously waiting for a devil to bare its face, she thought. *Or shuddering beside a husband with an unfamiliar smile. Or even killing time by looking at products I didn't even want and dining on the blandest, grittiest lunch I've ever eaten.*

Everything had been far too lofty for her tastes, so she hadn't been able to enjoy any of it. She'd worn a smile for show only. Now, even exhausted as she was, she couldn't even tell anyone her vision was going fuzzy.

Byletta didn't really understand why she felt that way, beyond that she had a certain pride as a woman.

What she *did* know was that she was at her limit, and she was determined to take a breather. Her heart needed a rest.

Before she could be reined in again, Byletta took the souvenir she'd purchased in town and hurried to Milena's room.

Three days after Byletta's shopping trip with Arnald, the time for the victory celebration arrived. Luckily, the dress she'd ordered arrived on time without any major issues.

Arnald had been following her everywhere, always looking to make a move if the opportunity presented itself. If it was just a peck on the lips or a light touch, Byletta could turn a blind eye, but when it progressed to a hand slipping inside her underwear, there was nothing she could do but let him.

Given that Arnald hadn't laid a finger on her during their entire stay at the Swangan country estate, she wasn't entirely sure what had brought about this turn of events. Perhaps it was just how men were, though she could concede it might be something else. Regardless, it wasn't pleasant for her to deal with.

As Byletta and Arnald rode their carriage to the victory celebration, she reached over and pinched his hand. He jerked it away from her,

but when he spoke, it was with an aloof tone. He seemed very confident that he was doing nothing wrong.

"You remember you signed a contract that states we have to act like husband and wife for a month, don't you?"

"I do, but it's annoying how persistent you are at night."

"I've heard it's common for newlyweds."

"We've been married for eight years. Newlyweds. Don't make me laugh."

How shameless could he be? They'd been together for nearly a decade!

She wouldn't have found his behavior such a problem if he'd only approached her at night, but now that he'd started to bed her at all times of the day, it had started to become a hassle.

"At least control yourself until the victory celebration starts," she warned.

"So I can begin after that?"

Just where was he planning to make mischief once the victory celebration began? Most parties were held in locations where multiple rooms had been prepared for guests to rest in, but a victory celebration probably wouldn't have anything of the sort.

Byletta had absolutely no intention of doing something vulgar in public.

She'd begun to glare at Arnald, though she didn't notice it herself. *Even beasts are less lustful than this man. Has my cold-blooded, ruthless husband, who showed no interest in anyone but himself, perished and gone away? Does even a fragment of him still exist anywhere?*

She could curse herself for signing that contract without being more thorough.

As they continued toward their destination, Byletta turned her mind to thinking up any possible way she could keep her husband in check.

She found herself exhausted even before the victory celebration began.

Once they'd gone inside the venue at the glittering imperial palace, Byletta let out a heavy sigh.

The people in attendance looked absolutely resplendent. The celebratory mood was helping, of course, but everyone looked happy, like they were enjoying themselves. Byletta, on the other hand, had a dark expression on her face. She probably stuck out like a sore thumb. Her husband, whose fault it was, stood silently beside her.

Yet now wasn't the time for Byletta to look so down. The dress she wore was one of the latest from her boutique, and she was excited to be able to reveal it at such an ideal occasion.

The men's ceremonial military uniforms were a dark-green color embroidered with gold and silver thread. The insignia of their rank, whether medals, badges, or both, only made them look all the more striking. Byletta puffed out her chest in pride—her husband was so handsome, even his resplendent uniform could not begin to compare.

Her dress had been made to match the ceremonial uniforms, though it was more intricate. The elaborate, detailed design her designers and seamstresses had come up with was destined to be that season's must-have garment. If possible, Byletta wanted it to become the topic of the night and to leave other attendees with the knowledge that she stocked designs for any occasion.

But standing as she was next to her husband, she was beginning to worry that her dress would be eclipsed. He was a lieutenant colonel, after all. His stately presence and calm demeanor overwhelmed everyone around him. It was detestable, but his good looks outclassed those of everyone else in the room. No matter how he was dressed, no one could compare to him.

As a woman, the feeling of defeat was hard to swallow, but to be honest, he looked so good that Byletta acknowledged the loss. She'd never thought the ceremonial uniform would suit him so well. Military uniforms were always made to look good, but the beauty of this one was transcendent.

Byletta sighed, resigning herself to the fact that it was unlikely she would get to talk much business that night.

Even so, the number of looks that Arnald drew was incredible. Whether from a man or woman, the brief glances he received were dripping with heat, yet he seemed entirely unperturbed. It was almost like it was a regular occurrence for him to be so distinguished from the crowd—and his outfit only made him stand out further.

As a subject of ill-intentioned rumors ever since she'd first entered high society, Byletta still found herself the target of malicious looks. Nevertheless, her husband received far more stares than she. Granted, the intent behind them was quite different.

Byletta turned to look at a group in friendly conversation who were surrounding a well-decorated middle-aged man. He was encircled by men who appeared to be of high rank and were all talking animatedly. Guessing from the look on Byletta's face that she didn't know who he was, Arnald told her.

"That's General Vasia Grusbel. I heard he has retired."

"*That's* him*?"*

Byletta had heard the name before from her father. People called the man a war hero.

But from the way he was talking in the center of his group, Byletta couldn't imagine him barking out a fierce strategy, nor burning lands and leaving nothing in his wake but blood and destruction, as he was said to have done.

"He's…shorter than I expected."

"He's also just as mild-mannered and charming as he looks. Everyone's always surprised by that. He also had the unenviable task of being General Dreslan's superior."

"That…poor man…"

If he was able to keep that devil Movris in check, then he was either as charming as everyone said or an irredeemable degenerate. Byletta watched Vasia stroke his snow-white beard and sympathized with his probable anguish.

"General Dreslan saved me once, some time ago. I owe him a great debt," said Arnald.

"You do?"

Arnald was Movris's subordinate. Vasia had probably saved him from a good deal of pain from that fiend. The thought of it made Byletta shudder. The fact that her husband was so admiring and grateful toward Movris, instead of sneering over the torture he must have endured, showed how shockingly dutiful he truly was.

"What kinds of insulting thoughts are running through that head of yours right now?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, husband. I was just impressed by what a wonderful gentleman General Vasia seems."

Arnald was nothing if not perceptive. *Just like his father,* Byletta lamented.

"Why don't we get some drinks? Do you like alcohol?"

"Yes, but I prefer something light."

"Coming up."

Taking two glasses from the nearest waiter, Arnald passed one to Byletta. It was filled with a clear, fruity wine. The bubbly drink perfectly straddled the line between sweet and dry. *To think that Arnald grabbed the perfect drink on his first try…* Byletta was impressed with his instincts when it came to entertaining a lady.

How many women had he accompanied in the past to polish his skills to this level?

"Thank you," Byletta said.

