

PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

Chapter 11

A vision that felt too real to be true came to me in an instant.

“Mm? What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

“...No. It just feels like it’s been ages since we last met.”

“What are you talking about? We played together just yesterday.”

“Yeah... What could it be? My memory is still perfectly fine.”

The Hans in this illusion appeared as he had in childhood.

It made sense.

The last time I had seen him was when I was 14.

Naturally, even hallucinations would be based on that memory.

He was young, and I was, too, as I stood before him.

I held out my palm before my eyes.

It was small. So very small.

Though my hands even now weren’t particularly large, back then they had been downright doll-like.

White, thin, small, delicate—those kinds of hands.

I had been healthier then, so they must have looked better, too.

I—or rather, I shouldn’t refer to myself like that yet, since this was before I had taken over this body.

The princess lowered her outstretched hand.

Hans’ gaze, which had been fixed on her, was beginning to turn puzzled.

It was only natural; this was not a side of her he was accustomed to seeing.

The princess of this era had never been one to follow his lead.

A calm response like the one just now would have been unthinkable.

Back then, she was unyielding and endlessly sharp.

She often directed her hysterical emotions at him, true to her title as a princess.

Whenever her mood swung, she took it out on him, who always stayed by her side.

Hans, with a troubled expression, would quietly endure her outbursts and then approach her again the next day as though nothing had happened.

He hadn't been unaffected, of course.

Surely, he had been bottling it all up inside.

What had the princess done to her very first friend, instead of treating him with kindness?

The consequences of such behavior could hardly have turned out well.

The Hans of 14 years old, wearing a look of puzzlement, began to distort and swirl, along with the mansion, fading back into the past.

Back to my room at age 8.

Hans' mother was having tea with mine.

The princess sat curled up on the floor, while Hans lowered his head and smiled at her.

That was their first meeting.

"Hello, are you Lady Remia Adelian?"

"...Who are you?"

"I'm Hans from the House of Dicardi.

I want to be your friend!"

Hans and the princess met due to their mothers' friendship.

He was the second son of a count, while she was the eldest daughter of a duke—a clear disparity in status.

Still, it seemed the princess' mother wanted to provide her lonely daughter with a companion.

Naturally, Hans had likely been instructed by his parents.

Under no circumstances should he upset the princess or treat her rudely.

This was only to be expected; the only status higher than that of a duke was royalty.

Thus, from their very first meeting, Hans had been remarkably kind and amicable.

An eight-year-old child had gone out of his way to consider her feelings, smiling warmly and speaking sweetly, accepting everything she did without complaint.

At the time, she had taken it for granted, but looking back now, it was clear he had made a real effort before they became close.

Once again, it was my fault.

I don't know. I'll just do what comes to mind.

In any case, young me and Hans kept getting entangled, and though I initially pushed him away, I gradually began to open up.

"Lady, what do you think of this flower?"

I picked it from the hill behind the estate because I thought it would suit you."

"...I don't like it."

"Oh, I'll bring you something else next time!"

"I said I don't need it."

"My lady~ Shall we go out and play?"

It must be boring to stay cooped up in your room all the time."

"I'm not bored.

You're the most bothersome thing, so why don't you leave?"

"You're so mean! But since I don't want to upset you, I'll leave.

Oh, if you miss me, please call for me!"

"...Hmph."

"My lady, by the way, is there anything you'd like for your birthday?"

I've been thinking about it, but you seem to dislike everything you receive, so I'm at a loss...."

"I hate everything you give me."

"Argh, that's no help at all!"

“...Anything is fine.

I’m just saying I don’t care.”

“...Really? Was that it?”

“I don’t know.”

To the lonely princess, who had pushed everyone away and only ever spoke properly with her parents, the relentless approach of a peer her age was shocking.

At first, she found him annoying, but before she realized it, she started feeling affection for him.

Over time, he became the only boy she knew, and her young heart began to hold him dear.

Besides, Hans was not only kind but also handsome.

It was the perfect combination.

Maintaining her relationship with Hans allowed her to form other connections as well.

Christina and Raymond.

Her “frenemies.”

“This is Christina Heston.

And that red-haired delinquent over there is Raymond!”

“Who’s a delinquent?”

“You are, with your dyed hair, you apprentice!

Ah, nice to meet you, Lady. I’m Christina.

I don’t really want to get too close, but let’s get along~”

“Hey! Be nice!”

The friends Hans introduced her to one day were unique in their own ways, which allowed them to get along with her.

Of course, they weren’t exactly the friendliest relationships.

At the very least, they were “frenemies”—bickering yet close.

Spending time with them brought Hans closer to her, narrowing the distance that had once existed between them.

Having already harbored feelings for him, she welcomed this change.

She even began to dream of closing the gap further, deliberating over it for the first time in her life.

Though, as the princess, her attempts were mostly missteps.

Still, her efforts bore fruit, and by her 12th birthday, she had made significant progress.

She recalled something he had said years earlier—when he'd asked her what she wanted as a birthday present.

At the time, she hadn't answered, but now she knew exactly what she wanted. And there was only one person in the world who could give it to her.

She summoned her courage.

"Hans. There's something I want."

"Huh? That's new...?"

"Whatever it is, just tell me."

"Call me by my name."

"...What?"

Hans' flustered voice stung slightly.

It felt like proof that, despite all these years, he still thought of her as distant.

But if she backed down now, there would truly be no next time.

As a princess, she was bound by an arranged marriage.

If she didn't share her feelings with him soon, the opportunity to begin anything would vanish.

Thinking this, she raised her voice.

"Stop calling me 'my lady.'

Call me Remia."

"Uh... Are you sure that's okay?"

Fortunately, his reaction was positive.

The tragedy of falling before even starting remained confined to her imagination.

Still, it wasn't enough.

If they were to grow closer, the barriers had to fall further.

Before she knew it, the words spilled out.

It was impulsive but desperate.

“...And drop the formal speech, too.”

“What? I mean—uh, that’s...”

“Think of it as a gift, and do it.”

Hans’ eyes wavered.

He seemed to be calculating something in his mind.

Whether it was truly okay to do as I asked, whether he would be criticized for acting thoughtlessly, or whether this might be a prank.

There was a pause of several seconds.

During that time, I endlessly regretted my impulsive action and wrestled with inner turmoil.

My face was flushed, and I couldn’t even imagine what kind of expression I was wearing.

If he had responded awkwardly, my torment would only have intensified, but fortunately, that didn’t happen.

“...Ah. Got it. Nice to meet you... Remia.”

Hans called me by my name, his face slightly blushing with embarrassment.

