

PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

Chapter 21

After that, I don't remember exactly what happened.

I just felt so good that I thought, Even if I die like this, I'd be happy.

The body that once ached as if it were breaking apart felt so light, as though one step would send it floating into the air.

The mind, which had always been clouded, suddenly became clear, as if it had returned to reality.

A rush of pleasure swept over me—something incomparable to any sexual act.

The Ariana before me, who had delivered this sensation to me, looked so indescribably lovable.

I wanted to meld our bodies together, to explore her, to unite from the deepest parts of ourselves.

And so, I think I pounced.

I pinned her down, stripped her clothes, and parted her intimate areas.

Sharing warmth, feeling the brush of skin, and hearing the mutual exchange of moans added a heightened sense of euphoria to the already drug-like bliss.

For a long while, I licked and sucked in that state, and when I opened my eyes, I saw Ariana sitting there fully dressed, as if nothing had happened.

I hugged her and expressed affection by rubbing my face against her neck, bringing us to the floor.

For a long while again, we rolled around, and when I opened my eyes, Ariana sat there as though nothing had changed.

Next, I limited myself to kissing, starting from her forehead and moving over every inch of her from head to toe.

We tasted and felt each other, and there she was again, embracing me calmly.

I couldn't tell what was delusion and what was reality anymore.

But even the chaotic intersection of fantasy and reality felt purely enjoyable.

"...Do you feel good?"

From a distance that seemed a handspan and yet eternal, Ariana softly asked me.

At that moment, I could answer without a shred of hesitation.

It feels amazing.

I'm insane. Electrified. Happy.

It's like someone's raking their nails over every nerve in my brain.

All the dark emotions I've felt—depression, despair...

I'm sure I'll never feel them again as long as I take the drug.

Now that I think about it, the reason I've been living without dying until now was because I had nothing to rely on.

But now, I have something.

I have something to lean on.

As long as I take the drug, I can do anything.

All my emotions are converted into pleasure when my brain is paralyzed.

Even dying no longer seems scary.

That means even survival instincts will stop working.

There will be no mind left to restrain my body.

Even the princess won't be able to stop me.

Hurrah.

"Ah, hahaha! Heh heh..."

"This seems to work better, doesn't it?"

"Yeah... I love it.

More. Give me more. More, more——"

"Don't rush so much.

I'm taking my time, carefully controlling it... so relax."

Come to think of it, they say narcotic substances are released even at the moment of death. Endorphins, I think.

They're supposed to be far stronger than any ordinary drug.

Then, how good must it feel?

My pathetic brain can't even begin to imagine something better than this.

Oh, what should I do?

I'm starting to look forward to the moment I die.

"Heh, heheh..."

I must really be insane.

My life is utterly over.

Well, it was ruined from the start, so maybe this is for the best.

Either way, it's better than staying stagnant. Change, any change, is an improvement.

Yes, this is better.

If it were the usual me, I'd still be stuck in the same cycle of thoughts.

I'd convince myself I could do nothing, no matter what.

This is a thousand times better.

Oh, I wish I could stay intoxicated forever.

I knew drugs made you feel good, but...

This far exceeds my expectations, far surpassing even the hallucinogen I took last time.

"It's because I'm combining various types together.

I didn't spend days researching for nothing, you know?

To give you the ultimate experience, I needed a technique like this."

"Oh, I see—"

"Yes, hehe."

I only thought about it, yet I heard Ariana's answer.

Is she reading my mind? Or is this conversation just another delusion? Or maybe I'm speaking my thoughts out loud without realizing it?

I hope it's not the last one.

I don't want to look like an even crazier woman than I already do.

Calling a crazy woman crazy wounds her deeply, you know.

Really. Truly.

I gave Ariana a deep smile.

And then, I surrendered myself to the swirling vortex that once again roiled inside my head.

The vortex spun counterclockwise, grinding my brain like a blender.

Surrendering to such a blender meant accepting that the pieces of my scattered thoughts might escape through my lips.

I hate you.

I've hated you from the first moment we met, without change.

You did, didn't you?

I like you.

I've liked you since the first moment I saw your face.

That's a bit surprising.

I wanted to befriend you.

Forget about family positions; I wanted us to be friends.

Like I was with Hans.

What a coincidence. I thought the same.

But it was impossible.

A princess can't have normal friends.

Hans was just an exception.

Is that how you see it?

Yes, we parted after ruining everything.

In the end, we had the worst possible parting.

It was the worst, wasn't it?

Yes, at the Academy.

We became master and dog.

Master and dog... That wasn't my intention.

If not, there's no better way to explain it.

Well, maybe it's lacking.

You were my last hope in life, the one thing that kept me going.

...What?

"Yes. I think I wouldn't mind dying now."

The princess, 'I,' or whatever else—ultimately, I've let it all go.

Now, I'm simply alive because I exist.

"Wait. What do you mean?"

Huh.

Is it you of all people reacting that way?

That's hypocrisy if I've ever seen it.

"No, there are still plenty of other solutions left! Why are you already thinking about death? It wasn't even that—"

"Shut up."

Because of you.

You have no idea how much I...

...If only I hadn't...

...Let go.

A long time ago.

I would've ended it.

I would've killed myself.

Since Hans.

From that time.

The princess was already...

After that,

The organization...

It hurts, but...

You.

“No... I didn't know. I didn't know anything.”

“Wait. What do you mean? Tell me more—”

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Ah.

Shi—

Damn.

It felt.

So.

Good.

And

Now.

I'm.

Screwed.

