

PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

Chapter 31

On my 11th birthday, my father died.

It wasn't a big deal.

It was such a dry and meaningless death that it left me feeling a little hollow.

It was an end no different from that of any vagrant, forgotten and unmemorialized by anyone.

It was suicide.

In the summer when I was 14, on the night of a waning moon, my younger sibling died.

It wasn't a big deal.

It just startled me a bit since I never thought it would happen twice.

It was still a death only I remembered and mourned, no different from that of a small animal.

It was suicide.

In the winter when I was 16, on an especially cold day when we were checking the mansion's heating system, my mother died.

It wasn't a big deal.

I only found myself disgusted by how numb I'd grown to such an obvious and uninspired death.

It was the selfish end of someone who thought they were atoning, even though I had never asked for it.

It was suicide.

I never cursed my circumstances.

I was just aware, objectively, that I wasn't particularly lucky.

A father who conned his way into a title.

A mother forced into marriage through financial ties.

A family bound solely by mutual interests, devoid of love, always desolate, where shouting and violence were constant.

And, of course, their rage wasn't solely directed at each other.

The two were like unwilling passengers on the same ship, tied to one another until one of them died.

Naturally, there were two convenient scapegoats at hand, aware of their situation yet unable to object.

Still, it seems they loved each other in their own way.

After nights filled with beatings and insults, mornings would always bring tears, embraces, and the semblance of a warm family union.

The carrot always followed the stick.

I don't think they were cunning enough to consciously manipulate us, but...

My younger sibling, who was tender-hearted, seemed to give her heart to them.

I didn't.

I don't think I ever loved them.

Though it doesn't seem I hated them either.

My father's reckless decisions in his youth brought him the barony, a status, and wealth that a commoner could never dream of.

But he lived his entire life tormented by a fear greater than what he had gained.

A single slip-up, and it would all be over.

No matter how carefully he concealed it, the pressure was unbearable.

Every time I looked at him, I felt pity more than hatred.

Even if he was a detestable man who wielded violence and then sobbed apologies the next day, I could at least understand the torment he carried.

Though I couldn't help but think he shouldn't have had children in the first place if he was going to apologize like that.

Still, the time when my father was alive was the least painful.

At least for my younger sibling.

She was small and fragile.

Rather than see such a little child hurt, it was better that I took it all.

I was already a prematurely withered child, devoid of affection or expectations for them.

If my sibling, who still loved them, suffered as I did, it would clearly leave deep scars in her heart.

It actually happened a few times.

So, it made sense for me to take the brunt of it.

Even my father seemed to agree.

Whether it was instinctual or intentional, he mostly hit me in every situation.

I thought that was enough.

Deficiency breeds dependency.

Of course, it wasn't healthy.

Alcohol, drugs, women.

It was a cliché downward spiral.

And soon, it became just as typical for him to lose his reason entirely.

After countless tearful apologies, swearing he'd never do it again, he'd return the next day as the same beast.

On the night before my 11th birthday, it was just another one of those nights.

Only slightly worse than usual.

He punched, elbowed, kicked, and struck until he finally picked up a shard from a broken glass that had rolled onto the floor.

Through my bloodied vision, I saw him walking toward my sibling.

The glass shard in his hand sparkled like a jewel, dangerously sharp and glaring.

Without thinking, I ran toward him, throwing my entire body against him.

Of course, with the strength of an 11-year-old, I couldn't even push him back a step, but I managed to divert his attention to me.

What happened after that is a blur.

Just pain, pain, and more pain.

When I opened my eyes, I saw my sibling sobbing and screaming while holding me tightly.

I saw my father trembling, dropping the glass shard as his hands quivered violently.

Feeling relief, I smiled faintly, and then I saw my father widen his eyes as if they would pop out and rush toward me.

He screamed for my mother, the mage, while pressing on my chest so hard it hurt.

And then, I must have fallen asleep.

The next day, I thought, Maybe I'll have a warm birthday today.

With a child's naive hope, I dragged my aching body to my father's door, only to be greeted by the sight of his body hanging limp from a noose.

A sallow corpse dangling in the loop of a rope.

His eyes stared vacantly into nothingness, his tongue lolling out.

Yellow fluid and filth dripped from his crotch, staining the floor.

Dried stains marked where fluids had seeped from every possible opening.

I thought I'd cry, scream, or react somehow at the sight of someone's death.

But I just stood there, silently, and picked up the neatly arranged letter on the desk.

He said he loved us.

He said he didn't do it out of hatred.

He said he was sorry.

He said he was scum.

He said he regretted having us.

He said he regretted becoming a noble.

He said, Happy birthday.

Ha.

I tore the letter to pieces and scattered it beneath his corpse.

It was the only way I could bear it.

Then I quietly sat down, leaning against the wall.

I stayed there until my mother, noticing the silence, came in and screamed.

Could there be a worse birthday gift?

An unbearably heavy burden I never asked for.

The life of my own father.

An utterly horrifying thing.

The Empire wasn't such a prosperous place that it could concern itself with every barony in the outskirts.

That's why my father could commit such atrocities and still indulge in the luxury of choosing his own death.

But if someone had been dispatched from the capital to investigate his death, everything would have been exposed.

In the end, he was irresponsible to the very last.

By choosing death, he tried to strip even our right to live.

Though I don't think he intended for things to turn out this way.

