

The World 211

Chapter 211: The Fall To Debauchery (5)

Charlotte's POV

'This is the worst,' I seethed inwardly as Leon's unwelcome touch invaded my most intimate space. It was a nauseating blend of embarrassment and disgust, like a foul taste lingering in my mouth. Never before had I felt such visceral revulsion towards anyone. Not even Father, who callously sold me into this predicament, elicited such a vehement response.

Yes, I felt betrayed by him, but the raw disgust I felt towards Leon was unparalleled.

I knew Leon, albeit not as intimately as those in my inner circle. His name carried infamy, yet I had always perceived him as somewhat good-natured. After all, he had once rescued me from a kidnapping attempt. But as his hands violated me now, any semblance of decency dissolved, revealing him for the scum he truly was.

My hands gripped the edges of the fabric of the maid skirt I was wearing as he touched me, my teeth sinking into my lip.

I refused to make a sound. Not from this.

But despite my resolve, my knees began to weaken. What was happening to me? I couldn't quite comprehend it, but it felt like something was overwhelming me.

My breath grew ragged, and my cheeks flushed with heat. I felt my legs tremble beneath me, and an inexplicable urge to let out a sound clawed at my throat. Even my hands shook uncontrollably.

"Hmm? Looks like you're holding up pretty well," Leon remarked. "That's good. It wouldn't be as fun if you crumbled too easily."

He started rubbing me more thoroughly, each movement of his fingers sending jolts of sensation through me. I closed my eyes and bit down harder on my lip. The intensity of his touch was overwhelming. How much experience did he have to possess such skilled hands that could elicit these feelings, even in violation?

No. No. This wasn't supposed to feel good. This was torture. Don't give in. Don't give in...!

Leon suddenly stopped moving his fingers and lifted his hand to show me. His fingers glistened with a clear liquid that I recognized all too well. I wasn't a stranger to masturbation; I knew this was the liquid that made my thing moist.

"What's this, Charlotte? You're getting wet," he observed, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I could feel how wet I was—it was undeniable.

"You enjoy this, don't you?" he prodded.

"T-There's no way I would enjoy this!" I protested.

"Then what's the meaning of this?" he taunted, a wicked grin spreading across his lips. "Your body is more honest than your words, you know?"

"That's just..."

"Are you looking forward to this?" he inquired further.

"N-No. T-There's no way. Hyaaan!"

He slipped his hand back and started rubbing again, but this time, instead of teasing me through the fabric of my panties, he went directly inside my underwear. His fingers brushed against my bare skin, sending shockwaves through my body.

"N-No, d-don't touch it directly," I stammered, my voice trembling with a mix of fear and unwanted arousal.

Despite my protest, he continued, his fingers exploring with maddening expertise. No. Resist this. This was supposed to be disgusting. It was supposed to be disgusting. And yet...

"Ngghhh, ahhnnn~!" The moan tore from my throat, unbidden and humiliatingly honest.

"Now, that's a nice sound," he said.

I clenched my fists, trying to fight the sensations overwhelming me, but his relentless teasing was breaking down my resolve. My breaths came in ragged gasps, my legs trembling as he continued to violate me with his touch.

He reached one hand to my breast, his touch both degrading and disgusting, yet it sent a shiver down my spine. His fingers teased and squeezed, igniting a fire I desperately wanted to extinguish. Then, he pulled his other hand from my panties, the sensation of his withdrawal leaving a shameful emptiness.

He grabbed my other breast, and with both hands, he seized the cloth of my maid uniform and tore it apart violently.

"Uuuh?!"

The sound of ripping fabric echoed in the room as my chest was exposed. He lifted my bra, and his hands began to fondle my bare breasts, kneading and squeezing with a mixture of roughness and expertise. I gritted my teeth, fighting against the unwanted pleasure his hands were forcing upon me.

"Keep your hands up, holding your skirt just like that," he commanded, his voice dripping with smug satisfaction. "Now, take a look at your reflection in the mirror. Isn't it an erotic figure? You said earlier that you don't enjoy this, but look at yourself. Your face tells a different story."

"Th-There's no way I..."

I could barely form the words. There was no way I could enjoy this. I was supposed to save this moment for the professor, for my love. I wanted to believe that I was still pure, still untainted for him. However...

"There's no way..."

But my reflection betrayed me. My flushed cheeks, the way my body trembled with each touch—it all said otherwise. My eyes, half-lidded with a mix of shame and unwanted pleasure, stared back at me. My lips, parted and quivering, whispered the truth I didn't want to accept. His hands on my breasts, squeezing and kneading, sent jolts of twisted delight through me.

