

PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

Chapter 16

When I last saw her, Sena, who had been wearing her school uniform, was now dressed in much lighter attire.

A white blouse and a navy cardigan.

A neat and elegant outfit that suited her perfectly.

Her hair was lightly braided, giving her a refined, ladylike appearance.

Honestly, I might be the only one still wearing a school uniform over the weekend.

Most students from families wealthy enough to send their children to the academy likely brought an entire wardrobe with them.

Even the duchess used to have an entire clothing warehouse to herself in the past.

“My” past and the duchess’ past were equally nostalgic.

Now? Just two uniforms.

One of which had been so soaked in blood it rendered me practically a pauper with only a single outfit.

I tried my best to wash it myself, but the stains wouldn’t come out with just water.

Wearing such a bloodied outfit in front of others was out of the question.

A duchess must always be elegant and dignified.

“Duchess, I apologize for asking this so suddenly, but may I ask you a question?”

As I was idly adding commentary to the image of Sena in my mind, she, who had been quietly observing me in return, spoke up.

Her tone was noticeably more subdued than before.

It was striking enough that she seemed gloomier than me, even though I was, quite literally, at my worst physically and mentally.

Come to think of it, the last time she visited was when I was delirious with a high fever. Was this her first time seeing my blood?

Since Sena was in a different class from mine, she probably had no idea what kind of treatment I typically received.

Ah, wait. Our first meeting was when I tripped on the stairs.

I even split my forehead open and bled back then.

So, she'd seen it before. Why was she overreacting now?

Curious, I tilted my head slightly, then pressed on my forehead wound again.

A sharp pain jolted my thoughts back into place.

"...I really need to stop."

"Excuse me? Stop what?"

"Oh, that wasn't directed at you, Sena."

It seemed like the duchess' aversion to people was rubbing off on me.

Recently, I found myself retreating into my own world no matter what I was doing, with slower reactions as a result.

Even when I was too despondent to want to do anything.

Even when my whole body trembled as if I might collapse at any moment.

The duchess' role demanded I always present a composed appearance.

Even escapism needed moderation.

Focus, now.

I needed to ensure that this fragile girl looking at me with such trembling eyes wouldn't get hurt any further.

Sena's expression was filled with unease, so I decided to ask.

She seemed to think my earlier words were meant for her.

But they weren't.

"So, what is it you wanted to ask?"

Finally startled out of her thoughts, Sena blurted out the question I'd been expecting.

"I'm curious... How did you hurt your forehead?"

"I tripped on the stairs. Just like I did last time in front of you."

“...You’re saying it was just a fall?”

“Is that a problem?”

I answered truthfully without hesitation, but her expression remained skeptical.

Her eyes stayed on my forehead, and she spoke again, her tone laced with doubt.

“...It’s just that the wound looks like someone deliberately tore the skin and repeatedly picked at it. It’s such a mess... unless it was done intentionally over multiple attempts....”

Sharp, isn’t she?

Or perhaps the condition of my wound was just that terrible.

Well, it’s true. Over the past few days, I’d clawed at it and stopped the bleeding dozens of times. Hoping for it to heal perfectly was probably wishful thinking.

Recently, there were signs of pus mixed in, not just blood.

It might rot away completely soon.

Given how it looked, her reaction was understandable.

Of course, I had no intention of telling her the truth.

I never said I wouldn’t lie at all. I just wouldn’t lie unnecessarily.

Even if I had to obey, it was better to avoid causing undue worry.

So, I deliberately feigned indifference.

Because, in truth, it wasn’t a big deal.

“It’s nothing. You heard, didn’t you? I haven’t been bullied these past few days.”

“That’s... true.”

So she’d heard something, at least.

Then what was she so curious about?

Did she think I’d done it to myself?

If so, I might just give her a round of applause. Truly.

Forcing a grin, I raised my voice slightly.

“Or do you think I did this to myself? Haha.”

“That couldn’t possibly be... right?”

Yes, that’s right.

There’s no way someone like Hans, who claimed the duchess had a cruel and strong personality, would believe she’d self-harm over school bullying.

Even I didn’t think so.

If it had been the pure duchess without “me,” she might have starved herself to death in a corner.

Or poisoned herself.

She wouldn’t have been able to endure the process of degrading into something pitiful.

Honestly, the current duchess’ fear of death and pain might be a result of “me.”

We chipped away at each other and grafted onto one another.

If this wasn’t dependence, then what was it?

Oh, I see.

In practical terms, we were married, weren’t we, duchess?

This could practically count as a common-law relationship.

Living together, merging physically and mentally.

Yeah.

Sorry. That was nonsense.

I pressed firmly on my forehead again.

The barely healing wound was on the verge of bursting open, but I stopped just short of letting it bleed.

I couldn’t show blood in front of Sena.

The dull ache was oddly unsatisfying, but I couldn’t let myself get used to it.

That would be dangerous.

“Oh. Oh no, that must hurt...! Let me help you treat it,” Sena exclaimed, alarmed by my actions, and approached me hurriedly.

She must have assumed I pressed on my wound because it hurt.

That wasn’t the case, but I didn’t bother correcting her.

I no longer had the will to refuse her kindness.

Sena's small, warm hands gently cradled my forehead.

It had been a long time since I'd felt the warmth of another person, and it was surprisingly pleasant.

Last time, because of my fever, her touch felt cold, but now I realized her body temperature was rather high.

A soft, white glow emanating from her magic focused on my wound.