He was just a terrible human who ran away under the guise of atonement, not one acting out of malice.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have left a letter like that.

The grotesque collection of letters that managed to disappoint me, someone who thought I wouldn't be let down as long as I never expected anything in the first place.

In any case, the reason I could survive even after my father's death was because my mother was, in her own way, a skilled mage.

She concealed his death, handled his responsibilities, and even created an imitation of him to attend the social gatherings he couldn't avoid.

In truth, it wasn't much different from how things had been before.

My father had always relied on her for everything, having talent only for deception.

Even so, the burden of fear my father left behind steadily consumed my mother.

My sibling.

My kind and lovable sibling seemed to have been deeply shaken by my father's death.

She locked herself in her room and cried for days, refusing food, leaving me more worried about what I should do for her.

My mother didn't have the capacity to console her.

My mother became my father.

She had cursed before, but the first time she lashed out violently, claiming my sibling's crying was annoying, was on that day.

Tragically enough.

My sibling stopped crying.

It seemed my mother found this to her liking.

So much so that similar incidents happened repeatedly afterward.

Unlike my father, my mother's violence was strangely targeted solely at my sibling.

I don't know why.

Perhaps she thought I was too old and unyielding to be an easy target.

Or maybe she had already taken note of my magical talents back then.

I never wanted such favoritism.

If my sibling was going to suffer, I would have preferred to endure it myself.

Not out of altruism.

But because she was the only precious thing I had.

The only family I was left with.

I tried pleading with my mother.

I begged her to stop. To hit me instead.

Of course, she didn't listen.

All I could do was hold my sibling tightly in my arms.

I couldn't kill my mother, after all.

My sibling began to break down.

Her bright, radiant eyes became nothing more than dull black spheres, lifelessly open.

The one human expression left in our family, which had belonged to her, eventually turned into something like mine.

Even so, she tried to act cheerful. Her effort was almost pitiful.

But there were too many things I couldn't ignore, no matter how hard I tried.

Though the wounds on her body were erased by magic, there always seemed to be a new one whenever I saw her.

Every night, I heard muffled sobbing from her room, as if she were choking on her cries to suppress them.

The day I found a trail of straight scars starting at her wrist and climbing up her forearm, I thought perhaps I should have killed my mother.

No, even if I had, my sibling would have suffered in her own way.

The moment she was born into this household with her fragile heart, her ending seemed predetermined.

The worst possible ending.

Chapter 32

The summer when I was 14, on the night of a waning moon.

After my mother's particularly brutal kicking that day, I helped my sibling up from where she lay.

Normally, her face would have been twisted in tears or pain, but this time, it was unusually bright.

She was smiling.

When I blinked, I realized my sibling had wrapped her entire body around mine.

Moments earlier, she'd endured insults and violence from the mother she adored, yet now she held me tightly and whispered that she loved me.

Something was clearly wrong.

But it had been so long since I'd seen her smile that I suppressed the unease gnawing at me.

She didn't seem as restless or unstable as Father had during his final moments.

In fact, she looked calmer than usual.

Why didn't I understand then? That the peace she felt was the relief of leaving behind this wretched reality?

Like a fool, I let her go when she said she wanted to bathe alone.

And that was the end of her.

Two hours later, I found her in the tub.

Her wrists were slit, and she was submerged.

The bathwater, dyed red, clashed chillingly with her pale, ghostly skin.

Her eyes, even in death, remained open, staring at the void.

What was she gazing at so longingly?

Did that man who wasn't even like a father to us come to greet her in her final moments?

I convinced myself he did.

Because if I didn't believe she had found happiness in death, I wouldn't have been able to endure it.

So I believed it.

The death of a 13-year-old child.

It was suicide, yet also murder.

Horribly enough, the culprits were the two people she had cherished most.

I stood there for a moment, staring at her lifeless body, before heading to my mother's room.

For the first time in my life, I raised my voice, shouting, screaming, flailing my hands and feet.

Perhaps the saying that children mimic their parents is true because I repeated everything they had done to us.

It wasn't until my mother used magic to hurl me against the wall that I crumbled to the floor, tears streaming for the first time.

I cried.

When my father died, not a single tear had fallen, but now they flowed uncontrollably.

My mother, puzzled by my behavior, went to check the bathroom.

Moments later, another voice joined my sobbing—her scream, filled with despair.

“I'm sorry. I love you. I didn't mean for this to happen.”

The same words my father had uttered.

But my sibling was no longer there to hear them.

Unlike me, she had probably always waited for those words.

Why?

Why only now?

Disgusting.

Why do humans only regret after everything falls apart?

I hated my parents, but this wasn't about just them.

I was revolted by myself, unable to bear my own existence.

Even as I watched my sibling deteriorate right in front of me, I did nothing.

The worst perpetrator of all was the one who stood closest and did nothing—me.

The two culprits who killed my sibling: my mother and me.

After that day, the violence in our home ceased.

Naturally, as there were only two of us left.

I wasn't even sure if what remained could be called a "family."

My mother and I, trapped in a strange and unfamiliar relationship, didn't know how to face each other.

I intentionally ignored her, and she lacked the will to care about me.

It took nearly a year before we could exchange even the smallest semblance of conversation.

But those conversations never carried the warmth of a mother-daughter bond.

Our relationship had dried to the bone, devoid of feeling.

I didn't find it particularly sad.