My nipples, hard and sensitive, only made it worse.

"Uuuuh!"

I could feel my arousal dripping, a damning wetness that marked his fingers. The heat between my legs was undeniable, and every touch from him made it worse. My reflection showed a woman who was being driven mad with a mix of disgust and forbidden desire. It was as if I was watching someone else—a woman who was cumming from the sheer humiliation and the expert manipulation of her body.

"You can't hide it," he taunted, his breath hot against my ear. "Your body is more honest than your words. Look at how you're cumming for me."

"N-No," I whimpered, but even I could hear the unconvincing waver in my voice.

"Your breasts are so bouncy and soft," he murmured, his tone laced with a hint of pleasure. "Maya always says she feels really happy when I do this to her breasts. You must be enjoying this sensation too, right?" His words danced in the air, a taunting melody that stirred a forbidden desire within me. "Oh my?"

It's really wet down here now," he remarked casually, his fingers tracing tantalizing patterns along my sensitive flesh. I squirmed beneath his touch, unable to suppress a soft moan that escaped my lips.

"Uuuhhh!"

"You're maintaining your position even in these circumstances. As expected of a duke's daughter," he observed, his voice dripping with amusement. His fingers trailed lower, exploring the depths of my desire with a sinful curiosity. "Now then, how about we move on to the main course?" he suggested, his voice low and husky with anticipation. With that, he pressed something hard against me.

"Ehh... Hhhhnnn..."

I attempted to resist, to do something, but my legs betrayed me, rendering me incapable of escape. Right now, I was at Leon's mercy.

"You can't escape from this, Charlotte. So why don't you just accept it?"

"T-There's no way I'll accept it..."

"You just have to endure it, for at least six times," he declared, his tone dripping with malice. "After that, you're free to do whatever you want. I'm not asking you to be my sex slave forever. Once you've paid your debt, you'll be free to go. I mean, that's the condition, right?"

If you can't agree to it, then it's either you'll be mine forever, or you'll have to work as a real prostitute to pay off all the money your father owes. There are three choices, and I'm giving you the easy one. If you choose it, then say 'Please, put it in, Master.'"

There was no way I could utter those words. There was no way I could surrender to this twisted demand.

But weirdly enough, my throat trembled, and the words were just at the tip of my tongue. The only thing stopping me from saying them was my sense of right and wrong. I mean, this wasn't right. This wasn't how I imagined my first time would be. But... But...

But despite my inner protest, the words spilled out, a desperate plea escaping my lips, "P-Please... put it in, Master..."

I couldn't fathom why those words emerged. Was it a rationalization, convincing myself that enduring him six times would somehow bring an end to this torment? Or was it a subconscious desire, longing for his penetration? I hastily brushed off the latter notion, clinging to the belief that it was simply a means to an end.

Still, this meant I would be losing my virginity to him. The virginity that I had saved for the professor. It was about to be taken from me. I bit my lip, feeling a surge of anxiety and regret wash over me. There was no turning back now.

"Good choice," Leon's voice echoed in the room, his tone filled with sinister satisfaction. Then, I felt his fingers deftly shifting the fabric of my underwear aside, exposing my thing to the cool air. The tip of his thing pressed against my lips. "I'll be taking your virginity now."

I clenched my fists, my heart pounding in my chest as I braced myself for what was to come. With a mixture of fear and anticipation, I closed my eyes tightly. And then, I felt it.

"Nhhhhhhhhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

A searing pain ripped through me as something inside me tore apart, marking the end of my innocence.

Chapter 212 - The Fall To Debauchery (6)

It hurts. It hurts.

It hurts.

It really hurts. It felt like something was tearing through me, splitting me in half. The sensation was excruciating, sending shockwaves of pain through my body, and tears immediately welled up in my eyes. I could feel a warm trickle from where he was inside me. I looked down, my vision blurred by tears, and saw blood dripping onto the floor. I had really been deflowered. The virginity I had saved for the professor was now gone, taken by someone I didn't love. That realization cut deeper than any physical pain.

"You're really the worst, Leon," I spat out, my voice trembling with a mix of anger and pain.

"My, you're blaming me again, even though you begged me to put it in," he replied, a smug grin spreading across his face.

"T-That was just...!" I started to protest, but my words were cut off as he pulled out halfway and then thrust back into me with force.