In that moment, I truly became his friend.

“...Yes. Hans.”

Now, all that was left was to become lovers.

A future of happiness awaited.

At least, that’s what I believed.

It was foolish to think so, having barely taken one step forward after so much resistance.

For a few years, life was indeed very happy.

Even though I never managed to escape the world’s label of a “villainess with an uncertain future.”

I started spending time outside my room, mingling with my three friends.

My relationship with Hans gradually deepened, giving me confidence that he, too, held feelings for me.

It was a joyful, peaceful, and blissful life.

And, as always, it was all overturned in an instant.

It happened on the night three days before my 14th birthday.

Hans and I had planned to meet late at night, so I carefully snuck out of my bedroom.

With the invisibility potion he'd provided, it was easy to avoid the guards.

As expected, Hans had arrived at the garden ahead of me and was waiting.

I took his hand and, smiling, led him inside the mansion.

Suppressing my excitement, we strolled slowly through the corridors when I noticed a light on in a small conference room that was rarely used.

Inside, by chance, were my father and his retainers.

By chance, they stepped out just as we were passing by.

By chance, there were no guests at the mansion, so the guards were lax.

By chance, they had been discussing treason.

When coincidences pile up like this, isn't it fate?

I didn't want to know.

I didn't want to hear it.

At 14, I was young.

Even though teenagers think they know everything, I was objectively and subjectively immature.

I was mentally less mature than younger children and overly reliant on those around me, especially Hans.

So, it was only natural that I panicked upon hearing the news that would upend everything about my life and those around me in just a week.

Hans and I ran frantically.

When we finally reached a place where we were sure no one could see us, we stopped and faced each other.

"Wh-what do we do...? Hic. Hans... Father, Mother... hic, sob... at this rate...."

I clung to Hans, crying.

I was terrified.

It was obvious what would happen to me if the rebellion failed.

Hans quickly collected himself and comforted me.

He embraced me and gently patted my back.

His warm, soft hand traced down my spine.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.

The Duke wouldn’t proceed carelessly, right?

And you’re a strong person.”

In hindsight, it was a slightly odd thing to say, but at the time, I nodded.

Hans couldn’t be wrong.

Hans would surely protect me.

“We shouldn’t meet for a while.

If we stand out, it could cause problems.

And don’t tell anyone about tonight, okay?”

So, I nodded without hesitation and let him go.

I returned to my room and hid under my blanket.

I didn’t tell my father or anyone else that Hans and I had overheard their conversation.

Hans had said it would be okay this way.

It was a mistake.

A foolish one.

Hans’ family wasn’t one of the five mentioned by my father.

And yet, I blindly believed he would keep silent.

That he wouldn’t tell anyone about this matter involving Christina’s and Raymond’s families.

My baseless faith was predictably betrayed.

The next day, the royal guards stormed in.

With my parents gone, as I fled with my two friends, I fell into an abyss of despair.

“It’s because of you.”

“You might still be useful.”

I knew it was my mistake.

Hans had made the rational choice for himself.

The one who had plunged me into this swamp was none other than me.

I knew that.

I knew it, but...

I could never forget Hans Dicardi.

Not even in death.

Never.

I cried in the endless nightmare of memories.

It was too vivid.

What kind of hallucinogen had they used...?

The princess’ memories, which I usually suppressed, were vividly displayed before me, and it was unbearable.

Hans, who had become a trauma. My parents, now a mix of love and hate.

Christina, who protected me until the end and died. Raymond, who silently followed me and cursed me in his final moments.

The people of Adelian, whom I had killed. The organization that had ultimately shaped “me.”

Fragments of the past, buried deep in my mind, surfaced, danced before my eyes, and vanished, only to reappear and repeat the torment.

Even the earlier sense of omnipotence would have been preferable to this.

At least that had felt good.

In this wretched experience, I intermittently lost my grip on reality.

“Ah, are you coming to your senses? I was startled by the unexpectedly intense reaction, but thank goodness—ugh!?”

As the hallucination subsided, I grabbed a thick textbook from the desk and slammed it onto Ariana's head.

I couldn't suppress the surging emotions.

Not at all.

Chapter 12

I was half-mad.

I brought down a book—so large and heavy that it could have been a deadly weapon if wielded with force—on Ariana's head.

At the same time, I spewed out every curse I could manage with the princess' tongue.

“Die... hhic... Die! Just die!!”

“Whoa, what the—!”

“What are you all standing there for? Restrain her!”

I don't even know how I managed to swing a book I could barely lift with both hands.

Any thought of consequences had long vanished from my mind.

All I wanted was to punish the detestable woman before me who had dragged me back into the depths of my worst trauma.

Hitting me was fine.

Waterboarding, electrocution—those were painful, but bearable.

I had no intention of resisting.

But this? This was too much.

If they were going to do this, they might as well just kill me. I'd told them that countless times.

...Had I told them?

I didn't know. I wasn't sure.

But I hated this. I wasn't the princess.

Don't torment me with someone else's memories. Please.

Of course, with my nonexistent strength, I couldn't even carry out my act of violence properly.

The book slipped from my hands by the third swing.

Before I could land a few more hits, Ariana grabbed my wrist.

The nearby commoners rushed in and forcibly tore me away from her.

Immediately after, Ariana struck my left cheek with her hand.

My head snapped to the side, and blood spilled from my split lip and the inside of my mouth.

Her cheerful demeanor, which she had maintained since we reunited at the academy, had vanished.

Her eyes, now cold and sunken, scanned me from head to toe, making my skin crawl.

It felt as though she were deliberating on how to deal with a disobedient animal.

Whether it was her gaze that overwhelmed me or my own body failing from the prior outburst, I couldn't breathe.

My lungs screamed for oxygen, but no matter how much I gasped, no air filled them.

The more I tried to breathe, the more suffocated I felt.

"...It seems you're beginning to overstep your bounds.

I thought I'd been considerate up until now, but maybe I've been too kind."

"Huff... Huff... Co-considerate? Don't talk, hhic, nonsense. What are you...?"

"There you go again.

You see, a dog that bites its owner... needs to be disciplined."

Even as I gasped for breath, I glared at her and raised my voice.

Ariana simply glanced at me with a dry expression.

Her gaze was far more terrifying than usual—it felt like she might truly do anything.

She motioned to the commoners holding me.

With just a light gesture, the results were brutal.

They grabbed my hair, punched my stomach, knocked me to the ground, stomped on me, slammed my back, kicked my chest, twisted my wrists in impossible directions, and pressed their feet against my temples.

