

PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

Chapter 3: Judgment

Just a single word.

Something anyone could have said, yet the effect was undeniable.

Not only I but the group surrounding me froze in response to her words.

Her tone, gentle yet commanding, carried the weight of noble authority.

Golden hair, taller than average, a face radiating confidence—

I recognized her. Not from my memories, but the noblewoman's.

She stopped us all with just one word, then approached me with graceful steps.

Even the group, which had so tightly encircled me, parted to make way for her.

A ridiculous sight.

Those who harbored such animosity toward nobles were utterly submissive in the presence of a “powerful” one.

“Lady Adelian, I wonder if you still remember me?”

“Ariana Warton... That's right. I remember.”

“Oh my, what a relief! I was worried you might have forgotten.”

Ariana Warton.

The second daughter of the Warton Count family.

Their rise to prominence had been marked by opportunism, catching the Emperor's favor despite their humble beginnings.

Though they held a title and matching competence, their lineage often subjected them to scorn, leading them to leech off the reputations of old aristocratic families.

For years, their host had been the Adelian family.

The noblewoman had known Ariana, who was of a similar age.

Back then, Ariana had acted so subserviently.

Even the socially awkward noblewoman had considered her comfortable company.

Ariana had always stayed by her side, tending to her needs.

Yes, a follower. She had been my follower.

For a family of a duke's stature, it wasn't uncommon to have admirers and hangers-on.

The same was true for other high-ranking nobles.

It was their survival strategy, so there was no reason to begrudge them for it.

But I could never adjust to the way they scavenged the remains of their fallen masters.

Just like now.

"When I heard that your once-proud family had fallen, I can't tell you how shocked I was.

And when news of your disappearance spread, I was so worried I could hardly sleep!"

Her words carried mockery rather than concern.

Her exaggerated gestures made her contempt for someone who had once been far above her but now lay beneath her feet all too clear.

"But something doesn't quite add up.

I heard the rebels fled the Empire, yet here you are, Lady Adelian.

Ah, you must have been abandoned! How pitiful."

"....."

"Honestly, it might be for the best.

Your family never knew their place and reached for more than they deserved.

At least being abandoned spared you from worse fates.

It's so much sadder when cruelty comes from one's own parents, don't you think?"

"...Ah."

“If I were in your position, I’d want to die. Ugh, just the thought of it is dreadful. Thankfully, it doesn’t seem like you ended up sold off to some brothel to work as a prostitute!”

Her taunts struck deeply.

She aimed directly at the most sensitive topic: the noblewoman’s parents.

The ones I simultaneously hated and loved.

I thought I’d buried those emotions.

But hearing her words, close enough to the truth, stirred something within me.

Before I knew it, I was glaring at her, my eyes wide with anger.

“Oh my, what’s with that look? Are you angry?”

But that was as far as I could go.

I couldn’t resist.

The balance of power was skewed from the start.

A frail and broken noblewoman with nothing left but a shattered body.

The best I could manage was to raise my delicate, trembling hand and slap that smirking face.

And even if I did, I’d only be stomped by the dozens of people surrounding me.

...No, I was just making excuses.

In the end, I’d resigned myself before even trying.

Pathetically weak—that’s what this mindset was.

A survival strategy I once despised but now relied on.

“No... I’m not angry. If it seemed that way, I apologize.”

“Wow, you’ve really changed. Shall we try it again?”

“...I’m sorry.”

“Have you never apologized before? You’re doing it wrong. Bow your head lower. And get on your knees.”

Slowly, I slid off my chair and knelt on the ground.

I bowed deeply until my forehead nearly touched the floor, then spoke again.

“I’m sorry.”

“Good! Now, what exactly are you apologizing for?”

“For reacting in a way that could be taken negatively toward your words.

...Even though they’re probably true.”

“That’s right. Your parents were rebels who committed unforgivable crimes.

As a loyal subject of the Empire, shouldn’t you do something before dismissing my words?

After all, you inherited their dirty blood. At the very least, you should prove your soul isn’t tainted.”

Did she want me to denounce my parents with my own mouth?

It wasn’t a particularly difficult request.

They abandoned me, so why shouldn’t I?

If anything, I was eager to curse them myself.

“.....”

At least, that’s what I thought.