I had long since been drained of the affection that might have made me grieve.

Even months later, my father's and sibling's deaths felt fundamentally different.

There was a brief time when I wanted to follow them, but each attempt ended with me backing out at the last moment.

I was afraid of death.

The thought alone made my limbs tremble, and the corpses I had seen twice now flashed before my eyes.

In the end, I realized I valued my own existence above all else.

Maybe that's why, unlike my sibling, I never once thought of dying, even when my father's violence was at its peak.

After abandoning the idea of suicide, I looked at my still-living mother and thought she must be like me.

If she were like my father, she would have ended her life long ago.

Perhaps I was reassured, thinking that at least she would stay by my side until the end.

And for quite a long time, she did stay with me.

It took years for me to realize how mistaken I had been.

My mother began teaching me.

Apparently, I had a natural talent for magic.

She said I could reach her level within a few years of dedicated practice.

For someone like me, who had planned to leave this false barony the moment I came of age, it was a welcome opportunity.

Magicians were well-respected in the Empire, a nation of magical prowess.

With no reason to refuse, I silently took her lessons.

Ironically, my mother was a far better teacher than she ever was a parent, leaving me with little to complain about.

Two years passed.

It was winter when I turned 16, on an especially cold day when we were inspecting the mansion's heating system.

Our relationship had shifted over the past few months. It would be more accurate to call us a teacher and student than mother and daughter.

I had absorbed all my mother's knowledge.

She said my progress was faster than expected and suggested I seek better teachers at an academy later.

As she said this, she stroked my hair, looking oddly relieved yet hollow.

The look was familiar.

It was my third time seeing it. There was no way I could miss the signs now.

I didn't hesitate.

I told her, "Don't die."

Her eyes widened in surprise before softening into a faint smile. She pulled me into an embrace.

It had been nearly three years since we shared such warmth.

Her arms, no longer broader, no longer comforting, no longer intimidating, carried only physical warmth now.

Her grip tightened.

The shoulder pressed against my face gradually grew damp.

This wasn't an embrace meant to console me.

It was an embrace for her own comfort.

Around that time, I understood what my mother was trying to do.

It wasn't difficult to discern.

After all, I had become a mage just like her.

Even so, a separate feeling lingered: the displeasure of realizing I was, once again, too late.

When I stayed silent, my mother began to mumble something, her face still buried in my shoulder.

Her voice was so faint it was hard to hear unless I strained to listen.

She said she loved me.

That it wasn't out of hatred.

That she was sorry.

That she was a wretched woman.

That she shouldn't have given birth to us.

That she shouldn't have married him.

Surely, I had been the only one to read and tear up my father's letter.

But apparently, a couple remains a couple even in their dying words—her final confession was disturbingly similar to his.

When she finished speaking and stepped back from my embrace, her face was filled with relief and tranquility.

It was as though she was glad to finally have said those words, as though she had finally atoned.

But I hadn't let go of anything yet.

Why did she selfishly find her peace alone?

If she wanted absolution, she should have spent her life in regret and died later than me.

I hated the idea of her running away like my father had, leaving me behind once more.

I opened my mouth to hurl these words at her, but it was already too late.

Her neck had fallen, severed, and rolled to the ground.

Blood spurted from the cut in her carotid artery, and the body that had been seated in the chair collapsed backward.

It was likely the result of a spell she had set up in advance.

The clean, precise cut, as though from an exceptionally sharp blade, was gruesomely vivid, as if the beheading were still alive.

I stood there, letting the splattering blood soak me, and locked eyes with her decapitated head as it lay on the floor.

Even severed from her body, her face continued to smile.

It seemed frozen that way.

So I think I smiled, too.

Honestly, it was a little funny.

How ridiculous I looked now, left all alone.

Concealing her death wasn't difficult.

By then, I had become a mage on her level.

Her decision to die only after raising me entirely was probably because she was worried about what would happen after her death.

Still, she was a better person than my father.

Though emotionally repulsive in the same way, objectively speaking, she was.

After finishing everything, I lay down on my bed and wondered what I should do next.

Then, on a bit of a whim, I filled out an academy application.

It was an escape, in truth.

I didn't want to spend another second in this mansion.

But unlike others who escaped through death, I still clung to life.

I thought that if I threw everything away and went far away, perhaps the broken parts of me might start functioning again.

I won't deny that her advice influenced me.

After all, regardless of everything, she was my biological mother.

The love she had given me in my childhood still lingered vividly in my memory.

So I thought I could at least follow her final advice as my teacher.

But as the thought crossed my mind, my eyes unexpectedly began to sting.

I blinked irritably several times, but the pain wouldn't subside.

It was the kind of pain that was annoyingly persistent.

Of course, I didn't feel anything special about her death.

I wasn't in my right mind enough to mourn being left alone now.

The only reason for this ache, I was sure, was my anger at being the only one left who remembered my sibling's death.

There was no other explanation.

There couldn't be.

I cried.

All night long.

I found a girl collapsed at the bottom of the stairs.

She was someone I had seen being bullied in the classroom a few times.

Back then, I had ignored it, not wanting to get involved.

But seeing her bleeding now reminded me of my sibling from back then.

Before I realized it, I had taken a step toward her.

Chapter 33

Sena, who had been hunched over sobbing for a long time, finally straightened herself as the moon began to wane.

It might have been a relief if crying made her feel better, but judging by her expression, she seemed utterly hollow.