Arnald had taken a glass of wine for himself. The deep-red liquid was smooth and alluring. Every time he tipped the glass and took a sip, the sight was erotic. As this was a military victory party, the venue was supposed to be bright, but Byletta found her mind wandering back to the captivating sights she'd witnessed during her and her husband's most recent nights together. Even though she could hear voices talking excitedly here and there around them, she couldn't stop her mind from wandering. How had she managed to end up with such a handsome husband?

One of the reasons she wondered as much was because all the stares around her had turned hostile, just as they always did at parties. The rumors were baseless, but they always managed to pull the carpet out from underneath her.

As Byletta relived flashbacks of her painful past, she thought about the kinds of looks she was receiving. If they were filled with contempt or envy, they would be easy enough to deal with, but some felt oddly vulgar.

As she pondered them and took a sip of the fizzy liquid in her glass, Arnald suddenly looked her in the eye.

"Is the drink to your taste?"

"What?"

"I've heard that women tend to like sweeter drinks, but you don't seem fond of those flavors, so I chose this for you instead. Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's lovely."

"Good."

Arnald broke into a smile.

It was a sweet expression, just like usual, but Byletta felt all the gazes upon her suddenly transform. The feeling was the same as if everyone had gasped, unable to believe their eyes.

In the blink of an eye, all the scorn and suspicion had turned into a sea of astonishment.

Arnald had his uses, even if he wasn't being the coolheaded and emotionless lieutenant colonel she'd first met. For the first time in her life, Byletta felt grateful for that bothersome smile of his.

"What a surprise… Who knew you could even make a face like that?" a casual voice asked, breaking through the frozen crowd of onlookers.

Arnald returned the salute of the brunet approaching him. He didn't even seem to notice the beautiful woman on the man's arm. The women who accompanied men to these types of events were usually nothing more than eye candy. Spouses might get a greeting, but luxury escorts and the like were usually ignored. Even so, given

that Arnald didn't even pay her a single glance, he must have been somewhat blind to the appearance of others.

"It's too bad… I was looking forward to teasing you a bit."

"Good tidings, General, sir."

The man was Lieutenant General Movris Dreslan. Or, rather, General Dreslan, as he'd been promoted during the commemorative celebration earlier in the day. Movris wrinkled his gentle face and began to speak with distaste.

"Aww, you know I dislike all those stuffy formalities, and yet you persist with them anyway. You're a horrible man. You should be more grateful to your generous superior. Anyway, let me change the subject for a moment. I had every intention of pulling you up behind me, but there weren't any posts available. You'll just have to settle for some medals and bonuses today. I'll have you promoted another two or three ranks before you know it!"

"On my deathbed, you mean?"

"Surely not. Anyway, you wouldn't go leaving this amusing wife of yours behind, would you?"

What about me does he find "amusing," exactly? Byletta wondered. He could have at least called her beautiful. Then she could have at least retaliated in her usual way. Not that receiving a compliment from that man had ever made Byletta happy.

Still, Arnald seemed to be friendly with Movris. Back when Byletta had first learned of her betrothal, her father had referred to her husband as Movris's "dear subordinate," but seeing them side by side really cemented how comfortable they were with each other. At first glance, her husband seemed unapproachable, and his superior seemed quite congenial, but underneath, they were two of a kind.

"I think you'll agree that I went above and beyond your expectations when I fulfilled those curious requirements of yours. You don't have any complaints, do you?"

"No, I'm very grateful."

Arnald nodded triumphantly at the self-assured Movris.

It sounded like the wish list that could have been mistaken for a soldier recruitment notice had come straight from Arnald after all. But it also seemed as if he'd based his requirements for a wife on something he found humorous, which Byletta had complicated feelings about.

I wish they wouldn't amuse themselves at my expense.

"I was worried about you at first, but here you two are, getting along wonderfully. Just like I said you would."

"I had no idea I'd given you cause for such concern."

"Well, I did set you up, remember? And after that serious conversation we had, of course I was concerned."

Byletta had no idea what Arnald had spoken to Movris about, but she was most skeptical about his friendly concern. She gave him a clear sidelong glance, and her husband appeared to do the same. It was a bit of a surprise to find they were on the same page, as if they were an old married couple, but Byletta found it didn't make her feel any better.

A normal matchmaker wouldn't have offered Byletta's name as a match for that absurd list of demands. They'd probably have just told Arnald to reconsider.

She still held a grudge over that.

"Byletta, I saw your father over there. You might want to go see him later. After he heard all the talk about you two, the color all but drained from his face."

What could he have been told to react in such a way? Byletta wondered.

Judging by the gleeful way Movris, the very man who'd arranged her and Arnald's union, had informed her of the situation, nothing good would come from interrogating him further.

Byletta had heard that her father was back from the war, but she hadn't returned home to see him yet, as she'd been too consumed with work to spare the time. The realization made her feel like a rather heartless daughter. It hadn't just been her husband she hadn't met for eight years, but her father, too.

"Thank you for treating me with such consideration, General."

"I must say, in all the years since we last met, you've grown less and less charming. It seems you've been losing youth and gaining tooth. You must be very grateful to me for finding you a match while you were at your most in demand."

Would it be so bad to strike this man? Byletta wondered.

She'd heard a lot about General Dreslan over the years from her father, and he'd turned out to be just as irksome as she'd imagined.

Now that he'd been promoted even further, the military might no longer have the control over him that it once had. It was possible he'd even seized power for himself—that was what Byletta suspected, at least. The rank of general was quite close to the top, after all. And it was obvious that handing a man like Movris Dreslan real power was reckless.

"I think I'll have to come over one day for a lark. See you then."

"We'll be looking forward to your visit, General Dreslan."

"Not endearing in the least. You're perfect for each other…"

After Movris sauntered away, Byletta's eyes landed on her father, who was chatting at the side of the room. She waited for a break in the conversation before approaching him.

"Father, it's been a while."

"Oh…Byletta."

As her father turned to face her, Byletta noticed how much older he looked than in her memories.

It was enough to make her realize just how long the last eight years had been. The new wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and flecks of white in his hair made her feel the passage of time keenly, yet he still had the look of a soldier. Even though he'd lost a bit of weight, his upright posture was still the same as she remembered.

She'd seen her mother several times since she'd gotten married, so Byletta wasn't too upset not to find her by her father's side. She was a sociable woman who acted as a sort of coordinator among the military wives and had spent the war supporting and lending an ear

to the spouses of her husband's subordinates. It was possible she was chatting with someone elsewhere in the venue.

"Congratulations on the occasion, Brigadier General."

"Thank you. I heard you were awarded a medal for ordering the methodical elimination of enemy supply lines."

"I couldn't have done it without the talent of my subordinates. I've also heard how you took out that bridge, sir."

The conversation between her father and Arnald was going more amicably than Byletta had first expected, especially given that he'd told her she could come back home after she'd first married into Arnald's family. And after what Movris had said earlier. In fact, the pair were acting so friendly that it was making Byletta uncomfortable.

Once their chat came to an end after a short while, her father turned back toward Byletta.

"You look so much like your mother now. Like a proper lady."

"Well, I *am* her daughter."