The light was so bright I closed my eyelids instinctively.

Before long, the sharp pain I had been enduring gradually dissipated.

As the white glow faded, Sena rubbed the area of my wound a few times before withdrawing her hand.

I raised my own hand to touch it.

It felt as though the wound had never existed, as if time itself had reversed.

Magic truly was convenient.

If the duchess had been even half as capable as Sena, life would have been much easier.

But, unfortunately, she had no talent for anything of the sort.

No magic, no physical prowess, no academic aptitude—nothing.

That was why she clung so desperately to decorum, etiquette, and the gaze of others.

Even though she hated people, she still craved their recognition.

"Thank you."

I smiled.

After all, I'd decided to obey the words of 'humans' like Sena.

Whether she continued to provoke the duchess' inferiority complex, or tormented me with her pity, all I needed to do was keep smiling.

It was easy, wasn't it? Being a doll.

If you stopped thinking of yourself as human, everything became so much simpler.

The duchess would never admit she was inferior to the trash in our class.

Unconsciously, I scratched at the spot where the wound had been.

Ah, right. It's gone now.

For some reason, I felt oddly regretful. I pressed down on the area firmly.

Staying here any longer felt unbearable.

It was time to leave.

I spoke to Sena, who had been staring into space ever since finishing her healing magic.

"Thank you for treating me. It's completely healed now. If there's nothing else, may I take my leave?"

"...Duchess."

Oh.

Her expression darkened even further.

She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

It was the same look I'd seen when she pleaded with me last time.

Something seemed wrong, but I couldn't figure out what.

I froze in place and waited. Sena slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"How long has it been since you last ate?"

"....."

I let out a faint sigh without realizing it.

This was exactly why I'd tried to leave quickly.

Before I could respond, Sena's tone grew cold and analytical, entirely at odds with her expression, as she listed what she had deduced.

I tried to interject, but it was useless.

"Before casting healing magic, I always use insight magic to assess a person's condition. That's why I get close to them."

"...You must have misunderstood."

"I thought something was odd from the beginning.

Your condition is worse than that of someone from the slums.

To be this severely malnourished for nearly a week... the only conclusion is that you haven't eaten anything at all."

She took a step closer and placed her hand on my shoulder.

Her gaze was heavy with emotion.

I couldn't pin it down exactly, but it was a mixture of pity, concern, and a hint of anger.

"Duchess... at this rate, you'll die."

The smile I had been forcing fell away.

There was no need to emphasize the point.

I already knew.

"Was the wound on your forehead really from a fall?"

No, it wasn't.

You're sharp, aren't you?

Or perhaps I should commend your magical skill in this case.

"I don't know. About anything. Duchess, no matter how I look at you, you don't seem like the person Hans described."

I don't know either.

Who is this person Hans talked about?

We're right here.

Then and now, as weak as ever.

What did he see?

What kind of person was the duchess in his eyes?

I truly don't know.

Anything.

Chapter 17

I silently stared at Sena.

Thoughts about Hans consumed most of my mind before suddenly subsiding.

It must be a defense mechanism of the duchess.

Hans, the very symbol of PTSD, was someone I didn't want to think about, either in the past or now.

"...So.

Why do you care if I starve, Sena?

It's not like I plan to starve to death, and even if I did, it wouldn't matter to you."

Even so, a faint sense of resentment crept up, and before I realized it, my words came out sharp.

Sena's eyes widened, as though hurt, but she didn't say anything in response.

Of course not.

Because I was right.

In reality, we'd barely known each other for two months, essentially making us strangers.

In fact, I couldn't understand why Sena cared so much about me in the first place.

At first, I thought it was simple pity or kindness, but there was an odd obsessiveness to it that went beyond that.

Naturally, I found it unpleasant.

Though it was still far preferable to pure pity, so my resolve to act obediently didn't waver.

Enough. Let's not think about it anymore.

Sena is human, and I am a doll.

She shows kindness, and I obey.

That's the only unchanging principle.

Her intentions—whether pure or not—don't concern me.

After all, we're strangers. Isn't that right?

While I was lost in thought, Sena, still wearing that wounded expression, bit her lip and abruptly grabbed my wrist.

"...Let's go eat."

"I don't have any money. I just spent the last of it."

The meager food allowance the organization provided had just been spent on cheap tea, coffee, and cookies.

I couldn't afford a meal, but at least I now had something to offer guests.

For someone like me—a soon-to-be corpse—entertaining guests was far more important than my health, wasn't it?

I truly believed that.

But Sena didn't seem willing to back down.

The grip of her hand on my wrist tightened.

Another bruise.

Go easier on me—it hurts.

“I'll pay for it.

And I can keep paying for your meals in the future.

So please, don't skip meals.

Especially when your health is already poor....”

No, absolutely not.

A duchess who has to mooch meals because she's broke? How disgraceful.

But I didn't feel strongly enough to reject her offer outright.

If this had been our first meeting, I might have screamed and lashed out, treating it like a landmine.

Or maybe I simply lacked the energy to refuse.

I was, after all, a patient who hadn't eaten anything for a week.

Without waiting for my response, she began dragging me toward the dining hall.

I didn't put up much resistance and let myself be pulled along.

My mind felt strangely light, as if floating.

I hadn't wanted anyone to notice my condition because I knew it would only invite pity.

But now that someone had noticed, I couldn't deny how objectively dire my state was.

It wasn't like I wanted to starve to death.

If I were to die, I'd prefer a quick and certain method.

