

# PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

## Chapter 36

When I shook my head, the health teacher blinked as if he had just witnessed something unexpected.

Then, placing a finger on his lips, he began murmuring seriously.

“...Could it be that you’re not getting enough oxygen to your brain? Is there an issue with the respiratory connection?”

What is he even talking about?

I gave him a look of utter disdain, and only then did he signal to Sena.

What does he think he knows about me to act like this from the beginning?

It annoyed me a little, feeling like he’d gained insight into the fact that I only relented because it was Sena.

“Well, it’s just... it doesn’t seem like you’d do that kind of thing. But whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

Sena, who hesitantly stepped into the hospital room, glanced at the teacher still sitting with crossed legs on the chair behind me.

That person has such an unnecessarily old-fashioned air about him.

Just his presence behind me creates this aura that makes it hard to ignore.

“...Are you planning to stay here the entire time?”

“Why not? I’m your attending physician. Don’t mind me; I’ll just sit quietly.”

He replied so casually that Sena, unable to say anything further, shifted her gaze to me.

The clarity in her eyes quickly dimmed.

She pulled a chair closer to my bed and sat down, radiating a gloomy energy.

“Hmm. I said we’d see each other often, but I didn’t think it would be the very next day—and in a place like this, too.”

True enough.

To be honest, I didn't think you'd come.

I thought Ariana would be the first to rush in.

Where is she, and what is she doing to be so late?

"...How did things end up like this? I'd feel a bit sad if it were my fault. Should I have carried you in instead of just covering you with the blanket that time?"

I doubt it.

I've been gradually falling apart for a while now. Even if I had done something differently yesterday, the outcome wouldn't have changed.

It's just that until now, I've been forcing myself to look away.

I'd convinced myself this was how things were—optimistic that while I might creak, I wouldn't completely break.

That's what I wanted to tell her.

But I had no way to convey it, so I just blinked.

Sena, noticing my difficulty in communicating, turned to the health teacher for help.

"...Excuse me, isn't there a way to fix this?"

"Ugh, really. Such a bother."

Grumbling, she furrowed her brows but still rummaged through the shelves before handing me a pen.

Then she sat next to Sena and held up a board in front of me, clearly taking my limited mobility into consideration.

"You can move your right arm, can't you? Write it here."

My right hand trembled slightly, but it wasn't so bad that I couldn't write.

I carefully moved my hand and began filling the board.

I kept it short to avoid overexerting myself.

[It's not Sena's fault. It's just that, as always, I was careless.]

Of course, my handwriting wasn't as neat as usual, so it ended up looking like a child's scrawl.

I thought she might laugh at it, but instead, Sena seemed more sympathetic, her gaze filled with pity for my trembling hand.

Her compassionate stare prickled at my fingertips.

She always becomes strangely tender whenever it involves me.

Just because my hand trembles a bit, she looks at me like she's my mother or something.

"You speak well—no, I should say you write well."

[Are you mocking me?]

"No way. I just... it's pitiful. ...Does it still hurt a lot?"

Sena's calm gaze swept over my body, following the lines connected to me.

There were at least five or six IV drips—quite a lot, admittedly.

Because of those, I probably look even more like a proper patient.

Although I don't feel as much pain as I did earlier, so her concern feels a little exaggerated.

Maybe I'm just the type who doesn't feel a sense of crisis unless I physically experience it.

[I'm okay for now. The painkillers are kicking in.]

"Is that true? Really?"

"...No. They probably won't work anyway."

Sena's gaze sharpened again.

Couldn't she play along, just a little?

This isn't helpful at all.

I shot a mildly reproachful glance at the health teacher, but all I got in return was a small laugh, as if to say, "Isn't this ridiculous?"

"See? I can never believe what the Lady says about herself."

[The pain really has lessened, though.]

"That just means you've gotten worse. If your condition hasn't improved but the pain has subsided, that's a bad sign."

[How about leaving the room?]

"No. Judging by how you're speaking, it seems like I need to stay to act as your interpreter."

I should've kicked him out right away.

He's more meddlesome than I anticipated.

In the end, all he accomplished was heightening Sena's distrust of me.

Feeling suddenly drained, I closed my eyes and let out a sigh.

Whatever Sena interpreted from that, her voice grew low.

I'm not in pain. I'm really not.

"...If it's not my fault, do you have a chronic illness? Was your usual condition because of that?"

[I think so. To be honest, I don't know much about my own body. This is the first time I've ever been properly diagnosed.]

"I may not know much about medicine, but I can tell the Lady is indifferent to her own health."

[I'm not that bad.]

"No. If I'd dragged you to the infirmary the first time we met, maybe you wouldn't have hated me so much, but we also wouldn't have gotten closer."

If she'd done that, our relationship probably wouldn't have progressed this far.

While I was thinking this, the surprisingly harmonious duo of caregiver and teacher began lamenting missed opportunities.

"Exactly. If we'd caught it earlier, there might've been a quicker way to treat it. Such a shame."

"...Is it that bad?"

"It's not good. If we'd left it alone, she probably wouldn't have made it past a month."

Sena's face darkened.

It must have been a shocking statement for her.

What's so shocking about someone who's already dying, dying a little earlier?

She must think that if she can just keep me alive somehow, everything will be fine someday. Unfortunately, I don't share that hopeful outlook.

"How could you not know, even with insight magic? I feel like I want to die now."

[Why? Don't die.]

"...If the Lady recovers, I think I'll manage to survive."

[Goodbye. You were a decent person, Sena.]

“Your resignation is way too fast....”

Giving up quickly on what’s impossible is the survival strategy of the weak.

Even with all her dramatic words, I knew Sena wouldn’t die.

She wasn’t like me.

No matter how hopeless the situation, she’s the kind of person who doesn’t give up—someone who finds a way, a bright and resilient soul.

In contrast, the one most similar to me is Ariana.

From her mask-like demeanor to her thorny attitude and the softness hidden beneath, we have an absurd number of things in common.

It’s unfair.

Honestly, I want to return to my room right now.

Just staying here deserves some praise, doesn’t it?

I conveyed my thoughts in a written sentence.

[It’s fine since you came, even if it’s late. It’s not like I want to die, you know.]

“Yes, you’re here now. After collapsing, you were discovered by a maid and brought here, weren’t you?”

[I don’t think the process matters much.]

“It does matter!”

When she suddenly shouted, my body flinched reflexively.

The sound reverberated in my ears, like vibrations seeping into my head and echoing.

I wish she wouldn’t yell so loudly.

My senses were particularly sensitive right now.

I looked at Sena with such feelings, and even she seemed startled, lowering her head.

She whispered a small apology.

I hadn’t expected an apology.

Silence lingered in the room until she spoke again.

“...You will recover, right?”

That was something I was curious about as well.

It'd actually be easier to cope if there were no hope at all.

The health teacher nodded at Sena's question.

Apparently, I wasn't going to get the answer I wanted.

