

# PLEASE DON'T DIE, MY LADY

## Chapter 6: Fragrance

Was it back in high school? There was a poem our literature teacher emphasized, saying it would be on the exam.

The title... right, Fragrance.

It was a famous poem praised for its poignant depiction of nostalgia and longing for one's hometown.

I memorized it back then without much thought.

I wasn't interested in the profound meanings hidden in the poem.

After that, I didn't look at it even once for a long time.

Yet now, out of the blue, a single line has resurfaced in my mind.

"How could that place ever be forgotten, even in dreams?"

Perhaps because it best captures my current state of mind.

It seems I only came to understand it after truly experiencing the poet's feelings myself.

Maybe what I feel is even worse.

At least the poet had a way to return.

As for me—

I seem to be stricken with a relentless homesickness.

Though, truthfully, I'm starting to forget.

And yet, I can never entirely let go.

No matter how much time passes, no matter how blurred everything about reality becomes, there's this one strange sensation that grows sharper and clearer.

And I can't even definitively say what that one thing is.

I can only guess—maybe this is what they call homesickness.

In the end, homesickness isn't merely about yearning for a physical hometown.

It's the deep ache of someone, exhausted by the hardships of living in a foreign land, succumbing to a biased nostalgia for the past—a past when life felt happier and more comfortable, back in the days when they were still at home.

Whether it truly was that way or merely seems so in retrospect doesn't matter much to someone afflicted with homesickness.

Don't older folks often say things like, "Those were the good old days"?

If we can define a temporal home in addition to a spatial one, then that, too, is homesickness.

A mental escape to the idealized haven of youth—a refuge from the harshness of the present.

If that's the case, isn't it fair to wonder:

Am I really longing for my ordinary past? Was it truly my home?

Or is it merely an illusion created by Remia Adelian to escape reality?

Though the memories are fragmented, parts of them remain vividly clear, enough to offer a hazy answer.

Probably, I think.

But as more time passes, when I truly can't remember anything, will I still be able to answer?

By then, if I've fully immersed myself in this world, even if reality does exist, there might be no reason to favor it over an illusion.

What meaning is there in a refuge from which one cannot escape?

At that point, wouldn't fleeing into an illusion become the true escape?

The person I used to be would vanish, leaving only a mere stand-in for Remia Adelian.

Or perhaps, by then, we would have fully merged into one.

That might be far better than this current, ambiguous state of separation.

No matter how much I try to improve my situation, the will of the duchess constantly thwarts me, driving me mad.

If we had been one from the beginning, perhaps things would have been slightly better.

At least not like this—

...Ridiculous.

I'm aware of it.

I'm straining to draw a line between myself and the duchess, yet deep down, I know.

I know that I can't truly distinguish where I end, and the duchess begins.

And yet, I offload even my own faults onto her, disgracefully consoling myself.

Calling her the root of all evil. What sin could such a fragile girl possibly have?

If there's any fault, it's merely being born that way.

How pitiful.

How much lower am I willing to sink?

"...Let's stop this."

I let out a deep sigh and pulled myself out of the private world of my thoughts.

Dwelling on these ideas over and over is just another form of escapism.

A long, meandering train of thought, utterly unfit for the situation at hand.

Maybe I'm not just homesick—maybe I'm delusional.

Lunchtime is almost over.

Whatever happens, I must leave this place. There's no way I'm letting anyone see my swollen, tear-stained eyes.

As for afternoon classes... I don't care.

I'm not in the mood to worry about that right now.

Gripping the desk, I pulled myself upright.

Though some strength had returned, it was just enough to make standing a chore.

The sudden motion made my head spin, dizziness overtaking me.

My body feels heavy.

My head burns—it hurts.

My entire body aches as if it might shatter at any moment.

Without realizing it, a faint groan escaped my lips.

“Haa... ugh...”

I hadn't noticed before, but my body already felt feverish.

Each breath I took carried heat through me, coming and going with every inhale and exhale.

My throat felt dry, as though I had a cold, and my nose began to tingle faintly.

The sense of upheaval in my stomach and the pounding in my head were beyond words.

I'd had a feeling earlier, but now I was certain—

When I get back, I'm going to be seriously sick.

Not surprising, really. On top of the wounds I sustained yesterday, I endured what felt like torture not once but twice today.

Frankly, I deserve credit for still being conscious.

How admirable.

Praise me.

I've worked so hard.

Somebody, please.

Hold me.

Pat my head.

Share some warmth.

Even that would be a comfort.

Stringing meaningless sentences together in my head, I took a step forward.

In the end, the only thing the duchess can do is flee to her room.

Because the people who could have done those things for me disappeared long ago.

When I stepped out of the classroom and into the hallway, I saw students in groups, laughing and chatting after their meals.

As soon as they noticed my unsteady steps, their gazes turned to me, the same as always—harsh and piercing.

Mockery, anger, contempt, indifference, and a faint trace of pity.

Their gazes mixed emotions and thoughts too complex to define with a single word.

It wasn't the first time, and I realized I'd grown somewhat numb to it.

Or so I thought.

Was I just shoving the discomfort onto the duchess again?

Even as I convinced myself their stares didn't faze me, my pace quickened.

It seems the duchess finds this unbearable.

I couldn't even tell if I was moving properly. My mind was hazy, but even in that state, I cared enough about others' eyes to straighten my steps—a demeanor truly befitting the duchess.

Of course, as always, my body couldn't keep up with the duchess' resolute will.

While descending the stairs toward the dormitory, my ankle finally gave out under the strain, and I fell forward.

Or perhaps "collapsed" would be a more accurate term.

In any case, the critical detail was that it happened on the stairs, and I fell almost immediately after stepping onto them.

Instinctively, I grabbed the handrail, but my arms lacked the strength to hold on. I hit my head on the edge of the stairs and tumbled downward.

Thud. Clunk. Thud.

The rhythmic sound of the impacts seemed distant.

I no longer had the energy to scream or even groan.

Something warm and sticky flowed from my forehead, which had struck the edge.