The long and excruciating process of starving didn't appeal to me.

And yet, when asked why I hadn't eaten for over a week, my only answer would be, just because.

That answer alone seemed to highlight just how broken I was.

At first, I could blame circumstances—being blocked from entering the dining hall.

But in recent days, there was no such excuse.

I was just... depressed.

Hollow and despondent.

I didn't want to do anything.

I couldn't do anything.

I didn't even know what the duchess wanted anymore.

Or what I wanted.

It felt like everything had blurred together so thoroughly that there was no trace of the original.

I hated that the duchess' memories grew clearer while my own reality faded.

I hated myself for missing Ariana's bullying and the wound that had healed on my forehead.

I hated that I was alive.

I hated that I wanted to die.

And I hated that I couldn't.

For that reason...

"—Duchess. Duchess!"

"...Oh, were you calling me?"

While lost in my own world, it seemed we'd arrived at the dining hall.

I snapped out of it and raised my head to acknowledge Sena, who had been shaking me.

I had no idea how long I'd been like that.

I hoped it hadn't been too long.

Drawing unnecessary attention was the last thing I wanted.

“...Are you sure you’re okay? If you have any symptoms, I can get you some medicine.”

“I’m fine. I was just... lost in thought.”

“If you say so....”

Sena still looked worried, so I gestured as if to assure her I was okay.

She seemed convinced enough and led me to an empty seat before helping me sit down.

“Do you have anything you’d like to eat?”

“Anything is fine.”

“Then I’ll order something light.

You’ve gone so long without food, so you shouldn’t overeat.”

She immediately went to place the order.

I stayed seated, waiting quietly for her to return.

Suddenly, a thought flitted through my mind.

Should I run away now?

It was a completely impulsive idea, but it wasn’t something I could even attempt unless she was away, like now.

Yes, if I were to do it, now would be the time. But why?

She wasn’t hurting me or anything. She just wanted to buy me a meal.

I pressed a finger to my lips and tilted my head.

I wanted to bolt back to my room immediately.

But I couldn’t figure out why.

After a few seconds of deliberation, I gave up and shook my head.

I don’t know. There must be a reason.

It wasn’t the first time my instincts and logic worked against each other.

I put strength into my legs to stand up.

“...Ah, haha.”

Well, I tried to.

But my trembling legs wouldn’t support my weight.

I'd felt on edge before, but it seemed I'd truly reached my limit.

I couldn't even stand anymore.

I found the situation absurdly funny and let out a dry laugh.

Just walking here had left me in this state. If I'd gone a few more days without eating, I might have died from heart failure or something.

And yet, just before reaching that point, I'd decided to step outside, run into Sena by chance, and collapse right when I could no longer escape.

When coincidences piled up this much, it started feeling like fate.

What a joke. Really.

Suddenly, my eyes grew hot, and I buried my face into the table.

I couldn't let them see me cry. Those disgusting gazes—they didn't deserve to witness it.

Ah, there it was again. The stares.

It didn't matter that they weren't physically touching me.

The most unbearable thing—those vile gazes—had only increased.

Malice, ridicule, pity, sympathy.

And that strange, sticky mixture of all those emotions.

Stop looking at me.

Stay out of my life.

This has nothing to do with any of you.

When are you coming back, Sena?

If you won't let me escape, at least stay by my side.

At least when you're here, I don't notice their stares as much.

Hurry.

"I brought it, Duchess...? Are you alright?! You're not feeling well, are you?!"

Ah.

The sound of her setting down the bowl snapped me back, and I quickly lifted my head.

Sena's anxious expression blocked out the oppressive gazes boring into me, her emotions shining with such intensity that they overpowered everything else.

The weight pressing down on me gradually lifted, replaced by a strange sense of relief.

That girl unsettled me. I found her presence burdensome.

But it was still better than being under the scrutiny of the rest of this filth.

Maybe dolls really do gravitate toward humans.

With trembling hands, I wiped the moisture from my eyes and spoke to her.

"I was in pain until a moment ago, but now I'm fine. Strangely enough."

"...Is that so."

At my words, Sena's expression darkened.

It wasn't a look of relief.

If anything, she appeared deeply uneasy.

Did she have some bad experience in the past?

Not that I had any intention of prying.

I didn't want to know more about her, nor did I want her to know more about me.

If I couldn't push her away, the least we could do was maintain this level of distance—it would be better for both of us.

Instead of dwelling on her expression, I shifted my gaze to the bowl she had brought.

It contained a thin soup, still warm to the touch.

The ingredients were finely chopped, almost unnoticeable, making it clear that the dish had been prepared with care for my weakened stomach.

I picked up the spoon and carefully scooped a small amount of the soup.

Bringing it to my lips, I hesitated briefly before taking a sip.

It wasn't hot enough to burn, and after a few gentle chews, I swallowed it without issue.

There wasn't much flavor.

I couldn't tell if that was because it had been intentionally bland or if there was something wrong with my sense of taste.

But I could feel the warmth as the soup slid down my throat, spreading heat through my stomach.

How should I describe it?

It felt like recovering a memory I had forgotten.

Since arriving at the academy, I had been subsisting on things that could barely be called food, eating only every few days.

Back with the organization, I had only ever consumed preserved rations that never left me feeling full.

It seemed I had forgotten what it felt like for my stomach to actually fill.

As I ate, I had to grip the table and force myself to eat slowly despite my trembling arms.

The duchess couldn't be seen devouring food like a starving beggar.