Every wave of pain drove out what little air remained in my lungs.

I desperately tried to pull myself together and breathe, but my lungs emptied faster than I could fill them.

All I could produce was a metallic rasp, and no matter how much I tried, my chest remained hollow.

My limbs stiffened.

I felt as if I were drowning, a profound sense of helplessness consuming me.

Even then, the fear of dying disgusted me.

So, I writhed under the relentless violence.

“You really dislike hallucinogens, don’t you?”

That was just a mild one, but if this is your reaction, I’m curious to see what happens with something stronger.

Next time, I’ll prepare something with real highs and withdrawal symptoms. You can look forward to it.”

Ariana crouched down and whispered to me as I lay curled up, struggling to breathe beneath the weight of the assault.

Her words were a death sentence.

If this was mild, then administering something stronger would be a psychological execution.

Dying physically would at least be a relief. This...

In that moment, a thought flitted through my oxygen-deprived mind.

If breathing wasn’t enough, I could just stop.

I weakly raised my dangling right hand to my throat and began to squeeze.

Though my grip was feeble, it was enough to cut off the scant breaths I was managing.

If I couldn’t breathe anyway, I might as well stop trying.

Harder, tighter—choke myself. Punish the princess who still feared death.

It wasn’t even my body. It didn’t matter what happened to it.

So, right now. Just kill me.

“...Wait. Stop.”

But at some point, my hand froze and refused to move.

Trembling violently, it wouldn't obey me.

Was it the princess stopping me, or had I given up?

In the end, I gasped for the breath I had denied myself, my body convulsing violently.

A numbness spread through me as if my blood had stopped circulating.

Like being hit with tear gas, fluids poured uncontrollably from every opening on my face.

My mouth, gulping air and expelling it, seemed broken, incapable of functioning anymore.

“A bag! Anything to catch this—quickly, bring it!”

Through the darkening edges of my vision, I saw Ariana's panicked expression.

Oh, so she didn't actually intend to kill me.

That realization brought both relief and despair.

I didn't know what expression to wear at a time like this.

As my mind faded, I laughed through my tears.

It must not have been a pleasant sight.

In my final moments of awareness, Ariana's face twisted with confusion and uncertainty.

Though I collapsed in chaos, nothing had changed in the end.

As before, I awoke sprawled on a desk.

By the time I regained consciousness, the professor had already started the lecture.

It must have been Ariana's group that moved me here again.

Expecting a surge of pain as I sat up, I braced myself, but surprisingly, I felt okay.

They must have used healing magic, as most of my external injuries were gone.

I guess they really thought it was serious this time.

Unlike before, they hadn't selectively healed only parts of me.

I sighed softly, rubbing my still-aching throat.

The suffocation earlier was probably due to hyperventilation.

In my fractured mental state, exacerbated by the beating, my frail body had likely reached its limit.

"Now, let's memorize this section briefly.

Pillar Opergamon: The Song of Wax and Parchment."

The voice of the magic professor was less sleep-inducing than that of the history professor.

I watched his writing on the board, letting my body slump against the desk.

Now that my head had cooled, my earlier actions felt foolish.

Caught up in surging emotions, I'd acted impulsively and even resorted to violence.

Sure, the target was someone who had caused me immense pain—a detestable excuse for a person.

But still, I'd stooped to her level.

The princess, who had always loathed and vowed never to behave in such a way, had shattered that resolve.

It must have been me in control.

If the princess had been in charge, she would never have done something like that.

A puppet incapable of doing anything alone.

The one who always blamed the princess for my suffering, shifting responsibility.

Yet here I was, letting my emotions dictate my actions, amplifying the pain to come.

And on top of that, I broke the promise.

I tried to kill her—the princess.

Claiming it wasn't my body, pretending it didn't matter what happened to it.

I wouldn't deny that I often thought that way.

But to act on it, to reduce myself to instinct, left an inexplicable heaviness in my chest.

Am I, perhaps, distinguishing between killing myself as “suicide” and killing the princess as “homicide”?

I should already know there’s no line to draw.

We’re so deeply intertwined that I’m experiencing vivid hallucinations based on her memories, grappling with severe PTSD.

And yet, I still try to separate myself from her.

.....

I don’t know.

I really don’t.

Let’s just leave it at that—I don’t know.

I forced my muddled mind to settle and turned my head.

At that moment, I felt someone’s gaze.

It wasn’t unusual to be hit with trash or glared at during class, but this time, there was something oddly familiar about it.

As I glanced around, I locked eyes with the source of the gaze.

“Ah.”

It was Ariana.

She was staring at me with an expression full of emotion.

Her eyes, so different from the carefree ones I was used to, stood out even more because of it.

It seemed I had wounded her pride.

Normally, I was obedient, but this time, I had lashed out excessively.

I’d probably pay for it during lunch.

Well, it’s my own mess. What can I do about it?

I sighed and let out a faint chuckle.

It was a laugh aimed at myself.

When Ariana saw my expression change as I noticed her, she flinched noticeably, as if interpreting it in some way.

Her gaze grew even more intense.

Ah, here we go again.

By the time lunch rolled around, my resigned thoughts had calmed me completely.

Expecting Ariana and her group to approach any moment, I took a deep breath to steady myself.

Then, a whisper reached my ear.

It was Ariana's voice, though I hadn't noticed her approaching.

"...Next time will be different."

Her tone was low, almost subdued, as she said that, and then, for the first time since we reunited at the academy, she left me alone and went to eat.

I sat there, blankly staring at the spot where she had been for a long time.

What on earth did she mean by that?

Chapter 13

That day was strangely uneventful.

The commoners who usually sought me out during every break to pick a fight...

The trash that would hit or poke me during class...

And Ariana, who never failed to visit during breakfast or lunch to "educate" me...

It was as if everyone had conspired to leave me alone.

Though I occasionally felt the discontented stares of the commoners, that was the extent of it.

Could this be Ariana's doing?

She seemed to be planning something, and perhaps this was her way of granting me a final respite before some grand scheme unfolded.

Should I thank her for her consideration?

Or should I call this measured cruelty?

Maybe she was just toying with me, letting me stew in suspense, preventing me from adjusting to any sort of pattern.

I wasn't sure, but I had to admit it was effective.

The disappearance of something I'd half-accepted as part of my routine only made it more conspicuous.

It gnawed at my nerves and made everything unbearably unsettling.

When would they come again?

How elaborate a form of torment were they preparing this time?

I couldn't help but grow anxious.

A hollow feeling settled in my chest, leaving me inexplicably desolate and drained.