So why couldn’t I bring myself to speak?

“Why so quiet?”

“.....I... can’t.”

“Ha, well, if it’s too hard, you can just quit.”

Ah, I’ve ruined everything.

My lingering attachments made me ruin it all.

Biting my lip hard, I tried to suppress the emotion rising within me, unsure if it was directed at her or myself.

Ariana leaned in closer with an exaggerated gesture, a mocking smile playing on her lips.

“Come to think of it, I did prepare something for our poor Lady Adelian.”

I knew what was coming.

She hadn’t approached me just to mock me with words.

Her presence here at the scene of intended violence meant she was prepared to do the same.

She smiled faintly, her expression steeped in malice.

“Ah, why don’t you ask me what it is? It’ll be more satisfying that way.”

“...What is it?”

“Lady Adelian, as you may know, one of our family’s specialties is torture.

They say the best way to overcome sorrow is through greater pain—it’s incredibly effective.

And since I’d love to see you crawling at my feet—oops, I mean writhing on the ground—we both win!”

Twisted logic.

Not that she intended to convince me of anything.

This was all theater, a grotesque performance designed to humiliate me and instill fear.

Her unnecessarily roundabout noble speech was crafted to make me lower my gaze and tremble in terror.

Unfortunately, it worked perfectly.

Flashes of the Warton family’s tortures, which I had glimpsed over shoulders in the past, flickered in my mind like vivid memories.

My body, anticipating what was to come, began trembling from my fingertips.

Desperate not to let them see this, I clenched my hands and legs tightly.

The noblewoman’s last shred of pride—an utterly pointless defiance—refused to show weakness, even as I shook in fear.

“There’s still some time before the professor arrives, so let’s start with something simple.”

“What? Wait, that’s not—”

“Helping, of course.

Even for a ruined noble family, if she continues to appear like this, the academy will have no choice but to intervene.

That’s where Warton’s torture comes in—it’s far more effective than simple violence and leaves fewer marks!”

“...That makes sense.”

“Right? If she dies from being beaten, that’s a whole other problem.”

“Still, she’s a noble too—”

“Hey, shut up. We could never do this in our lifetimes. This girl’s just... unusual.”

“Alright, now that we’re all clear, let’s get moving. There’s a lot to prepare.”

At Ariana’s words, the commoners scattered, each taking on their assigned tasks.

Satisfied that everyone was occupied, she turned back to me with a smile—one so genuinely pleased it was all the more chilling.

I closed my eyes quietly.

One thought swirled endlessly in my mind:

God, please take my life.

Before these demons reach me.

Drowning.

A death caused by being submerged in water.

For me, it was a familiar kind of death.

I’d often joke about the water temperature of the Han River, after all.

It’s a common risk at swimming pools or beaches, one as mundane as fevers or accidents.

In a way, drowning might be as close to an everyday death as you can get.

Even so, drowning is said to be one of the most excruciating ways to die.

Like hanging or dying of thirst, it takes time to lose consciousness, inflicting prolonged, agonizing pain.

How else would water torture have earned its infamous reputation as an ancient method of interrogation?

Water torture—yes, water torture.

All you need is a basin deep enough to submerge someone’s head and hands to hold them down.

Simple, efficient, and cost-effective.

The victim feels as though they're on the verge of death, gasping for air with lungs filled with water.

As water floods your nose and mouth, your chest burns as though on fire, and every gasp for air feels like a desperate battle for survival.

The dizziness claws at your brain, making coherent thought or even struggling impossible.

You flail as though death is imminent, only for your head to be pulled up briefly, driving you to beg for mercy like a mad person.

No form of torture is humane, but at this moment, nothing scared me more than water.

“Gah! Hah, haah, ahh—”

I sucked in air like it was holy nectar, gasping as though every breath were a gift.

Water dripped pathetically from every orifice of my face—eyes, nose, mouth, ears.

My face, once one of my few redeeming features, had lost even that slight charm.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please, please don't—”

“Oh, why beg so soon? We've barely even started. Now then—”

“N-no! Ple— —!! ———! ———!! —————!”

I thrashed wildly, twisting my body to escape the hands holding me down, but it was futile.

Finally, with all dignity abandoned, I began begging Ariana.

She smiled in satisfaction and, as if it were the most natural thing, shoved my head back into the basin.