Byletta was well aware that she'd inherited her mother's divine good looks, so all she could do was nod along.

"I see that you're the same as ever on the inside, though… I hope you're not causing your husband too much trouble."

So her father was on Arnald's side, even though he was the one causing trouble for Byletta? Could he not be a little more forthcoming with praise for a daughter he hadn't seen in so long? How could he tear her down again so soon after complimenting her for her femininity?

"Also…I'm sure you've heard the rumors, but my daughter has quite the reputation among both the returning troops and those who remained here on reserve. I've even heard them repeated here and there tonight. I'm unable to shut them down now, but I want you to be aware."

"I know the rumors are baseless. I apologize for any upset they have caused you."

Rumors again.

Had something plausible been spreading among the ranks?

Worrying about whether she should ask what it was or not, Byletta stared at her father and husband.

"You two look very friendly for a first meeting. Have you met each other before?" she questioned.

"Oh, yes…at the ceremony earlier today. Arnald here sought me out to say hello."

"I had never spoken to him before that, so I thought it was a good opportunity."

While the victory party was an evening event, there had been a commemoration ceremony during the daytime, followed by an award ceremony. Apparently, they had met sometime during the course of those events.

"I see. I'm sure you're relieved to find that I have such a wonderful husband, aren't you?"

Byletta made no efforts to hide her irritation, but her father was gazing sternly at Arnald.

"I apologize for my tiresome daughter, but do remain strong."

"Yes, of course."

Arnald didn't deny that she was tiresome.

And what had her father even meant by that?

Shouldn't her husband have at least denied it?

Byletta couldn't help but feel dejected as she stood between the two men.

Even though the event was called a "victory celebration," it was first and foremost an opportunity for people involved with the military to gather, drink, and have some fun. Friends thronged together, singing each other's praises for their feats on the battlefield and congratulating one another on making it home alive.

The venue was a party in full swing, but Arnald did not speak to any of his subordinates, only conversing at times with passing superiors. Byletta's father, on the other hand, made sure to thank

and appreciate all his men. Byletta could see from where she stood how much fun they were having together.

"Don't you wish to speak with anyone else?"

"My presence would only make things awkward," Arnald said, unfazed. He drained another glass.

Byletta couldn't bring herself to agree with his casual assertion.

How could he have never developed a relationship with his subordinates, even though they'd been at war together for eight whole years?

She found herself concerned for Arnald.

"Byletta Holland?"

Up to this point, Arnald had been the only one to be addressed by name. Byletta braced herself, surprised to hear someone calling out to her at all—let alone using her maiden name. No one in the military that she knew would refer to her that way. Most people just called her "Colonel Holland's daughter."

This couldn't be good.

Byletta turned to face the source of the voice and found an elegant-looking young man dressed for the party. He appeared quite the dandy, as was befitting of a man who belonged to one of the most distinguished lines of the old empire. His luxurious jacket had been fringed with gold thread, his colored tie made of the finest, softest fabric, and his clothes perfectly tailored—just one glance, and Byletta knew he was a customer of the finest tailor in Gaihandar. He was certainly not the kind of person to purchase anything mass-produced in a factory.

His name was Emilio Gracche.

He was the heir of Marquis Gracche and an aide to the Speaker of Parliament. He was the same age as Byletta and a former classmate of hers at Stacia Academy.

With his pale golden hair tied back at the nape of his neck and his sharp ice-blue eyes, he was a different kind of handsome than Arnald.

His attitude was arrogant and haughty, his personality sly and spiteful.

This wasn't going to be good after all. Byletta had spied him from afar at noble faction parties, but this was the first time she had seen him up close. He looked much more manly than she remembered from her academy days, and yet he was cloaked in the same unpleasant aura.

Why would he greet a woman he hated so?

"My, what a long time it has been, Lord Gracche."

"Do you two know each other?" asked Arnald, looking Byletta in the eye.

He seemed more curious than probing. He most likely thought it strange that she had a young acquaintance in the noble faction. No, wait. It seemed more likely her husband was interested in knowing whether she and Emilio had a deeper relationship. She had no idea how to answer.

Should she call him an old acquaintance? A fated nemesis?

In the end, she chose to simply nod.

"Yes… He was one of my classmates at the academy. Do you know him as well, husband?"

"I do. He's the aide to the Speaker of Parliament."

Emilio loved his title more than anything, so the fact that Arnald knew it would surely put him in a good mood. Just as Byletta had expected, the corners of his mouth curled up as he turned to her with a passive-aggressive look on his face.

"The Honorable Speaker couldn't make it this evening, so I am here in his stead."

The Speaker of Parliament was the head of the noble faction, so it was no surprise that he was absent from a party held by the military faction, especially one being hosted on their own turf. Given that the emperor was scheduled to attend, the speaker had only been invited as a matter of courtesy. The speaker probably knew that, too, which would be why he'd sent a young aide in his place. In other words, attending was a work task. But despite that, Emilio seemed to be

puffed up with pride even though he thought everyone in his vicinity was below him. It was odd, given that he shouldn't have even wanted to be there.

"I understand the bonuses have been delayed. Is that why you're here?"

"Bonuses?"

Emilio's expression turned stiff as soon as Arnald mentioned the word, as if he'd hit a nerve.

An article in the newspaper had mentioned bonuses were in the process of being negotiated between the military and the legislature. It was reported that, although enough money had been acquired from neighboring lands, the bonuses were yet to be paid.

"I have no authority in that matter, but my lord will address it at a later date. Now, I'm a busy man and I don't have the time to steep in the stench of gunpowder with the lot of you. I do, however, have a piece of advice for you, Lieutenant Colonel."

Emilio was as haughty and tactless as ever.

What was he hoping to achieve by insulting the military in a room full of service members? Byletta knew that there was no love lost between the noble faction and the military faction, but she would've thought they would at least keep things civil in public.

"I was surprised to find out the colonel had taken you for a wife," Emilio said to Byletta. "That explains a lot of the rumors."

"And what rumors would those be?"

As Byletta tilted her head questioningly, Arnald turned his sharp eyes on Emilio.

"Do you have business with my wife?"

The low pitch of his voice warned of his displeasure.

"No, I just couldn't stand by and watch this woman deceive the colonel who was so instrumental to our victory. Perhaps you didn't know, but this witch toyed with all the boys in our academy. In the end, even the teachers took up against her."

Emilio spoke smugly, not even looking to gauge Arnald's reaction. It appeared that they'd found the source of the rumors, and it had

all started because he was jealous that a woman, and a woman from a military family no less, was smarter than he was.

There was nothing as unsightly as a man's jealousy. Their feelings were much more deeply rooted than those of women—although this instance had nothing to do with gender and everything to do with a rotten personality.

Unfortunately, Byletta had never had proof that he was the one who started the rumors, and thus no one had believed her. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that her four years at that academy had been hell. During her time there, two of her classmates had attempted to assault her sexually, and Emilio was the ringleader who'd set the pair on her with such malice.