Oddly detached, as if I were observing from a third-person perspective, I lay on the spot where I'd fallen.

My body trembled uncontrollably, clutching my own shoulders as if unable to bear the pain.

The sensation of detachment between "me" and my body felt strange.

You're in pain too, aren't you?

I get it.

I stared at the blurry ceiling for a moment before propping myself up.

The red liquid flowing from my forehead stung as it entered my right eye.

My left eye was already weak, and now the discomfort worsened.

What a sight I must be.

Nothing seems to go right.

Even something as simple as returning to my room is too much for the duchess.

Pathetic. How can a person be this wretched?

Oh, right. I'd decided not to think like this anymore.

Whatever happens, it's my fault, I told myself.

Still, since the duchess is part of me now, isn't it okay to blame her for this?

I don't know.

I'm sorry.

I'll stop these silly thoughts.

I need to go back.

I stood up.

The pain had started to fade, making it easier to get up compared to before.

However, the numbness creeping in from my extremities didn't seem like a good sign.

If I delayed, I might collapse entirely.

Dragging my body along, I moved to leave when I heard footsteps coming from the other side of the stairs.

Even though I didn't want to look, my gaze naturally shifted.

My vision was blurry, but it seemed to be a girl with long black hair and a build similar to mine.

She hesitated for a moment, staring at me in surprise, then approached and spoke.

"Are you... okay?"

Of course not.

How could I possibly be okay in this situation?

The concern in her voice was something I hadn't imagined anyone would express toward me.

I instinctively tried to respond, but my lips clamped shut.

For the first time since coming to this world, I heard words of genuine concern. They felt hollow.

And they hurt—more than any physical pain.

I could barely endure the pity conveyed through others' gazes.

This pity, expressed in words and followed by an offer of help, felt like an assault on my very humanity.

It was as if the words echoed the self-reproach I'd hurled at myself.

Pity can only be shown to someone less fortunate, so from any perspective, the duchess is utterly pitiful.

If I were to accept this goodwill, born of pity, Remia Adelian would be finished.

I'd no longer function as a human being.

As she reached out, intending to help me, I spoke.

My voice, cracked and dry, emerged hoarse.

"I'm fine. Move... aside."

Then I swatted her hand away.

The girl stared at me in shock, but I walked past her, heading toward the one space in the academy that was mine alone.

The only refuge I had left that wasn't an illusion.

I walked.

I fell.

I stood up.

I walked again.

I fell.

I tried to stand but fell again.

So I crawled.

Finally, just before losing consciousness, I reached my room.

Leaning my weight against the doorknob, I managed to open the door.

Dizzy.

Out of breath.

I feel like I'm dying.

Using the last bit of my strength, I stumbled a few more steps and collapsed onto the bed.

Only then did I feel a sense of relief.

The contrast with the unease I'd felt outside was so stark that my mind felt blank.

Reality or whatever—it doesn't matter. From now on, this room is my home.

My homesickness is resolved.

Hooray.

I let go of the last threads of my consciousness.

Chapter 7: Fever

My body feels like it's on fire.

The heat swirls around my forehead as if it's burning through my mind, yet I also feel a chill, as if I've stepped outside naked in the middle of winter.

Even in this hazy state, I instinctively burrow deeper into the blanket, searching for warmth.

Why does it feel so cold when my body is unbearably hot?

The chills cut deep into my bones, refusing to fade even as I curl up under the covers.

I bend my knees, pressing them against my chest, and wrap my arms around them, assuming a fetal position as I shiver uncontrollably.

The annoying part is that each tremor brings with it the aching joint pain unique to the flu.

In my case, it feels like my body is breaking down, with not just the joints but the bones themselves throbbing in pain.

And then there's the other pain—injuries scattered all over my body, untreated and unaddressed.



For instance, the wound on my forehead, which hasn't stopped bleeding, must be deeper than I thought.

My left ankle, swollen since this morning, worsened after it twisted on the stairs.

Now, it's so tender that even the slightest touch feels unbearable.

Maybe this time, it's really broken.

How am I supposed to walk now?

Should I crawl around like before?

What a sight that would be.

Cough! "...My throat hurts."

I'm thirsty.

I want a sip of warm water.

But, of course, I can't even lift a finger, let alone get up to fetch it.

In short, it's an absolute disaster.

My body has gone on strike just two days after transferring to the academy.

So I missed the afternoon classes after all.

Leaving without saying anything—it might turn into a bigger problem than I expected.

To be absent without notice from the second day... I might be marked as trouble.

Even in the midst of this misery, I couldn't help but let out a wry laugh at the thought.

Worrying about my reputation in a situation like this—how absurd.

It's not like I had a reputation to begin with; it's just nonexistent.

What I should seriously be worried about is the possibility of dying alone in the middle of the night, without anyone to care for me.

Ah, but that might not be so bad.

A hollow laugh escaped my lips again.

Maybe it's the fever talking, but I felt oddly giddy, as if the heat were lifting my spirits.

For some reason, the worries that had plagued me before now seemed trivial. Honestly, they are.

Why let myself be bothered by the petty bullying of classmates?

I could just hole up in my room forever.

My second home.

The one place in this world that's entirely mine.

My beautiful, cozy sanctuary.

Here, whether it's Ariana or even her grandmother coming to threaten me, this place will protect me.

An unbroken truth since the heavens parted from the earth—this is an unassailable fact.

Q.E.D. Proven. Problem solved. I'm happy now.

...Wait?

Even if I can get water from the bathroom, what about food?

Well, if I get hungry, I'll just gnaw on the pillars or something.

"Pfft, ha... haah...."

This time, I laughed a little louder, only to wince as my head throbbed in protest.

The burst of euphoria subsided slightly.

I'm being ridiculous.

Once my mind settled, I fully realized just how out of it I was.

Still, staying locked up might actually be a good idea.

It's not like I came here with any real intention of graduating, so what's the big deal?

...Am I serious?

Do I really want to earn a reputation as the "reclusive duchess"?

I care so much about my image, yet I'm desperate to find an escape. Which is it?