I woke up clutching my head.

A horrible headache echoed through my skull, as though my eyeballs might pop out if I stayed still.

Right after the headache came a wave of nausea, like I might vomit everything inside me.

The sensation felt oddly familiar. I traced my memory and realized it was similar to a hangover.

Though, incomparable in intensity.

...I didn't want to revisit reality like this.

“Are you awake? Here, water.”

Hearing Ariana's voice beside me, I drank the water she offered, slowly regaining my senses.

Finally, I realized Ariana was nearby, but the lights were off, so I couldn't tell where I was.

Hiding my growing unease, I cautiously asked:

“...Where is this?”

“Where else? My room.”

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, my surroundings slowly came into view.

I was lying on Ariana’s bed, right next to her.

Both of us were in nothing but our underwear.

Wait.

What exactly happened?

As I became more aware of my situation, fragments of what happened before I blacked out started surfacing.

Ah, right.

The drug.

It felt incredible.

Incredible, incredible, so incredible.

Ah.

The memories of how good it felt drowned out the details.

I think I did something with Ariana, or maybe we talked.

But my thoughts kept drifting back, wanting to feel that pleasure again.

Is this what the drug does?

It’s terrifying how quickly it can ruin someone.

If I’m already craving it, I probably won’t take long to fall apart completely.

Sorry, princess.

Ever since I came into your life, I’ve done everything bad for you.

What’s next? I’m almost looking forward to it.

Maybe I’ll end up being assaulted.

Oh, that might be fun in its own way.

Should I tease myself a bit, warming up with my fingers? Haha.

While I was trying to sort out my jumbled thoughts, Ariana, who had been watching me with a sunken gaze, spoke.

“You can leave if you want, or you can stay and sleep.”

Staying might be better, though. It's late, and if the guards catch you, you'll get penalized."

"Can I really go?"

"Yes. It doesn't matter to me. You've already done everything you wanted. From now on, I don't have to worry about you; you'll come back on your own." That's true.

Once I've tasted it, there's no going back to not knowing the sensation.

It hit me, the realization that my life had hit rock bottom, yet oddly, I didn't feel bad about it.

Maybe it's because I'm not in pain right now.

But I know this relief is only temporary.

Thinking about the withdrawal symptoms and the suffering to come should terrify me.

Maybe my mind is so scattered, so overwhelmed, that the part responsible for feeling and managing emotions is broken.

I'm insane.

I've always been, but now I'm more so.

The life of the princess has always been a journey of insanity, anyway.

Really. The further I go, the more amusing it seems.

They say tragedy is comedy from a distance.

Even losing my sense of reality doesn't seem so bad now.

I chuckled softly and rolled over to face the ceiling.

"Then I'll stay. Thanks."

"You don't have to thank me.

It's something I ought to do."

I was about to close my eyes, but Ariana's gaze unsettled me.

Her words carried a strange weight, and the emotions in her eyes felt out of place.

It seemed I'd said something while I was high.

I had too many thoughts bottled up to know what it might have been.

...I don't know.

Does it even matter anymore?

Even if you start caring about me now, it's meaningless.

The point of no return was crossed long ago.

You knew everything yet pretended not to.

You just put on a mask, acting as if nothing was wrong.

From the moment we reunited, it was already too late for us.

With that thought, I closed my eyes.

My body, weighed down with fatigue, soon surrendered to sleep.

That night, I dreamt of my childhood again.

As always, Hans, Raymond, and Christina were there, but this time, there was an unfamiliar face among them.

I couldn't recognize who it was.

And I didn't want to.

Chapter 22

From my earliest memory, my life was already stained with blood.

While girls my age were learning etiquette or tea ceremonies, I was in my father's workshop studying more effective methods of torture.

My first kill was when I was six years old.

A boy a couple of years older than me.

I twisted three of his fingers, and he foamed at the mouth before collapsing dead.

What a fragile little thing, I thought, but my father kindly explained the concept of death by shock.

Anyway, since he was the first person whose life I took, I remember his face vividly.

The first time always leaves a deep impression.

Of course, it's not only the first time that I remember.

I recall the second and third too.

Oh, the fourth one lingers faintly in my memory as well.

After that, I've forgotten them all, but I'd ask not to be blamed.

Back then, I was less skilled and killed more people than I do now.

Practically every day, using various methods.

When they came at me in numbers, I didn't have the luxury to focus on each one individually.

Watching me stain my hands with blood day after day, my father worried that I might develop some kind of trauma.

After all, this would become my livelihood, and it would be troublesome if I grew bad memories from a young age.

At the time, I did cry and suffer sleepless nights.

Thankfully—or perhaps not—I no longer feel anything now.

Maybe I deceived others so thoroughly that I fooled myself, or maybe my emotions simply crumbled and dulled over time.

It doesn't matter either way.

What's important is that I've grown accustomed to it.

My attitude toward life followed a similar pattern.

Though my life was anything but ordinary, I never resented anyone or anything, even as I endured everything alone.

After all, I am a noble.

One of the blue-blooded rulers who stand atop the empire's pyramid, with millions of commoners underfoot.

Even if we descend from lowly slaves, we are nobles because we fulfill the duties given to us.

Our privileges are a reward for offering our talents to His Majesty the Emperor.

Complaining is for those who've never even been granted an opportunity.

Whenever I experimented on commoners brought in as test subjects, those thoughts only grew stronger.

I'm truly fortunate, I'd think.

When I turned ten, I visited the Adelian Duchy with my father for the first time.

I knew our family served the Adelians, but that day was my first time seeing them in person.