One of the boys had pulled out a knife to threaten her, but Byletta had simply wrestled it away and turned it back on him. The wound she'd left was just a scratch, but noble children were sensitive beings. He'd run off crying and caused an uproar.

That was the bloodshed from her academy days that Byletta's father and uncle referred to on occasion.

Byletta hadn't thought it was a major incident. All she'd done was cut the skin on his arm a little bit. It could be covered up. And he was a man. Moreover, he'd been threatening her virtue as a noblewoman. It had been shortsighted of him to think she wouldn't fight back.

Luckily, the attack had never progressed to full-on rape, but for some reason Byletta had been punished with rumors that she had led them on, while the boys were unscathed. She'd graduated soon after at the bottom of her class, which was only natural given that she hadn't been able to take her exams. It was a miracle she'd been allowed to graduate at all.

Her reputation and dignity were left in tatters.

Byletta knew that she was good-looking. She was the daughter of a woman who looked like a goddess, after all. Still, she hated that men she didn't know were attracted to her. She'd come to hate her

own face. She'd always been awkward around the opposite sex, but that one incident had cemented it in her mind: She hated men.

Emilio was an old adversary.

He always spread the same rumors from her time at the academy at noble faction parties, and they'd shown no sign of fading after she'd made her high society debut. Even now, after marrying Arnald, they persisted and had evolved to the point that people were claiming she'd seduced her father-in-law and uncle. Her father-in-law was, of course, enraged by the gossip and firmly denied it, while her mother-in-law, steady in the knowledge that none of it was true, just laughed them off awkwardly.

But Byletta had never imagined that the rumors would spread to the military.

"She still dallies with men left and right, doesn't she? Your own father chief among them."

"I knew it was you who started the rumors…"

The sneering man hadn't changed one bit since their school days.

Something in Byletta snapped after she realized why she'd been inundated with uncomfortable stares from the moment she'd arrived at the venue, but a stern voice quickly interjected.

"I ask that you stop insulting my wife," Arnald stated flatly to Emilio before Byletta had a chance to snap back.

Byletta had made her husband angry before, but this was the most furious she'd ever seen him. His stare alone was enough to freeze Emilio in his tracks.

Emilio faltered. He'd always been an abject coward.

"I-I was just looking out for you…"

"I don't care. I know my wife better than you. I know she is a woman of integrity."

"But she stabbed someone during our academy days! She may have the face of a lady, but she's a wicked harlot, and it would be most unfortunate if a lieutenant colonel got injured by such a woman somehow."

"I've seen her skill with a blade and know how impressive she is. It's enough to captivate a man. But she only draws her sword on the lowest of lowlifes, because senseless violence is what she despises the most. Perhaps she's had to turn her sword on you before?"

"I-I must take my leave, Colonel. Excuse me…"

In a rare moment of timidity, Emilio disappeared back into the crowd.

Byletta stared at her husband beside her. His expression hadn't changed one iota.

Was he not angry that Byletta had been called a harlot and accused of sleeping with other men? Perhaps he'd suggested the wager because he'd already heard the rumors. Would he divorce her once he had his fill? Or was he simply trying to teach her a lesson? But what man, as uninterested in others as he was, would even deem such a thing worthy of wasting his time on? Whatever his designs were, Byletta couldn't put her finger on them yet.

Neither Byletta's father nor her uncle had supported her unwomanly pursuit of the sword. Even the teachers at the academy had refused to instruct her, so she'd mostly taught herself. Frustrated by his defeat at her hand, her father-in-law had sparred with her on numerous occasions, but never before had someone accepted her as she was so wholly.

The only person who had ever called her impressive was her husband. And even more than that, he'd acknowledged that she wielded her sword with conviction and not just for fun.

What was this feeling welling up inside her?

Byletta looked at her husband, filled with an indescribable emotion.

"So…you know about the rumors?"

"It's hardly strange for a man to look into the background of the woman he's going to marry."

It was probably common in arranged marriages among the nobility and military. Yet even knowing all about the gossip, he'd still agreed to marry her. How unpopular must he have been to agree to marry a

supposed shrew like her, who'd been accused of bloodying a fellow student? Or was there another reason that explained it all?

"You knew, but you married me anyway?"

"I only found out recently. We were already married."

"But then you went and rejected my proposal to divorce and suggested our wager instead. Wouldn't most men just ask for a divorce if they heard those kinds of rumors?"

Byletta's husband was too eccentric. His thinking was a mystery to her.

"I made quite a few assumptions at first, but after getting to know you and seeing you around the estate, I came to realize the rumors were baseless. But you seemed to be quite the object of fascination, given gossip about you had even spread within the military."

"What…? I am?" Byletta asked Arnald.

She'd expected her husband to criticize her, but he actually seemed rather impressed.

"The men you turned down appear to have been rather spiteful and spoken poorly of you, and now everyone's wondering about this harridan my fate has been tied to."

"You might as well divorce me, then."

Byletta knew the meaning behind the looks she'd gotten as soon as she'd walked into the venue, strangely enough. It was her husband's attitude that she couldn't fathom.

Byletta blinked, only to find Arnald looking back at her with a puzzled expression.

"Do you think any man worth his salt would willingly abandon such a wonderful wife? Alas, I am not that foolish. I consider myself fortunate to have made such an indomitable woman my wife. I won't set you aside."

Byletta had never cared for when people complimented her appearance, and even now, being praised for being "indomitable" was difficult for her to accept with open arms. She was doubtful whether it really was a compliment.

But she could feel that her cheeks had suddenly flushed red.

A kind of embarrassment different from the one she'd experienced during her and Arnald's nightly encounters began to rise up within her.

It felt slightly uncomfortable. Her heart was pounding.

It was the first time she'd ever felt this way. It sent panic coursing through her.

"I-I have to go and freshen up."

"I'll take a breather outside, then."

"Okay."

Byletta ran as fast as she could to the corridor outside the venue.

Why did she feel so embarrassed beside her husband? Her heart was racing. She wanted to scream.

He understood her. He accepted her. He didn't criticize her. And most importantly, he defended her.

That was the first time someone had ever defended her in front of anyone. It made her so happy she could cry out in joy.

"Would you happen to be Lady Byletta Swangan?"

The moment Byletta exited into the corridor, someone called her name. She snapped her head around to look at them with the same intensity as the pounding of her racing heart.

Standing there was an extravagant woman with blond curls. Her garish purple dress suited her so well that the color actually looked good.

The woman's face, however, was caked with so much makeup that it was hard to make out her natural features. Even worse was the amount of perfume she wore, which made her so offensive to the nose that it took all of Byletta's determination not to grimace.

"That's me…," Byletta began.

"I do apologize for suddenly intruding on your thoughts. I'm Carla Rydewall."

The woman looked like she was in her thirties. Byletta wasn't sure if it was because of all the makeup, but her seductive aura expressed a mature femininity. The queenly air of nobility she

embodied seemed to let her get away with the openness of the bust of her dress.

Byletta hurriedly averted her gaze from the woman's ample and unashamedly exposed bosom.