But I couldn't muster the effort to manage my expression, leaving me anxious about how I appeared to others.

Judging by Sena's pitiful gaze, I could guess it wasn't great.

Even so, I couldn't stop.

Was I always this greedy for food?

Ah, it's instinct. Survival instinct.

How ironic.

Humans are such contradictions.

Feeling satisfaction at my stomach filling.

Feeling joy at being alive.

And simultaneously feeling despair because I couldn't die.

Disliking Sena Blomberg as a person.

Wanting to push her away.

Yet instinctively leaning on her.

I already knew it.

But it's just... too much.

Chapter 18

After finishing the bowl of porridge, I finally felt a semblance of vitality return to my body.

Of course, having been on the brink of starvation, it wasn't as if my energy suddenly surged back in a dramatic way.

Still, there was a significant difference between having an empty stomach and having something to fill it.

I set the spoon down and turned my gaze to Sena.

Proper gratitude is important, isn't it?

After all, I'm a good doll.

Besides, she's essentially my savior at the moment.

Whether or not I wanted to be saved isn't something I'm certain about, so maybe it's best to leave that aside for now.

Recognizing how deeply contradictory I am is already progress in itself.

I shook my head lightly as if to clear away the unnecessary thoughts.

Focus. Just thank her.

"Thank you for the meal. It was good."

Sena, who had been looking at me with pity, seemed surprised by my words.

She probably hadn't expected me to express gratitude.

I wonder what kind of image I have in the eyes of others.

Her surprised expression quickly softened into one of relief.

Yes, relief is far better than pity.

"...I'm glad to hear that.

From now on, please come to me whenever you feel like eating.

It doesn't matter how much it costs."

"And if I don't come to you?"

"Then I'll come to you.

I'll make sure you're eating properly."

"So, in the end, I don't have a choice."

She was essentially saying she'd force me to eat no matter what.

If she never intended to give me a choice, why bother phrasing it so vaguely?

If it's to avoid coming across as too forceful, I wish she'd realize that her approach makes it feel all the more hypocritical.

Perhaps sensing the dissatisfaction in my tone, Sena added an explanation.

"...Please don't take it the wrong way. My intentions are pure."

"I know. You're doing this out of goodwill."

If it weren't goodwill, what other motivation could there be?

She's simply spending her own money to feed a poor, needy child nearby.

That's what I am, after all.

A sickly, pitiable, unstable child who can't be left alone.

Out of sympathy. Out of pity.

Because she doesn't want me to die.

A saint, truly.

I mean that sincerely, not sarcastically.

After all, most people would turn a blind eye, or worse, actively torment someone like me, just like the trash around me.

From an objective standpoint, she's undeniably a good person.

Just a little self-righteous, perhaps.

Enough to leave a deep wound on the crumbling pride of the duchess.

"I understand. I'll rely on you for meals from now on.

That said, may I leave now?"

I watched her expression twist slightly before rising to my feet.

I worried for a moment that my legs might not cooperate, but it seemed I had recovered enough to stand, albeit a bit unsteadily.

I had no intention of arguing further.

If this was what she wanted, I'd go along with it.

My pride? It's been shattered for so long that there's no point in trying to salvage it.

If maintaining a connection with Sena meant shaving away at the duchess, then so be it.

Physically, mentally—whatever it takes.

“Then, goodbye. Until next time.”

“...Yes. Next time, for sure.”

After hesitating as if lost in thought, Sena reluctantly responded to my farewell.

I nodded politely, turned away, and left the dining hall at a pace that was neither hurried nor slow.

I could still feel some stares, but fortunately, they weren't as blatant as the ones in the dining hall.

I made it back to my room without any major issues.

Compared to when I'd left, my condition was remarkably better—so much so that it was almost shocking how much one meal could improve things.

It felt as though a week's worth of effort to wither away had been undone in a single indulgence.

Now, with external interference, starving myself to death was no longer an option.

Seeing this strange sense of regret surface within me, I couldn't help but laugh.

I had longed for the bullying, missed the wound on my forehead I could scratch at whenever I pleased, and now, I was mourning the hunger I could no longer feel.

I must truly be insane.

Yes, that's it. I've gone mad.

The moment you came into my life, it was no different from developing dissociative identity disorder.

The illness is commonly called split personality.

Even before you arrived, I had an unhealthy aversion to relationships.

Maybe I had some kind of mental illness I wasn't aware of.

I know I've always been that kind of crazy. But what I'm talking about now is different.

Unlike before—when I could clearly distinguish between myself and you and resisted escaping through death—now everything's so blended together that I don't even know whose will I'm following anymore.

So.

Whose thought is this right now?

I don't know.

It could just be me monologuing to myself. Or maybe my mind truly has split in two.

Which do you prefer?

Both are crazy. What's there to prefer?

"Is that so."

Yes, that must be it.

Even as I tossed and turned in bed, the ceaseless dialogue in my mind continued.

My body was utterly exhausted, yet my chaotic thoughts wouldn't let me sleep.

First, it was my body. Now, it's my mind.

Well, if I'm going to go insane, I might as well do it completely.

Nothing is more agonizing than staying in the gray area.

Once you cross the line, it's strangely liberating.

I forced a smile, even as cold sweat soaked my skin.

That night, I never managed to fall asleep.

By the time morning arrived, after a night of twisting and writhing, my mind had finally quieted down.

I took advantage of the reprieve to get ready for school.

Going to school seemed like the better option right now.