As I dwelled on these thoughts, a single sentence flashed through my mind.

The way I'm thinking right now... doesn't it sound like I'm missing it?

...Wait, what?

For some reason, I felt like I didn't dislike Ariana's torment as much as I thought I did.

"...Ah, haha. I must be going crazy."

I shook my head vigorously.

My mind, which had grown a little foggy, cleared up again.

Absolutely not.

Even now, the memories of her torture made my body tremble.

I still hated the pain, and her hostility far outweighed any semblance of goodwill.

Water, electricity, nails, coffins—each method had been utterly unbearable.

It was so excruciating that I'd wanted to die right there and then.

And most importantly, I—the daughter of a fallen noble house—hated Ariana to the point of wanting her dead.

I detested her, resented her, and harbored murderous intent toward her.

I was merely suppressing it, that's all.

So then...

...No, wait.

If that's the case, then what about "me"?

Do I hate Ariana?

I thought I hated her because I couldn't suppress the noble daughter's memories, but as pure "me," without any of that mixed in, it's different.

"I" want death as an escape, and Ariana pushes the noble daughter closer to that goal, speeding up the process.

If that's the case...

Maybe "I" don't actually have a reason to hate her—

Smack!

"Ugh...!"

"And so, when casting a spell, you must... Hmm?

Is something the matter, Miss Adelian?"

"...It's nothing. My apologies."

I had slapped myself across the face—hard.

It was a form of self-punishment for indulging in such pointless thoughts.

The blow was so forceful that my mind went blank for a moment.

The dark, oppressive fantasies that had clouded my thoughts dissipated, and the suffocating sense of emptiness and futility faded away with them.

As expected, Ariana was right.

If you've done something wrong, you ought to face the consequences.

I hadn't realized it when someone else inflicted punishment on me, but now that I'd done it to myself, I could feel its effectiveness firsthand.

When I thought about it calmly with my now-clear mind, my behavior just moments ago had been quite peculiar.

I should've been relieved that the usual torment was gone, yet I'd let myself become needlessly gloomy.

In the first place, feeling as though my routine had been disrupted because of it was twisted in itself.

My strange fondness toward Ariana? That was definitely insanity.

My body might be at ease, but my mind was playing tricks on me.

Not that my mind had ever been fully intact from the start.

Still, this was the first time it had threatened to split so openly.

I pressed my throbbing temples firmly.

Whatever.

I don't care anymore.

I just... want to go home.

Should I just go home?

"Well then, let's end the class here for today.

Don't forget, your assignments are due tomorrow."

The professor's words signaled the end of the lecture, and he began preparing to leave.

There was still one afternoon class left, but since I'd already skipped once, skipping twice didn't seem like such a big deal.

The noble daughter would understand.

I mean, I'm sick. I'm practically a patient.

I just hope no one asks where I'm hurting when my body looks fine.

Even so, I really do feel like I'm in pain.

Resolving myself, I stood up.

Although the other students glanced my way, not one of them spoke to me.

I'd half-expected someone to start something as I left the classroom, but no one did.

Well, that's convenient, I guess.

Time to go home.

I began making my way to my dormitory room.

"Miss Adelian?"

A single voice called out to stop me as I left.

It was the curious tone of the magic professor, who was still in the classroom.

I ignored it.

I wasn't deaf, but... I just didn't have the energy to care about anyone else.

After leaving the classroom, I heard no further voices calling me back.

Good.

Leaving the classroom was easy, but returning to my room proved less so.

Of course, no one stopped or harassed me.

Everyone acted the same as they had in class, keeping their distance and exchanging hushed whispers while casting sticky glances my way.

This time, what tripped me up was, as always, myself.

First, as I walked down the hallway, I twisted my ankle and fell.

Blood trickled from my scraped knees.

Second, perhaps due to the earlier fall, my legs gave out, and I tumbled down the stairs.

Bruises and gashes appeared on my forehead and palms.

Third, without any discernible reason, dizziness overcame me, and I lost my balance, collapsing again.

Though I didn't sustain new injuries, this same scenario repeated itself several times afterward.

Now that I think about it, I've been losing my balance or feeling my strength drain away strangely often lately.

The reason... well.

There are too many possibilities to pinpoint one.

It could be because I haven't eaten in four days, or maybe I've been sick without realizing it.

It could also be that I'm physically damaged from too much abuse or still dealing with the aftereffects of hallucinogens I was forced to take.

Maybe it's all of the above.

Even just one of those reasons would be enough to make someone a wreck, and with them piling up, it's no wonder my body's falling apart.

Not that it matters.

There's nothing I can do about it, and I have no intention of fixing it.

All I want are two things:

To maintain the status quo.

And to die peacefully.

With those detached thoughts, I reached for the doorknob.

“...Huh.”

That’s when I realized the door wasn’t locked.

I was sure I had locked it this morning before leaving.

Suppressing the wave of unease that washed over me, I pressed my ear against the door.

Inside, I heard unmistakable signs of someone’s presence.

Someone... had entered?

Into my room.

My sanctuary.

My escape.

A place meant only for me had been invaded by someone else?

The previously emotionless void in my mind twisted violently.

The pounding of my heart echoed in my ears, and my breath began to grow ragged.

What... What was I supposed to do?

Could Ariana’s grand plan have been to invade my room?

She had said “next time,” and I’d let my guard down.

Even if it wasn’t her, any other reason for this intrusion could only spell more danger.

There was no way I could resist on my own.

I’d probably collapse before they even laid a hand on me. What could I possibly do?

In that case, I needed to ask for help.

Having reached that conclusion, I tried to let go of the doorknob.

That’s when reality—something I’d momentarily forgotten in my panic—hit me.

“Help... who would I even ask for help from...?”

There wasn’t anyone.

Everyone who might have helped me had either died or left a long time ago.

I already knew this well enough.

The faces of professors, familiar students, and even Sena briefly flitted through my mind.

I stuffed all those options into the mental trash bin and shook my head.

No. Absolutely not.

The professors and students wouldn't lift a finger to help me, and approaching Sena myself had never been an option to begin with.

In the end, there was only one answer.

I clenched the doorknob so tightly that my fingers ached, cutting off circulation.

I had to open it.

Even if it meant my death, I needed to protect my home, my sanctuary.

If I lost this space too, my life at the academy would truly be over.

My heart pounded so violently I thought it might burst. My vision spun with dizziness as I slowly turned the doorknob.

Once I was inside... First, first... what was I supposed to do?

My mind wasn't working at all, yet my trembling hand continued to move as if guided by a will not entirely my own.