As one of the “Four Great Houses,” their grandeur and majesty made it impossible to look away.

It felt surreal that our family was part of a faction led by such an extraordinary house.

To me, the Warton family honestly didn’t seem noble at all.

That must’ve been why I was so tense.

As a child, I feared that a mistake of mine might earn the disfavor of someone so esteemed.

Naive, childish thoughts.

As if anyone would take notice of the second daughter of a house like Warton.

But tension wasn’t the only thing I felt.

The strongest emotion, I think, was inferiority.

The princess’ birthday banquet we attended was a massive gathering of nobles.

I didn’t want to be the subject of ridicule for not even knowing proper etiquette.

But objectively, I knew I was lacking compared to girls my age.

So, as I resolved to focus and not embarrass myself, a thought crossed my mind.

The princess was said to be my age.

If I could befriend her, it might give me an advantage over others as we grew older.

I’ll cling to her, no matter what it takes, and forge a connection.

With this determination, I decided to make this effort for my family’s future.

And then, when I first met Remia Adelian—

“Hello...”

“...Beautiful.”

“...Huh?”

She was stunning.

I couldn't think of anything else.

Eyes as clear as jade, a perfectly sculpted nose, lips soft and red as pomegranates.

Hair so fine it seemed it might dissolve at a touch, and a face carved to perfection.

Her shy demeanor, her tiny hands fidgeting nervously...

Even at her young age, her figure showed promise. Her pale skin tinged faintly with pink...

Could someone so lovely truly exist?

I couldn't look away. She was too beautiful.

The silence stretched on until the Duke himself grew curious. But I remained entranced, staring blankly at the princess' face.

Honestly, at that moment—

“...Ah, I misspoke.

I'm Ariana Warton, Princess!”

“Oh... okay...”

“I am part of the Warton family, who serve you loyally.

Whatever you need, please just say the word!”

“Ah...? Oh... uh...”

—I fell for her.

At first sight.

It wasn't a feeling of affection.

I may have been young, but with my knowledge of torture and anatomy, I understood what it was.

What I wanted to share with her was physical love.

To kiss her, touch her, and engage in sexual intimacy—it was the feeling of desire.

Not that I was some lust-driven child.

It was simply that this was the only form of love I knew.

Having been trained extensively in torture, I had no education on how to function as a normal human.

I wish my first love had been purer, but it was doomed from the start.

Regardless, I felt my heart race with this new emotion.

And then, it sank just as quickly.

Not because my feelings for the princess faded, but because I realized it was a love that could never be fulfilled.

There were too many obstacles: our difference in status, among other things.

...Even putting that aside, loving another woman?

That was strange.

I'd never liked a man before, but I assumed that was just because I was young. I never imagined I might be a homosexual.

It was shocking and a bit disheartening.

A lifetime of unrequited love seemed so bleak.

I wished I could be normal.

I wanted to love like everyone else.

I even tried to deceive my feelings, just as I'd deceived others with my masks.

But it was impossible.

No matter how hard I suppressed it, seeing the princess' face reignited the flames.

As puberty set in and my encounters with the princess became more frequent, I realized this couldn't go on.

Now, it wasn't just her appearance—it was everything about Remia herself that I adored.

The more I learned about her, the deeper my feelings grew.

I couldn't contain them.

I worried that one day, I might act impulsively and ruin not just myself, but my entire family.

It wasn't a joke—every time I met her, it felt like my brain was breaking.

When I caught myself debating whether to just go for it and take her, I knew I was in real trouble.

In the end, I gave up on suppressing my emotions and decided to redirect them.

I would become her devoted follower.

If I couldn't stand by her as a lover, I'd at least become someone she could rely on, serving her faithfully for life.

It was an extension of the mask I'd painstakingly crafted over the years.

Emotions are fluid, after all, and even a slight redirection can change their entire nature.

"Ariana."

"Yes, Princess?"

"Will you hold my hand?"

"...I think it's time I refrain from such actions."

"Really?"

"...Is that okay?"

"Hm? Of course."

But truthfully—

I didn't want to be apart from you for even a moment.

Seeing you accept things so easily, I clutched my chest in secret.

I couldn't help it.

I harbored feelings for you, and without doing something—anything—I couldn't control myself.

Just the fact that I could stay by your side had to be enough for me.

Even when you slowly opened your heart to Hans Decardi,

I always watched from a step behind, and that alone was satisfying.

No, to be honest,

when I realized the feelings you held for Decardi, it hurt.

It hurt enough that I spent a long time crying under the covers, worrying my family, locking myself in my room without saying a word, until it took me three days to finally pull myself together enough to pretend I was okay in front of others.

...Looking back, it must've hurt a lot.

I didn't even have any hope to begin with, yet I acted like I'd been rejected outright. What a ridiculous display.

Still, for me, it was as inevitable as a natural disaster.

You asked me what those feelings you had for Decardi were.

That was when I learned how vile it feels to give love advice to the person you're secretly in love with.

It had been nearly five years since I last struggled this hard to maintain my composure, even with the mask I had painstakingly crafted to perfection, one that no longer cracked or fell apart.

And that wasn't the end of it.

From that moment on, every single consultation about Decardi was mine to handle.

I can't count how many times I thought about giving up—on being your follower, on everything.

When you, without hesitation or thought, climbed into the same bed as me, unguarded because we were the same gender, I even wondered if you were deliberately trying to tempt me.

But still, I endured.

I never once let it show, and in the end, you never found out.

...Can you understand even a fraction of how hard it was for me?