Ah, maybe this was "me" wanting it.

Could be.

I don't know anymore.

Maybe it's the fever, or maybe it's the way I'm starting to blend together—but I was oddly confused.

What's "you," and what's "me"?

If I'm in pain, I should just sleep.

No point wasting energy on strange thoughts.

I closed my eyes tightly and tried to empty my mind.

My whole body sank deeper and deeper into the mattress.

I dreamed.

It was the same dream I always had when escaping reality.

A dream so familiar I was sick of it.

In the dream, I was on my way home from work.

I hailed a carriage, despite my usual effort to save on transportation costs by walking.

But today, I just wanted to get home quickly.

When I arrived at my apartment and opened the door, I was greeted by a sight of antique furniture, ornate chandeliers, and wallpaper embroidered with gold thread.

It felt vaguely nostalgic but still undeniably like home.

I felt at ease.

Knowing I was back, my family came to greet me.

My kind father, Eamond Adelian.

My beautiful mother, Reina Adelian.

They both embraced me warmly.

Their arms were so comforting.

My playful brothers waved at me enthusiastically.

Not just my family but also my dear friends approached me.

There was Raymond, the smug but good-looking acolyte.

Christina, the neighbor's daughter, with whom I always bickered but trusted deeply.

And Ariana, my loyal follower and constant companion.

They were few in number, but each was an irreplaceable piece of my life.

Today, even Hans, my childhood friend and secret crush, was there.

It turned out it was my birthday.

Hans grabbed my wrist, flashing a bright smile as he led me.

I couldn't help but notice the contrast between his large hand and my slender wrist, drawing my attention again and again.

My face felt hot, probably because it had been so long since I'd last seen him.

He led me to a table adorned with a cream cake, seaweed soup, and other birthday dishes.

Everyone wore familiar party hats and celebrated with me.

My chest felt tight, and tears welled up.

It was embarrassing for a grown man to cry, but I couldn't hold it back.

Hans, watching me, smiled warmly and placed something on my hair.

I stared at him blankly, and he whispered that it was a gift and wished me a happy birthday again.

I felt like I might burst.

I was burning up.

My mother handed me a hand mirror, saying it looked good on me.

I took it absentmindedly and looked at my reflection.

Snow-white hair, eyes close to silver.

Skin so pale it seemed almost translucent.

From head to toe, a pure white girl was staring back at me.

On her hair gleamed an ornament made of white jewels that suited her perfectly.

The duchess was smiling.

Tears shimmered in her eyes, yet her expression radiated pure happiness.

It was such an unfamiliar look that I couldn't recall ever seeing that expression on her face before.

The déjà vu I had been feeling grew stronger.

Is this how I originally looked?

No, is this even my memory in the first place?

I erased all emotion from my face.

The duchess in the mirror, however, kept smiling.

That isn't me.

Then where am I?

Where is "I"?

As I pondered that thought, I looked around compulsively, only to find that everything around me had vanished.

All the joyous scenery that had surrounded me dissolved into nothing but a blindingly white space, leaving only the mirror reflecting the duchess' face.

The lips of the duchess in the mirror moved.

"Gone. Nowhere. Anymore."

The duchess outside the mirror responded.

"I knew it."

\*\*\*

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The intermittent sound of knocking woke me from the dream.

"Ugh..."

A headache slammed into me like a hammer, and I let out a groan as I twisted in pain.

My head felt foggy, as though something was clouding it.

The fever hadn't gone down much, apparently.

I glanced out the window and saw that it was still evening, the same time as when I had fallen asleep.

Had I only slept briefly? Or had I slept the entire day? It had to be one of the two.

Judging by my terrible condition, it was probably the former.

Not that I had taken any medicine or received treatment, so it wouldn't be surprising if things had worsened.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

The knocking persisted, indifferent to my groans of pain.

It wasn't a hurried or forceful pounding.

Rather, it was a gentle, almost cautious sound, as if the knocker didn't want to disturb the person inside.

They'd been knocking for quite a while—why hadn't they left yet?

I listened to the sound for a while before pushing myself up.

Blood rushed to my head, bringing a wave of dizziness.

I was used to it by now.

As I tried to lower my feet off the bed, I remembered my utterly wrecked ankle.

After some deliberation, I dropped to my knees and crawled on all fours.

It wasn't a dignified sight.

Most people would probably look at me with pity.

If it were Ariana, she'd laugh.

Honestly, I wanted to ignore the knocking and go back to sleep. But I didn't want to give the impression that something terrible had happened inside, so I decided to say something brief and send them away.

Whether they'd actually listen to me was another matter.

I hooked my arm around the doorknob and used all my strength to pull myself up.

After a lengthy struggle, I managed to balance on one leg.

Alright, let's see who's there.

"...Hello. Are you feeling alright?"

The moment I opened the door, I had the sudden urge to shut it again without a word.

The person knocking was a girl with long black hair, eyes like the night sky, and delicate, symmetrical features. She was similar in build to me and held a thick folder tightly against her chest.

Her appearance was vaguely familiar, albeit hazy in my memory.

It was the girl I'd met on the stairs earlier.

You've got to be kidding me.

Chapter 8: Human

I could feel everything related to me deteriorating in real-time.

This situation.

My physical state.

Perhaps it was the mental strain, but the blood rushing to my head made the back of my neck stiff.

It felt like someone had opened a nightclub in my skull.

The pulsing sensation, perfectly timed with my heartbeat, was almost artistic in its own way.

"...You don't look well. Your head is bleeding," said the girl in front of me.

Most of this situation stemmed from her.

I thought I had managed to brush off the embarrassing scene on the stairs by rejecting her kindness, yet here she was, back again, seemingly intent on causing me further pain.

Suppressing the urge to slam the door shut, I asked her a question.

I just wanted to hear her reason for coming and send her on her way as quickly as possible.

"It's stopped. I'm fine, so don't worry about it.

Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

"...You didn't show up to class today, so I told the professor you might be sick.

This is today's coursework," she said, pulling out three or four sheets of paper from the folder she was holding and handing them to me.