And when the door swung open, inside was—

“Oh, I'm a maid. Just cleaning the room... huh?”

A petite young maid with dirty blonde hair was dusting off the table.

“...Ah.”

I collapsed to the floor, feeling like I had just plummeted to the very depths of hell.

So that's what it was.

The maids made their rounds cleaning the dorm rooms during class hours.

And since I had skipped my afternoon class and returned early, it wasn't strange to run into one now.

In fact, it was sheer luck that I hadn't encountered this before.

I was so terrified that I worried I might've wet myself, but I managed to calm my racing heart as I sat there on the floor.

The maid, who had been watching me curiously, noticed the blood dripping from my forehead and knees. She let out a small, sharp gasp.

“Ah, oh!”

Then, pointing at me in apparent realization, she exclaimed loudly,

“Please clean up the blood and lie down on the bed, miss! It’s really hard to clean up after you, you know!”

...Oh, right.

Memories of all the times I’d soaked my bed with bodily fluids and blood flashed through my mind.

Every time I returned from class, the bed was always clean again.

So, this girl was the one who had cleaned up after me all those times.

As the misunderstanding cleared and embarrassment rose within me, I hung my head low in shame.

This was all my own doing. My karma, really.

Serves me right.

Chapter 14

I couldn’t calm the surge of emotions, so I buried my face in my knees for several minutes.

The maid, likely finding my behavior strange, stepped closer and gently shook my shoulder.

I barely managed to ignore her.

There was no way I could face the person who had made me feel this way right now.

“...Excuse me, miss. Are you alright? Should I call the nurse?”

She sounded genuinely concerned now.

It was only when she started speaking to me that I finally raised my head.

If I didn’t, she might actually go fetch someone.

“...No, I’m fine. It’s not because I’m unwell.”

By then, the heat that had risen to my face had subsided. I got to my feet and asked her,

“Other students will be returning soon. Is my room the last one you need to clean?”

“Yes! I was planning to finish here and then take a break.”

“I see... Well, I’m sorry about dirtying the bed earlier. It’s not much of a repayment, but how about staying for a bit? I’ll serve you some tea.”

“Ah, but is that alright?”

It was one of the many compulsions drilled into me as the noble daughter—to repay any favor in kind.

Normally, there wouldn’t have been a need to show such courtesy to a maid, but considering I had fallen from grace and now occupied a position lower than hers, it seemed only right.

“Yes, it’s fine.”

I smiled as I spoke and walked further into the room.

As I moved, the blood trickling down my forehead began to obstruct my vision.

Annoyed, I pressed down on the wound, prodding it with irritation.

The torn flesh throbbed with sharp pain, but oddly enough, the pressure seemed to slow the bleeding.

The fleeting pain didn’t bother me anymore.

At first, I’d hated how much it hurt, but maybe I’d grown numb to it.

The maid flinched at the sight, clearly startled by the gruesome act.

Not a pleasant scene to witness, I suppose.

As I searched through the shelves for something to serve, the maid sat by the table, casting cautious glances my way.

Her curious expression made it obvious she wanted to ask how I’d gotten hurt.

Since there wasn’t much to hide this time, I spoke up.

“I fell down the stairs. That’s how I got these injuries.”

“Oh, I see... Sorry, was I staring too much?”

“Well, it’s hard not to notice when you look so openly.”

“Sorry...”

“It’s fine. It’s only natural to be curious.”

Reassured by my calm tone, the maid hesitantly asked the question I had dreaded.

“Um... So, does that mean all the other stains on the bed before were also...?”

I froze, my hand momentarily pausing on the shelf.

I resumed quickly, but the awkward gap was undeniable.

I forced out a response as naturally as I could.

“...Yes.”

The maid seemed like she had more to say but clamped her mouth shut.

...So, it was obvious after all.

I guess lying is still too hard for me in this body.

The air grew heavy, with only the faint sound of my hands moving through the shelves breaking the silence.

The weight of the tension was palpable.

The maid fidgeted with her fingers and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

It was clear that she felt uneasy, too.

I needed to change the subject.

Fortunately, I had a good excuse.

“...Sorry, I don't seem to have anything to serve you.”

This time, it was true.

I had intended to stock up on refreshments after Sena's last visit, but things had been too chaotic for me to make it to the store.

My futile rummaging through the shelves had only proven that point.

And yet, I'd offered tea without considering my situation at all.

The shame of my repeated blunders left my head spinning.

Is my memory failing me too? Ugh.

The maid suddenly stood up.

“Oh, in that case, I'll bring something from the staff supplies! Please wait a moment!”

“You really don't have to—”

Before I could finish my sentence, she dashed out of the room.

Now this wasn't me hosting; it was me being hosted.

I stared at the empty doorway where she'd disappeared, then looked down at my outstretched hand in frustration.

I felt a familiar wave of helplessness and shame wash over me.

Nothing ever goes right.

I'd wanted, at the very least, to maintain some semblance of composure in front of a third party.

Then again, maybe that was impossible from the moment she saw me bleeding.

I hugged my knees tightly and buried my face again.

After a while, the maid's voice broke the silence.

"...Um, I brought something."

"Oh."

She was back already.

When I raised my head, I saw her holding a small package.

Her breathing was labored, and beads of sweat dotted her forehead, suggesting she had sprinted.

The sight of her awkwardly offering me the package of tea leaves was oddly heartwarming.

Though I felt the usual sting of pity, her careful, considerate manner soothed me.

I took the package and stood.

"Have a seat. I'll prepare the tea."

"Okay!"

Fortunately, I already had a teapot and cups on hand.

I brewed the tea, poured it into two cups, and set them on the table.

There were no snacks to go with it, but for a casual tea time with a maid, this was enough.

It was also the first thing other than water I'd had in four days.

Even if it was just liquid, it felt luxurious.

We lifted our cups and took our first sips in silence.

The hot liquid slid down my throat, warming me from the inside.

Though it stung my empty stomach a little, the discomfort wasn't unbearable.

The maid seemed to enjoy the tea.

"...This is delicious. You're really good at making tea."

"I've had plenty of practice. It's part of basic etiquette, after all."

For someone of noble standing, mastering the art of hosting, including tea preparation, was mandatory.

The noble daughter, for all her sharp edges, had diligently learned such skills to maintain her image of refinement.

Thanks to her, even I benefited from these habits now.

Perhaps this was the most useful thing she had left behind.

The maid smiled genuinely, her innocent expression undimmed by my modest response.

"Even so, you're amazing."

That compliment.

That smile.

That pure sincerity.

It all felt strangely unfamiliar.