"Of course. Now that you're here, I won't let you die. Though you'll be hospitalized for a while."

[How long are we talking?]

"At least... six months.

And if your condition worsens, it could take longer."

Six months.

A laugh escaped me.

If this was the case, a month-long prognosis would've been better.

Six months trapped in this infirmary.

On top of that, the professor was footing the bill, so I couldn't even use money as an excuse.

This was the worst-case scenario for me.

Unwilling to let things slide, I quickly moved my hand to write.

[Can't this be replaced with periodic visits?]

"There's no way." "Of course not."

Their overlapping voices of refusal sounded even more resolute.

At this point, could they acknowledge something?

I might die before the treatment is even finished.

With a momentary pause, I mustered strength in my hand again.

[A prolonged stay is too much for me. I have personal reasons, among other things.]

"Warton? Is it that woman who's against your hospitalization? If that's it, don't worry. I'll go kill her right now."

[No, it's not that, so please don't kill her.]

Why was her guess so dramatically off the mark?

I quickly denied it, not wanting to witness the two people close to me embroiled in a deadly confrontation.

“...Then what is it? Convince me properly.”

At her words, I hesitated, pondering my response before deciding to write down the truth.

I was tired of making excuses.

Maybe living honestly for once wouldn't be so bad.

It's not like she'd believe a lie anyway.

[It's hard for me.]

“...?”

[It's hard to be anywhere else. Really, very hard.]

“...Why?”

[Do you want to know?]

“...I think I already do.”

Like before, Sena's eyes filled with tears, and she clenched them shut, lowering her head.

Whenever I say things like this, she reacts in a similar way.

So you've seen someone like me before.

Who was it?

If it's someone your age, maybe it was family.

Given the extreme trauma responses and obsessive tendencies, the ending probably wasn't good.

...Did they commit suicide?

With one simple deduction, the gears misaligned in my mind seemed to click into place.

I'm truly sorry, but I don't think that's entirely bad.

“I'm sorry, but no. That's already the minimum time we've estimated. Discharging you now would be suicidal.”

[Then may I ask for one favor?]

“Go ahead.”

[I enjoy crafts. Could I have some scissors, paper, glue, and a knife?]

“That much is fine, but... why?”

Sena grabbed the health teacher’s arm as if trying to crush it.

Her eyes, brimming with tears yet bloodshot and glaring fiercely, were locked on him.

She trembled violently, breathing heavily. It must’ve hit a nerve.

Is that what I looked like in other people’s eyes?

It’s not a pleasant sight.

Despite squinting at her, I continued to write with my pen.

I didn’t feel the need to comfort her.

Instead, I planned to prod at her wound, making it sting more.

In the end, when it comes to being in the same position, I’m no different.

What could I not understand with such a subject as this?

“No... No, you can’t.”

[Sena.]

“You can’t... Absolutely not...”

[Sena, please? I’ve already made concessions.]

“.....”

[If you don’t give me anything, I really don’t know what I might do.]

I might even kill myself.

It’s not even that hard, just a little pain and determination.

“Why? Why does it have to be this way?”

[Because there’s nothing else. There’s only one option, so what else can I do?]

“Haha... Haha... Hic... Yeah, it’s too late...”

It was too late long ago.

Still, you’re not too late, so don’t worry.

The Remia you’re dealing with was already too far gone the day she last saw Hans.

If Sena's at fault for anything, it's the misfortune of having encountered me, bloodied and broken.

To blame her for that would be overly cruel.

"So, what's the conclusion? Is it okay to give it to her?"

With Sena sobbing again and me staring blankly, the health teacher glanced between us before speaking in a tone completely out of place for the grave atmosphere.

"....."

"I'll make sure to supervise so it doesn't get out of hand. Don't worry."

Then, she added matter-of-factly.

At her words, Sena raised her head to look at the teacher.

I hadn't explicitly mentioned self-harm, but she seemed to have picked up on it.

It didn't seem like she intended to stop me either.

Should I be grateful for that?

"If you knew, shouldn't you try to stop her?"

"As long as she doesn't die, it's fine. People need an escape sometimes."

"You're insane."

"Even I think so."

Though Sena's gaze wasn't directed at me, it still stung my chest, as if she was watching someone truly insane.

The teacher, however, seemed completely unbothered, nodding in agreement.

Unnecessarily self-aware.

"Still, I'm probably the only one who can help Remia get better. Only a crazy person can understand another crazy person."

Her last words were especially ridiculous.

What's worse is that they were all true.

Not a single word was wrong, and that made it even harder to swallow.

Sena's frozen expression, her mouth slightly agape, said it all.

It seemed I'd found myself an unusual, eccentric, and practical attending physician.

Even if I didn't like her, the implicit permission made me feel oddly relieved.

Yeah. This is right.

This way, I won't die.

I'm so scared of dying that I cling to life desperately.

I must be pretty easy to handle, yet this health teacher was the first to figure that out.

That only a crazy person can understand another crazy person.

It's the truest thing I've ever heard.

Chapter 37

After that, Sena didn't bring up anything related to the issue.

The serious atmosphere dissipated quickly, replaced by casual, everyday topics.

It didn't seem like she had given up.

She probably thought it would be impossible to persuade me with words, especially since the health teacher had already agreed.

I wish she'd just let it go with words.

The thought of what she might do already scared me.

People like Sena, once they've decided on something, see it through to the end.

"Then I'll head back. I'll see you tomorrow too."

"You can't come tomorrow."

"Why not?"

We'd been chatting for about an hour when she finally seemed ready to leave, standing up to go.

If the health teacher hadn't interrupted, she would've probably rushed back right after class tomorrow.

Her glare, filled with hostility, turned toward the teacher.

“Visits are allowed only once every three days.”

“...Who decided that?”

“I did. And it’s better for the patient if there’s some time in between.”

“.....”

Sena didn’t argue further, but her discomfort was evident on her face.

Even after she left, the health teacher stared at the door for a while before sighing and ruffling my hair.

I looked at her with questioning eyes, not rejecting her touch, and she began to speak.

“You’re really quite pitiful, patient.

What an unfortunate fate you’ve been dealt.

A child who should be loved at this age is instead tearing themselves down.”

Though her words conveyed sympathy, her eyes did not.

Was it understanding?

It seemed like she knew something.

I couldn’t ask.

Right after Sena left, she took away my board and pen as if she didn’t intend to entertain questions.

Yet strangely, I didn’t feel particularly upset by it.

“I can’t save you, but I’ll do my best to make you comfortable, so don’t be too uneasy about this place.”

Fair enough.

That’s enough.

What more could I possibly ask for?

She’s healing my body, letting me have tools, and turning a blind eye to whatever I do.

Anything beyond that would be a luxury.

I meant it sincerely.

The slight hostility I’d initially felt toward her had long since cooled.

The sensation of being understood was unexpectedly comforting.

I suppose I've come to think this isn't so bad.