She looked like she had turned into a doll, just like I once had—spilling out everything, forcing herself to accept it all.

“...I'll go in first. It's cold, so don't stay out too long.”

“Will you be okay? It's been a while since you've seen him.”

“I'm fine. Besides, I think I'll be seeing him often now.”

I see. It seems she has made up her mind. That's a relief.

Though I can't say I'm pleased about it.

If I could do what Sena is doing, life would be so much easier.

Even if we both became dolls, perhaps this is where the differences between us become apparent.

Her retreating figure wobbled, but her path remained straight, strangely radiant.

Perhaps that's why I felt a pang of sadness.

Being misunderstood by everyone—it's always like that.

I stayed by the fountain only until the warmth left the space Sena had vacated.

If something had never been there, it wouldn't have mattered. But losing something that was—it's always too cold.

The moon no longer provided any comfort.

The very notion that I had thought it could was absurd to begin with.

Back in my room, I collapsed onto the bed.

I wasn't particularly upset enough to spend the dawn in turmoil.

As soon as I closed my eyes, I quickly fell asleep.

When I woke up, my body felt strange.

That was my first thought.

At the same time, I felt weary.

It was a sensation I had grown far too familiar with.

A fever seemed to seep into my brain.

A sense of weakness, as if the cartilage and muscles between my joints had been torn apart.

Headache, nausea, chest pain, joint pain, stomach pain.

It was the aggravatingly familiar sensation of a body breaking down.

I experienced this at least once or twice a week.

The cause was obvious—it had to be last night's walk.

I thought I'd covered myself with a blanket quickly enough, but my fragile body must not have been able to endure even that.

I raised an arm and covered my throbbing eyes.

It's hot, yet cold. No matter how many times I experience this, I can't get used to it.

"...Can I hide it? I don't want anyone to worry."

Even breathing through my nose felt a bit difficult.

It wasn't that it was blocked—it was just too hot.

But breathing through my mouth felt like it would draw too much attention.

That would make me look like a patient, no matter who saw me.

Troublesome.

Every time my body was like this, I had similar worries.

Ariana always insisted she would stick by my side and nurse me whenever I was sick, which annoyed me.

I hated being under worried gazes, so I naturally ended up contemplating how to hide my condition.

When I refused her help, Ariana always looked even more concerned, and I would end up saying the same thing to her.

It's not that I hated being cared for.

I just felt burdened by the idea of someone spending their time on me over something as trivial as a cold.

There are people far more ill than I am, and someone somewhere must desperately need that time more than I do.

I wished Ariana would use her time more meaningfully.

Just leave me alone in a corner.

Only help me when it truly seems like I'm dying.

It's not a problem otherwise.

...But that's just an excuse.

"It's true, though."

I don't want to be worried over.

Maybe I just hate the version of myself that makes others worry.

If I could learn to like myself, would I accept others' concern more easily?

If so—no, let's stop here.

I shook my head a couple of times.

The feverish fog clouding my mind cleared just slightly.

When my temperature rises, my thoughts tend to wander excessively—a bad habit of mine.

Alright, open your eyes.

It's time for school.

I can't let anyone see me looking disheveled.

Cough.

As I pressed my hands against the floor and pushed myself up, a sharp pain spread through my chest.

Frowning instinctively, I brought my hand to my mouth, only for a cough to burst out.

At the same time, I felt something hot rise through my throat.

To quell the tightness in my chest, I tapped it with my free hand.

A more intense bout of coughing followed.

Tears welled up in my eyes.

Something seemed thoroughly stuck, as the pain lingered for a long time.

When I finally managed to stop coughing, I noticed a few dark spots of blood on my palm.

Suddenly?

I tilted my head, puzzled.

I hadn't been hit, nor had I broken anything. So why was this happening?

"I- I should wash... Ugh?"

Trying to suppress my panic, I took a step forward, but now my stomach acted up.

The dizziness and nausea that had already been plaguing me surged uncontrollably.

It felt as though my stomach was being squeezed tightly.

Without the chance to do anything, I ended up vomiting on the floor.

"Ugh... Hrk..."

Having eaten nothing, only yellow bile should have come out, but even this was tinged with red.

This definitely wasn't an ordinary cold.

Breathing heavily, with an unpleasant wheeze, I curled the corners of my mouth into a faint smile.

From the shortness of breath, I had sensed something was off.

Who would have thought it was my body's warning signal?

"Hah... I hate this... Really."

I staggered, pressing a hand over my mouth, and eventually slumped back down.

I tried to get up again, but my legs wouldn't hold me.

Giving up, I leaned against the bed.

I was definitely going to be late.

As I rested my head against the bedspread, a rush of blood surged upward.

My vision blurred, like it was swaying in waves.

Hah.

I'm not going to sleep.

I'll go, so don't rush me.

Just a moment.

I'm just taking a moment to rest.

"So...."

I stayed still with my eyes closed for a while, but I felt like I was about to black out entirely, so I forced them open.

I thought I might feel a bit better.

But instead, my vision rippled as if I were under the influence of opium.

As heat consumed me, an icy chill seeped deep into my bones.

I felt like dough being baked in an oven.

I couldn't even move of my own volition.

It hurts.

It hurts.

My head. My stomach. My chest. My throat. My legs. My arms.

Everything hurts.

I probably need to take some medicine.