The stares of those around me would help suppress the duchess, who constantly tried to rear her head.

As they always had.

That was what I thought as I left my room several minutes earlier than usual.

Walking through the crowded hallways, trembling under everyone's stares, I felt the effectiveness of my decision.

As unpleasant as it was, it wasn't the wrong choice.

By the time I arrived in the classroom, I was feeling somewhat reassured.

That reassurance shattered the moment I stepped inside.

A sense of foreboding hit me immediately.

"...?"

The atmosphere around Ariana's group, which had been relatively quiet for the past few days, had shifted.

It was... nastier than usual.

Like a dam on the verge of bursting after being held back for too long.

Ariana herself was nowhere to be seen, though.

So now it was just a pack of unleashed attack dogs, with no master to rein them in.

Ah.

Today is going to be rough.

The thought hit me instinctively.

That ominous sense of foreboding I had never once been wrong about earned another victory today.

The moment the morning assembly ended, a large male student approached me.

He had a cigarette dangling from his lips, irritation practically radiating from his expression.

It was Jean, the boy who had seemed to act as a leader for the commoner students before.

From what I'd heard, he was a martial arts prodigy, and his family was wealthy enough to rival nobles.

Why his hostility was focused solely on me, I didn't understand.

Did the Adelian family wrong him in some way?

Even if they had, it had nothing to do with me.

This isn't the kind of world where guilt is inherited—

Ah, right.

This is another world.

One where destroying entire noble families is commonplace.

In that case, I guess it is my fault.

I'm sorry.

It's my fault.

Everything is my fault.

I don't know what unforgivable crime Adelian committed against your still-thriving family, but yes, it's all my fault.

Still, shouldn't I at least get credit for one thing?

It was me, after all, who ruined Adelian by sending Hans to his death that day.

You hate nobles, don't you?

Doesn't that make me your ally? I mean, I destroyed a whole ducal family.

Am I crazy?

Jean hadn't said anything, but the words echoed in my mind as if someone had.

Ah, you're the one who said it.

Yes. I'm crazy.

I pressed my hands against my head, forcing the duchess back into her box.

Stop it. Please.

Jean's increasingly sour expression was terrifying enough as it was.

"Just thinking about it pisses me off," Jean growled, finally taking the cigarette from his mouth and exhaling a plume of smoke.

"We're the ones who started this, so why the hell are we letting that bitch call the shots?"

My eyes flicked downward at his words, but for a moment, I almost nodded along.

Exactly. Why are you being controlled?

Ariana's a noble too, but you don't seem to have any issue with her.

You're pathetic—groveling in front of her and puffing up your chest now that she's gone.

If you're going to bow, do it completely.

If you're going to resist, then resist properly.

Being a spineless bat, doing neither—how revolting.

I bit my lip and stayed silent, though my mind seethed.

Yes, bow completely.

Like that...

But you're worse, you know.

Shut up.

Jean's eyes narrowed as his voice grew louder.

"What the hell does 'don't hurt her' even mean? Torture? That lukewarm crap doesn't even count as torture.

People need scars they can't erase. Something they'll regret and suffer from for the rest of their lives.

Something fleeting like that doesn't do shit!"

".....Ah. Uh, ngh—!"

Just as his emotions reached their peak, Jean snubbed out his cigarette.

On the back of my hand.

The sharp hiss of burning flesh echoed unnervingly close.

Pain seared through the center of my hand as the glowing end of the cigarette melted my skin.

The sensation of it burning, digging into me, was horrifically vivid before it dulled into numbness.

I barely managed to stifle the scream that tried to escape my lips.

Drawing attention now wouldn't end well for me.

My mind began to go blank, everything turning white.

Surely, this wasn't as bad as the pain I'd felt before. Yet it seemed I had become weaker in just a few days.

Jean sneered, his face twisting into the now-familiar expression of derision.

“Ah, see that? You’re well-trained, aren’t you, Duchess?

Not even a scream in a situation like this. How impressive.”

He leaned down, resting a heavy hand on my head as though I were a toy.

The way he treated me reminded me of some loathsome insect crawling across my skin.

I hated him.

He disgusted me.

He was the worst.

I was certain of that.

And yet.

“Seems like that bitch won’t be coming in until later today.

Let’s enjoy the morning thoroughly, shall we? Got it?”

Hearing that, the gloom I’d felt vanished.

Ahaha.

Chapter 19

From the first period until lunchtime, during every break, I was subjected to relentless violence.

It was primal, raw.

Not systematic, not calculated—just overflowing with unfiltered emotions, completely impervious to reason.

Here, strength was everything.

And to someone like me, who lacked even the strength for daily life, let alone resistance, strength might as well not exist.

Of course, this wasn’t anything new.

Even when Ariana was in charge, they treated me as if my will didn’t matter, tormenting me as they pleased.

Before that, back when I was part of the organization or even when Adelian was still intact, it was always the same.

At least back then, they used healing magic to keep me functional.

I'm sure there's at least one mage among these people now, but they're being stingy with their spells.

Oh, is this their way of expressing their great fury toward nobles?

I pinched my nose to stop the blood from pouring out and smiled.

It hurt to laugh, as if my collarbone might shatter, but the amusement was undeniable.

Because, strangely, this didn't feel that bad.

Ever since Jean first hit me earlier today, I'd been unconsciously treating this long-overdue beating as a refreshing rain after a drought.

The sharp pain of the moment was quickly followed by the undeniable reminder that I was alive.

And, like some hormone with a long name being released, my mind cleared.