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Time passed slowly.

It seemed the health teacher hadn't lied.

The next day, beside my bed, lay various tools—cleaned and thoroughly disinfected blades.

Her attitude toward me didn't change either.

No matter what I did at night, she'd quietly erase the traces the next morning.

I wasn't sure if it was compassion or understanding, but it felt sincere.

While the maid's kindness guided me toward healthier habits, the teacher's approach was closer to indifference.

From a normal person's perspective, her way was hardly ideal, but from my point of view, it was perfect.

I even began to understand her earlier claim—that she was the only one who could help me heal.

The approach seemed effective.

Without anyone restricting me, there was no reason for my self-destructive behaviors to escalate.

Despite saying she'd monitor me to prevent things from getting worse, the teacher didn't intervene once over several weeks. My self-harm was less severe than it had been when I was left alone in my room.

For that reason, I managed to endure.

Even the act of carving and cutting myself began to feel dull and meaningless as my mind grew increasingly numb.

It wasn't as bad as I'd thought.

As my mental state stabilized, my physical condition improved rapidly.

A week later, I no longer needed the respirator.

The discomfort of being unable to speak or eat was resolved, but it was replaced by dozens of pills I had to take, leaving my stomach in a constant state of unease.

Since I couldn't eat properly, IV drips for nutrition became a routine part of my life.

But aside from that, it wasn't bad.

At some point, the pain subsided.

My body just felt weak, like it was floating in water, and sluggish.

I'd been told repeatedly that losing sensitivity to pain wasn't a good sign, but as long as I wasn't in pain, I didn't care.

So, I figured my condition was improving.

The number of pills I had to take was bothersome, but my body seemed to be recovering.

If I felt it was true, then it was true.

There was no need to pay attention to test results or diagnoses.

It wasn't bad.

Not at all.

Sena continued to visit me every three days without fail.

Fortunately, the drastic actions I'd feared never materialized.

She'd glance around as if trying to familiarize herself with the room's layout, but that was it.

Other than that, our visits were filled with casual conversations, just like her first visit.

She even brought small snacks, saying they were easy to swallow, for the days I had trouble eating.

Honestly, even those so-called easy-to-swallow snacks weren't manageable for me, but I ate everything she brought.

I couldn't waste her gifts.

Though I ended up vomiting it all later, I hoped she understood since I'd tried my best.

It was exhausting to stop the health teacher from scolding her for bringing food each time.

I wish you'd praise me for holding back my nausea in front of you.

Sometimes, when timing worked out, the maid would accompany her.

Even after a long time, she still shone brilliantly.

She looked more fitting for nobility than someone like me.

Seeing her somehow put my mind at ease, and I'd unconsciously pat her head.

My trembling, rough hands weren't soft at all, but she didn't avoid them and smiled sweetly.

It was oddly overwhelming.

Maybe noticing how much I liked her presence, Sena began to bring her along every time.

That was enough for me.

That was all I wanted from Sena.

Despite their consistent visits, Ariana didn't show up even once.

At this point, I began to wonder if something had happened.

The matter involving the professor, which I had dismissed as paranoia, resurfaced in my mind.

Even so, there was nothing I could do.

I was stuck here, unable to move—though even if I weren't, I had no means of obtaining information about her.

If it's Ariana, she'll handle herself well.

That thought allowed me to brush off the unease, though it lingered faintly.

Still, it wasn't bad.

From beginning to end, it wasn't bad at all.

I even thought, "Would it be okay to just die like this in bed?"

At first, I'd hated it so much.

But now, I feel satisfied with having even one person who understood me.

At night, I whittled away at my identity as a noblewoman, and by day, I passed time idly, welcoming the children with a smile every three days.

This routine, free of pressure and expectations, blurred the line between reality and dreams.

So, it wasn't bad.

Even if my final moments could remain this way, I wouldn't hesitate.

Yet, every time I thought that, I laughed at myself.

As if my wishes could ever be granted.

How do I still have the energy to hope after being betrayed so many times?

Deep down, I had wished to be proven wrong.

But, as if it were inevitable, my hope shattered one day with a loud explosion echoing from beyond the door.

What's going on now?

My gaze, which had been blankly fixed on the ceiling, shifted toward the door.

Moments later, it opened, and Ariana stumbled in, battered and clutching her bleeding forehead.

As soon as her eyes met mine, she bit her lip and began pulling out the IV lines connected to my hand, one by one.

I couldn't help but notice her hands trembling—not from concern that she might hurt me—but from the deep, red cracks on her skin, which continued to bleed unabated.

"Whatever's going on, it looks like you're losing a lot of blood. Shouldn't you stop the bleeding first?"

"There's no time. This is urgent."

She certainly looked rushed.

What on earth had happened to leave her like this?

Given the time of day, there was probably no one here but the health teacher. Did she... kill her?

I hoped not. That would make me feel a little sad.

"Did you get that injury fighting the health teacher?"

"...Yes."

"Then you're here to take me out of here, aren't you?"

"That's... correct."

"For a reunion after three weeks, this seems a bit extreme. If you'd come the first day, I would've followed you without a word."

I'd only just begun to adjust to life here.

Forcing me to change environments again felt excessive.

Even animals die quickly if you move them between enclosures this often.

To be honest, I didn't want to go.

It wasn't that I'd forgiven Ariana or let go of my frustrations about her, so a vague sense of rejection lingered.

Would it hurt to explain properly for once?

Every time, she acts on her whims and forces things her way—it's exhausting.

Perhaps noticing the refusal in my eyes, Ariana's expression twisted.

"...I know I'm too late. But... can't you trust me, just this once?"

I'm really doing this for you. If you stay here any longer..."

"What will happen?"

"....."

See? She doesn't plan to tell me anything.

And yet, she dares to claim she's acting for my sake, that things will change, and spouts such self-righteous nonsense.

Ariana pressed her lips together tightly and adjusted the IV lines she'd removed.

Then she scooped me up, supporting my legs and back.

It seemed she intended to take me with her, even without my consent.

It was so predictable that I didn't even feel like resisting.

I sighed and rested my head against her chest.

As we began moving, the shaking intensified, and nausea rose within me.

If this much shaking came from just a few steps, I'd probably throw up before we even left the infirmary.

That would be unpleasant.

As we stepped into the lobby, I saw that it was a complete wreck, as though something massive had torn through it.

Did she use some kind of wide-area magic?

I wasn't sure if this level of destruction was justified.

If I were the Emperor, I'd be furious about someone smashing my prized display cases.

The silence made me wonder if the health teacher was dead, but the sound of footsteps crunching over debris dispelled that notion.

There she was, tapping her stiff shoulders, her body just as battered as Ariana's.

Is it odd to feel relieved that she's alive?

"...They say kids these days are aggressive. Guess it's true.

Do you think it's okay to beat up your teacher like this?"

Unlike Ariana, who was tense and wary, the health teacher seemed entirely unfazed.