So,

since you hurt me so deeply,

the least you could've done was be with Decardi, raise beautiful children, and live a peaceful life together.

For someone filthy like me, just seeing you happy would've been enough.

I wished for someone as pure as you to at least find happiness.

Chapter 23

"So, treason... you say."

"Yes. The official justification for the Adelian purge announced by the Imperial Family is treason."

“What about the princess? What happened to her?”

“They say she’s gone missing. She’s being pursued, so she probably won’t die peacefully.”

“.....”

How could it come to this?

If there is a god, this shouldn’t be allowed to happen.

The fall of Duke Adelian and his treason.

Remia Adelian, status unknown—possibly dead.

All I did was spend a normal day and go to sleep, yet when I woke up, everything around me had drastically changed.

To be honest, it didn’t feel real.

Even the thought that you might be dead didn’t bring me to tears.

And yet, when I was by your side, I shed so many of them.

I decided it couldn’t be helped.

When reality is shoved in your face without giving you any time to adjust, all someone like me can do is pretend to accept it and nod along.

Even if I were to get angry, grieve, or despair—what could I do?

I wouldn’t go combing through the lands that used to be the Adelian Duchy by myself, without a single retainer.

If I can’t do anything anyway, it’s better not to stir my emotions in the first place.

Telling myself that I hadn’t lost the ability to feel, but rather had chosen to set my emotions aside, was the only way to cope.

...And then, as if this were some cruel joke by the gods, I heard that the one who betrayed the Adelians was none other than Hans Decardi.

For just a moment, my heart seized.

A voice whispered to me: You should’ve killed him.

“This isn’t the time to concern yourself with such things, Ariana.

If you’re not careful, we could end up the same way.”

“...But didn’t Sister join Duke Kayan’s faction?”

“That alone won’t be enough.

We only secured our position in Adelian through years of building results.

The only reason we were recognized was because of our usefulness, and now we’ll have to prove it tenfold to survive.”

After the initial shock came the crushing weight of reality.

The Warton family—parasites.

Fake nobles who mask their lowly bloodline with competence. What happens to such people when they lose their host?

The answer is obvious.

They all get dragged down and killed together.

The only reason I managed to leave the mansion unscathed that day, even while utterly clueless, was because of my sister’s resourcefulness.

She realized something was amiss with Adelian and aligned us with Kayan, their opposing faction. That insight saved our lives.

Meanwhile, I was fast asleep, oblivious to everything happening around me.

Now, all I can do is laugh bitterly.

I let myself be deceived by praise, thinking I might truly be talented.

But I’m just pretending, aren’t I?

All I did was slap a poorly crafted mask over my flaws and convince myself that I’d changed—that I could finally carry my own weight.

In the end, I achieved nothing, letting everything slip through my fingers.

I can’t even begin to imagine how pathetic I must’ve looked to others.

My sister—

If it had been her—

If she had been the one—

She would’ve been different.

She could’ve saved the princess.

“...I’m the one who has to do it.”

The fact that they sought out someone as incompetent as me instead of my sister meant they expected something of me.

I respected my father, but objectively, he was a calculating man.

...Even when it came to family, he was fair.

“Yes. Your sister can’t act in the field right now, so you’ll have to do it.

Duke Kayan has a privately run organization. Join them and get involved in any operation where nobles can participate.”

If it’s an organization run personally by Duke Kayan, there’s only one possibility.

I’d heard of it in passing.

A colossal force operating in the shadows, closely tied to the Imperial Guard.

The bright empire’s dark underbelly.

A deep abyss no one in the light should ever approach.

My only connection with them had been when I procured large quantities of drugs and test subjects.

Over the years, most shady organizations capable of such dealings had been absorbed into them.

That’s the kind of labyrinth it was.

The internal environment wouldn’t be much better, I was sure.

Sending his daughter to such a place—it was clear the moment I heard the suggestion.

Ah, this is a discard play.

“They said three years. If you can endure for just three years, they’ll pull you out to a safer position.

I know it’s confusing and unpleasant, but there’s no other—”

“I’ll do it, Father. Don’t worry.”

“...So be it.”

Not bring you back, but pull you to the rear.

Ah, so I’m just another tool to be used.

The clarity made it easier to accept.

I preferred this to false hope.

“...I’m sorry to burden you. As your father, it shames me to leave everything to you.

For the sake of everyone tied to the Warton name, sacrifice yourself.

That is the duty of those of us who have claimed the name of nobles and enjoyed its privileges until now.”

You’re long-winded, Father.

There’s no need for such words—I understand it all perfectly.

My sister is the heir.

You can’t entrust her with dangerous tasks like this.

A second daughter who’s neither here nor there—a burden—is the perfect choice for something like this.

I’d have made the same decision. I understand.

So, please, don’t make that face.

Don’t wear such a clumsy, crude mask.

You’re much more dignified than that.

You’re the “real thing,” unlike someone like me.

Please, remain the father I respect.

“I understand. I’ll leave immediately, then.”

“...Alright.”

“Give my regards to Sister. She’ll have a hard time—I know how much she hates tedious things.”

I turned away before he could respond.

Even as I left the room, my father didn’t stop me.

I exchanged farewells with my family a few more times during the preparation period, but I remember none of them.

I couldn’t even meet my sister’s gaze, so perhaps I found them unworthy of remembering.

All I recall is crying a lot in the carriage as I left.

I don’t know why I cried.

Was it because of the princess, delayed grief finally surfacing?

Was I secretly bitter toward my family?