In the endless cycle of being submerged and resurfaced, I prayed over and over:

It hurts. I feel like I'm dying. This is unbearable.

Please save me. Save me. Save me.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

No, actually, I do want to die. But—

Not like this. Not in pain.

I'm scared... Please....

The repetitive process stretched on endlessly, erasing all sense of time.

Gradually, my strength faded. I couldn't even flail anymore, nor could I utter a single coherent word.

My mind blurred, my judgment faded.

Rationality disappeared, leaving only survival instinct—and even that was now dimming.

Why am I drowning in this basin?

Why did I come here in the first place?

If I'm being punished like this, I must have done something terrible.

But why can't I remember anything?

Who am I?

I... I...

Oh, that's right. I was... taking a walk.

The sunset was beautifully painting the evening sky.

The cool breeze felt so pleasant.

And I exchanged light greetings with the neighbors I passed.

A simple, ordinary walk.

When I got thirsty during my walks, I'd quench my thirst with a refreshing sip of barley tea from the thermos I always carried.

Returning home, my parents would greet me warmly.

They were the kind who still visited their grown-up son's house, bringing side dishes and taking the time to listen to his day.

I even had a woman I wanted to marry.

We'd been together for a long time—almost like childhood friends.

Who knew how romantic feelings had crept in?

You can never predict what life has in store.

And then there was...

A sibling who, despite occasional fights, cared deeply for me.

Friends who, though not always present, would check in from time to time.

A respectable job I could be proud of.

Hobbies that allowed me to connect with others.

I had it all.

Because I was ordinary.

Because I was just a normal person.

Back then, it all seemed so natural.

That sense of normalcy, those small joys,

The tiny fragments of routine that made me who I was.

Those were the most crucial things keeping my life intact.

I should have realized it when I still had them all.

Why did I only understand after they had all slipped away, like bubbles bursting?

I want to go back.

I will go back.

Give it back.

I miss it.

I want to die.

But I don't want to die.

Why am I...

What am I...

Why...

"She's not breathing! She's dead!"

"After holding her head under so many times, did you really expect her to be fine?"

"You said we could trust you! That you could finish this cleanly without leaving a trace!"

When water floods the lungs, it seems it also clouds the brain.

My thoughts became hazy, and my consciousness faded.

Moments ago, I had been drowning in indescribable pain, but now a strange serenity overtook me.

At some point, I was laid on the floor, my narrowing field of vision catching a faint glimpse of the ceiling.

Through the faint ringing in my ears, the distant screams and shouts of those around me barely registered.

Ah, so this is it.

I'm dying.

Dying as my head is repeatedly plunged underwater, facing a painful and miserable end.

My face must look utterly wretched.

Whatever dignity I had as a noblewoman, as a person, must have long since crumbled.

Don't shove that ugly face in my sight—it's disgusting. But, hey, don't worry about it.

And yet...

At least in this moment, I was grateful there was no more pain.

Thinking that brought a small sense of joy.

I'm glad.

Glad.

Because I can finally find peace.

Glad.

Of course, there's a way. Torture that leaves the victim dead offers no useful information—it's pointless.

Ah.

The Warton family isn't just renowned for their torture. They're equally famed for their magic.

They can bring someone back from the brink of any death—as long as the heart still beats.

No.

No. Please, no. I was finally at peace.

Wait, wait just a moment. I'm so close.

I was finally able to die.

Not yet. Please, not—

“Keuhhh—!”

The moment Ariana's finger touched my chest, something foreign coursed through me.

A searing headache crushed my skull, and my lungs burned as if set aflame.

Water burst violently from every hole in my face.

“Khah! Khah! Cough... Cough... Hah... Hah...”

“Congratulations on coming back to life, Lady Adelian!

But it seems we still have a bit of time. Shall we begin again?”

The sound of my heart pounding echoed in my ears like the toll of despair.

I was alive. Alive again.

The ones who killed me brought me back to life.

Shaking my head like a madwoman, I felt my body tremble as though in convulsions.

“No, no. Ariana. I'm sorry. Forgive me. Please—”

“Nope~”

Ariana's cheerful declaration dropped like divine judgment, sealing my fate.

Without resistance, I was dragged, sobbing, toward the water-filled basin once more.