She waved her hand dismissively, as if to show she had no intention of attacking, and turned her gaze toward me.

"Patient, are you sure you can keep her alive?"

She may look fine on the outside, but inside, she's rotting away, on the verge of breaking apart.

If you can't take responsibility, you'd better stop now."

"I may not be as skilled as you, but I won't let her die. Never."

"Is that so? Well, in that case, I don't see why not. Take her.

Oh, there are some spare meds and equipment over there—don't forget to grab them."

Ariana's eyes widened in surprise.

She hadn't expected such a lukewarm response.

If someone wrecked my hospital like this to take a patient, I'd let them leave too.

There was probably something going on that I didn't know, but I wasn't even surprised anymore.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Like you don't understand anything.

We already talked about this, didn't we?"

"...Thank you."

“Sure, sure. I’ll take care of the mess here, so hurry up and go. And don’t come back.”

Ariana stared at her for a moment, then turned and left the infirmary.

I kept my eyes on the teacher until the very end.

She, too, watched me as I was carried away.

That was our farewell.

After weeks of being together, that was all.

Or perhaps, because we’d spent those weeks together, it could end like that.

Maybe I should be grateful we parted without cursing each other.

“...Ha.”

Once she disappeared from view, I closed my eyes.

There was no reason to keep them open anymore.

I focused all my attention on suppressing the nausea that surged within me.

That alone was exhausting.

Exhausting enough.

When the movement stopped and I opened my eyes, I was lying on a bed.

Looking around, I realized I was in Ariana’s room.

Was this where I was supposed to stay from now on?

As I tried to sit up, I heard a metallic click, and something cold brushed against my left wrist.

It was a handcuff.

Connected to the bed’s railing.

It was so absurd that I let out a laugh.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, my Lady. But... this was the only way.”

Ariana, the one who had cuffed me to the bed, was trembling and on the verge of tears.

Looking at her, I felt both disgusted and strangely curious.

“Why are you the one crying?”

I’m the one who feels like dying right now.

## Chapter 38

Every time I moved, the handcuffs around my wrist made a metallic clinking sound.

The only sounds in the room were the echo of the chains and Ariana's sobbing, as she sat there crying without answering a single one of my questions.

So, you're suffering.

I don't know why you're so distraught, but I'm sure there's some grand reason I can't comprehend.

It seems I'm expected to figure it out and come to terms with it on my own.

As always.

That's how it goes.

"So, will you let me attend classes?"

"...No."

"What about the bathroom?"

"...I'll bring you a chamber pot.

I'll clean it up neatly with magic."

"And meals?"

"I'll manage your diet, using IV drips alongside well-prepared meals..."

"I see."

Understood.

Your determination to never let me go is crystal clear.

I tugged on the handcuffs, only to feel a sharp pain in my wrist. The cuffs didn't budge.

Feeling drained, I leaned against the bed railing.

What should I do now?

Not in the sense of solving this situation, of course.

I was pondering how I should react.

If this had been me shortly after arriving at the academy, I would've thrown a fit, flailing and screaming.

If this had been me when Ariana had me under her thumb, I would've pulled at the cuffs until my arms broke.

If it had been me after becoming weary of life, I would've tried to end it all, no matter the method.

But now?

I wasn't as hopeless as when I first came to the academy. I wasn't as terrified of her as I was when she tormented me. And I wasn't so broken by life that I wanted to die.

Because of that, I didn't know what to do.

Ah, is this what exhaustion feels like?

Maybe so.

If this isn't exhaustion, what else could explain my lack of strength to even be angry when faced with a situation that should make me want to die?

And yet, the thought of quietly complying set off an alarm bell in my head.

How annoying.

If I'm going to be tired, I should fully succumb to it. If I'm going to hate this, I should fully commit to hating it.

Being stuck in this ambiguous state makes me waste energy on useless thoughts.

I turned my gaze to Ariana, who couldn't even meet my eyes properly.

Fine, I could endure this.

If it's just for a few days, sure.

It wouldn't be impossible.

Because it's Ariana.

I don't see the point in resisting her.

"When will you let me go?"

Come on, just say it.

Say it'll only be for about a week.

Say it.

“...Until you graduate. Please bear with it until then.”

“Ha.”

Her hesitant response was, of course, far beyond what I'd expected.

Graduate?

For me, that's synonymous with death.

She was essentially telling me to stay chained until my lifespan ran out.

Why not just kill me now?

It would be easier for both of us, and I wouldn't have to resent you.

Ah.

Do I even need to ask?

I could do it myself.

I pulled out the knife I'd kept in my pocket since I'd been hospitalized.

Without hesitation, I slashed my neck, severing my carotid artery.

I have endless respect for the health teacher, who had provided me with unrealistically sharp blades, saying they were easier to treat with clean cuts.

From the jagged wound, crimson liquid began to gush out, not in trickles but in torrents.

It looked horrific, but it didn't hurt much.

Just the pain you'd expect from slashing your throat—nothing more, nothing less.

Maybe it felt so trivial because I'd experienced far worse or because my senses had dulled. Either way, it wasn't a big deal.

The sensation of vitality draining from me wasn't exactly pleasant, but it didn't matter.

Looking at Ariana made all those thoughts vanish.

“Remia...? Why...?”

Ariana struck the knife from my loosened grip and hurriedly pressed her pale hands against the gash in my neck.

Her trembling eyes and ashen face, as if she had never anticipated this, were oddly satisfying.

If only I weren't starting to lose consciousness, I would've laughed at her.

Look at that face.

It's almost inhuman.

You helped make me this way. Partially, at least.

Why did you tie yourself to someone like me—a wretched, broken doll?

Despite Ariana pouring magic into the wound, slowly closing it, the life that had already drained from me wouldn't return.

Perhaps it was because my body had been on the brink of collapse to begin with.

Even as I felt myself dying in Ariana's trembling arms, it wasn't all that bad.

"The blood... there isn't enough blood. The transfusion pack... the blue blood pack...."

Ah, right. They did say I was always short on blood.

They say hearing is the last sense to go. Even as my vision blurred, my ears remained sharp.

Ariana seemed to be struggling to find a transfusion pack.

I heard the crashing of shelves and, finally, the sound of her picking up the knife I'd dropped.

Ahahaha.

No way.

The knife that had cut my neck now left a wound on Ariana's wrist.

What a grand slam for that knife.

Judging by the amount of blood pouring out, it seemed she'd severed an artery.

"My Lady, open your mouth. Quickly."

She pressed her bleeding wrist to my lips and began pouring the blood into my mouth.

Blood transfusions don't work this way.

Is it some different method in this world?

I don't know, but I preferred this to having it injected into my veins.

I just wouldn't swallow.

"Swallow! Hurry! Why... Why are you trying to die...?!"

"I'm trying to save you—to help you!"

"Cough! You... already... know why..."