Or did I just not want to go?

...It didn't matter. I wasn't curious enough to dwell on it.

The organization, contrary to my expectations, was surprisingly well-structured.

I had assumed it would be a hellscape where murder and assault were commonplace, but instead, it was a collective of compartmentalized cells that loyally followed a solid chain of command.

As such, the tasks assigned to me were quite limited.

For the first year, which served as my adaptation period, I was stationed in a branch office, where my job was to torture the living beings brought in.

It wasn't much different from my time with the Warton family.

The worst that happened was occasionally dealing with particularly unruly captives, resulting in a few more injuries than usual.

It was a mechanical process of extracting the desired information through torture.

In the latter half of my time there, my magical abilities were utilized, and I was deployed on combat-related assignments.

Even though I gained experience, those memories were far from pleasant.

Time passed, and as my third year approached its end, the branch chief of my division summoned me.

Alberto Kayan.

The third son of Duke Kayan.

A prodigy in magic who, despite his young age, held a professor's position at the academy.

He was a soft-spoken superior, always dressed in a sharp suit and monocle, which had become his trademark.

When I heard someone of his stature had specifically requested me, I was nervous, but the task he proposed didn't seem all that dangerous.

"An assignment... at the academy?"

“Yes. Watch someone, and if they show any unusual behavior, torture them. Make it painful. So much so that they’ll never dare resist us again. The more thorough, the better.”

“Is there a reason we need to torture them? If they’re disobedient, we could just—”

“They have potential for long-term use, so we can’t kill them.

And the academy’s internal regulations make external interference difficult.

However, they tend to overlook disputes among students.”

“...In that case, I’m the perfect fit, aren’t I?”

“Exactly. That’s what I appreciate about you, Ariana—you’re quick to understand.”

“Who’s the target?”

“Ah, yes. Let me show you.

You’re probably already acquainted with them.”

Alberto pulled a photograph from his desk drawer.

The face was thinner and frailer than I remembered, but the beauty was unmistakable.

It was you.

“Remia Adelian.

A familiar name, isn’t it?”

“...Ah.”

After three years, I was reunited with you.

I should’ve been overjoyed, but I couldn’t be.

Because my task was to torture you.

Why now?

Why under these circumstances?

...Please, just give me a break.

What followed was all too predictable.

I reunited with you in the worst possible way, committing unspeakable sins against you.

I justified it to myself with excuses, over and over again.

The safety of my entire family depended on it, so I had no choice.

It's just a relic of the past, so it doesn't matter anymore.

I'm helping you avoid being killed by the organization, so it's okay.

You're strong; you won't die from this.

Excuses like those.

Even when I saw you on the brink of choosing death, all I did was remove the commoners from the equation. I took no further action.

I knew full well that I was trying to hold onto both you and my family, even as everything slipped through my grasp. But I couldn't let go of either.

That all shattered when Alberto ordered me to administer drugs to you in a secluded space.

Under the influence of the drug, you began muttering incoherently, and from your words, I learned the truth.

I saw how your unstable mind had split and been driven to its breaking point.

I was forced to confront the messy, clinging feelings I had for you once again.

And I realized that most of my excuses were nothing but illusions.

Sitting by your side as you lay collapsed and exhausted, I stared blankly for a long time before finally letting go of one of the things I'd been clinging to.

I let go of my family. I let go of Warton.

I decided to betray the organization.

After all the times I had forcibly turned my eyes away from reality, my change of heart came in an instant.

I had already crossed a river I could never return from.

I couldn't go back to the way things were or hope for forgiveness anymore.

Knowing it was too late, I still regretted it.

Why am I always like this?

Chapter 24

The next morning.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was already up.

I turned my head, feeling the emptiness beside me, only to find the space vacant.

From the direction of the wardrobe, I could hear the soft sound of Ariana's footsteps, as though she was trying not to wake me.

It seems I overslept.

I often stay up all night in my own room because I can't fall asleep, yet I managed to sleep soundly in Ariana's room.

Although my dreams were slightly unsettling, that wasn't anything new for me.

Perhaps the negative impression I'd built up toward her crumbled completely in just one day.

Oddly enough, I found her space to be inexplicably comforting.

"Hmmp..."

I stretched lightly as I sat up.

The sensation of my stiff muscles loosening and blood beginning to circulate felt oddly pleasant.

A faint groan escaped my lips.

Ariana, who had been fastening the buttons of her shirt in front of the mirror, noticed me stirring and quickly finished before approaching.

"Good morning."

"...Oh, uh, yes. Good morning."

I froze for a moment, caught off guard by her sudden greeting.

It had already been unusual for her to invite me to stay the night, but I chalked it up to the late hour.

I didn't expect the same atmosphere to carry over into the morning.

Apparently, it wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment thing.

Taking a step closer, she continued.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"If you're experiencing any side effects, let me know. I can treat you."

“No, I’m fine. Perfectly fine, uh—”

“You seem like the type to endure pain without saying anything.

Excuse me, but I’ll check just to be sure.”

With a swift but deliberate touch, Ariana’s hands began probing every part of my body.

If you know it’s intrusive, don’t do it.

I felt an unpleasant, crawling sensation, as if bugs were skittering up my nerves, and I tried to swat her hands away.

Of course, with my strength, I couldn’t even push her back, let alone stop her.

Once again, all I could do was try reasoning with her—something I’d never seen anyone actually take seriously.

It was an utterly futile resistance, one I repeated only because I didn’t know how to stop.

Just as before, my voice drifted aimlessly into the air.