The Rydewalls were considered the same rank as the Swangans, as the family heads were both counts. It went without saying that the former was also part of the noble faction, granting them a certain status.

Byletta had heard many rumors in high society circles about the Rydewalls. There, the countess was known as the "Queen of Seduction."

Carla had become Count Rydewall's second wife at a tender fifteen years of age. She'd lost her husband since then, becoming a widow, and now spent her time flitting from man to man. It had earned her a reputation for being somewhat flighty.

She was currently acting as an interim countess until her son came of age.

Rumor had it, however, that the former count's younger brother had taken responsibility for the day-to-day duties that accompanied the title, and Carla had fully devoted herself to the pursuit of passion, instead.

Since Byletta belonged to a different high society faction, she'd only ever seen Carla from afar and hadn't experienced her feminine intensity up close and personal before.

The rumors about Byletta might have been baseless, but it seemed this woman was a true femme fatale.

As if dissatisfied with only being able to prowl the noble half of high society, Carla regularly attended military functions as well, so she'd become well connected. Still, she wasn't related to any military men, so it was probable that she'd asked one to bring her here as his plus one.

As Byletta began to wonder what her reasons for going through all that effort just to attend this function could be, the countess smiled sweetly and spoke again.

"Do you know where I might find Arnald?"

"My husband should still be inside."

Although he *had* said that he needed to step outside for some air, so perhaps he was on the terrace instead.

"I'm afraid I didn't see him inside. It appears his wife has lost him, too."

Carla snorted as if she considered Byletta beneath her before unceremoniously looking her up and down.

"I never imagined a young woman such as yourself would be able to keep up with Arnald—but then again, your reputation precedes you."

"It's truly embarrassing. What an utter travesty that such utter nonsense keeps making the rounds."

"I see someone's playing coy…"

"I'm afraid I don't boast the same allure as you, Countess Rydewall."

Usually those were words used to lift someone up, but in this case, Byletta wanted to put this woman down.

Whether Carla would be able to sense the disdain in her tone or not depended on the woman herself, but she seemed to be finding something else disagreeable. Carla's well-groomed brow was furrowed, as though she didn't appreciate Byletta's collected attitude.

From her increasingly chilly expression, Byletta could tell the reason Carla was in attendance that night was to seek out Arnald.

"Lord Arnald and I are very well acquainted, you know. At least, ever since he stopped being a boy. They do say a man never forgets his first time, after all. Although, I guess that's the last thing I should be telling his wife… I just wanted to see him again, for old times' sake. I don't suppose I could borrow him for a bit, could I?"

"I see."

The honeyed words from the woman's voluptuous red lips made Byletta feel uncomfortable, but to the ears of a man, they probably would have sounded inviting and pleasant. Yet the fact that she'd

gone through the trouble of asking Byletta where Arnald was suggested that she was either declaring war or trying to warn Byletta off.

Byletta wished she could tell the woman she'd gladly accept her challenge, but at the same time, she felt a bitterness rise up inside about her husband's taste in women.

Why did *Carla Rydewall* have to be his first?

Especially when girls like Milena existed.

How could he be so indifferent to the sweetness of girls like Milena, yet have liaisons with witches like Carla? Byletta couldn't help but frown now that she knew her husband's sexual history.

Carla excused herself, seemingly satisfied with Byletta's reaction. They'd only spoken for a moment, but the smell of perfume lingered in the air so heavily that Byletta began to feel sick.

As she tried to suppress her disgust, she rushed to the restroom.

Arnald had said that he was going out for some air. When Byletta eventually returned to the venue and made her way out onto the terrace, she soon caught sight of him sequestered in one of the corners.

He was leaning against the rail and talking to someone.

But it wasn't Carla. She was nowhere to be seen. Feeling a bit relieved, Byletta pondered the reason why. Why was she relieved that Carla wasn't there? Was it purely because she wouldn't have to be subjected to that suffocatingly strong smell of perfume again?

"I haven't seen the countess in a while, but she does come on strong. You handled her well."

Arnald's companion was hidden by his shadow, but she could tell the pair were friendly by the tone of their voices. Byletta was hesitant to interrupt a conversation between two old friends, but she was also afraid of hearing something she might not like if she stood there waiting in silence. The best course of action was probably to greet them and then leave. But then again, Arnald would probably

worry about her if she simply disappeared into the crowd. Although she supposed it was also possible he wouldn't even notice.

As Byletta wavered between her options, Arnald replied matter-of-factly to his companion.

"I often find myself around women like her. But you already know that."

"Hm… That's right. You even thought your wife was one of her kind… What were you thinking, you woman hater?"

"I wasn't really thinking of anything at all. I just needed a wife."

Arnald hated women?

If that was true, why was he refusing to let her go?

Why did she have to endure what he put her through every night?

She'd divorce him if he asked. He knew that she would be more than happy to. *He* was the one who wanted to stay married.

"Do you not mind since you don't have to pay to sleep with her? I know it was rough going for you in the war. Too little pocket money and not very many affordable escorts. I was always worried you'd end up with one of mine."

Arnald didn't say anything in response but seemed to chuckle. Byletta suddenly felt the atmosphere turn tense.

"But now you get to bed a singular beauty for free, you lucky devil! Your average whore isn't nearly as blessed in the looks department."

"Do you think so?"

"We both chose to marry quick before going off to battle, but now there's a marriage boom. Did you hear about that boor Heinz? Even *he* received a proposal. And so have many of the returnees. It seems you're only at a disadvantage if you didn't make it back with a pulse. Plus, all those widows are inflating the market as well. Any military man seems to be a big catch. I wonder if I might've found myself a prettier wife had I just waited a little longer…"

"Do looks really matter?"

"A prettier wife is better. Not that I'd ever find a wife prettier than you, of course."

"Enough of that."

"You really hate to be handsome, don't you? Now that you mention it, weren't you targeted by the head of District Two?"

"I politely declined."

"I think I heard that General Dreslan was quite influential, but the truth gets completely mangled after a while."

Finished listening to the pair catch up, Byletta slowly walked away.

At some point, she found herself in the courtyard.

As she walked around in a daze, she came across a bench and decided to sit down. That's when she finally let out the heavy sigh she'd been keeping pent up inside her. It seemed like she'd forgotten to even breathe properly.

She hadn't expected much of anything from her husband. She'd stopped expecting anything from men back in the academy and had been desperate to become the kind of woman who didn't have to rely on anybody after that.

She hated that her value changed depending on the whims of men.

But why was she feeling so shocked right now?

What was it?

Was it because she was being treated like a whore? Was it because people saw her as an empty-headed bimbo?

No, she knew it was neither of those.

She had been so happy when Arnald had resolutely defended her against Emilio. Even though he'd known the rumors about her, his attitude hadn't changed. He hadn't looked down on her or accused her of impudence. He hadn't frowned upon her unwomanly pursuit of the sword, either. All he'd done was praise her and tell her how impressive she was.

She'd been truly happy. She'd begun to trust him.

He was the first man to ever raise her hopes.

But now she knew that everything had just been a front. She was hurt. She felt betrayed.