The notes were a combination of the professor's lecture, magically copied, and her own handwriting, thoughtfully added for clarity.

The attention to detail was evident.

I silently raised my right hand to accept the papers.

Taking them with one hand might come across as rude, but my left hand was still holding onto the doorknob, bearing my weight.

Apparently, I had slept through the entire day.

Judging by my condition, however, leaving things as they were could spell serious trouble.

It would be wise to ask her for help right now.

Of course, while my mind acknowledged that, the words that came out of my mouth were the opposite.

“Thank you.

If that’s all, could you please leave now?”

“No. I have something else to discuss, so please let me in.”

“No.”

Despite her gentle appearance, the girl had a certain firmness about her.

So I responded with equal decisiveness.

Normally, I would have used the roundabout phrasing of a noble, but I didn’t have the energy for that now.

I wanted to get back to bed as soon as possible.

I hoped she would understand and leave, but it seemed that was too much to ask.

Her expression stiffened for a moment before she said something that turned my mind blank.

“I’ve heard a lot about you from Hans, Your Grace.

He said you value etiquette and grace. Isn’t treating your guests with respect also a noble virtue?”

Hans. Hans Decardi.

The duchess’ unrequited love, her first love—and her betrayer.

Memories I hadn’t even tried to recall began flooding my mind, throwing it into chaos.

Joyful moments.

Longing for the past.

Regretful decisions.

Eyes filled with contempt.



Parents who disappeared without a trace.

Me, frozen in confusion.

Servants crying out in despair, sensing their inevitable fate.

Soldiers in uniforms breaking down the doors and storming in.

Christina grabbing my hand and pulling me away.

Her neck severed in an instant.

Blood spurting from the cut like a fountain, staining everything around it.

Me, standing there blankly, drenched in that crimson spray.

Raymond, muttering her name repeatedly, pouring divine power into her lifeless body.

Soon, Raymond too was struck down, riddled with arrows, his body resembling a pincushion as he collapsed.

His final, hate-filled words directed at me.

A figure emerging from the shadows, grabbing my arm.

The way his eyes scanned me up and down as he murmured indifferently.

Words that still clung to my mind like an unshakable nightmare.

“It’s your fault.”

“You might be useful.”

“It’s your fault.”

“You might be useful.”

Over and over.

“It’s your fault.”

“You might be useful.”

Stop.

Please, just stop.

I clasped my head with both hands as if trying to keep it from being torn apart.

My breathing was ragged.

I couldn't distinguish whether the excruciating headache and the all-encompassing pain in my body were due to my physical condition or a trauma response triggered by the flashbacks.

The duchess was screaming in earnest, using my body as collateral.

Why was his name being brought up now, of all times—when I was already at my lowest, both physically and mentally?

The absurdity of this situation, which seemed almost intentional, made me want to curse out loud.

As I tightened my grip on my head, my hand slipped from the doorknob, and I lost my balance.

The girl, who had been watching me with a startled expression, quickly reached out to steady me.

“You're burning up, just as I thought...”

Half of that is because of you, I thought bitterly.

Her worried gaze, as if shocked by the heat radiating from my arm, felt almost offensive.

I knew it wasn't her fault, but I couldn't help feeling that way.

Grinding my teeth, I shoved her away roughly.

Given the bruises covering my arms, I doubted I had much strength to push her, but she immediately let go, perhaps afraid of causing me more harm.

She sighed as she watched me fall flat onto the floor.

I sat there, taking deep breaths, trying to untangle the chaotic mess in my mind.

Trying to hold back the duchess, who seemed ready to burst out at any moment.

She was right.

I am Remia Adelian.

A person who once prided herself on dignity and honor, someone who held her identity as a noblewoman above all else.

And this girl before me was essentially my guest.

In that case, it was only right to welcome her properly and present myself as composed.

Though, of course, it was already far too late for that.

Feigning calm, I spoke.

“Come in.”

“...Ah. Yes, excuse me.”

She stepped into my room cautiously, her movements careful.

I hooked my arm onto the doorknob again and pulled myself upright.

This time, I couldn't simply crawl—there was no way I would let her see me like that.

I lowered my injured left foot to the ground and shifted my weight onto it.

Twice, I faltered, the pain giving way to a numbing sensation that spread through my leg.

It felt as though something was going seriously wrong in real-time, but I maintained my facade of calmness as I limped into the room.

The girl looked at me with concern, hesitant to approach, likely because of how I had brushed her off earlier.

I gestured toward a chair and looked around my shelves for anything to offer her.

Offering nothing, no matter how cheap, would be impolite.

Unsurprisingly, there was only dust; I had never stocked the shelves.

I should have asked the maid for something.

Brushing the dust off my hands, I turned back to her.

“Sorry, I... don't have anything to offer.”

“...That's okay.”

A strained groan escaped my lips, betraying how much standing was taking its toll.

I needed to sit down before my legs gave out completely.

I dragged a chair over to sit across from her but missed it three times before giving up and collapsing onto the bed instead.

Bending over reminded me of the pain in my ribs, making it impossible to exert any strength.

Once again, I was struck by how weak this body truly was.

“Hah... would it be alright if we talked while I sit here?”

“Of course. And, please, don’t worry about what I said earlier.

I felt like I had to say something to get in here.”

Her previously assertive demeanor gave way to visible unease.

Was my condition worse than she had imagined?

I had tried so hard to appear fine, but maybe all my efforts were wasted.

Not that it mattered now.

I decided to steer the conversation toward her reason for coming.

“So, what is it you wanted to talk about?

If you’ve heard about me from Hans, your impression can’t be a good one.”

I didn’t believe for a second that Hans would share any positive stories about me.

Not that there were any to begin with.

Hans, who had suffered at my hands, would have long since grown sick of me.

Just thinking about him made my breathing unsteady again.

It would be better not to dwell on him.

Still, I was curious why this girl, who seemed to be his friend, was showing such interest in me.

If her reasons were similar to Ariana’s, I might actually understand.

“I saw you being mistreated.

I overheard the students’ sneers and gossip. And then, when you didn’t show up to class, I grew worried.”