Was it because I hadn't encountered someone like this in years?

Unlike others, she didn't display overt pity toward me.

Whether it was due to her role as a maid or just her personality, she made a conscious effort not to pry too deeply.

Her attitude embodied the very "status quo" I had always desired—unchanging, neutral, and detached.

Ironically, she was the ideal of what I had longed for from others.

If everyone had been like this maid, my remaining days would have been so much easier.

No one to deeply entangle with.

No one to bear hostility toward.

No one to pity me.

Detached and indifferent, only addressing the immediate reality while maintaining a functional relationship.

It sounded perfect.

No pain, no sorrow.

It wasn't happiness, but at least life wouldn't feel unbearable.

What could be more ideal than that?

As I let my thoughts wander, staring blankly, the maid spoke first.

"You've had quite an unusual day, huh? I even ended up pointing at a noble lady and got treated to tea."

"I'm hardly a noble anymore. You don't have to be so formal—you can speak casually if you'd like."

The only thing I had over her was this room. No money, no freedom—I was no better than a servant myself.

I didn't expect her to treat me like a nobility anymore. I wouldn't care if she spoke informally or acted impolitely.

After all, I let commoners beat me daily. Why draw the line here?

"...No, I couldn't possibly do that."

Despite my offer, the maid shook her head with a troubled expression.

Then, after finishing the rest of her tea, she placed a small white cloth on the table.

When I looked at her questioningly, she smiled her usual cheerful smile and explained.

"It's a clean, sterilized cloth. Use it to dress your wound. I mean... it's really hard to clean blood off the bed, you know? Please be more careful next time! Hehe."

"....."

Instead of directly doing something for me, she provided me with the means to do it myself, ensuring her actions didn't come across as pity.

By adding that it was a hassle to clean, she cleverly diffused any perception of charity.

She was skilled at handling someone like me.

Unlike with Sena, I didn't feel the urge to overreact this time.

Maybe it was my hunger for kindness clouding my judgment, but still, I found myself subtly nodding.

"...Yeah. I'll be more careful."

"Alright!"

After that, the maid gave a light bow and left my room.

I had told her she could rest here a little longer, but she declined, saying she had work to do back at the staff quarters.

Funny—she'd said earlier she planned to take a break after finishing my room.

Her excuse was as transparent as glass.

Still, it didn't leave me with any unpleasant feelings.

I glanced around the room, which was now noticeably tidier thanks to her cleaning.

I hadn't asked for her name or invited her to return.

But her presence lingered in my memory.

"...This is making me itch."

For no apparent reason, my mind felt restless.

It was as if the space where my brain met my skull was floating uncomfortably.

I scratched at the wound on my forehead again.

A sickening sound, like something tearing, accompanied a sharper pain than before.

Blood trickled down my eyelid, giving me the grotesque sensation of crying tears of blood.

At least the itch was gone.

Good.

Pain was better.

I raised the teacup, now tainted with red from the blood that had dripped into it, and drank.

It tasted metallic, like iron.

Chapter 14

I couldn't calm the surge of emotions, so I buried my face in my knees for several minutes.

The maid, likely finding my behavior strange, stepped closer and gently shook my shoulder.

I barely managed to ignore her.

There was no way I could face the person who had made me feel this way right now.

"...Excuse me, miss. Are you alright? Should I call the nurse?"

She sounded genuinely concerned now.

It was only when she started speaking to me that I finally raised my head.

If I didn't, she might actually go fetch someone.

"...No, I'm fine. It's not because I'm unwell."

By then, the heat that had risen to my face had subsided. I got to my feet and asked her,

"Other students will be returning soon. Is my room the last one you need to clean?"

"Yes! I was planning to finish here and then take a break."

"I see... Well, I'm sorry about dirtying the bed earlier. It's not much of a repayment, but how about staying for a bit? I'll serve you some tea."

"Ah, but is that alright?"

It was one of the many compulsions drilled into me as the noble daughter—to repay any favor in kind.

Normally, there wouldn't have been a need to show such courtesy to a maid, but considering I had fallen from grace and now occupied a position lower than hers, it seemed only right.

"Yes, it's fine."

I smiled as I spoke and walked further into the room.

As I moved, the blood trickling down my forehead began to obstruct my vision.

Annoyed, I pressed down on the wound, prodding it with irritation.

The torn flesh throbbed with sharp pain, but oddly enough, the pressure seemed to slow the bleeding.

The fleeting pain didn't bother me anymore.

At first, I'd hated how much it hurt, but maybe I'd grown numb to it.

The maid flinched at the sight, clearly startled by the gruesome act.

Not a pleasant scene to witness, I suppose.

As I searched through the shelves for something to serve, the maid sat by the table, casting cautious glances my way.

Her curious expression made it obvious she wanted to ask how I'd gotten hurt.

Since there wasn't much to hide this time, I spoke up.

"I fell down the stairs. That's how I got these injuries."

"Oh, I see... Sorry, was I staring too much?"

"Well, it's hard not to notice when you look so openly."

"Sorry..."

"It's fine. It's only natural to be curious."

Reassured by my calm tone, the maid hesitantly asked the question I had dreaded.

"Um... So, does that mean all the other stains on the bed before were also...?"

I froze, my hand momentarily pausing on the shelf.

I resumed quickly, but the awkward gap was undeniable.

I forced out a response as naturally as I could.

"...Yes."

The maid seemed like she had more to say but clamped her mouth shut.

...So, it was obvious after all.

I guess lying is still too hard for me in this body.

The air grew heavy, with only the faint sound of my hands moving through the shelves breaking the silence.

The weight of the tension was palpable.

The maid fidgeted with her fingers and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

It was clear that she felt uneasy, too.

I needed to change the subject.

Fortunately, I had a good excuse.

“...Sorry, I don’t seem to have anything to serve you.”

This time, it was true.

I had intended to stock up on refreshments after Sena’s last visit, but things had been too chaotic for me to make it to the store.

My futile rummaging through the shelves had only proven that point.

And yet, I’d offered tea without considering my situation at all.

The shame of my repeated blunders left my head spinning.

Is my memory failing me too? Ugh.

The maid suddenly stood up.

“Oh, in that case, I’ll bring something from the staff supplies! Please wait a moment!”

“You really don’t have to—”

Before I could finish my sentence, she dashed out of the room.

Now this wasn’t me hosting; it was me being hosted.

I stared at the empty doorway where she’d disappeared, then looked down at my outstretched hand in frustration.

I felt a familiar wave of helplessness and shame wash over me.

Nothing ever goes right.