I spat out all the blood that had entered my mouth and smiled faintly.

You already know why I'm doing this.

Among all the people in the academy, you know my circumstances better than anyone. So, saying things like that feels a bit cruel.

I don't expect you to understand, but I had hoped for at least some mutual respect.

Was that asking for too much?

You said you'd handle it, so I foolishly allowed myself to hope.

And again, I was the idiot.

How many times has this happened now?

"I know. I know, but... I just don't understand. Not at all.

Is it really such a big problem that I care about you and don't want you to die...?"

Ariana shut her eyes tightly, then sucked the blood from her wrist into her mouth.

Then, she pressed her lips against mine.

Wait, this—

No.

Don't.

Forcing my lips apart, her tongue invaded my mouth, pinning my tongue down as she pushed the blood into my throat.

I could've resisted if I tried, but it all happened too suddenly, and I was too flustered. Before I realized it, I'd swallowed a mouthful.

After that, I didn't have the chance to do anything.

Gulp, gulp, gulp.

For several seconds, the only sound in the room was the pathetic noise of me swallowing. Then, as she pulled away, the desperate gasps of our breathing joined the mix.

A string of crimson stretched between us before breaking.

When the blood I couldn't swallow dribbled down my chin, Ariana's hand gently wiped it away.

The effect was dramatic.

My blurred vision cleared, and some strength returned to my limp limbs.

Annoyingly, consuming blood orally seemed to be an effective treatment.

"Hah... Hah... I'm sorry... but this is partly your fault, my Lady."

"Heh, ha! My fault?"

I did the only thing I could, and that's somehow my fault?"

"...Then now, even the only thing you could do is gone, isn't it?"

I'm sorry, but I have no intention of sitting back and watching you die."

Though her wrist still bled profusely, Ariana, now oddly flushed despite her injury, pressed the wound to my mouth.

I had no choice but to drink.

A faint sense of rebellion stirred within me, so I let half the blood spill out instead of swallowing. Her expression darkened.

"You're not swallowing properly.

If that's the case, I'll have to feed you by mouth ag—"

"Don't you dare!

If you try it again, I'll bite off either your tongue or mine and end this once and for all!"

No matter the intention, any action that could be interpreted as sexual was utterly revolting to me.

I might harm myself, but I never let my suffering spill over to others.

But if this kind of situation repeats, who knows what I might do.

Even a small dog bites when provoked.

So, please.

“...If you don’t like it, stop wasting it.

I’m starting to feel dizzy, too.”

Hearing that, I drank obediently.

I didn’t want to drag this out and risk Ariana collapsing.

I endured the metallic taste, holding back the nausea until it became unbearable.

Finally, after I vomited most of it onto the blanket, Ariana healed her wrist wound.

I’d ended up spitting blood in a different way.

Anyone unaware of the context would’ve been horrified.

As I continued dry-heaving, Ariana looked at me with a gaze full of worry—a feeling that disgusted me.

Her hand gently patted my back, seemingly unbothered.

Infuriatingly tender.

“Just... kill me. Please.

Living out the rest of my life here is worse than dying.”

“...I’m sorry.

But if you survive, eventually everything will be okay.

Even now, look—you’re doing much better than before.

If you just keep living, time will make things better.”

Better than before? What part of me is better?

That saying about time healing all wounds only applies to people who have time.

I came to the academy to spend my last days peacefully, not to get battered around like this!

I glared at her and screamed.

“That again! Again and again!

What do you mean ‘better’? What part of me is better?

I’m just dragging myself along, unable to die!

I'm too exhausted to even react anymore, so I just lie still—but if that looks like improvement to you...

Forget it. At least tell me.

Why are you keeping me tied up? You know I'm your dog already. Isn't that enough?"

I was angry.

Fury burned inside me.

The dying embers in my mind reignited.

Even so, I struggled to suppress it, conceding just enough to beg for a reason.

But, as expected, what I got in return was—

"No."

A refusal.

I didn't even have the strength to question her anymore.

"If I tell you, or if I let you go, you'll surely go off to die.

I refuse to let that happen.

Even if it means you'll hate me so much you'd rather die than endure it, I'll bear that burden."

"...And just now? That wasn't me trying to die?"

"No. But...

Just now, my Lady neither tried to sever her arm to escape nor pierced her brow to die instantly.

You haven't completely overcome your fear of death, your fear of pain.

There's still a sliver of will to live inside you."

"And how would you know that?"

"I can tell just by looking."

I'm the one suffering—so why are you the one enduring it?

It's my feelings—how could you possibly know them?

Am I your possession?

Or maybe your pet?

At the very least, are we even family?

Why do you think you can take ownership of me, even over myself, when you're none of those things?

That's all I have left.

"I see, sure."

Her response was utterly nonsensical, but I didn't argue.

I just felt horrible.

Horrible, horrible, horrible.

The suffocating feelings of helplessness, disgust, and fear overwhelmed me.

And now, on top of everything else, I felt betrayed. By Ariana, who I thought had gotten better.

Maybe the problem is that I'm still thinking at all.

If I just gave up entirely, like a doll, I wouldn't need to hope or feel disappointed.

"I was surprised you didn't drink the blood, but that was my fault for not realizing we were out of transfusion packs.

I need to stay sharp—for your sake."

"...You really are..."

I couldn't finish my sentence.

The kiss from earlier seemed to have triggered something, and I began struggling to breathe again.

Ariana, as if she had a sixth sense, immediately noticed and placed the respirator she'd brought from the infirmary over my face.

The discomfort of being forcibly laid down made me try to sit up, but all it did was tighten the restraint on my free wrist.

Now both my arms were bound, spread apart. How delightful.

With nothing left to do, I simply rolled my eyes around the room.

Spatters of blood had flown everywhere—on the walls, the door, even the ceiling had droplets clinging to it.

It made me laugh.

What now?

## Chapter 39

Thankfully, as she had initially promised, I wasn't chained up 24/7.

When I needed to use the bathroom or eat, Ariana would remove the handcuffs.

Sometimes, under her watchful eye, I was even allowed to move freely around the room.

Of course, none of that changed the fact that Ariana never let me leave the room.

She acted as if I were a premature infant in an incubator—one step outside her sight and I might die.

It was an obsessive fixation, bordering on pathological.

When she had to leave the room, she made sure I couldn't move an inch by tightening the handcuffs.

Then she'd look at me with guilt-filled eyes that made me want to curse her out.

Whatever excuse she gave the professors, no one came looking for me.

Her claim that she'd keep me locked up until graduation seemed entirely sincere.

Is this what it feels like to wither away?

Sitting hunched in a corner of the dimly lit room, my face buried in my knees, I'd sink into existential doubt.

I had no purpose. I was as useful as a corpse, except I cost far more to maintain than simply burying one.

I was tied to a bed, provided with meals, forced to take medicine for my poor health, and even given mental care now and then to prevent suicide.

At this point, I was worse than a corpse.