She was sadder that he didn't really believe in her than she was angry at the humiliation of it all.

But worse still was the overwhelming realization that her fate, if she had not walked out on that balcony, had been to live a life misled.

She had just covered her face with her hands when a shadow fell over her.

Byletta looked up, only to find a familiar face.

"Uncle Samus…"

Samus, who was dressed up for the occasion, elegantly ran his fingers through his dark-brown, almost black hair. It felt strange to see him there in a sea of military uniforms, but his association had fronted the military with supplies during the war. Byletta remembered how he'd joked about how much he'd profited from them. That's probably why he'd been invited.

But it was the dark look in her uncle's jade eyes that left her puzzled.

"Who's been making my dear niece cry?"

"I wasn't crying. I'm just a bit overwhelmed. I haven't been to a party in a while…"

"You get that stubbornness from your mother, you know."

Samus strode toward his niece, sat down on the bench next to her, and wrapped her up in his arms.

Byletta's heart calmed at the fresh, leafy scent of his cologne, which was so much different than her husband's. Her uncle had always worn that scent.

"Do this and no one will be able to see your face. Then you can cry as much as you want."

"Heh-heh. Uncle Samus, I'm already a woman grown. I don't cry like a little girl anymore, you know?"

"You'll always be my sweet little niece."

"You're too kind."

Byletta had nothing but appreciation for her uncle, who had shown her much affection over the years. She knew it was because she

favored her mother so, but he had been the one to take her seriously all this time, as well as the one to make her dream of becoming a businesswoman and store owner come true.

He patted her back softly, just as he always did. No matter how much she grew up, he would continue to dote on her like she was still a little girl, even though she was now twenty-four years of age and old enough to be someone's wife.

But she didn't feel belittled. How could she, when his sentiments came from a place of such deep affection?

As Samus silently cradled Byletta in his arms, his attention was suddenly drawn to her necklace.

"Is that a necklace of heliodor…? That reminds me—didn't I hear that you'd helped out the owner of Biamonte Jewels recently? Did the stones come from there?"

Byletta looked back up at her uncle without breaking their embrace.

She had to laugh. He knew that talking shop would cheer her up. He was ever the businessman.

But she appreciated it all the same right now.

"As you always say, a competitive spirit leads to better business. Monopolies and stagnation lead nowhere."

"But that doesn't mean you need to go helping those who don't need it."

"What do you mean, Uncle? I thought he was a good person."

"He's not a bad person, per se, but he's savvy. He has amazing intuition, and his store was doing just fine even before you started to assist him."

Samus seemed to be suggesting that the owner of Biamonte Jewels, a man who had suddenly succeeded his sick father in the company and was struggling to make ends meet, had not needed Byletta's help. That she'd been meddling unnecessarily.

As she considered the matter, a voice suddenly pierced the silence.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The cold, pointed voice made Byletta sit up straight.

Samus gently stroked her back as if to comfort her. “Well, well! If it isn’t Lieutenant Colonel Swangan,” he said.

“Would you kindly unhand my wife?”

“I’m so sorry, Uncle Samus. I’m afraid he’s gotten the wrong idea.”

As Byletta gently pushed her uncle away, a small smile appeared on his face.

“No, it’s fine, Byletta. I’m not one to take criticism from a young fool who’d abandon his wife to go and find pleasure elsewhere.”

“I took my eyes off you for merely a second, and you were nowhere to be found, beloved wife. Surely that’s no reason for a grown man to go after another man’s bride, now is it?”

She was a “beloved wife,” was she? What a barefaced lie.

Byletta had just found out that he considered her nothing more than a prostitute. She was just trying not to notice how much that had hurt.

“Can’t you see that I was simply doting on my precious niece?”

“You do realize that attitude of yours is what gave rise to all the rumors, don’t you?”

“Rumors? As long as the pests leave her alone, I can’t say I really care about them.”

That had always been Samus’s stance.

Fight fire with fire. Tackle rumors with rumors.

That was exactly why he’d never denied the gossip surrounding Byletta and let her do as she pleased.

“Though I suppose the biggest pest of them all has really stuck his feelers into her… So when will you be leaving Byletta?”

Byletta wanted to say that they’d be parting amicably in only a few weeks, but it didn’t seem like the time.

“I don’t intend to leave her at all.”

“That’s rich, coming from someone who married his wife from a distance and then abandoned her for eight whole years. I don’t intend to acknowledge a union like that.”

“And what gives you the right to interfere in our business?”

"How cute. A youngster like you picking a fight with someone like me? I am her mentor and part of her family. What rights do you have exactly? You think you own her because you've been married to her on paper for eight years? Don't make me laugh," Samus said, suddenly angry.

"I'm still her husband, and we are still legally married. Besides, Byletta should be the one to decide her own future. I'll respect her wishes," Arnald answered quietly.

If Arnald had truly respected Byletta's wishes, he wouldn't have proposed that wager to her at all. He would have just granted her the divorce.

He was the one keeping her in their marriage, and he was the one who had suggested their wager.

"I see. What a fine attitude. Then, Byletta…it's time for you to be free."

"Unfortunately for you, she cannot leave me."

That was only because they had a contract!

But there was no way she could tell her uncle that. If he knew that she'd made such a wager, he'd be furious with her for doing something so stupid. She didn't want to be accused of being a mediocre businesswoman who entered into unwinnable bets on a whim. But the arrogant look on her husband's face was infuriating. He didn't have to word everything in a way that would invite misunderstandings. What was the point in getting under her uncle's skin like that?

"What is that supposed to mean?" demanded Samus. "Is that your ego speaking? And why does Byletta look so flustered, if that's the case?"

Samus's eyes slowly drifted from Arnald to Byletta. His keen stare left her uneasy. When she'd first told him that she was going to get married, he'd spent half the day interrogating her with those eyes. She shuddered at the mere thought of having to go through that again.

Byletta knew instantly that they needed to leave.

"Uncle, could you and I speak about this matter some other time?"

"Very well… How about tomorrow? We could have lunch together at our usual place."

Byletta knew very well to expect an interrogation as to why her husband was so confident that she wouldn't leave him. Unless she deferred and came up with a real plan of action, she could only see her future becoming even more complicated.

The place they usually met for lunch was a room on the top floor of her uncle's luxury restaurant in the capital. It was a dining establishment used for important business meetings and receptions. She knew it well.

"Yes, thank you. Well then, if you'll excuse us. Let's go, dear."

Byletta stood up, took Arnald by the arm, and began to walk away.

Her husband followed as Samus silently watched them leave. Byletta was grateful that he didn't say anything else to try and provoke Arnald. It didn't matter how many insults he had lined up in his head, as long as he didn't say them out loud, there wouldn't be an issue.

She was grateful that he was being smart about it.

They made it to the middle of the courtyard before Arnald suddenly took over and pulled her away from the venue. She'd believed they were about to go back inside, but instead, it seemed they were heading somewhere more secluded. Now she was the one being dragged along.

As Arnald led her to some nearby bushes, Byletta stopped in her tracks and called out to him.