A painkiller—something, anything—to get up and function.

But all I had in this room were pills that numbed the mind.

Ah, should I just take those?

Since it was medicine, wasn't it better to take it than not?

I reached out with trembling arms to grab the pill bottle I had left by my bedside.

Even that small act seemed too heavy for my shaking hands, causing me to drop it halfway. Still, I managed to spill its contents onto the floor.

Now, all that was left was to take them.

But since the pills had mixed together, I couldn't tell which was which.

They all looked blue to me.

Well, wouldn't it be fine to just take them randomly?

It's not like I expected them to work anyway.

Thinking that, I grabbed whatever came to hand and put them in my mouth one by one.

I didn't even have the energy to get water, so I simply forced them down my dry throat.

But even that proved to be too much for my parched mouth.

By the eighth swallow, I felt a choking sensation somewhere in my throat—esophagus or windpipe, I wasn't sure.

Cough, hack! Wheeze! Gasp!

Damn it.

It's stuck.

I curled into myself and coughed violently, but whatever was lodged didn't show any sign of coming out.

Even as I gasped for air, my lungs didn't feel like they were filling.

It was similar to my usual episodes, but this time there was no solution other than dislodging the obstruction, making it all the more dreadful.

Already, the edges of my vision began to darken.

At this rate, I didn't need to see the ending to know how it would turn out.

Haha.

I really made a mess of things this time.

Doing something unnecessary, as always, and ending up like this.

I had wanted to die, but not like this.

I had hoped for a clean, dignified death, one that wouldn't invite ridicule.

Dying from choking on pills? Absolutely not.

Then, I couldn't die.

I forced my oxygen-starved brain to think.

What methods could I use in this situation?

Heimlich maneuver? I'd need someone else for that.

For a self-application... I didn't know.

I could vaguely recall something about applying pressure to the chest, but it wasn't clear.

Doing it alone seemed impossible. If I hit myself hard, maybe it would work somehow.

I braced myself against the bed and struggled to stand.

I worried I might not even manage to get up, but faced with the threat of death, my leg muscles decided to cooperate.

Somehow, I stood up.

And then I fell.

Without anything to cushion the impact, I hit the hard floor face- and chest-first.

Dizziness overwhelmed me as my head throbbed from where it had slammed into the ground.

My body felt impossibly heavy, as if I couldn't lift it anymore.

It felt like stars were spinning around me.

Was that cartoonish depiction actually somewhat realistic?

A sticky, unpleasant liquid dripped steadily from my face. My nose might have been broken.

Ah, looking closely, it was also coming from my mouth. That must mean—

The pain in my chest had worsened, but the choking sensation was gone.

Perhaps the force of the impact had dislodged whatever was stuck. That's good.

Though my head felt foggy and hurt, I hadn't blacked out. It seemed I'd gotten away with a mild concussion.

As for my chest, it was probably just another rib fracture—nothing new for me.

Considering I'd avoided the humiliation of choking to death on pills, this was a fair trade.

Spitting out the blood pooling in my mouth, I let out a weak laugh.

The absurdity of my situation struck me.

"I... can't go..."

Even my muttered words carried a metallic rasp.

Where could I possibly go, looking like this?

I'd rather die unnoticed in a corner somewhere.

Still, I couldn't just lie here doing nothing.

I had to clean up the mess—the vomit, the blood, the spilled pills—before the maid found it all.

But right now, my body refused to move.

Maybe I should sleep a little first.

Since I'd already given up on school, I had plenty of time.

If I could wake up before the afternoon and clean everything up, it'd be fine.

Yeah. I'd manage somehow.

I would.

I closed my eyes in the same collapsed position.

Or rather, my eyes closed on their own.

It was practically beyond my control.

Too many things had piled up.

Everywhere hurt, and it felt like even my brain wanted a break, dropping me into unconsciousness.

It wasn't like I'd done anything significant.

The whole situation was absurd enough to make me laugh until the moment I fell asleep.

Chapter 34

The maid cautiously opened the door.

It was the room of a young lady whose presence had become burdensome to her ever since the previous incident.

A maid of humble origins, with no remarkable background or connections, she hailed from a simple rural area.

It was only natural that she felt threatened after being cornered by the count's daughter.

She had often seen aristocrats, full of malice, extend their influence even to the families of servants.

Reflecting on her once overly meddlesome behavior, the maid now took extra care with her actions.

"What if I run into her...?"

Mumbling with a troubled expression, she chewed on her lip.

Normally, this would be the time the young lady would have left for school, so the worry seemed unwarranted. However, her frequent absences made it less certain.

The vivid memories of narrowly avoiding encounters with her or actually meeting her and fleeing filled her mind.

The maid sighed deeply.

If I do see her, I'll just greet her and run away.

Resolving herself, she pushed the half-open door fully open and entered the room.

The sight that greeted her was far from clean.

There were clear signs of vomit, bloodstains scattered across the room, and pills spilled from a toppled medicine bottle.

Though the room's untidiness wasn't unusual, today it was far worse than usual.

Yet the maid couldn't focus on the mess.

The young lady she had hoped to avoid was collapsed on the floor right in front of the bed.

She lay sprawled as though she had fallen forward upon standing up, and a pool of blood had formed beneath her face, as though she had hit it hard.

The maid froze, covering her mouth.

"Ah."

But as soon as she processed the situation, she began to move urgently.