“I’m really fine, so stop touching me.”

“.....”

“I said I’m fine. I’m okay.”

“.....”

“I said no, didn’t I? Stop it, I told you.”

“.....”

“Stop.”

“.....”

“Please... just listen.”

“.....”

“For god’s sake, please, please, please! Enough already!

I’m telling you to stop, aren’t I? How many times do I have to say it!?

Why does no one ever listen to a word I say!?”

“There’s only a little left.”

“...Ha, haha.”

Normally, I would've kept my reactions in check because of the princess, but today, for some reason, my emotions felt particularly raw.

It was almost as if the princess and I were sharing the same feelings.

In the end, I couldn't hold back.

For the first time since this body became mine, I shouted.

I foolishly hoped that maybe things would change, even just a little.

But of course, all I got in return was a few curt, businesslike remarks.

I laughed bitterly without realizing it.

After that, I stopped talking altogether.

Fine. This is always how it ends.

No matter what I do, no matter what I think, whether the other person has goodwill or ill intentions,

my so-called free will doesn't exist.

It's not even a joke—I really might be a puppet.

Every time someone treats me like this, it feels like I'm inching closer to something worse than death.

"There don't seem to be any major issues."

"...I see. That's a relief."

"I've washed your uniform.

Can you dress yourself?"

"Yes."

"I'll help you put it on."

"....."

What am I even talking to right now?

The air?

I don't know.

But one of us isn't human, that's for sure.

After her probing hands withdrew, they were quickly replaced by hands holding my uniform.

The fabric of my uniform, pristine and white, began to layer over my bare skin.

Though I let my body go limp, Ariana dressed me with practiced ease.

She spread my arms, slipped them into sleeves, and fastened the buttons.

She guided my head through the collar, adjusted the neckline, and slipped on the skirt.

She moved me as if I were a doll, and before long, I was dressed more neatly than I could've managed myself.

"All done. There's nothing uncomfortable, is there?"

"....."

"In that case, I'll brush your hair."

As if there wasn't a moment to waste, the hand holding the comb approached without hesitation.

The comb slid gently through my hair, smoothing out the tangles.

Despite its stark white color, reminiscent of an old man's hair, my hair glided like freshly woven silk under her meticulous care.

Even though I hadn't washed it, the areas the comb passed over appeared moist and glossy, as if touched by water.

She must have used some kind of magic.

How convenient.

The magic I can't use always seems useful.

No, it's the opposite.

The things I can use are just useless.

I already know that; no need to rub it in.

Still, facts need to be clarified when it comes to such things.

What a nuisance.

"All right. Next is..."

Even after setting the comb down, Ariana didn't seem to think her task was done.

She must have decided to do everything she possibly could for me.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, the nausea I'd been suppressing reached its peak.

It felt as though I might actually vomit everything right there.

Desperate, I called out her name.

Thankfully, this time, she responded.

"Ariana."

"Yes, I'm here."

"Could you stop now?"

I don't know what you heard yesterday, but please treat it all as the ramblings of a madwoman. Please."

"I can't, Princess."

"...It's too much. I can't handle this. I'm going to fall apart."

"I'm sorry. But it'll be fine.

Soon, you'll get used to it."

"...There's no way that's true."

"It will be, I promise."

"....."

I lowered my head to hide the tears that were threatening to spill.

No, they were already blurring my vision.

I shut my eyes tightly, trying to stop them from falling.

If I didn't, she'd probably try to wipe them away, wouldn't she?

And if that happened, I might really collapse, spilling out everything inside me before fainting.

No matter what, I couldn't let her see me like that.

She'd undoubtedly take it as an opportunity to get even closer.

I swallowed back my tears and the ragged breaths that came with them, forcing them down into my throat.

Fortunately, Ariana didn't seem to notice anything, continuing to touch around my hair.

I guess that's a relief.

“.....”

“.....”

Even though I stayed completely silent, the strange atmosphere persisted.

The distance between us and even her tone felt awkward.

It wasn't just me who was off—she seemed just as out of sorts.

We're not supposed to have this kind of relationship.

I'm the victim, and you're the perpetrator.

If you weren't hiding behind a particularly thick mask, your conscience alone should stop you from acting like this.

If you'd just kept tormenting me the way you used to, this wouldn't be so hard.

I was even starting to feel a faint sense of familiarity toward you.

I don't know anymore.

I've never been the perpetrator before.

Ever since coming here, I've always been the absolute weakling.

I can't begin to understand how they think.

“...It's done.

I'd love to do more, but any more, and we'll be late. Shall we go?”

Her voice, signaling the end, brought me back to reality, and I opened my eyes.

A single tear had escaped down my cheek, but I quickly wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Thankfully, it didn't lead to a flood of tears.

I've cried a lot recently.

Maybe I'm starting to dry out.

“Princess, give me your hand.”

Ariana reached out to me.

I stared at her for a moment before placing my hand in hers.

As if waiting for this, she pulled me up with a gentle yet steady tug.

She held onto me, keeping me steady as my trembling legs found their footing.

Her unnecessary attentiveness only added to my torment.

She's not going to save me anyway.

People don't change overnight.

"...Hypocrite."

I never thought you'd turn into this.

I muttered softly as I let go of her arm.

Whether she didn't hear it or simply pretended not to, Ariana began walking toward the door without reacting.

Either way, it didn't matter.

Whether she ignored me or didn't notice, it was clear she had no intention of changing this relationship.

I stood there for a moment before finally following her out of the room.

The mood that had been fine when I woke up had plummeted to rock bottom by now.