"Um, where are we…?"

"Would you rather do this right here?"

Arnald turned around and reached out a hand.

"What are you talking abou— Mmph!"

Byletta's question was drowned out by Arnald's lips.

As she gasped, Arnald adjusted his angle and deepened the kiss. A large hand snaked its way to the back of her head. Another was supporting her back with a grip so tight it was like he was trying to

stop her from running away. Arnald's strong arms were those of a soldier, but he had nothing to prove here.

"Mm… Aah… No…!"

Byletta's protests escaped her as flirtatious, nasally moans.

Unlike usual, Arnald's hands were roaming erratically over her body. That said, the precise, exact way in which the situation was unfolding was very much her husband's style.

One of Arnald's hands reached up under Byletta's skirts without hesitation and began to caress her thigh. Byletta's body began to quiver in pleasure at her husband's familiar touch. Anger consumed her at the way her body so easily danced to his tune, but underneath the emotion was an irresistible joy.

But they were outside. In the imperial palace courtyard. This wasn't somewhere such a shameful act would be easily forgiven.

Of course, Byletta knew that some men and women got a thrill out of that, but she wasn't one of them.

Perhaps Arnald simply considered her a free whore he could take at his own convenience.

Even though she was wounded by her husband's betrayal, Byletta's body gladly accepted his touch. She clenched her teeth at the mismatch of emotions.

"S-stop… Please!"

"Our wager still stands. You cannot refuse me."

Arnald's emerald-green eyes were filled with a jealous light that made Byletta's blood run cold. It was like the man who had looked upon her so sweetly at the party had been nothing but an illusion.

It appeared that he, too, considered Byletta to be the harlot the rumors spoke of.

All of the feelings of understanding and acceptance she'd felt soured in an instant.

"I told you… Aah… Mnn…"

"Does it feel good? You did say you were fine doing this here, didn't you?"

"No… Aah… Ungh! Not outside!"

"But you seem more than ready…"

Byletta's thoughts were at the mercy of her shame and ecstasy. She wanted to deny him, but the words that fell from her lips were drenched in honey.

The arm she'd had tucked between their bodies slid around Arnald's neck as if to pull him in closer, until their bodies slotted perfectly together.

As their tongues entwined between short gasps of air, Byletta could feel herself becoming drunk on all the pleasure. She could feel her body relinquishing control to him, but she didn't want to nod and lose her last scrap of self-respect.

"Hmph… I'm surprised…at how this just doesn't sit right with me."

"Then…let me…go."

"You must be joking. Why don't you try being a bit more honest with yourself?"

Arnald smiled, as if mocking Byletta's body and its sensitivity to his touch.

Even though Byletta didn't know what Arnald meant when he'd said something didn't sit right with him, her heart was silently begging her not to disappoint him.

Goosebumps spread over her body as Arnald's long fingers glided across her skin.

"A wife who lies about her desires must be punished, but a wife who sweetly begs for my touch deserves to be rewarded. You look angry that your body so easily dances to my tune, but you always show me a good time."

"No… A-ah…"

Byletta stared at Arnald, gasping for breath, only to find an alluring light gleaming in his eyes. All her emotions were replaced with an ache, and everything went white.

Byletta coveted neither reward nor punishment, but her anger was soon overwritten with shame and delight. She was gaining a deep self-loathing for her body, thirsty as it was for pleasure, but even those feelings soon turned into a sweet euphoria.

"Prepare yourself, Byletta…"

Arnald's fleeting whisper vanished into Byletta's melting consciousness.

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As he held his unconscious wife, Arnald reflected on how he'd let his emotions get the better of him in the courtyard.

They were in the carriage, heading back to the Swangan manor house. Inside the vehicle were roomy seats that could fit multiple people facing each other, one of which had been claimed by Arnald. He tightened his grip on his wife, who was in his arms. Before embarking on the journey home, he'd simply told everyone at the venue that his wife had taken ill. The event was almost over anyway. Arnald had never stayed at any of those functions for this long before anyway, so when he'd left Byletta in the carriage and gone back inside to tell them he was leaving, his acquaintances had been in shock. They hadn't been able to believe he was still there.

As the carriage trundled along the path home, Arnald began to feel calm again. It was unusual for him to become as hot-blooded as he had back there.

He had never felt that depravity and sexual desire could come bound together as they had in the courtyard, but that had been the most turned on he'd ever felt.

Arnald had had no idea that such a savage heart beat within him. Byletta was out cold and didn't appear to be waking up anytime soon. A spasm of horror ran through his body as he looked down at how her tiny frame fit snugly in his arms.

When she stood at his side, she was bold and had a spirited aura about her. That was probably what made her seem so larger than life. But as Arnald cradled his sleeping wife, he could see just how petite she really was.

Had she always been so slim and fragile looking?

As he stared down at her, he realized that he'd always thought of her as a steel plate, something that could be hammered back to normal, but she was as delicate and fragile as glass. He tightened his grip on her again.

I've always known she was close with her uncle, haven't I? Arnald asked himself within the rocking carriage.

He absolutely had.

He'd read the reports, heard the rumors that they were more than just family. Of course, he didn't suspect that at all. Plus, he knew for certain that he'd been the first man that Byletta had ever slept with. But the impact of reading something on paper didn't compare to seeing something with one's own eyes.

Were they close?

Most uncles and nieces didn't sit side by side on benches, embracing each other.

They didn't stare into each other's eyes and speak so happily.

Nor did they stroke each other's backs to offer comfort.

And, of course, most uncles didn't hold such a murderous malice toward their nieces' husbands.

You could tell that their connection transcended familial closeness just by looking at them. When Arnald thought back to what he'd seen on that bench, it seemed no great wonder that rumors had gone around about them. Yet somehow it made him feel sick to his stomach.

Seeing his wife like that had made him feel that something just wasn't right.

The more rational side had just found it interesting and laughed.

The only two emotions he'd ever recognized within himself were discomfort and emptiness. He'd faked all the rest by watching the people around him. Most of the time, he was completely expressionless because keeping up an emotional facade was surprisingly tiring. But when *she* was involved—and only then—he found his emotions changing. They changed shade and shape. Sometimes his discomfort felt like it was going to boil over in an

instant, and other times it felt like a slow and painful poison. And occasionally, it would be accompanied by a feeling of heaviness in his gut or an irrepressible frustration.

"Just how far have you fallen?"

Arnald couldn't help but remember what Movris had asked him.

It was the first time he'd ever felt favorably toward anyone.

It wasn't until his superior had pointed it out that Arnald had thought of her as anything other than an interesting and amusing wife. Movris's words had been what motivated him to see Byletta as something more, as an object of his affection.

How insensitive was he if he needed someone else to enlighten him about his own emotions?

But, Arnald reminded himself, there was no way to confirm whether what his superior had told him was true or not.

He'd just have to wait and see what happened.

As his feelings continued to evolve day by day, he couldn't be sure how things would ultimately end. He could only stand by and wait. He couldn't think of any other way to deal with what was going on between them.