"Hiiii!" I cried out, my voice breaking as a mixture of pain and unbearable pleasure coursed through me. He was so skilled at this. As he moved inside me, his fingers expertly crawled over my breasts, pinching my nipples, and then between my legs, teasing my thing as he thrust deeper into me. The dual sensations were overwhelming. I was terrified that as he continued, my disgust would melt into unwanted pleasure at a frightening rate. His relentless rhythm, the way he knew exactly where to touch, made my body betray me, responding to his every move despite the revulsion and anger simmering inside me.

The slightest movement of his hips sent a sharp, searing pain through my wound, as if salt were being mercilessly rubbed into it.

"It hurts! Ow! It hurts, I say!"

No matter how much I screamed and pleaded, Leon wouldn't stop. He kept thrusting, his hips moving with relentless determination. My body felt like it was being torn into pieces, the agony almost unbearable.

But...

That was what should have been happening. And yet... amidst the excruciating pain, there was a strange sensation building up inside me. "You're saying it hurts, but your pussy is squeezing me tight. You have a rape fetish, don't you?"

There was no way I was like that. I could deny it with every fiber of my being, but an itch was spreading in my groin, igniting a shameful heat. Despite the discomfort, despite the degradation...

"Hnngg~! Hnnn! Hnnn!"

Why... Why was I making such sounds? Even though it was him? Just why?

I stared at my own reflection. The woman looking back at me had an expression of pure, unrestrained pleasure. Her tongue was lolling out, and her eyes were glazed over with ecstasy. It was hard to believe that woman was me. I couldn't believe it.

Why was I making such an expression? Just why?

I had no idea, but I was scared. I wanted someone to help me. Professor... Prince Julius... Help me. Because if this went on any longer, I might just fall into his hands completely.

"Hngg, ahhn, ahhh, ahhh."

I wanted to resist, but my body refused to listen. Was letting this happen really all I could do?

"Ahhh, n-no...!"

I clutched the edge of my maid uniform's skirt tightly as he pounded me from behind. Each thrust sent waves of raw, intense pleasure crashing through me. My senses were overwhelmed, my mind drowning in the sensation. The storm of ecstasy raged inside my body, building with every movement. I could feel it, the inevitable peak. I was cumming.

I could hear the slick sounds of our bodies connecting, his thing plunging deeper into me. My insides clenched around him, betraying my body's unwanted pleasure. Tears of humiliation mixed with my cries of reluctant ecstasy. Every thrust felt like a hammer blow, shattering my resolve and replacing it with an unbearable, undeniable need.

"Please... stop...", I whimpered, my voice weak and breathless, knowing it was futile. My grip tightened on the skirt, knuckles white, as if holding on to it could anchor me to some semblance of dignity. The truth was inescapable: I was lost in the overwhelming sensation, teetering on the edge of release.

The friction, the heat, the relentless rhythm of his thrusts—it all pushed me closer to the brink. My thoughts fragmented, dissolving into pure, unadulterated sensation. I felt my muscles tighten, my back arch involuntarily, and then it hit me. The climax tore through me like a tidal wave, consuming everything in its path. I was cumming, and there was no turning back.

"Ahhh! I'm... cumming!" I cried out, the words torn from my lips in a mix of pleasure and despair.
"NnnNnnnNnNnnnnnn~!!!"

My body convulsed, a torrent of pleasure surging through me, leaving me gasping and trembling in its wake. I struggled to stifle the moan that tore from my lips, but my muscles betrayed me, clenching around him as I reached my peak.

"If you tighten like that, I'll cum...!" he groaned, his voice thick with desire.

My eyes widened in shock. "C-Cum? Inside me?"

"Where else? Prostitutes take it all, you know?" he retorted, a smirk playing on his lips.

"No way, I could get pregnant!"

"Well, that's the risk. But what else can you do? Just accept it."

Was he really going to cum inside me? Oh no, if he did, there was no going back! I had to stop him.

But something inside me wanted it. What would it feel like to be filled with his seed? Despite my protests, there was a part of me that yearned to experience it.

"Here it goes...!" Leon exclaimed as he pounded me faster this time.

"Hyaaaa! Nooo, pleaseeee!" I pleaded with him, but my words seemed to fall on deaf ears. I could feel myself cumming again from the rough sensation of his thrusts. I desperately tried to suppress my climax, but my body betrayed me further and further. It seemed like my body wanted to sync with his, to surrender completely to him. Would I truly become his at this point?