It felt almost addictive, like I'd taken a drug.

At this rate, it felt worth it.

A few hours ago, I'd found this odd sensation frightening—how the more I was beaten, the more comforted I felt.

But people are adaptable creatures, and after being exposed to pain repeatedly, I started to... enjoy it.

"Phft—cough! Koff! Koff...!"

Unable to control the floating feeling in my head, I let out a small laugh.

But then a sharp sensation rushed up from my chest, blocking my airway.

I coughed violently several times, and bright red blood splattered onto my palm.

Ah, must've been a broken rib piercing something again.

"...You think this is funny?"

I was still gasping for breath when I turned toward the voice above me.

Through my blood-smeared vision, I looked up from the floor to see Jean.

He was fiddling with his bloodstained knuckles, towering over me in a way that felt suffocating even while sitting down.

Of course, the blood was mine, a souvenir from when his fist had shattered my nose not long ago.

“Looks like the Duchess thinks this is all some kind of joke. But we’re dead serious.”

His expression matched the venom in his tone as he glared down at me.

Of course, it’s not a joke.

If this were a joke, then the insane one here wouldn’t be me—it’d be you.

“Get a grip, yeah?”

Open your eyes properly. Speak clearly. Stop flopping around like some lifeless rag.”

I didn’t know if it was my eyeball or a blood vessel that had burst, but my vision was so red I couldn’t even open my eyes fully.

He’d been hitting me nonstop, so even if I could think straight, my brain had long given up.

And my body, bruised all over, lacked even the strength to stand.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop looking at me like that?”

Thud!

When I continued staring blankly at him, Jean smirked and kicked my head as if it were a soccer ball.

I rolled several meters, crashing into a row of desks, which collapsed in a chain reaction.

My head slammed against multiple hard surfaces, sending searing pain and a fresh wave of blood through me.

The crimson haze in my vision faded to black.

Well, I guess that’s one way to resolve things.

How efficient.

I almost wanted to applaud.

If my body’s falling apart anyway, I might as well do it all at once, right?

Even as countless thoughts raced through my mind, I lay motionless, as if dead.

There wasn’t a single part of my body that didn’t hurt.

It felt like I’d been completely shattered.

No, I probably was completely shattered.

This was nothing like last time when it was just a few ribs and an ankle.

The sheer intensity this time was in another league.

If I actually died from this, would they be able to handle the fallout?

Well, not that I'd mind.

I tried to ask, but speaking was difficult when even breathing hurt.

"Cough! Hrk...! If I die... you won't... hic, be able to cover it up... right?"

After coughing up blood several times, I managed to choke out the words.

Jean's eyes widened briefly before he burst into laughter.

"Oh, what's this? Worried about me, are you? Hah! That's hilarious."

He laughed so hard his shoulders shook.

"Don't worry, Duchess. Even if you die, it's all covered.

I checked, you see. Money solves everything."

He made a gesture with his fingers—a circle.

Ah, of course. Money.

There's nothing money can't do.

"Bribing the professors is easy. If we're caught, we just pay our way out.

Worst case? We swap you out with someone else.

My family might not have much in the way of honor, but we've got plenty of cash."

I had a feeling something was off.

If Adelian had even a shred of its name left, maybe.

But the family was completely stripped of its title, exiled for treason.

Killing me wouldn't incur any serious punishment.

Ariana, you really told some ridiculous lies, didn't you?

Why?

Why would someone like you, who couldn't care less whether I lived or died, go out of your way to interfere?

There were plenty of better excuses if you just wanted an excuse to meddle.

“Got all worked up over nothing. Scared me for no reason with those empty threats.

If her family wasn't a Count's, we could've handled her too.

But whatever. The process doesn't matter, right? Only the result does.”

Well, he's not wrong.

I stopped thinking and simply waited for the next blow.

Getting beaten to death didn't sound so bad at this point.

Jean's gang, grinning from ear to ear, started closing in on me.

I shut my eyes.

But the pain didn't come.

Seconds passed, and still nothing.

I wondered if I'd lost my sense of touch, so I cracked an eye open.

Jean was still standing there, but his gaze wasn't on me anymore.

“It seems you couldn't wait even a single week, could you?”

A calm, deliberate voice came from where his gaze was fixed.

Turning my head with great effort, I saw Ariana leaning casually against the classroom door.

Too late.

And yet, too soon.

Jean's voice wavered slightly as he responded, betraying his unease.

He must've been rattled, especially after badmouthing her so openly just moments ago.

“...Beating her a little isn't a big deal, right?

As long as she doesn't die, you won't...”

“Ah, yes. As long as she doesn't die, I don't really care.”

Ariana's voice was dismissive as she strolled into the room, her finger slowly pointing at the group.

A moment later, they were engulfed in crackling blue sparks.

Screams, the stench of burning, and the sound of bodies collapsing filled the room.

Jean, at the forefront, shrieked as he yelled at her.

“Y-You said it was fine! Why are you doing this?!”

Ariana’s gaze was ice-cold as she replied.

“That’s secondary.

I’m upset you didn’t even bother to listen to me.

I guess you thought I was all talk, huh?”

“That’s what happens when you go too easy!

Telling us not to lay a finger on her for a whole week? That’s asking too much!”

Jean lashed out in frustration, his voice rising.

Ariana gave a small flick of her finger in response, and a streak of blue light silenced him with a sizzling sound.

She crossed her arms, her tone dripping with irritation.