“Worried? What, did you think I was going to kill myself?”

“...Yes. That thought crossed my mind.”

“That’s... quite a pessimistic stretch.”

“...”

“And why didn’t you intervene when I was being bullied? Were you scared?”

Her response, while not hostile, carried an unmistakable note of pity, making my chest tighten. I shot back sharply, my frustration evident.

Even so, I couldn't deny that she was human—different from the garbage that littered the academy.

Why was she acting this way toward me?

“Because I didn't realize it at the time.”

I had hoped my barbed words would drive her away, but once again, my wishes went unfulfilled.

“Hans said you wouldn't care about anything that happened to you.

He said you were twisted but strong because of it.

But after meeting you yesterday, I realized that wasn't true at all.”

“...He said that about me?”

Her words stopped my train of thought.

I was learning a lot of new things.

I never would have imagined Hans saw me that way.

The duchess, who was as mentally fragile as they come, had always tried to hide her vulnerability behind a thorny exterior.

The disparity in perception was startling.

It explained many of Hans' actions, but so what?

Time had passed. Events had unfolded.

Nothing could change now.

I nodded.

I had learned that she was human and what Hans thought of me.

That was all I needed to know.

“If that's all, then I understand, so please leave now.

You came because you were worried and wanted to check on me, right?

As you can see, I'm alive and doing relatively fine.”

I tried to convey my thoughts with a slightly firm tone.

The girl stared at me blankly, her lips twitching as if she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to.

If this doesn't work, what should I say next?

Should I start hysterically screaming that I'll die if she doesn't leave?

No, that would only make her stay out of concern, thinking I was even more unstable.

Maybe I should consider something more drastic—like showing her blood flowing in real time.

The shock of it might scare her away.

But even as I repeated these nonsensical thoughts, her answer was worse than I could have imagined.

“You're right, I did come to check on you...

But I still can't leave.

You seem far too... unstable, Your Grace.”

Worse yet, she looked like she was about to cry.

If the duchess were an ordinary person capable of harsh words in response to this, I wouldn't be suffering so much now.

What is she even talking about?

The reflection of the duchess in the mirror on the opposite wall was entirely emotionless.

Pale and haggard, sure, but those features only made her face appear more like that of an expressionless corpse.

Was her comment figurative? Or was she just highly empathetic?

Either way, she was meddling far too much.

Despite my thoughts, all I could do was repeat myself like a broken record.

“I don't need pity.

Just being alone is enough for me right now.

Really, I'm fine, so please leave.”

Instead of responding, the girl raised her hand and grasped my right wrist, which had been resting on the bed.

The duchess usually ran cold, but with her body burning up now, the girl's touch felt like ice against my skin.

“And you're clearly unwell...”

“Let go of me...”

I tried to pull my hand away with what little strength I had.

Instead of letting go, she grabbed my left wrist with her other hand and gently pushed me down onto the bed.

In an instant, she was on top of me, pinning me down with her weight.

I twisted and turned, but her grip on my wrists held firm.

Was she even human?

This position brought back unpleasant memories.

I started trembling, taking short, shallow breaths that echoed with a hitching, nervous rhythm. I clenched my eyes shut, imagining all the terrible things that might come next.

Then I felt it—the warm, soothing sensation I had experienced thousands of times over the years, a feeling that was both comforting and terrifying in a different sense.

“I’m sorry. I’m going to heal you, even if it’s a little forceful.

You’re in such bad shape that it might become serious if I don’t.”

It was healing magic.

The screaming pain in my body began to subside.

Unlike the rough, overwhelming healing I had endured in the organization, her touch was gentle, precise, and unfamiliar.

She seemed to be a skilled mage, better than most.

Of course, knowing she was acquainted with Hans meant she couldn’t be ordinary.

At least she wasn’t someone like Ariana, who was trash.

As my tension eased, I exhaled a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Seeing this, the girl made a slightly perplexed expression, perhaps surprised by how scared I had been.

“My name is Sena Blomberg,” she said suddenly.

The fact that I hadn’t even asked for her name until now struck me as a bit shocking. But even so, it didn’t seem like the appropriate thing to say at this moment.

Before I could react to her introduction, she continued speaking.

“...I'll visit you often from now on.”

At that moment, I realized all my efforts to drive her away had been in vain.

Why is she doing this to me?

Chapter 9: Doll

The healing magic finally came to an end after a long while.

Unlike the treatments I received in the organization, it didn't feel like my body was being forcefully pieced back together.

It was a testament to how much care Sena had put into the process.

Yet, I couldn't help but glare at her with bloodshot eyes.

Her final words had struck a nerve deep within me.

“The external wounds are healed, but everything else remains the same.

I'll fetch some medicine, so please lie down for now.”

“Leave.”

“Your Grace—”

“Leave. Now.”

I tried to say it nicely, but she didn't get the message.

This is why I despise the limitations of the duchess' body.

Without the ability to throw out a sharp curse or insult, my arsenal for driving people away was significantly reduced.

As soon as Sena stepped away from my body after finishing her healing spell, I shifted to the corner of the bed, putting as much distance between us as possible.

Even to me, my behavior resembled that of a frightened animal, but what choice did I have?

I didn't have the strength to physically push her away. My only option was to retreat.

Even as I curled up in the corner, my eyes never left her.

It was the closest thing to hostility I had displayed since arriving at the academy.



Sena met my gaze head-on, her expression not startled but filled with pity.  
Those eyes.

I couldn't bear those eyes.

"Thank you for your concern.

And for using magic on me—I'll repay you.

But I never once asked you to do this."

Yes, Sena Blomberg is human. So what?

If she's human, if her actions stem from good intentions, does that mean she can disregard the other person's wishes and act as she pleases?

I had refused her.

I had expressed my will multiple times.

But now, even people don't listen to me anymore. What else could I do?

"You don't have to thank me, and there's no need to repay me.

Can't you simply accept it as blind kindness from goodwill?"

I knew, of course.

I knew that everything I was saying was just the stubborn pride of a pathological duchess.