The resolve to flee vanished entirely, and her steps were steady as she approached the fallen girl.

She knelt and placed her fingers near the girl's nose, relieved to feel the faint, irregular flow of air.

At least she wasn't dead.

Was it fainting from head trauma? Or maybe some sudden illness?

First, she turned the young lady's face to the side to make her breathing easier.

That's when she got a clearer look at her condition.

Blood was flowing from a broken nose, and her lips were split.

It was evident she had fallen face-first.

As the maid supported her head, she felt a searing heat that had been masked by the visible injuries.

A fever. A faint caused by illness, worsened by trauma. The scattered pills hinted at her desperate attempt to medicate herself.

The pieces came together in the maid's mind.

She must have been in pain.

If she was suffering so much, she could have rung the bell and called for me.

Why did she stubbornly endure until things got this bad?

Even if she couldn't afford treatment at the infirmary, I could've at least provided basic care.

She wouldn't have ended up unconscious like this.

Knowing the young lady's personality, the maid could guess why she hadn't asked for help. Even so, she couldn't help but feel sympathy.

"If it's come to this, there's nothing I can do..."

The maid frowned.

In this state, her basic knowledge of home remedies and first aid wouldn't suffice.

She needed to get the young lady to the infirmary or find someone capable of using healing magic. Neither was an easy option.

"...No, there's one person."

A name came to her mind.

The girl who had been desperately searching for the young lady last time.

She'd even asked around extensively, and the maid had struck up a conversation with her back then.

If it was Sena, someone who deeply cared for the young lady and was also a skilled mage, she would undoubtedly use healing magic.

"But... ugh."

The problem was that, at this time, Sena was surely in class.

A maid barging into a classroom full of nobles was unthinkable.

The maid agonized for a moment before standing up.

She couldn't just sit idly by while the girl continued to bleed.

If it came to it, she was willing to risk punishment and find Sena.

After wandering aimlessly for a few minutes, she saw a man polishing his monocle with a handkerchief in the corridor leading to the classrooms.

Before she could call out to him for help, the man spoke first.

"Is something the matter? There's blood on your hands."

His gaze fell on her bloodstained hands.

Blood had splattered on her hands and clothes as she supported the young lady, making her look suspicious to anyone unaware of the circumstances.

She opened her mouth to explain but hesitated, realizing she didn't even know who the man was.

"Um, may I ask who you are...?"

"...You're an academy maid, yet you don't recognize a professor's face? I teach Magic Studies."

Her mind lit up like a lightning bolt.

The Magic Studies professor. He was one of the most esteemed individuals here.

If she upset him, she might be dragged off for insolence.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry...! I didn't mean to offend...."

"It's fine, it's fine. Mistakes happen. Anyway, the blood—are you injured?"

"No, it's not my blood, it's—oh."

Realizing she had let something slip, she quickly bowed her head.

The professor waved dismissively with a smile.

He was clearly of a different breed than the typical nobles.

She hesitated for a moment, then thought, What if I asked him for help?

He seemed intelligent and reasonable. If she explained politely, perhaps he would agree.

After deliberating, she slowly began recounting the young lady's situation.

The haze of unconsciousness began to clear, shaken by a periodic swaying sensation.

Though my body had been at its worst when I fell asleep, it felt unexpectedly fine now.

The pounding headache and fever remained, but the rest of my injuries seemed to have healed.

...Did my sense of pain dull?

That would explain it.

"Ugh..."

Feeling something was off, I cracked my eyes open. My blurry vision revealed a face looking down at me.

My legs weren't touching the ground, and I felt something supporting my body.

There was no mistaking it—I was being carried.

This was only the second time I'd been carried like this.

The person carrying me seemed much stronger than Ariana, making it far more comfortable this time.

As I stirred, the person spoke.

"You're awake? Don't lift your head. I've healed all your wounds, but your fever hasn't subsided yet. Stay still until we reach the infirmary."

"The infirmary...? I can't afford that..."

Recently, even my meals had been paid for by Ariana, so there was no way I could afford a place like the infirmary.

Whoever this was, they were unintentionally putting me further in debt.

I swayed my legs in the air to signal that I wanted to stop walking.

The man carrying me chuckled softly at my antics but didn't stop. Instead, he glanced down.

Only then did I realize who he was.

It was a face I recognized well.

"I'm aware of your situation. Don't worry, I'll cover the cost."

"Professor...? But why?"

"You only recognize me now? That's a little disappointing."

The young gentleman with a mild demeanor—it was the Magic Studies professor.

I was momentarily dumbfounded. Outside of lectures, we had no connection at all.

Come to think of it, I had been asleep in my room. Did he unlock the door and come in?

As my confusion grew, I heard a familiar voice from below.

"I... I asked him for help! My lady, please call for me if you're unwell. Don't suffer alone...."

It was the maid, Ai.

It had been a while since I'd seen her, and compared to her previously bright demeanor, she now seemed uneasy.

...Of course.

I must've fallen asleep without moving until she arrived.

Her face suddenly loomed close, and her eyes brimmed with anger and worry.

I couldn't muster the nerve to shamelessly retort, so I pressed my lips together in silence.

"Yes, whether it's me or this child, just call someone. Please. If you were found dead in your room, it would cause chaos across the academy."

"...Yes. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize."

"It's fine, as long as this doesn't happen a second time. I'm only worried about you, that's all...."