"Well, I guess I do have one use."

It wasn't intentional, but I'd noticed Ariana seemed to have a sexual attraction to me.

Whenever we bathed together or lay side by side, her reactions made it hard not to notice.

Sometimes, she'd turn her back to me and—

Yeah, I'd catch her pleasuring herself.

She must have thought I was asleep, but I've been such a light sleeper lately that her moans inevitably woke me up.

I don't know why she's attracted to someone like me.

Maybe she's just a lesbian and naturally feels desire for a woman she lives with.

Either way, if she finds me arousing, I suppose I do have one purpose.

Honestly, she might as well direct it toward me instead of hiding and dealing with it alone.

I hate the idea, but...

Even if I hate it, it might be better than continuing this lifeless existence.

At least it's not some hairy, pot-bellied man.

It's a hundred times better to be handled by someone like Ariana, who at least looks pleasant on the outside.

Yeah, I can handle it. Totally.

Just as I reached this conclusion, the door opened, and Ariana returned from wherever she'd been in the morning.

I greeted her with a broad smile, eager to share my decision.

"You seem to be in a good mood.

It's been a while since I've seen you smile like that.

Were you thinking of something funny?"

"Ariana, want to have sex with me?"

"...What?"

She stared at me in shock, as if doubting her own ears.

I responded with a chuckle.

Her eyes, initially filled with confusion and a hint of excitement, dimmed into her usual reserved expression upon seeing my smile.

She must think I've gone mad.

If someone who had been acting like a lifeless doll suddenly smiled and made such a suggestion, anyone would think they were crazy.

But I'm serious.

I've thought about it long and hard.

"You don't like things like that, though. Why the sudden change?"

"If it's with you, I don't mind. Do you dislike me, Ariana?"

"...Of course I like you. But..."

"Then there's no problem. Come here. I've had experience with women before. I'll take the lead."

Smiling sweetly, I offered my cuffed hand to her, the chains jingling softly.

If she took it, I planned to pull her in for a kiss.

But Ariana simply stared at my extended hand for a long time, showing no intention of taking it.

When I shook my hand slightly in encouragement, she finally opened her mouth.

"My Lady."

"What are you waiting for? Come here already."

"...You're trembling.

Don't push yourself."

I glanced down at my hand.

It was trembling uncontrollably, as though I had some kind of disorder.

It wasn't just my hand.

I was shaking all over, like someone terrified out of their mind.

It was almost pitiful.

Sure, I hated this, but couldn't my body at least cooperate for once?

Nothing ever goes the way I want.

Trying to steady the tremors, I grasped my wrist. Ariana sighed, as if she'd expected this.

Heh, this isn't good.

Now it's a matter of pride.

“Why are you so desperate to hurt yourself?

When I stopped you from cutting yourself, you moved on to your mind?

Offering your body like this to someone you don't even want—it's nonsensical.”

“I like you.”

“You like me? Then don't hurt yourself—”

“You love me. You're attracted to me. You want to have me, don't you?”

“Wha—what?”

Ah, I flustered her.

I shouldn't feel this way, but it's oddly satisfying.

“How did you...?”

“Did you think I wouldn't know? You've been so obvious.

I've seen you using me as your little fantasy fuel countless times. Don't even think of denying it.”

“Ah, uh... ugh...”

I grabbed Ariana's shoulder and pulled her closer, watching her face flush red as she bowed her head.

She didn't resist, letting herself be drawn in until we were inches apart.

I could feel her hot breath against my cheek, a clear sign of her growing arousal.

Look at that.

She's already had her way with me a thousand times in her mind, yet she gets like this when she's actually in front of me.

Be honest with yourself.

Stop pretending to be pure and just give in to your instincts.

“So don't lie to yourself. You want me, don't you?”

When the person you desire the most comes to you, asking for it, why would you say no?

Are you such a novice, even in this, that you can't handle it?”

“I—I locked you up to protect you, not to assault you!

Don't taint my intentions. They're pure and—"

Sure, pure intentions.

Locking someone up without laying a finger on them—

That's something only someone truly selfless could do.

But just because it's done with good intentions doesn't mean those intentions are pure.

Why did you go to such lengths for me in the first place?

There must have been a reason.

It's probably because you like me.

...You know what, Ariana?

The moment you get defensive, you've already lost.

Isn't there a saying that strong denial is an admission?

By reacting so strongly, you've essentially admitted that, beneath your "good intentions," there's a desire directed at me.

I dropped my smile.

"Good intentions, my ass.

You've been looking at me with lustful eyes for ages, so stop pretending otherwise.

Back where I'm from, there's a term for it—'eye assault.' Though, I guess you wouldn't know that."

"I'm not saying I didn't have sexual thoughts, but I held back!

Even if I gave in to my instincts, I didn't act on them!"

"Good job, then.

But now, you don't have to hold back anymore. Come on, let's—"

"Stop trying to make this seem natural!"

Taking advantage of her moment of agitation, I tried to sneak in a kiss, but she pushed me away, shoving me back onto the bed.

Despite her dizzy eyes, she somehow always noticed things like this.

She sank to the floor beneath the bed, her legs pressed tightly together, her face bright red, and her breathing ragged.

Her trembling movements made it obvious she was barely keeping herself in check.

It looked like she was already at her limit.

Why was she holding back so much?

“If you’re too rough, it’ll hurt.

I am still a patient, after all.”

“...Oh, right.

I’m sorry. I panicked... This isn’t how it’s supposed to be....”

Regret flickered in her softening eyes.

This was the moment to push further.

I stretched my body, lifting my arms into a pose that highlighted certain areas.

Would she like this?

Well, I liked it.

Though my body was too skinny to show much, her stolen glances suggested it worked.

Seems she has a thing for the frail and vulnerable type.

That explains why she likes me.

“What kind of patient seduces their caretaker?”

“I was just stretching,” I said, grinning playfully.

Ariana sighed, pressing her temples with her fingers. Then, after a pause, she removed my handcuffs and climbed onto the bed to sit across from me.

For a moment, I thought she was finally ready, but instead, she smoothed the bedsheets and launched into a lecture.

“...Both beasts and humans have sexual desires.

But what makes us human is that we don’t act on them whenever we want!

If I’d just ignored it, I could’ve endured to the end.

So why is it that you, who recoiled from a single kiss before, are now—”

“Oh, I see. I understand what you’re saying.

You locked me up, drove me insane, and now you’re saying you can’t bring yourself to assault me? Got it. You’re practically a saint, aren’t you?”

If you're going to drive me mad, you should at least take responsibility for it.

Why can't you understand that beating me into shape would be better for me than leaving me like this?

It's this hypocrisy that makes Ariana, the "changed" version of her, so nauseating to deal with.

Besides, it's not like this would be assault.

I'm the one asking for it. If anything, it'd be reverse assault.

"Sure, it's a bit annoying that we're both women, but whatever. Let's start.