I should've just gone back to my own room last night.

At least then I wouldn't have known about this situation until morning.

All that remained in my mind was regret, swirling endlessly.

Despite my foul mood, I figured being with Ariana might at least help me avoid running into anyone else.

That hope was dashed less than a minute after we started walking.

From the other end of the hallway, an all-too-familiar voice called out to me.

Turning my head, I saw a girl looking my way, her expression worn compared to before.

The girl—Sena—ran toward me and grabbed my shoulders.

"Princess!"

"...Sena?"

"Where on earth have you been!?"

You left in the middle of class and didn't return to your room all night! We were worried sick!

The maids and I searched everywhere, but you were nowhere to be found, so I was so, so...!"

As she continued her tirade, Sena suddenly trailed off, her gaze landing on Ariana, who was standing beside me.

"Ariana Warton...?"

"...Princess. Who is this girl?"

Sena, knowing what I'd been through, seemed to recognize Ariana as well.

Ariana, on the other hand, apparently didn't know Sena, as she lightly tugged on my sleeve.

It was clear that neither of them was happy about this encounter.

I had a bad feeling that things were about to get complicated.

"...This is driving me crazy."

In my head, something snapped.

Please, just stop.

I'm at my limit.

Chapter 25

"Why... why are you by the princess' side?"

"Well, because we spent the night together.

And you, who might you be to ask such a question?"

While I clutched my throbbing forehead, the two of them began exchanging words, their eyes locked in mutual distrust.

Sena didn't answer Ariana's question and instead turned her attention to me.

It was exactly the kind of development I expected.

"Spent... the night? ...Princess."

To be honest, I wanted to ignore her.

But I couldn't dismiss the concern and doubt on her face—not after everything I'd received from Sena, whether I'd wanted it or not.

After hesitating for a moment, I chose to respond to Sena before addressing Ariana's earlier question.

"...Yes, did you call for me?"

"Did you really stay in Warton's room last night?"

It was true, so I nodded.

After all, I had been there.

Ariana, visibly irritated, let out an exasperated sigh, likely annoyed by the repeated confirmations.

Sena's expression, which had been a mix of doubt and unease, shifted entirely to unease upon hearing my answer.

She probably thought something had happened to me.

And honestly, she wouldn't be wrong.

Something did happen.

I just happened to feel unnaturally good about it, probably thanks to the drug's peculiar effects.

It made me wonder if this was one of the so-called "benefits" of narcotics.

Oh, great, now I'm thinking about it again.

My head's going to be useless for a while.

Whenever this happens, my mind gets filled with nothing but thoughts of the drug.

Pressing my temple with my fingers, I felt a growing sense of discomfort, as though the inside of my skull was itching.

I wanted to claw it out.

Sena, seemingly alarmed by my gesture, hurriedly continued speaking.

"...Are you sure you're okay?"

No, of course not. Something must have happened to you. I should treat you—"

"You don't even answer me," Ariana interjected.

"So, Princess, who is this girl, exactly?"

Since Sena refused to answer her, Ariana decided to direct the question to me instead.

Now I had to expend twice the effort.

Couldn't they cut me some slack?

"Princess~?" Ariana elongated her words, urging me for a response.

I turned to her and began thinking about how to answer her question.

Who is Sena?

I tilted my head slightly, silently asking myself.

I knew the basics: Sena Blomberg, her name, her appearance, her status as Hans's friend. But defining the relationship between Sena and me—the part Ariana was probably most curious about—didn't yield any clear answers.

We weren't family, lovers, or enemies.

Friends? Definitely not.

Honestly, the closest description would be a master-servant relationship, but saying that outright would create a whole new set of problems.

So... an acquaintance?

That seemed appropriate. After all, it's a broad term that encompasses all types of human relationships.

Satisfied with my answer, I finally spoke.

"Sena Blomberg from the next class over.

She's... an acquaintance of mine."

"An acquaintance? Hmm..."

Ariana narrowed her eyes, her tone trailing off.

Though I'd given her an answer, it was clear she wasn't convinced.

She must have thought there was more to it.

And honestly, she wasn't wrong—Sena's behavior was excessive, given the nature of our relationship.

It was unreasonably clingy and persistent.

Even now, look at her.

Her hand is already glowing with a healing spell, reaching toward me.

I wasn't even planning to avoid her touch this time, resigned to letting her do what she wanted, when Ariana suddenly grabbed Sena's hand.

She wore her signature disarming smile, feigning innocence as if she didn't know what she was doing.

But it was clearly intentional.

For a brief moment, their eyes met, darting quickly between each other.

The tension between them escalated, shifting from caution to outright hostility.

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

"What else? Stopping an impudent subordinate from touching the princess, of course."

Sena frowned at Ariana's smirking response.

She tugged her hand several times, trying to free it, but failed each time.

Ariana showed no intention of letting her go or allowing her anywhere near me.

Eventually, Sena raised her voice, frustration boiling over.

"...Hah? You, of all people, have the nerve to say that?"

Who's the one touching the princess the most, without a shred of shame?

I was just trying to heal her, like always! Heal the wounds you left!"

With each word Sena shouted, her voice grew louder, echoing in my ears.

And with each sharp sound, the itch in my head intensified.

I wanted to flip my skull open and scratch it raw.

It was hard to tell whether it itched or hurt anymore.

Instead of pressing my temples, which might draw attention, I dug my nails into my wrist to distract myself.

The sensation of my nails biting into my skin was unpleasant, but it was surprisingly effective.