I’d wanted, at the very least, to maintain some semblance of composure in front of a third party.

Then again, maybe that was impossible from the moment she saw me bleeding.

I hugged my knees tightly and buried my face again.

After a while, the maid’s voice broke the silence.

“...Um, I brought something.”

“Oh.”

She was back already.

When I raised my head, I saw her holding a small package.

Her breathing was labored, and beads of sweat dotted her forehead, suggesting she had sprinted.

The sight of her awkwardly offering me the package of tea leaves was oddly heartwarming.

Though I felt the usual sting of pity, her careful, considerate manner soothed me.

I took the package and stood.

“Have a seat. I’ll prepare the tea.”

“Okay!”

Fortunately, I already had a teapot and cups on hand.

I brewed the tea, poured it into two cups, and set them on the table.

There were no snacks to go with it, but for a casual tea time with a maid, this was enough.

It was also the first thing other than water I’d had in four days.

Even if it was just liquid, it felt luxurious.

We lifted our cups and took our first sips in silence.

The hot liquid slid down my throat, warming me from the inside.

Though it stung my empty stomach a little, the discomfort wasn’t unbearable.

The maid seemed to enjoy the tea.

“...This is delicious. You’re really good at making tea.”

“I’ve had plenty of practice. It’s part of basic etiquette, after all.”

For someone of noble standing, mastering the art of hosting, including tea preparation, was mandatory.

The noble daughter, for all her sharp edges, had diligently learned such skills to maintain her image of refinement.

Thanks to her, even I benefited from these habits now.

Perhaps this was the most useful thing she had left behind.

The maid smiled genuinely, her innocent expression undimmed by my modest response.

“Even so, you’re amazing.”

That compliment.

That smile.

That pure sincerity.

It all felt strangely unfamiliar.

Was it because I hadn’t encountered someone like this in years?

Unlike others, she didn’t display overt pity toward me.

Whether it was due to her role as a maid or just her personality, she made a conscious effort not to pry too deeply.

Her attitude embodied the very “status quo” I had always desired—unchanging, neutral, and detached.

Ironically, she was the ideal of what I had longed for from others.

If everyone had been like this maid, my remaining days would have been so much easier.

No one to deeply entangle with.

No one to bear hostility toward.

No one to pity me.

Detached and indifferent, only addressing the immediate reality while maintaining a functional relationship.

It sounded perfect.

No pain, no sorrow.

It wasn’t happiness, but at least life wouldn’t feel unbearable.

What could be more ideal than that?

As I let my thoughts wander, staring blankly, the maid spoke first.

“You’ve had quite an unusual day, huh? I even ended up pointing at a noble lady and got treated to tea.”

“I’m hardly a noble anymore. You don’t have to be so formal—you can speak casually if you’d like.”

The only thing I had over her was this room. No money, no freedom—I was no better than a servant myself.

I didn't expect her to treat me like a nobility anymore. I wouldn't care if she spoke informally or acted impolitely.

After all, I let commoners beat me daily. Why draw the line here?

"...No, I couldn't possibly do that."

Despite my offer, the maid shook her head with a troubled expression.

Then, after finishing the rest of her tea, she placed a small white cloth on the table.

When I looked at her questioningly, she smiled her usual cheerful smile and explained.

"It's a clean, sterilized cloth. Use it to dress your wound. I mean... it's really hard to clean blood off the bed, you know? Please be more careful next time! Hehe."

"....."

Instead of directly doing something for me, she provided me with the means to do it myself, ensuring her actions didn't come across as pity.

By adding that it was a hassle to clean, she cleverly diffused any perception of charity.

She was skilled at handling someone like me.

Unlike with Sena, I didn't feel the urge to overreact this time.

Maybe it was my hunger for kindness clouding my judgment, but still, I found myself subtly nodding.

"...Yeah. I'll be more careful."

"Alright!"

After that, the maid gave a light bow and left my room.

I had told her she could rest here a little longer, but she declined, saying she had work to do back at the staff quarters.

Funny—she'd said earlier she planned to take a break after finishing my room.

Her excuse was as transparent as glass.

Still, it didn't leave me with any unpleasant feelings.

I glanced around the room, which was now noticeably tidier thanks to her cleaning.

I hadn't asked for her name or invited her to return.

But her presence lingered in my memory.

"...This is making me itch."

For no apparent reason, my mind felt restless.

It was as if the space where my brain met my skull was floating uncomfortably.

I scratched at the wound on my forehead again.

A sickening sound, like something tearing, accompanied a sharper pain than before.

Blood trickled down my eyelid, giving me the grotesque sensation of crying tears of blood.

At least the itch was gone.

Good.

Pain was better.

I raised the teacup, now tainted with red from the blood that had dripped into it, and drank.

It tasted metallic, like iron.

Chapter 15

Days passed, yet Ariana's group made no moves.

From what I occasionally overheard, it seemed Ariana had forbidden anyone from approaching me.

And yet, whenever I encountered her during class or elsewhere, she cast lingering, sticky gazes full of emotion in my direction.

If she was going to act like that, why keep them away in the first place?

Was there someone else pulling the strings behind her?

Either way, this gave me something precious: time.

For the first time since enrolling at the academy, I could live without interacting with anyone.

Sena hadn't visited me since that day, and the maid simply exchanged brief greetings before leaving whenever we crossed paths.

Neither hostility nor goodwill reached me.

Even when I felt someone's gaze, it remained confined to a distant, limited range.

So, naturally, I should have been enjoying a peaceful daily life.

"...But I'm miserable."

I lay sprawled on my bed, drowning in a deep melancholy.

There wasn't any particular reason for it.

The fear of Ariana, which had been suppressing my depression and helplessness, had subsided with her absence, allowing those feelings to flood back in.

Though the physical pain had disappeared, my circumstances hadn't improved in the slightest.

And strangely—oddly enough—I felt an emptiness inside.

Unbelievable as it seemed, Ariana's absence might actually be the reason.

After enduring Ariana's tortures, I'd often felt an odd surge of vitality.

Perhaps it was the torrent of unfamiliar emotions—fear, despair, relief at having survived—that invigorated me.

Or maybe it was because, amidst the ongoing fusion of the noble daughter and myself, her torment allowed me to feel distinctly present.

Either way, it might have triggered some kind of adrenaline or dopamine rush in my brain.

That peculiar energy had kept me going despite her torment.

Looking back now, I relied on it far more than I'd realized, even in my daily life.

Not that I know if it's fair to call something like that "energy."

Growl—

Maybe it's just that my body is weak from hunger.

My stomach is empty.