No one in their right mind would reject free healing magic out of sheer spite.

If anything, it was something to be grateful for—especially when even the academy infirmary charged money.

But I—

The duchess couldn't tolerate it.

For the duchess, pride was no longer just about holding her head high; it was the last line defining her as human.

If that line crumbled, she would die as a human.

No, she would become something worse than a corpse—a puppet incapable of functioning as a person yet requiring the resources of life.

So I opened my eyes wide, trying to convey anything but pity to her.

I'd rather be hated than pitied.

"Oh, that one-sided kindness and generosity?"

Fine. I understand that not appreciating unsolicited kindness makes me a terrible person.

I've seen people like that plenty—those who offer charity only for their own satisfaction while ignoring what the other party wants, deluding themselves into thinking they're good people.”

“W-Wait, that's not what I meant! You've misunderstood—”

“Of course, it's not what you meant.

I know Sena isn't like that.

But I hope you'll keep this in mind.

If your kindness isn't received as such, it ceases to be a good deed.

I apologize if I sound like I'm lecturing; I'm just a troublesome person.”

“Your Grace... your skin, bones, and organs—there wasn't a single part of you that wasn't damaged.

If left untreated, things might have spiraled out of control.”

Her tone grew more defensive, as if she felt wronged.

And rightly so—she had acted out of genuine concern.

But did she realize her concern was eating away at me?

That it had already hollowed me out, leaving nothing but a shell?

That her pity, like a parasite, had burrowed deep into my mind?

Of course not.

Nor did she need to.

“Then let me die.

That's my choice.”

“W-What?!”

I wouldn't stoop to the selfish act of yelling at her for not understanding me.

But this much, at least, was fine.

Because this is who I am.

I am, and the duchess is, a creature with nothing left but her life, and the only thing she can do with it is choose to throw it away—a being somewhere between a corpse and a doll.

“Why does it matter?

Are you going to tell me I don't even have the right to choose my own death?  
If so, there's nothing left for me.”

Truthfully, even that right was something I only regained after coming to the academy.

Before that, even my life and death were at the whims of my masters—I was nothing but a puppet.

By that standard, I'm practically living a happy life now.

Because I've come to understand what a blessing it is to have the right to choose my end.

So expressing anger toward Sena for denying my right isn't wrong.

My feelings are justified.

Aren't they? Don't you agree, duchess?

“And yet, you...”

I felt the emotions I had been suppressing clawing their way up, threatening to spill out.

They were raw, tangled, and intense—things I had kept buried deep inside.

If I let this continue, I'd vomit up everything I had held back.

“Hah.”

But the moment I saw Sena's expression, it all cooled off like a dying flame.

Confusion, fear, curiosity, a hint of frustration—and pity.

Pity. Pity. Pity. Pity.

...That's enough.

I don't care anymore.

No matter what I say, to her, I'll always be just a pitiful person.

And honestly, she's not even wrong.

“...I'm sorry. I went too far.”

“N-No, it's my fault. I should have asked for your permission first—”

“Of course not.”

Sena, your actions were admirable.

I'm just someone with no decency who responded poorly to kindness.

Isn't that right?"

"...Ah."

"At least I realized it before being more impolite.

I'm sorry, Sena Blomberg."

Sena's face trembled as she accepted my apology, clearly shaken by the impression that she had done something terribly wrong.

But she hadn't.

It was my fault.

I truly believed that.

How could I, a corpse, lie to a human?

I stared at her intently, signaling that I wouldn't add anything further or argue anymore.

See?

I'm such a well-behaved doll.

What do you think?

I'm quite pretty on the outside, aren't I?

I don't know how she interpreted my gaze, but it seemed to make her uncomfortable.

"...I'm sorry. I'll leave now."

Eventually, after fidgeting for a while, she hung her head and rose from her seat.

Funny how she wouldn't budge when I asked her to leave earlier.

Now, no matter what I say, it seems to have the opposite effect.

The thought made me laugh quietly.

If that were truly the case, life would be so much easier.

I'd just say the opposite of what I mean.

I'd be a liar, but life would be far more convenient.

Of course, the duchess would still cling to her sense of dignity, insisting on the truth even in such a situation.

The thought made me laugh again—it was oddly believable.

“Thank you. I’ll see you again next time.”

I didn’t miss the chance to offer a kind farewell, naturally smiling.

These days, even forcing a smile feels like a struggle.

As the duchess becomes more of a liar, does that mean I’m becoming more honest in contrast?

Sena gave me a troubled look before bowing her head and leaving my room.

Listening quietly to the sound of her footsteps fading away, I slowly let my body collapse onto the bed.

For some reason, I felt at peace.

It was a peculiar sensation, as if I had either let something go or locked it away completely.

The comfort brought by her healing magic likely played a part.

At this moment, I felt as though I could have a pleasant dream, so I closed my eyes.

Even though I had slept extensively earlier, sleep soon overtook me again.

I should savor it while I can.

By tomorrow, this fleeting comfort will vanish.

I’ll return to the classroom, endure the same torment, and come back battered once more.

As the frail doll that I am, I’ll inevitably fall ill again.

Honestly, it’d be easier to remain in pain continuously.

It’s harder to deal with the contrast of feeling fine and then hurting again.

Even as I felt a faint satisfaction from Sena’s magic, I lamented the emptiness I knew would follow and allowed myself to drift off into the embrace of sleep.

That night, I dreamt of Hans.

Sena’s mention of him must have stirred those memories.

I’m not sure if it was a good dream.

Since it was a memory from happier times, perhaps it was.

\*\*\*

Day after day, time continued to pass.

Without any particular excitement, extraordinary events, or unbearable suffering.

Just the same cycle of being hit, cut, stabbed, and crying.

I let myself flow with the monotony of this dry, repetitive existence—a mixture of reality and delusion.

Four days.

A week.

Half a month.

Even as time sped by, Ariana never failed to prepare new tortures daily.

Some, like an iron maiden, were so absurdly intricate that they seemed beyond normal imagination, overwhelming me visually. But experiencing them firsthand, they didn't feel all that different.