That's her way of saying I made her worry.

It means that even someone who preferred to keep their distance felt compelled to step in because of me.

I didn't want someone as uninvolved as her to get tangled up with someone like me.

And yet, here I was, receiving her help again.

And the professor's, too.

Well done, Remia. Really.

To calm my pounding head—whether from stress or fever—I closed my half-opened eyes. They didn't speak to me further.

Their quiet but considerate restraint was a welcome relief.

This delicate, ticklish feeling... I liked it, but at the same time, I hated it.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Adelian. This is just a personal curiosity of mine."

Half-asleep and nodding off, I heard the professor's voice, prompting me to open my eyes faintly.

"The pills scattered in your room—who gave them to you? A few of them looked familiar. They're not the kind of medicine that's easy to obtain."

"...Ariana—" I started to answer reflexively, then quickly shut my mouth.

For some reason, it felt like I shouldn't say anything more.

A bad feeling crept over me, warning me that I shouldn't answer this question.

What was this feeling?

It was just a minor thing—Ariana helping me get medicine wasn't anything unusual.

Yet, having said her name already felt like an irreversible mistake.

“...Ah, I see.”

The professor smiled.

It was the same warm expression as before.

Nothing about him seemed out of the ordinary.

...Maybe it was just my imagination.

Too exhausted to think any further, I forced myself to ignore the unease and closed my eyes again.

Chapter 35

As my consciousness flickered on and off, the color of the ceiling changed—from a dingy off-white to a pure white.

Though I had never been to the infirmary before, I instinctively knew where I was.

So, we've arrived.

The professor placed me on something soft and pulled a blanket over me.

Through blurred vision, as if I were underwater, I could see figures moving busily around me.

They attached something to my arm, covered my face with something else, and tended to me in various ways, yet my attention drifted elsewhere.

The professor was speaking to a woman in a white coat who had stepped out from the inner room.

Is that the infirmary doctor?

Her gaze turned to me as I struggled to keep my eyes open. When our eyes met, her expression briefly betrayed surprise.

Pushing the professor aside, she approached me, placing her palm over my eyes and whispering softly.

“If you're tired, you should sleep. Don't force yourself to stay awake.”

But I've already slept enough.

I opened my mouth to respond, but a sudden rush of air prevented me from making a sound.

Is that... a respirator on my face?

Come to think of it, I did have trouble breathing before I collapsed.

With even my arms immobile, I couldn't express myself at all.

To make matters worse, the coolness of her hand soothed the heat from my eyelids, and it felt so good I grew drowsy.

I'm going to fall asleep again like this.

My memory ended there. I must not have been able to fight off the approaching sleep.

The soft sound of paper rustling woke me.

The fog clouding my mind began to lift, making everything feel sharper and more vivid.

How many times have I passed out and woken up now?

It felt like I'd repeated this cycle three or four times in a single day. It was starting to get tiresome.

How did my body end up like this?

It might be hard to believe now, but I wasn't always so sickly.

I had no physical talents, but as a child, I had only suffered as many colds as other kids my age.

It must have been after I was captured by the organization that my body deteriorated. Even so, I couldn't pinpoint exactly when.

At the organization, healing magic had been used excessively on me. I wondered if I'd ever even had a chance to sustain injuries severe enough to cause this.

Of course, the lack of visible scars had emboldened them to treat me roughly.

Could healing magic have its limits?

If it only made things appear healed, wasn't it crueler than not using it at all?

One or two uses might not have been an issue, but I practically lived on it. It's almost as if they were saying, We're going to make you die slowly, painfully.

Well, they were demons who wouldn't care about such things.

I chuckled faintly at the thought, causing the rustling of paper from my right to stop.

Turning my head slightly, I saw a woman in a white coat sitting nearby.

She was seated on a modern-looking chair, her legs crossed as she read a book.

"You're awake. If you agree, just nod your head slightly. It's probably hard to speak."

I reflexively tried to speak but ended up nodding instead.

The respirator was still on my face.

It didn't seem like I was having that much trouble breathing anymore, though. Couldn't they take it off?

I lifted my free hand—the one not hooked to an IV—and fiddled with the respirator.

The woman sighed, came closer, and gently moved my hand away.

Ugh, how annoying.

"The ones who brought you here have already left. They insisted I handle all the care and cleanup."

Good.

If they were still hovering around me, I wouldn't have been able to bear it.

Receiving selfless kindness once was enough.

"I don't know why I have to do this when there are nurses for such things. What a pain."

She tossed the book she had been holding backward.

The title caught my eye—it looked technical and daunting, a proper headache-inducing read.

No wonder she looks so tired. Reading that during her breaks won't help.

She grabbed a stack of papers from the side of my bed and began flipping through them quickly, frowning as she read.

“Now, about your test results... What exactly have you been doing to yourself? I can’t imagine how a body ends up in such a state.”

Good question.

I was curious about that myself.

I thought I’d taken decent care of myself—or at least tried to survive, which should count as maintenance.

“The organs are barely functioning—at best. Some are nearly beyond recovery, especially your lungs and heart.

Your blood is at two-thirds the level of a normal person’s. You’re malnourished.

And your bones are so brittle, they might break if touched too hard.”

Worse than I thought.

I guess there was a reason for the respirator after all.

The more she read, the colder her gaze became.

It was the look one gives a terminal patient with no hope for recovery.