"I'm cumming...!" he growled from behind me.

"Aaahm n-no!"

His hands tightened around my hips, anchoring me in place as he drew back, then thrust into me with a force that stole my breath. The room reverberated with the sound of our bodies colliding, the sensation of his thing plunging deep, piercing my womb.

"Hyigh!"

I opened my eyes wide, startled by the intense sensation coursing through me, emitting an unladylike sound reminiscent of a squashed frog. Then, in the next heartbeat, his thing, pressing against the depths of my womb, erupted with an explosive force.

"Ah, ahhhhhhhhh! I-It's coming out! It's spurting out! It's so hot! Ahhh, I'm cummmmmmmmmming!"

His cum, scalding and relentless, slapped against the walls of my insides, creating a visceral, wet symphony. Each splatter sent shivers down my spine as it crawled through the depths of my stomach, evoking both disgust and a strange, forbidden pleasure. And as his orgasm cascaded, I too surrendered to the overwhelming ecstasy, my own climax unfolding in waves that left me feeling as if my very essence had melted away.

"Kuahhh... ahhh..."

I panted as I looked down. Beneath me, on the floor, was white cum dripping down from our connection, tainted with a hint of blood. It made me feel disgusted, or at least I tried to force myself to feel that way. If I didn't, I might admit to myself that it felt good. And that was something I couldn't afford to acknowledge. If I didn't do that, I might never recover.

Leon gripped my chin and forced me to look up, confronting my reflection. My eyes were glazed with desire, my tongue hanging out of my mouth in a lewd expression of pleasure. Saliva dripped from the corners of my mouth, and a trail of snot ran down my nose. This wasn't the dignified woman of the Sierra household. This was the face of a woman enslaved by pleasure.

"Did that feel good?" Leon's voice brushed against my ear, sending a wave of tingles down my spine.

I gulped nervously. Oh no. If I answered, I might lose myself completely. I had to remember, I was a woman in love with Professor Sesillian, and we were on the brink of starting a relationship. If I graduated, we could finally be together. So, I had to resist. No matter what.

However...

"It... it felt amazing~" I mumbled, my tongue still hanging out of my mouth.

"You don't say?" Leon smirked. "Well, why don't we keep going? Let's move to the bed."

"Y-Yeshhh..." I replied, eagerly following his lead. I willingly climbed onto the bed, lying beside the woman who had just shared his bed moments ago. Looking at him, I spread my legs in anticipation. "F-Fuck me again, M-Mashter..."

I couldn't comprehend what was happening to me. It felt like my body was no longer under my control.

Chapter 213 The Fall To Debauchery (7)

Leon's POV

I felt like I was finally breaking Charlotte down. I didn't expect it to be this easy, but maybe her current lack of choices had made her more compliant. I knew that by tomorrow, she'd probably revert to her old self, throwing verbal jabs at me like before. But that was a problem for another day. Right now, I wanted to savor the sight of her spreading her legs for me.

I positioned myself over her, feeling the anticipation build. Slowly, I slid my dick inside her. Unlike the first time, it wasn't as hard now; she was no longer a virgin. Yet, she was still incredibly tight, her body gripping me with a familiar intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

"Nghhhnn~!"

Charlotte still felt a twinge of pain, but the pleasure flooding through her eclipsed it completely. I had no intention of handling her gently. No, to assert dominance, I had to make it abundantly clear who was in charge. So, like a relentless pile driver, my meat rod hammered into her womb. Each thrust rubbed against her folds with a forceful intensity, scraping them and igniting a firestorm of pleasure down her spine.

"Ahhh, ahhh, nnnn!" she moaned, her voice a symphony of pain and ecstasy.

With each vigorous thrust, the semen I had recently released surged out from between her folds, creating a visceral, sloshing symphony.

"Ah, ah, ah, Nn, ahhhh!"

Charlotte's hands instinctively covered her flushed cheeks, torn between shame and the overwhelming pleasure coursing through her. With each forceful thrust, she couldn't help but surrender to the sensations coursing through her body. Her once-glassy eyes now drooped heavily, her expression twisted with unrestrained desire.

"A, ah... Ah, ahhh, ah, higu, it's so deep...!"

With each thrust, she let out an impatient whimper, her voice climbing higher in pitch with each passing moment, as though she were teetering on the edge of her limits. Watching her in this state only fueled my arousal further. A once dignified woman, now beneath me, her refined demeanor replaced by unbridled desire.