Yes, it hurts.

It hurt so much that I could do nothing but scream, unable to think or act.

But the pain was only inflicted on the duchess' body.

As the suffering repeated, my reactions dulled. It was inevitable.

After all, they didn't kill me.

No matter how they tortured me, they always restored me afterward.

And so—

I found myself growing accustomed to this so-called "torture."

Maybe, at some point, I even thought:

"Maybe it's not so bad."

If my days continued to consist solely of physical pain, I could accept it dispassionately.

Yes, I'd cry and curse the duchess after each session, swearing I'd rather die, but it would pass quickly, leaving no lasting impression.

When nighttime came, I'd simply think, "I survived another day," and feel relieved.

It was awful, but the sheer weight of my suffering left no room for introspection or lamenting my life.

Instead, I emptied my mind, grateful for the simple continuation of existence.

It's a dependency, the worst way to feel alive—but what choice do I have?

Right now, this dull survival is the only thing keeping me aware of myself.

I can only adapt to the best of my ability.

"This much is fine, isn't it?"

I no longer wish for improvement, a return to the past, or for someone to die.

I've stopped making those extravagant wishes.

I simply, cautiously hope that if suffering must continue, let it be the familiar pain.

Is that so unreasonable?

That's all I ask as a mere corpse doll of a duchess.

No more people, please.

No more kindness.

No more hostility.

No more acquaintances.

No more hatred.

Isn't that reasonable?

No more pain, please.

No more lingering pain.

No more sudden pain.

No more physical pain.

No more emotional pain.

Isn't that reasonable?

No more events, please.

No more changes.

No more suffering.

No more salvation.

No more death.

Isn't that reasonable?

I've already suffered enough, and I've resigned myself to enduring it indefinitely.

Is wishing for mere constancy—neither more nor less—so unreasonable?

Perhaps it is.

“Are you going to take away even this modest desire?”

That would be just like you.

I'm sure you're laughing at me even now.

How does it feel, looking at the corpse doll you created?

Is it beautiful?

Amusing?

Or does it... excite you?

If it's none of those, I can't understand.

Why me, this corpse?

Why the duchess, this doll?

Why bind the two together to create this corpse doll?

What is it you're watching now?

Chapter 10

Hallucinogen

“...Another meaningless remark.

Just grant my wish already.

I'll make one, as much as I want, for as long as I need.”

I chuckled faintly, clasping my hands together.

A mockery of prayer.



I wasn't really talking to anyone.

As always, I lay on my bed, staring into the void and muttering to myself.

If I were to assign a recipient for my words, it would be the demon, god, or some human entity that had crammed me into this body.

If this phenomenon isn't just a delusion, it means someone must exist who made us this way.

Given the godlike power they've demonstrated, making a wish doesn't seem entirely unreasonable.

Of course, I didn't expect it to be granted.

Most of me still believed this was someone's delusion.

Besides, anyone with such a twisted sense of humor couldn't possibly have a normal personality.

"Rationalization, delusion—what's next, a cult?

Really, I'm following the stereotypical path in the worst possible way."

I didn't know.

It would work out somehow.

I closed my eyes again.

It was almost time for school, but for some reason, I couldn't muster any strength.

Even though I'd been sleeping almost all day lately, the drowsiness wouldn't go away.

It seemed even the duke's daughter knew that staying awake would only drain her mental strength.

Still, I had to attend class.

No, more than that...

"Yeah, I've got torture to endure. Today's session... heh."

\*\*\*

...Forget it.

Let's skip today.

I'll just sleep, and if I hurt twice as much tomorrow, so be it.

If there's even a shred of mercy left in them, they'll let me off for a day.

Of course, I knew better than to expect that.

With a hollow laugh, I fled into a dream, wishing that when I opened my eyes, I'd wake up as if nothing had happened.

Just like on my first day at the academy.

Endlessly repeating and praying.

My expectations missed the mark, in the worst possible way.

When I woke up, I left my room without a trace of emotion, like a doll.

Now, with homeroom over, I found myself surrounded by the usual crowd.

At the front of the group, Ariana wore a concerned expression.

Of course, unlike Sena's, hers was an artificial look, so it didn't bother me much.

"It feels like it's been a while, doesn't it, Your Grace?"

I heard you were unwell yesterday... Are you feeling better?"

How had the story turned into that?

Had Sena made up another excuse for me?

I wasn't sure, but I wanted to tell them to mind their own business.

I forced a wry smile and opened my mouth.

"...Of course, I'm fine."

Even if I weren't, I'd still be here.

"That's a relief! We're testing something different today, so it would have been inconvenient if you weren't well."

With a picture-perfect smile, she turned to the noble boy standing beside her, holding out her hand.

He placed a long box into Ariana's hands.

"Oh, if you're still feeling any symptoms, please let me know in advance. I'll have to adjust the mixture."

"The mixture...?"

Ariana pulled out a syringe with a strange hue from the box.

Feeling an ominous premonition, I asked again.

She spun the syringe once and cheerfully replied, as if waiting for my reaction.

“Yes! Today won’t hurt as much. We can’t go hitting a patient who just recovered, can we?”

So, it won’t hurt as much this time.

In other words, they’re planning to jab my soft skin with that suspicious drug using that hollowed-out awl.

It was obvious.

A stimulant, an aphrodisiac, or a hallucinogen—something along those lines.

“Instead, we’ve prepared this. It’s called a hallucinogen!”

She proudly held up the syringe. The blue liquid inside swirled.

Of course, I was right.

I hated how accustomed I’d become to predicting this.

It may seem like an exaggeration, but the history of drugs truly dates back to ancient times.

Even in Sumer, the so-called cradle of civilization, traces of processed opium have been found.

Humans, weapons, poaching, drugs. Among the four pillars of the black market, drugs were notorious for being impossible to quit once used, making them extremely lucrative.

For various reasons, drugs have been passed down through the hands of those driven by greed for money and pleasure. And all humans harbor such greed.

That’s why drugs can never be eradicated, no matter how hard people try.