If his feelings really were what people called "love," it was a hell of a thing.

Still, there was something within him that he wouldn't compromise on.

"Prepare yourself, Byletta. I have no intention of letting you go."

Ruminating on the last words he'd said to her before she passed out in the palace courtyard, Arnald planted a soft kiss on Byletta's lips. They were beautiful, pillowy, and delightfully warm.

Arnald tenderly closed his eyes.

He basked in the warmth of the woman who'd sent his feelings into such disarray.

EPILOGUE

The Foxhunt Begins

"Who does that little minx think she is?! How dare she look down her nose so coyly at me! And to think, she's utterly pulled the wool over Arnald's eyes! What the hell is she playing at?!"

Carla Rydewall had been in such a good mood on the way to the victory party, but now that she was home, she bit her long fingernails and howled in anger.

As her partner for the night, Emilio found the outburst unsightly. He was growing tired of her antics.

Carla had been very enthusiastic earlier at the prospect of ensnaring Arnald once again after all these years, only to get harshly rejected. When he'd gone on and on about how his beloved wife was so beautiful and lovely, Carla had stamped her feet in anger and frustration. Even Emilio, who barely ever saw the lieutenant colonel, hadn't been able to believe that the man he knew would gush so about his bride.

Emilio was astonished that Carla had lost so totally and utterly to Byletta. That said, when he'd tried to warn Arnald about the girl's wicked ways, he'd been met with an ice-cold stare before the man had chased him away. Emilio gritted his teeth at the thought of how he'd refused to hear a single word against his wife, despite Emilio's good intentions.

Sitting on a sofa at the Rydewall estate, Emillio called out to Carla, who had been pacing back and forth across the room as she vented her bitterness.

"Please do calm down, Lady Carla. This is how that dreadful wench operates. You are not the only one who wishes to see the

lieutenant colonel saved from her evil clutches. If you lose your cool now, you'll be playing right into her hands."

"Ah, yes. There is that."

Carla nuzzled up to Emilio and clung to him. The smell of pungent perfume filled the man's nostrils, but he tried his hardest not to allow his disgust to show on his face.

He was the aide to the Speaker of Parliament. That was his title.

He had come all this way to be appointed by the Speaker of Parliament himself, Marquis Carisein Girelle. And he wanted more. He had so much more to offer than he could provide as a lowly aide.

Carla was a woman worth using. Emilio was under strict orders from Girelle himself not to provoke her unnecessarily, nor was he to allow her temper to go unchecked. And he had no right to refuse those orders.

But Emilio couldn't help his own inadequacies. Instead of acting as he'd been directed, he just grinned and bore Carla's reactions instead.

"You'll stay the night with me, won't you?"

"I have some matters that I must get back to attend to immediately, though it is a pity."

"How heartless."

Carla smiled without seeming the least bit disappointed. She had plenty of other favorites, even if Emilio wasn't intending to stay.

His eyes suddenly landed upon Carla's golden curls. Emilio smiled. *Her* hair color had been so much paler.

That vibrant strawberry-blond hue flashed up into the back of Emilio's mind.

The color of Byletta's hair was much more vivid and distinct in his memories of her, perhaps because of the strong impression she had left upon him. Or because his memories of her were so intense.

When she'd arrived at Stacia Academy, she had been a beautiful young girl who could have any other student she wanted. But by the time she'd graduated, the incident with the knife had stopped her from coming to school completely.

Even though he had never intended things to end that way, Emilio held a deep resentment for the girl who refused to ever submit to him.

If only she'd depended on him more, he could have helped her.

If only she'd been more of a fool, he would've held out his hand to lift her up.

If only she'd been duller, he would have taken her for his own and treasured her.

Emilio's match had already been decided for him, so he could never have married a daughter of a lowly viscount and man of the military, especially given that they were from different factions.

The heir to a noble faction marquis knew no freedom, but he would have kept her beside him as his mistress.

Unfortunately for him, Byletta was strong, intelligent, and sharp-edged as a blade.

That's why she would never be his.

Neither back then, nor today.

The Byletta that Emilio had met at the victory celebration that evening had been far more womanly than he'd remembered. Her gorgeous strawberry-blond hair had been paler than he recalled and lent her a gentler air. She'd looked softer and sweeter.

Emilio had spotted her at other parties before her husband had returned from the front, but she'd grown even more beautiful since then. She always seemed to be grappling with something and putting her best foot forward, but her unbreakable amethyst eyes still had the same sparkle in them as always.

It looked like she'd also gained some sex appeal. She'd always had a very pretty face, but now there was an allure and seductiveness to go with it.

There had been whispers of an inappropriate relationship with her uncle, and that she played mistress to her father-in-law when her husband was away. Emilio had made sure they spread like wildfire at the military's victory party. It didn't matter to him whether they were true or not.

That said, innocent girls were beautiful, and Emilio thought he should be the only one to know of her innocence.

And yet, just a few hours ago, he had trembled in front of her. She'd matured so much.

Byletta had become stunningly beautiful, and all she'd done was smile and belittle the man who yearned for her.

Rumor had it that she'd also successfully seduced her notoriously coldhearted husband.

They'd been seen acting intimate with each other here and there and had even traveled all the way to the Swangan's countryside estate, which Arnald hadn't been to since he was a boy. They'd been seen walking together, shopping together, riding a carriage together… And each and every time, Emilio had gotten the impulse to smash something to pieces.

Then he'd seen them together at the victory party, enjoying each other's conversation.

He'd spread rumors about her to sow discord between the pair. So that Arnald would lose faith in his wife.

But Emilio had been firmly sent on his way.

He gritted his teeth to try to suppress his anger.

He'd planned to be nice.

Byletta was supposed to come running to him in tears, crying about how she hated military men. Then it would've been time to make his move. Then they would've holed up in a villa somewhere. Arnald was supposed to accept Carla's offer, but that too had ended in failure.

It was supposed to have been easy.

But everything had failed.

And all by Byletta's hand.

But there was no stopping the plan now.

She was the one who'd smashed their more amicable strategy to pieces. She had only herself to blame for what was going to happen next.

Emilio's approach was about to get more extreme and dangerous.

There was no other way.

It was Byletta's choice. She had always been a detestable woman, an unpleasant person whom Emilio hated more and more with every ruined scheme.

But one day she would be his.

Even if she did mock him. Even if he did feel his kindness was only rewarded with spite.

He simply couldn't give her up.

"We have no other choice. Let the foxhunt begin."

"Heh-heh, just make doubly sure not to hurt him. He's rather a favorite of mine."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, but I can make no guarantees. I bid you goodnight."

Emilio stood up and smiled seductively.

Then he prayed a little prayer.

For once, he couldn't help but wonder, what if?

If she depended on me, I know I'd…

Emilio left the Rydewall residence thinking of the girl with the unyielding spirit. Though they lived under the same sky, they were so close, yet so far from each other.

A letter had arrived. Inside was a summons to the Swangan's countryside estate, written by her father-in-law. It seemed the new flood prevention project had sparked an uprising.

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