I'll undress first, okay? Even though I'm thin, I still look like a woman, don't I?"

"...Stop."

Too exhausted to think anymore, I used my free hands to undo my shirt.

Holding the fabric tightly, I began sliding it off my shoulders, inch by inch.

Each small movement made Ariana flinch, her trembling figure utterly ridiculous.

Actions speak louder than words, after all.

Besides, she's the one who uncuffed me.

Isn't that implicit consent?

If she was really against this, she wouldn't have loosened the restraints.

Unless her kink is being overwhelmed by the "prey." That'd be a bit too perverted for my taste.

But oh well, I guess the desperate party has to put in the effort.

I half-removed my top and began crawling toward her.

"See? You're at your limit, aren't you? You can't hold back anymore.

You've been struggling alone for so long—just take it out on me. I'm giving you permission."

I nestled into her lap, pressing my face against her chest and resting a hand lightly there.

Despite the closeness, there was still plenty of space between us, thanks to her taller frame.

Her racing heartbeat pounded in my ears.

Her breathing was so fast it made me worry she might pass out.

If it were me, I'd have already fainted. Would Ariana be okay?

"Please... stop... Just stop... Why, why are you doing this to me...?"

"Why? I'm not doing anything bad.

I'm just giving you permission to do what you already want to do."

She was practically sobbing now. I asked as if I didn't already know.

I'd openly admitted her attraction to me—what more reason did she need to stop resisting?

Even if she's worried about me, this seems excessive.

She locked me up without hesitation, so why is this where she draws the line?

"I don't want to regret this...

I want to be the one person who lived selflessly for you. Without selfish motives."

Ah.

So that's what she's worried about.

I smiled gently.

You could've told me that earlier.

I've had my answer prepared for a while.

"It's too late for that, you damn hypocrite."

That seemed to be the trigger.

Something snapped into place—or out of place—inside Ariana.

She stared at me, her body frozen, blinking slowly.

Her once-vacant expression shifted as her parted lips closed, growing darker and more dangerous with each passing second.

Her unfocused eyes went completely wild.

Honestly, it was terrifying.

Maybe I pushed her too far.

I started to pull away instinctively, but her hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

I tried to shake her off but quickly gave up.

Her grip was tight. Painfully so.

“So, that’s how it is.”

A small mutter.

“I see now.”

Her voice was steady, filled with certainty.

She pulled me into an iron embrace, wrapping her arms around my back and pinning me beneath her weight.

My clothes came undone naturally as her lips pressed against mine. Something hot and wet slipped into my mouth.

Her right hand slid over my stomach and slipped under my underwear.

Her left hand flicked my bra aside and began fondling my chest.

To put it plainly, that’s how it went.

The rest of the night followed a similar pattern. I didn’t sleep a wink.

She was rougher than I’d expected.

It made me wonder just how much she’d been holding back.

And embarrassingly, by the end, I was practically begging her to stop.

I cried the whole night.

Both above and below.

Chapter 40

The long night finally passed, and morning arrived.

It was only then that Ariana’s rationality seemed to return, leaving her trembling uncontrollably.

She kept apologizing, saying she’d lost her mind, calling herself insane.

She cried so much that just hugging and consoling her became a chore.

I kept telling her it was fine.

I tried to get up to put my clothes back on, but my body refused to cooperate. My waist wouldn’t hold any strength.

I tried ignoring it for a while, but my body ached.

A fever seemed to be setting in as my head throbbed and my mind clouded. Every muscle in my body screamed after being tossed around all night. Cold, hot, and painful.

It felt like my body was about to succumb to a severe illness.

Well, considering I'd essentially become a sex toy, it wasn't surprising.

I personally prefer gentler treatment, but last night was rough.

Not that I had much room to complain since I initiated it.

Giving up, I started stroking her back with my bare hand, still unclothed.

"It's fine, Ariana.

I gave you permission, didn't I? It's not your fault."

"I-I'll never... sob, do this again... sniff... even if you tempt me... hic, I'm so sorry..."

She promised there wouldn't be a next time.

I just smiled at her.

I know what kind of creature humans are.

Humans can't fully suppress their desires.

If it had been her first experience, maybe. But after succumbing to those desires and fully indulging in them?

Sure, she could say that now, but could she really promise it wouldn't happen again?

I highly doubted it.

"It's fine if you give in.

Honestly, I didn't mind.

I guess my preferences haven't changed—I still prefer women over men. Much more."

It had been painful and scary at times, but overall, it was tolerable.

Physical pleasure is still pleasure, after all.

And Ariana is... well, she's beautiful.

If I had my old body back in my homeland, she'd have been way out of my league.

“Didn’t mind’...? What...?”

“What else? I’m a person too, you know.

I have sexual desires. If I don’t release them, they build up.

I’ve gone without for so long because I don’t like the idea of it, so maybe I was starving for it more than most.”

“N-No, not that... What do you mean, you prefer women...?”

Her tears abruptly stopped, and she looked at me with a mix of confusion and panic. I tilted my head, then let out a small “Ah.”

Of course, it’d be an important issue for her.

But was there really a need to ask?

The fact that I initiated it should’ve made my preferences obvious.

Did she seriously think I forced myself to go through with it, hence her excessive guilt?

...If you’d been a man, Ariana, I wouldn’t even have tried.

I might’ve been crazy, but I wasn’t that crazy.

Still, if she wanted an answer, I could give her one.

“I’m a lesbian too.”

“...Oh.”

Ariana’s face lit up instantly.

I could easily tell what she was thinking.

I could’ve corrected her, but I didn’t feel the need to.

“From that perspective, your technique wasn’t bad, Ariana.

A little rough, but that’s partly my fault for riling you up.”

“What kind of... That’s not comforting at all...”

“Ahaha, really?”

Her mood seemed lighter, though.

I doubt anyone would be upset to hear their first sexual partner say it wasn’t bad.

She seemed adequately placated, and I smiled faintly.

The truth is, I didn't think it was bad either.

The process was questionable, but the result?

The stimulation had served its purpose—it shook my spirit, which had been wasting away.

Even though I hadn't slept at all, I felt more mentally energized than I had in days.

That alone made it worth it.

You could call it a different kind of self-harm, sure.

Not that I enjoy self-harm—I don't.

It's just that it's all I have.

I still hate pain.

So doesn't it make sense to try replacing it with something else, even if just a little?

This is fine.

It's helped me hold on a little longer.

That's enough for me.

After about an hour, my fever worsened, and I became bedridden.

My chronic lung condition flared up again, and for the next week, I was in and out of a critical state.

While nursing me back to health, Ariana began blaming herself again.

Once I recovered, however, it was as if she was making up for lost time—she was rougher than ever.

I knew it would happen.

Sometimes, I think humans' brains might as well be in their lower halves.

Even if it's disgusting, I won't blame you.

It's instinct, after all.

If anyone's at fault, it's me for being too weak to resist you.