Once injected, even the most devout individual is doomed.

This world was no different.

Drugs were still regarded as a social evil, and even the current emperor despised them. Wasn’t the empress dowager—his mother—a severe drug addict?

The issue was this world’s outdated societal structure. There was no proper regulation against drugs.

Sure, commoners caught using them might be executed, but it seemed the aristocrats, who saw drugs as a means to make easy money or indulge in fleeting pleasures, felt no need for restraint.

As a result, most academy students could easily access addictive substances.

Excuses were always ready to be made.

Ariana, now rolling up my sleeve and searching for a vein, was no exception.

Her family background likely made acquiring drugs for torture purposes as easy as pie.

Few tortures deliver despair like giving someone drugs and then cutting them off.

She carefully inspected the crook of my left arm, running her hand over it several times.

Apparently, my veins weren't easy to spot, as she frowned slightly.

"You've got thin veins. I thought they'd be easy to see with such pale skin."

"Can't you just jab it anywhere? Why go through the trouble of finding a vein?"

"This isn't a particularly strong hallucinogen. If I used something too potent right off the bat, Your Grace might break immediately."

I was already broken. You broke me further, yet now you worry about that?

Was this like playing with a toy you planned to keep for a while? Well, it had only been four days, so breaking me too soon might be a waste.

They'd said it wasn't easy to find noble test subjects they could use as they pleased.

I quietly watched the group chat among themselves.

Since I didn't resist or react, they didn't bother tying me up like last time.

It was the right call. Even if I'd been left alone, I wouldn't have tried to run.

I simply stared blankly at the syringe Ariana held.

Since I was about to be injected with it, it wouldn't hurt to speculate about its effects.

I'd never seen a drug with such a brilliant blue hue in reality. Perhaps it was a magical substance unique to this world.

When you think of hallucinogens, LSD comes to mind first, though I've never actually tried it myself.

I think I've heard accounts from others before, so let me try to recall.

Heightened imagination, fantastical images, fluid transitions between scenes, vivid and bizarre patterns, ever-shifting colors.

A few words drifted through my mind.

Not bad.

As you can see, I was remarkably calm.

There wasn't any particular reason for it.

Maybe I was hoping for a good experience.

After all, drugs are supposed to bring pleasure.

Sure, there's immense pain waiting once you quit after becoming addicted, but that's likely not anytime soon.

At the very least, they'd wait a month or so.

No need to be scared prematurely.

In fact, withdrawal symptoms might suppress the duke's daughter's vague resistance to suicide.

They would offer me a sanctuary of pleasure, an escape from my broken state.

Perhaps even nudge me back toward reality.

"Oh, I've found it. Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Grace. Let's get started!"

"....."

"You should say something, shouldn't you?"

"...I'll leave it to you."

"Yes! I'll do my best."

Ariana gripped my arm firmly, her eyes curving gently.

In her gaze, I could see a faint glimmer of anticipation.

Sometimes, it seemed like she enjoyed seeing how her victims reacted during torture.

Would I meet her expectations this time?

To be honest, ever since Sena left, my mind had felt empty, as if something had snapped inside me. I wasn't feeling much of anything at the moment.



Strangely, they were glowing.

Grotesque, luminous masks.

When did this place become a masquerade ball?

If such masks existed, I'd like to buy one myself.

Gradually, an intense excitement rose in my extremities, so strong it was almost paralyzing.

My head, body, and limbs turned cold and numb, one after the other.

It felt as though I was no longer myself.

But it wasn't like the feeling of becoming a doll.

It was more like shedding the shackles of my flesh and being reborn as something new.

My throat was dry.

My breath came in shallow, rasping gasps.

I felt suffocated, as if I were underwater.

No, it was water. At some point, the classroom was filled with water.

A sense of fear crept in.

My mind alternated between moments of utter confusion and brief flashes of clarity.

The sensations of constriction and release oscillated dizzily.

Weak? How is this a "weak" hallucinogen?

Time around me twisted endlessly.

Ariana's voice elongated into eternity, blending with fragments of past, reversed, vertical, and even future speech.

The group surrounding me was swept away by her torrent of words, their thoughts spilling into my mind unfiltered.

These thoughts became swords, hands, even my eyes.

Space flowed with time as one.

Hearing became sight, vision turned into sound, and smell could be touched.

Touch unified everything, becoming a perfect sense.

I could hear, see, smell, and feel everything.

The air touching my soul brought an exaltation so vivid it was like a nail being driven into the crown of my head.

Crushed by fear, yet descending into madness, I spiraled further.

The worst part was that I couldn't stop it and was fully aware of what was happening.

The occasional sensation of my body separating from "me" felt vibrant yet akin to death.

In those moments, I thought I had died.

My "self" floated somewhere in space, and I could see my dead body slumped in a chair.

The "other me" left behind mourned, wandering the room.

At that moment, I became two.

As the extreme fear reached its peak, it began to subside.

Two became three, three became four, until I realized that the "me" who cared about such things had already vanished into the cosmos.

\*\*\*

Now, I could enjoy the unprecedented colors and forms lingering behind my closed eyes.

Ever-changing, fantastical imagery surged within me like a kaleidoscope, morphing and exploding into fountains of color, rearranging and blending in endless fluidity.

Like turning pages in a book or raising the curtain on a play.

The world transformed, completely overshadowing reality's visuals.

To me, it was an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-encompassing experience.

The world was being recreated.

The sound of doors opening and closing, footsteps, and murmurs hovered in the air, distinctly visible and physically present. Witnessing this metamorphosis felt profoundly meaningful.

Every sound, scent, life, death, shape, and void formed a ceaselessly shifting image, each with its own coherent form and color.

It was pure will.





It didn't take long to realize that this was a grave misconception.

In an instant, the scenery around me changed.

The familiar Adelian mansion appeared.

In its center, I was standing with someone.

He was in front of me.

"Remia? What are you doing?"

"...Hans."

It seemed the true hallucinations were just beginning.

A creeping sense of unease surged, warning me that this was about to become a horrifying nightmare.