The clingy, complicated emotions she’d been radiating lately were unmistakable.

“Do you think I want to deal with the Duchess like this?

If I could’ve ended this, I would’ve done it already. I’m doing this because things aren’t going my way.”

Her gaze turned to me.

I couldn’t react—my body was barely holding on—but I could clearly read the emotions in her eyes.

Jealousy.

Seriously?

How absurd.

What could I possibly have that you lack?

“To begin with, all of this happened because he told me to keep her alive, and you started the violence.”

Her words, muttered almost to herself, made my head spin.

He?

What’s that supposed to mean?

It sounded as if someone else was behind this.

Then again, maybe it wasn't so surprising.

The timing of everything—being let go by the organization and Ariana's overly zealous interest in me—had always felt suspiciously deliberate.

I'd suspected there was some connection, but if that were true...

No.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

If this is true, then the foundation of everything falls apart.

Because I'm still—

"I don't care.

An uncontrollable dog has no place here."

Ariana broke off her grumbling and turned her attention to the others sprawled across the floor.

"From now on, don't even think about approaching the Duchess.

I won't tolerate you lowering my standing any further."

"You think we're just going to sit back and take that?" one of the remaining leaders, a woman, snapped.

"And what will you do if you don't?" Ariana replied coldly.

"It'd be wise to stop pretending that a little bit of money makes you something special.

Unlike other nobles, I don't care. I could kill any one of you commoners here at the academy without hesitation."

At that, the woman clamped her mouth shut.

Ariana's casual, detached threat hung in the air, silencing everyone.

Satisfied with the quiet, she turned and walked toward me.

Without a word, she cast healing magic over my battered body.

Then, without waiting for a response, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me to my feet.

Even with the external wounds healed, broken bones took time to mend.

Standing up in my state was excruciating—every muscle and joint screamed in agony.

“...Ah.”

“Let’s go.”

Ignoring my groan of pain, Ariana roughly tugged me along.

Her pace was too fast for me to keep up, especially in my weakened condition.

The grip on my wrist was painfully tight, cutting off circulation to the point of numbness.

There was no regard for my comfort or well-being in her movements.

I felt as though I might collapse at any moment, ready to be dragged behind her like dead weight.

We left the classroom in this precarious state.

Chapter 20

Ariana dragged me through the empty hallway, her grip unrelenting.

At first, I thought she intended to shove me into some hidden corner by the stairs, but the journey lasted far longer than expected.

What is she planning this time?

Panting, I cautiously asked, “...It’s almost time for class. Is this okay?”

“Magic class, isn’t it?”

“Uh... yes.”

No further explanation followed.

So, magic class makes it fine?

Maybe she bribed the professor.

Come to think of it, whenever Ariana got particularly creative with her methods of torment, it often coincided with magic class.

Perhaps she had some arrangement in place, which wouldn’t be surprising.

At the academy, skipping classes or pushing lessons aside was more common than you’d think.

For the Emperor, the academy wasn’t about actual education but more about presenting a prestigious façade to elevate his standing.

The academy's classes were, in a way, a useless trinket—neither remarkable in quality nor indispensable in practice.

Sure, they hired competent professors to maintain appearances, but that was the extent of it.

The rest of the academy's focus was on security, ensuring students were entirely isolated for three years.

With such a system, it was no wonder that rot set in, producing people like me.

It's easy to cover up a death in such an isolated environment.

Congratulations, Your Majesty, for creating this endlessly amusing institution.

A small, bitter laugh escaped me amidst my labored breaths.

No point digging deeper.

I stopped thinking about it and simply allowed myself to be dragged along.

“Here we are.”

We finally stopped as the bell signaling the start of class rang.

We stood in front of one of the rooms in the dormitory wing.

Without warning, she opened the door and shoved me inside with such force that I tumbled to the floor, rolling several times.

“Wait, ugh...”

The partially healed bones in my body protested loudly, twisting and creaking with every movement.

I didn't expect gentleness, but this was excessive.

The room's interior felt eerily familiar.

Of course—it was in the same building as the dormitory room I used every day.

Dormitory Block B.

Ariana Warton's personal room.

Her private sanctuary.

And here I was, thrown into it, unable to resist.

What she planned to do next was all too obvious.

I steadied my trembling body and surveyed the room.

The dimly lit space had a strikingly modern aesthetic, inconsistent with this world's typical style.

What stood out, however, were the torture instruments hanging here and there.

If bloodstains were added, the place could easily pass as a horror movie set.

In some ways, it suited Ariana perfectly.

She seemed outwardly polished, but just beneath the surface lay hidden thorns.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Duchess?"

I apologize for failing to keep those lowlifes in check."

I'd managed to pull myself upright and leaned against a nearby table when I heard Ariana's voice.

I turned to see her seated on the edge of the bed, legs elegantly crossed.

The posture was quintessentially Ariana, exuding poise and confidence.

Yet something felt off, like she was trying too hard to appear her usual self.

Her behavior raised more questions than it answered.

People unnaturally orbiting me.

Individuals seemingly confined to their own roles, never crossing boundaries.

A chain of events, punctuated by just enough healing to keep me alive.

Torture carefully calibrated to stop short of killing me.

Every time I felt ready to collapse, someone kind or supportive conveniently appeared.

It was all too... deliberate.

Even I, as slow-witted as I can be, couldn't chalk it all up to coincidence anymore.

From the start, was it a mistake to believe I'd escaped the organization's control?

Where does the performance end, and where does the truth begin?