From that day on, my life became a cycle of falling ill and being ravaged every few days.

At first, Ariana felt guilty. But when I didn't say anything, she began to accept this routine as normal.

Maybe she even thinks I'm enjoying it.

You've been fooled, Ariana.

Sure, I said I'm a lesbian, but I never said I liked you.

For someone I always thought was so mature, it turns out you're surprisingly simple-minded.

Seeing you act your age for once, even as I was pinned beneath you, made it hard not to laugh.

Though your actions are anything but childlike.

You're such a beast that after every session, I'm left completely drained.

"Haha."

Still, it's bearable.

Not enjoyable, but not awful either.

It's hard, painful, exhausting, and it feels like I'm dying.

But it's still better than doing nothing.

It's enough to live on.

"Remia... do you like it?"

"Maybe..."

It's enough to live on.

Really.

\*\*\*

In Ariana's room, the bed was positioned near the window.

At night, I would lean against it and gaze at the night sky.

Not for any particular reason.

Being confined to the room left me with nothing to do, so stargazing became the only tolerable activity I could find.

It almost made me feel like the tragic heroine of a story.

Like someone trapped in a tower, left too long for the night sky.

If I were the protagonist, my story would likely end with me throwing myself from the tower under the guise of “starting a journey.”

Though “longing” feels too glamorous a word, it had become a small hobby of mine, one I found solace in.

Over time, it became such a routine that I could now tell the date just by observing the moon’s phases.

Even this foolish brain of mine managed to retain something through repetition.

It was surprising to realize I still had the potential for growth.

That night, as I gazed at the usual sky, Ariana sat beside me and struck up a conversation.

“Do you like stars?”

“If I had to say, I don’t.”

“Really? I thought you might since you’re always looking at them every night.

Oh, is it just because there’s nothing else to see...?”

She hit the nail on the head, and I shrank back slightly.

She was right; there wasn’t anything else to look at.

But it wasn’t the stars I liked.

I liked the moon.

Not the stars, those grotesque shards of glass embedded in the black canvas.

“...It’s not that.

I was just looking at the moon.”

“The moon...?”

But tonight, there isn’t one.”

I glanced back at the sky.

Sure enough, there were only countless stars twinkling as if they might spill out of the heavens.

No matter how hard I searched, the moon was nowhere to be seen.

Of course not—tonight was the new moon.

It wasn’t as if I had been hallucinating.

I had merely been staring at the empty space where the moon usually hung.

“The visible moon is something you can see every night to the point of boredom, right?”

So, I figured, maybe the unseen moon holds more value. Just a silly thought.”

“I see... I misunderstood.”

“It’s an understandable mistake.

The stars do look particularly beautiful tonight.”

“...That’s true. That’s why I thought you might be watching them.

On nights without the moon, the stars shine the brightest.”

She was right. Tonight, the stars were especially brilliant.

Staring at the crowded sky, so full of stars it felt like they might fall, I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed despite my dislike of them.

Even in my homeland, you wouldn’t see a view like this, even in the countryside.

Although the sky looks the same every night, tonight’s view felt more poignant—perhaps because the moon wasn’t there.

The moon here was so large and bright that it swallowed up many of the faint stars nearby.

And yet, during the new moon, it was completely overshadowed by the sun, which was larger and brighter still.

A fitting bit of karmic irony.

“You’re right. Usually, there are so many stars hidden by the moon’s light.

It’s incredible how many it conceals just to shine alone.”

Perhaps that’s why my favorite phases of the moon are the full moon and the new moon.

One is when the moon is fully illuminated.

The other is when it vanishes entirely.

It might seem ironic, but their stark opposition makes them more alike.

Even at their brightest or darkest, they fail to coexist with the stars around them.

A being whose disappearance benefits everyone—it's both sad and laughable.

Still, I can't help but envy it.

The moon always has something with it, whether it overshadows or is overshadowed.

It's never truly alone in the night sky.

"...I don't know. If I were the moon, I think I'd feel lonely.

To know that the things lying dormant in my presence only come alive when I'm gone...

What's that supposed to mean? It's almost like being shunned."

"I think I'd like it.

Even at its brightest, the moon still has a few truly brilliant stars by its side.

Isn't it better to have a handful of close companions than to maintain shallow ties with thousands?"

"Maybe... you're right."

Ariana nodded faintly, pressing her temples as if she had a headache.

She seemed confused.

I hadn't expected her to think about it so seriously.

"Still, comparing the moon to people is difficult.

Its scale is too grand, and it makes everything seem similar."

"...True. It's ultimately a false comparison.

After all, the moon always has stars by its side."

Though it's a little pathetic to admit, I've occasionally felt jealous of the moon.

Drunk on late nights, I would feel a sense of camaraderie with it—only to feel betrayed when I saw the stars lingering nearby.

Perhaps I watch the moon every night because I project onto it.

With no friends or family of my own, I might be treating the moon as my companion.

A slightly more accomplished friend who stirs my envy.

"A handful of companions is more than enough for a person.

Comparing having none to having thousands is an entirely different matter.”

Amused by my own thoughts, I chuckled softly, but Ariana’s words piqued my interest. I turned to her.

None or thousands.

That is an interesting question.

Far more worth pondering than the earlier one.

I mulled it over briefly, then grew curious.

Which would Ariana choose?

“...What about you, Ariana?”

“Me?”

“The thing you just mentioned—none or thousands.

If you had to pick one, which would it be?”

“Oh. I guess... Hmm.”

After a brief moment of thought, she answered.

“Thousands are far too many.

I’d rather live alone.”

It wasn’t a surprising answer, but it did catch me off guard.

I’d expected someone like Ariana to prefer living among people.

Then again, it was unfair to call her “normal.”

She had spent her life forcibly changing masks, surviving in the arms of various hosts. If anything, liking people would’ve been stranger.

“What about none versus a handful?”

“Oh, continuing the game, huh? In that case...”

This time, she deliberated longer, her expression more thoughtful.

When she answered, her voice carried a quiet conviction.

“I’d still prefer to live alone.

I guess I really don’t like people.”

I was a little surprised.

Her misanthropy ran deeper than I’d expected.

Could it be that she liked me because of a sense of kinship?

Our similarities seem to crop up in the strangest places.

I hesitated before asking one last question.

If her answer to this was the same as mine, I might start seeing her differently.

“And... none versus just one?”

“That one...”

There was no hesitation.

With a picture-perfect smile, she met my gaze and spoke with quiet intensity.

“If that one is someone I love, I’d want to live with them.”

There was no need for her to explain who that “one” was.

Her eyes, her body, and her past actions had already made it clear.

Thank goodness.

At least in this, we’re different.

“I see.”

A face flashed in my mind.

Unfortunately for Ariana, it wasn’t hers.

“So do I.”

I wondered when I would finally leave this place.

Just a moment ago, the star-filled sky had seemed beautiful.

Now, it felt completely empty.