It's been over a week since I last ate, and even getting out of bed feels like a monumental effort.

The first few days, my stomach had growled loudly enough to sound like it was twisting itself into knots. Now, it barely makes a faint, pitiful sound—too exhausted to protest.

Why had I stopped eating in the first place?

No one was stopping me from going to the dining hall anymore.

I tried to recall a reason but came up with nothing.

If I had to sum it up in one word: just because.

There hadn't been a real reason.

I simply didn't want to eat.

It felt like a hassle.

I wasn't hungry.

And honestly, what was the point?

Ironically, now that I had the time and space I'd supposedly wanted, I had no will to do anything at all.

Even if a year passed without any further incidents, the only thing waiting at the end would still be death.

I still suffered from a fierce longing for home, but I'd long since abandoned the hopeful fantasy that death might serve as a trigger for my return.

Death, no matter how it's dressed up, is still just death.

A final rest. Oblivion. Nothingness.

I'd known that from the beginning.

The only reason I hadn't acknowledged such a simple truth was that the constant hostility surrounding me had left me too overwhelmed to accept it.

As the weight of my depression grew, my thoughts naturally settled into a calm state.

And as my mind cleared, the tangled confusion of my thoughts began to unravel.

But as I sorted out even the beliefs that had sustained me until now, my depression only deepened.

A vicious cycle, really.

It seems I'd clung to the idea of death as an escape because I didn't want to hurt anymore.

But even death turned out to be just another means of prolonging life.

I'd told myself I could escape anytime if things got worse, if the pain became unbearable.

I'd reassured myself with the illusion of control, thinking I had a way back to reality.

It was only now that I realized this self-satisfaction for what it was.

Whether that realization was good or bad, I wasn't sure.

I wondered, now that I wasn't hurting anymore, what was left for me to do.

Maybe dying would be better after all.

"...No, that's not it."

I muttered to myself and shook my head.

It wasn't that I didn't want to; it was that I couldn't.

Even now, the noble daughter was terrified of death.

Having lost everything that made life meaningful, she had also experienced the sensation of losing life itself at my hands.

She hated life but clung to it with everything she had.

Even as I stewed in my depression, that truth remained unchanged.

I understood that death promised peace, but the fear of my existence dissolving into dust was overwhelming.

Every time I tried to take that final step, my hand froze before I could go through with it.

So, what should I do?

If I can't even die now...

Rip.

"Ugh..."

The familiar pain of torn skin returned countless times in recent days.

Without realizing it, I scratched at the wound on my forehead again.

The injury, which should have healed by now, was repeatedly being reopened, barely scabbing over before tearing anew.

Dark red blood trickled down my temple and stained the sheets.

My fingernails were embedded with flecks of raw flesh, a grotesque sight.

Why was I doing this?

I knew it would fester if I didn't stop.

Of course, I knew that stopping was the rational thing to do.

Yet since the maid's visit that day, picking at the wound had become my way of sorting out my emotions.

It was effective—alarmingly so.

The sharp, stinging pain would clear my head immediately.

Though it wasn't as intense as Ariana's torture, perhaps the perverse sense of self-inflicted control made it bearable.

Hmm.

Maybe I should get a knife.

I'd thought I wouldn't go through with it before, but now it seemed like it wouldn't matter.

A dull blade would hurt more—stop.

“Stop... Just stop already!”

Please. Please stop.

Stop tormenting me. Stop tormenting the noble daughter.

I don't want to hurt anymore.

That's the one thing about me that's never changed and never should.

If I start allowing even a little, I'll slide all the way down before I know it.

I pressed firmly on my bleeding forehead.

That's enough. Stop thinking about it.

But lying still only caused my thoughts to spiral into dangerous places.

Lost in depressive fantasies, I'd scare myself awake and clutch my head in alarm.

That was my new daily routine without Ariana.

I sat up on the bed.

Just standing on both legs made them tremble violently, and a dizzy spell washed over me.

Even so, I had to move if I wanted to break free of my thoughts.

Let's go to the store.

I can't allow another situation where I have nothing to offer, like last time.

I'll stock up on something—snacks, tea, anything.

With dignity comes everything else.

That simple truth had never once betrayed either the noble daughter or myself.

My forehead still bled, and I hadn't wiped the blood from my hands or hair.

Yet, I forced myself to take a step forward.

On shaky legs, I staggered to the door and turned the knob.

The light from the hallway spilled into the dark room.

Aside from going to class, this was my first time leaving the dorm.

Since it was the weekend, I hoped no one would be around.

My foolish hope was quickly shattered.

If anything, there were more people out than during the week.

Most students, who usually stayed in their classrooms, were now loitering in the halls.

As their eyes turned toward me, I immediately regretted leaving.

But if I turned back now, it would only feel like an extension of my earlier spiral.

Keeping my head down, I continued to walk.

Should I call it fortunate? Soon enough, I had bigger problems than their stares.

It was my stamina—or rather, the complete lack of it.

I had never been in great shape, but now, with everything that had happened recently, it felt like my body was collapsing.

I hadn't even run, yet my breathing was labored.

My hollow stomach twisted and churned nauseatingly.

A few days ago, I could still manage to move around somewhat, but now, even a few minutes of walking left me trembling as if I'd collapse at any moment.

I think I'm starting to understand what starvation feels like.

By the time I reached the store, I was on the verge of fainting.

I didn't even want to imagine what I looked like.

Whatever it was, it had to be bad enough to make anyone who saw me grimace in disgust.

I forced myself to suppress the thought and directed my gaze inside the shop.

The academy's "store" was too lavish to be called that—a sprawling shopping district adorned with polished marble and an air of grandeur.

Thankfully, the teas and snacks I needed were available in the outer section, so I didn't have to venture too far.

I fumbled inside my uniform pocket and pulled out a pouch containing silver coins.

It was the allowance the organization had provided for my living expenses.

It wasn't much, but since I'd only been eating the bare minimum, it had hardly been touched.

In truth, this money was my lifeline.

And yet, here I was, dragging my half-dead body all this way just to buy tea and snacks.

The absurdity of it made me chuckle faintly as I retrieved three or four coins from the pouch and held them tightly in my hand.

I shifted my gaze toward the display shelves, only to freeze as a familiar voice called out.

"Lady Adelian? What are you... is that blood?"

"...Sena."

The voice belonged to a dark-haired girl, her eyes widening in shock as she saw me.

Her expression quickly hardened as she registered my condition.

Of course, it had to be Sena.

How is it that we always run into each other at the worst possible times?

Is someone out there orchestrating my misery?