My mind felt a bit clearer.

Maybe the itch had been in my arm all along.

"Oh my, is that so? Truly a saint, aren't you!"

What should I do? Your halo might purify a villainess like me completely."

Ariana let out a light laugh at the end of her words, but her face quickly darkened into a stern expression.

The sudden shift in demeanor, sharp and contrasting, seemed to catch Sena off guard.

“But tell me, if you disliked seeing the princess get hurt so much, why didn’t you stop it in the first place?”

Someone as strong, virtuous, and intelligent as Lady Blomberg—why did you only ever treat wounds that had already been inflicted, repeating such meaningless acts?”

“I simply didn’t have the chance.

If you don’t catch them in the act, it’s all pointless anyway.”

“Hmm? But that’s not true, is it?”

You had plenty of chances to intervene, to catch them red-handed.

Ah, now I remember. I caught a glimpse of you back in the classroom that day.

You ignored it then—so why are you acting this way now? Did something suddenly ignite your emotions?”

“...That’s...”

Oh, that’s what she’d said before.

That she ‘saw’ me being hurt and became concerned.

So, does that mean she had the chance to step in but chose to ignore it?

But is that really such a terrible thing?

Most people would turn a blind eye if they saw someone they didn’t know being mistreated.

Back in that classroom, not a single person who wasn’t hostile toward me came to my aid.

Afterward, only Sena sought me out to offer help.

Objectively, Sena is kind.

At least her intentions are sincere.

So why is she so flustered now?

Her trembling pupils and faintly pale complexion reminded me of someone who had just been stabbed where it hurt most.

Ariana wasn’t the type to miss such an opportunity.

With a picture-perfect smile, she quickly continued speaking.

“I understand. You must have been worried about retaliation.

For a lowly baron’s family from the frontier, offending a count’s daughter would have been quite burdensome, wouldn’t it?

But if you were going to stay silent, you should’ve stayed that way. Why are you getting involved now? Did you lose your composure?”

Then, pulling Sena’s arm closer, she whispered into her ear.

I watched as Sena’s expression visibly soured.

“I know I’m not in a position to say this, but isn’t your behavior a bit... ambiguous?

It’s like you’re trying to advertise, ‘I’m a good person.’”

“That’s not true! I’ve been trying to help the princess ever since then.

I was just too startled at the time...”

“Oh~ Is that so? I see, I see.

Well, if that’s what you want, I suppose I should tell you something.”

Ariana’s playful tone filled me with an inexplicable sense of dread.

I released my left wrist, where I’d been gripping too tightly, and something began to drip.

I opened my mouth, but only heavy breaths escaped—no words came out.

I needed to stop this.

Whatever Ariana was about to say next was undoubtedly...

“It would be best if you stayed away from the princess from now on.

If you don’t... something terrible might happen to the rest of the Blomberg family.

I heard you’re close with them. What do you think they’d feel?”

“You...!”

Right, a threat.

When crushed under the weight of noble rank, resistance becomes impossible.

Sena’s complexion, already pale, turned ashen.

My mouth opened and closed repeatedly, but no sound came out.
Even if I had managed to speak, it wouldn't have changed anything.
What good is being called 'princess' now?
I'm no better than a commoner.
What could I possibly do in a dispute between noble families?
As helplessness set in, I lowered my gaze slightly.
A droplet of blood slid down my wrist and stained the rug beneath me.
When did it get like this?
After the first sting, it hadn't hurt much.
"Hmm? Why the silence? Isn't this what you were pushing me to say all along?
Ah, or were you really just that stupid? Ahahaha!"
Ariana's mocking laughter echoed through the empty hallway.
As the atmosphere grew increasingly hostile, something hard pressed against my back.
Startled, I turned to see it was a wall.
I must have been backing away without realizing it.
With a sigh, I sank fully against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor.
Honestly, I couldn't stand any longer.
Even though I hadn't done much, my strength had completely left me.
From where I sat, I looked up at the two of them.
They were still glaring at each other, entirely ignoring me.
In truth, my presence in this conversation was irrelevant.
Even though I was the topic, my opinions weren't considered.
No one even noticed I was bleeding.
Listening to their words, you'd think they'd solve any problem that arose for my sake.
What am I to them?
A decorative doll?

A trophy to prove their righteousness?

A fragile glass ornament?

Whatever it is, I doubt they see me as an equal human being.

I probably seem more like a pet.

“What are you standing there for? Get lost.”

“.....”

Ariana, her mocking tone suddenly gone, spoke sharply, and Sena, despite biting her lip in frustration, turned and walked away.

A maid, who had apparently been listening nearby, suddenly appeared and hurried after Sena.

Oh, that maid.

She must have been the one helping Sena look for me.

I guess Ariana’s warning wasn’t just for Sena but extended to anyone who tried to approach me.

Unwilling as I was, the only person who showed me kindness was now gone.

Should I feel sad about this? Relieved?

I don’t know.

Either way, I felt a little depressed.

I brought my hand to my left wrist again.

Using my nails, I pressed into the deep marks that had already formed, digging further.

A sharp pain surged through me, and a faint groan escaped my lips.

But the effect was immediate—the cloud of melancholy began to lift.

Stimuli that don’t kill me paralyze my mind and relax my body.

I must have been through too much recently.

I’ve grown so numb that only something this extreme registers anymore.

The scattered cuts on my wrist now formed a long, continuous line, as if drawn with a knife.

It really does look like I slit my wrist.

Not that I’ve gone that far yet.

Still, what if someone misunderstands? Heh.