If I just left this infirmary, returned to my daily life, and carried on as usual, wouldn’t I naturally die in a few months?

That would be perfect, honestly.

“If left as is, you’ll die. I’m not joking.”

And just as I thought that, she confirmed it.

It’s not exactly good news, but it feels nice, I thought.

As I smiled at the peculiar sense of satisfaction, the woman gave me a strange look.

It wasn’t one of pity or concern—it was more like she was observing a patient’s condition clinically.

Was she already beginning to see me purely as a patient to be treated?

“Stay hospitalized for the time being,” she declared.

Ah.

The one thing I absolutely didn’t want to hear had been said.

My body froze, and so did my expression.

My faintly good mood plummeted off a cliff in an instant.

So, they were telling me to leave my refuge and live confined in a strange place?

Unpleasant memories began to resurface.

I could already picture the expression I must have been making without needing a mirror.

I tried to protest, pulling off the respirator and sitting up, but before I could get a single word out, a fit of coughing overwhelmed me, and I collapsed back.

I couldn't breathe.

"Ah—hic—huff... Wh-what...?"

"Everything the doctor sets up has a purpose, dear patient. Don't make this harder and just lie down."

It felt like my lungs had shrunk to the size of a fist.

Even before I collapsed, it hadn't been this bad. Why now?

The woman sighed, replaced the respirator on my face, and pushed my shoulders back to lay me down.

"Even if you don't want to, you'll be forcibly kept here, just so you know. Oh, and Albe already covered the costs."

I let out a strained, raspy sound, utterly defeated.

Only then did I realize how long it took for my body to stabilize after that episode.

In the end, all I could do was watch as the woman left the room without uttering a single word in protest.

"Ah, right," she said, turning back just before disappearing through the door.

"I'm the Academy's medical director, Arlezienne Kayan. Pleased to meet you, Lady Remia Adelian."

She brushed her platinum hair—which just barely reached her shoulders—neatly behind her ear and gave a poised, noble bow in my direction.

Her deep navy-blue eyes shimmered brightly, almost captivatingly.

Still clutching my chest and struggling to catch my breath, I could only gape at her in silence.

What's with the sudden formal display?

It didn't suit her at all—it was completely at odds with the way she'd acted so far.

“...I'd heard you value etiquette, so I thought I'd make an effort. But if you're going to stare at me like that, it's a bit awkward,” she added brusquely, pouting slightly.

Etiquette?

If it's about my own conduct, fine, but forcing it on others was something I'd left behind in my days with the organization.

How did she know about that?

For some reason, I didn't like her.

And it definitely wasn't just because she was forcing me to stay hospitalized. Definitely not.

“Anyway, I'll be back soon. Get some rest in the meantime. Ring the bell if you're in pain.”

With that, she left the room.

Only then could I relax my tense mind.

Of course, it was only my mind that calmed.

Ever since the sleepiness had worn off and I became more aware of my body's condition, I had been feeling absolutely terrible.

My chest ached so badly I couldn't even sigh properly.

My fever hadn't broken—it had just lessened slightly.

Staring at the ceiling, I clenched and released my grip on the blanket repeatedly with each wave of pain, gripping so hard that wrinkles formed in the fabric.

I couldn't even keep my IV-drip hand still, and before long, I noticed blood had started to backflow.

I lay there in silence, sweating coldly, until drowsiness crept in again, and I closed my eyes.

Why have I become so prone to sleep?

I didn't like it, but in my current state, sleep felt like a much-needed escape.

As I drifted into slumber, worries about the future loomed in my mind.

What should I do now?

Judging by my condition, it seemed I wouldn't be discharged for at least a week.

Could I handle that without losing my sanity?

...Of course not.

Here, even getting through the nights would be a challenge.

A day or two might be bearable, but anything longer would drive me mad—or worse.

There's no knife.

I hated harming myself with my nails—it left messy, unpleasant marks.

Maybe I could find a syringe or a scalpel lying around.

Hospitals have those, don't they? Surely, I'd get a chance at least once.

Haha.

See? The fact that I'm even thinking about this means it's already over.

I knew I should stop, but instead, I was scheming for a way around it.

If the respirator wasn't on, I might have laughed out loud at how ridiculous I looked.

What a sight.

I really didn't want to continue, but just in case, I should keep an eye out for something sharp.

It's only "just in case."

If I find one, I'll use it, of course.

But it's still "just in case."

That's all it is.

"Excuse me, patient, I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but could you sit up for a moment?"

Roused from a light sleep, I opened my eyes slightly. My body felt so terrible that I was already irritated at being woken up.

"You have a visitor."

Visitor? I furrowed my brow, unable to respond verbally.

I didn't have anyone I'd call a "friend." That much, I was certain of.

"They're not your friend? Who else would visit someone in the hospital?"

"More like... something close to a friend. Less than a friend, more than a stranger...?"

"What kind of ambiguous relationship is that? Anyway, if you don't want to see them, I'll send them away."

"Ah, um, well, Lady... are you going to send me away?"

From the voice, I could already guess who it was.

Sena again, huh.

It made sense—she seemed close to the maid, so she probably heard about my condition through her.

I shook my head slightly.

If she'd come all the way here, there was no need to refuse to meet her.

Sena had, at some point, become a fairly familiar presence to me.

"Less than a friend, more than a stranger" was probably an apt description of our relationship.