If not you, Ariana, then what about Sena? That maid?

What about Hans?

The tangled mess of questions spilled out of me, unbidden.

“...Who’s behind you?”

Someone must’ve sent you to approach me, right?

I had my suspicions, but you—”

“Enough.”

Ariana cut me off, pressing her fingers to her temples as if nursing a headache.

Her vibrant, lively demeanor was replaced with a weary, disenchanted expression, making the difference all the more stark.

“...I really must’ve said something unnecessary.

This is why I hate losing my composure. Holding back makes it all the harder to control.”

Her voice, too, had lost its usual liveliness, now low and drained.

She seemed like a completely different person, shedding the girlish pretense she typically wore around me.

What remained was a jaded, almost decadent woman.

Is this her true self?

Everyone puts on a mask to some extent, especially those who deal with people regularly.

The greater the difference between someone’s true self and their outward persona, the thicker the mask they wear.

Torture, too, is a kind of performance, albeit an extreme one.

The thicker the mask, the greater the shock when it shatters.

Her façade breaking was proof that my suspicions were close to the mark.

But it also dashed any hope of getting straight answers.

Why would she admit the truth when my words had struck such a nerve?

This conversation was little more than amusement for her, a way to pass the time.

I wasn’t a person to her. I was a pet.

“Let’s establish one thing clearly.

I have no intention of answering your questions, Duchess.”

“...Of course not.”

“So, let’s talk about something else!

We’ve had a break over the past few days, haven’t we? Both of us, avoiding each other.”

No matter what I said, Ariana held the reins of the conversation.

She openly announced she was steering the topic elsewhere, and there was no room for resistance.

If I pressed further, it would only lead to more pain later.

In the end, my questions remained unspoken, buried in the back of my mind.

“Still, it was quite the effort on my part.

Every day, I thought about how to give you satisfying pain while ensuring nothing truly dangerous happened.

I really worked hard, you know.”

Ariana’s tone shifted, her earlier weariness vanishing as she returned to her usual lively demeanor.

Her sudden cheerfulness was so stark it felt as though the somber, drained persona from moments ago had never existed.

This wasn’t just a return to her professional façade; it was a warning.

Don’t even think about overstepping—her message was clear.

I understood it well and silently watched as she opened a wooden chest resting on the bed.

Not a sound escaped me.

Of course, I listen well.

Even though the foundation of everything I’d trusted was crumbling, I wasn’t panicking or asking questions.

Just because someone told me to stay quiet, I was obediently silent. Ha.

“In the end, this was the solution.

I spent several days finding something with low mortality but high addictive and withdrawal effects.

It was exhausting. Do you know how many traps there were?

No wonder Father always avoided drugs—they're such a hassle.”

From the chest, Ariana pulled out a syringe that looked slightly different from the last one I'd seen.

The liquid inside was clear and colorless, like water.

Compared to the blue hallucinogen she had used before, it looked far less dangerous.

But things that appear harmless often aren't.

Her hands didn't stop with the syringe.

She pulled out a white powder in a pouch, oval-shaped blue pills, sugar cube-like solids, and a flask of luminous scarlet liquid.

It looked as though she was preparing for a drug market, laying out the array of substances neatly on the bed.

Ariana smiled proudly, like a child showing off her toys.

“Last time, we used hallucinogens, so today we'll explore stimulants and suppressants.

I'll mix and adjust them to give you an excellent experience—you can look forward to it.

Let's keep things relaxed and just enjoy ourselves today, okay?”

“.....”

“Come on, your response?”

“...Sure, I'll look forward to it.”

“Good.”

Her voice dropped again, quieter and more deliberate.

Ariana picked up the syringe she had initially prepared.

Stepping down from the bed, she knelt before me, closing the space between us until our breaths mingled.

Her knee pressed against mine, pinning me in place.

Though the restraint was familiar, her soft whisper near my ear made it feel different.

“No one will interrupt us.

Relax your body and take a deep breath.”

As she spoke, her hand gently stroked the back of my neck.

Her touch was unnervingly calming, as if she had mastered the art of pacifying others.

The tension that had gripped my body dissipated before I realized it, leaving me strangely pliant.

It was a clear reminder of how thoroughly I’d been conditioned.

Perhaps it didn’t matter anymore.

Even the duchess within me seemed to have stopped resisting.

I used to think Ariana was just a parasite feeding off her past host, but after seeing her unmasked moments ago, that belief crumbled.

The emotions she showed toward me—jealousy and faint expectation—felt so starkly detached, as though deliberately suppressed.

The duchess despised pity and concern, but Ariana wasn’t one of those sympathetic saints.

She treated me clinically, like a hired torturer doing a job.

Ultimately, there’s someone behind her too, isn’t there?

“...Heh.”

I let out a quiet laugh and closed my eyes.

What am I even thinking?

None of it changes anything.

As her hand continued to stroke my neck, Ariana began to speak softly.

“If you’re relaxed, let’s begin.”

Not that I was truly relaxed, but at this point, she could do as she pleased.

I let my body go limp, signaling my resignation.

Ariana rolled up my sleeve and ran her fingers over the pale skin of my arm.

Having done this before, she worked quickly, tying off my arm to expose the veins.

The needle’s point approached, pricking the crook of my elbow with a sharp sting.

I felt the syringe's contents seep into my veins, the tepid liquid spreading within me.

From where the needle pierced, an indescribable sensation began to creep through my body.

Ah, here it comes.

That was all I could think of.