'Now I'm going to transform you into a woman who doesn't remind me of Kaori anymore.'

With that determination fueling me, I shifted my position, lifting myself from below and raising her hips as if folding her in half.

"Eh, W, what are you doing? Kyaa! It's so heavy...!"

In this position, I fucked her. It's what some call the mating press. An exaggerated missionary position that lets me penetrate her deeply. In this stance, I could feel her cervix, that ring-like muscle, being stretched by my cock.

I plunged my hips down with urgency in the mating press position, my weight pressing her into the mattress.

"Ahh, no, ahh, nn...! It's so deep. It's hitting every inch inside me! Ah, ah, ah, hiin, ahh!"

Her face contorted in a mix of pleasure and discomfort, her hands clawing at the sheet beneath her.

"Ahh, stop, stop it please... y-you're suddenly getting so rough... Nooo, you're hitting that spot! Hyaaaaa!"

Her high-pitched moaning in my ears was like sweet music, urging me on. Unconsciously, she locked her legs around my waist, pulling me in closer. Her long brown hair was a tangled mess, strands sticking to

her flushed skin. Drool dripped sloppily from the corner of her mouth. Her cheeks glistened with a sheen of sweat, her expression desperate for more. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, adding to her allure, making her even more desirable to me.

"Ahh, p, please forgive me! Please, d-don't be so rough!"

Seeing her in this state was incredibly arousing, to say the least. I could feel her pussy tightening around me, a clear sign that she was on the brink of climax. With a sense of urgency, I quickened my hip movements, ensuring our orgasms would synchronize perfectly.

Then, a wave of pleasure surged through me, starting from the tips of my toes and traveling up my legs, electrifying every nerve ending on its path to my crotch. With a determined motion, I pulled out halfway, savoring the anticipation, before forcefully slamming my hips back into her depths. The room was filled with the unmistakable sound of flesh meeting flesh as my bloodshot glans pierced her womb.

"Hyighnggg!"

Her eyes widened in shock, her mouth opening in a strange cry of surprise. Suddenly, the tip of my throbbing cock, buried deep in her womb, unleashed its torrent.

"HngggggggggggggggggggggggghhhnnnnnnnnnnnnnnNnNnnnnnnnnnnnnnn~!!!"

In response, her legs instinctively wrapped tightly around my waist, her teeth clenched, eyes wide with ecstasy as she arched her back in pleasure. Meanwhile, my hot cum erupted inside her, splashing against the depths of her womb with a satisfying splatter.

"Ahh, ahhh, puhi, fuhhh, ahhh, fuhh..."

Charlotte appeared like a broken toy, her body trembling uncontrollably as she emitted strange, almost inhuman sounds that barely resembled moans.

Once my ejaculation subsided, she extended her tongue lazily, her body swaying back and forth in a dazed state.

Her delicate features contorted into the iconic expression known as *ahegao*, her eyes rolling back in bliss and her mouth forming a perfect "O" of ecstasy. I couldn't believe she could pull off such a look, especially considering it was her first time. The sight of this breathtaking woman adorned with such an expression was like witnessing a rare work of art—a masterpiece reserved solely for my eyes. Not even the Prince or the Professor had seen her like this. It was me who had the privilege of unveiling this side of her, a realization that ignited a renewed sense of conquest within me. As this realization dawned upon me, a surge of heat pulsed through my crotch once more.

I'd had sex with Maya five times before this, and she'd also made me cum once with her mouth, bringing the total to six ejaculations. Adding this romp with Charlotte made it eight in total. Yet, there was no sign of my dick fading at all. My body felt anything but tired, and the desire to fill this woman's womb with my cum still pulsed in my lower belly.

Feeling my dick twitch inside her, Charlotte's mouth formed a dazed expression.

"N-No way... I... I'm gonna lose it... I can't handle any more..."

I paid no heed to her pleas. Instead, I resumed thrusting my hips.

"S-Someone... save me..."

I could tell she was drifting into a daze. I silenced her with a kiss, sealing her lips with mine. In response, she teasingly flicked her tongue against mine. She was unraveling before my eyes. Yes, she was on the verge of breaking. But I wouldn't relent. The night was young, and her body still craved me.

Maya's POV

I woke to the sensation of the bed shaking, a feeling I was all too familiar with. After all, this bed was used for Master's pleasure. So, it was natural for it to shake. I wasn't the one currently enjoying Master's company, which meant he had someone else in his bed at the moment.

However, something felt off instantly. Despite the bed shaking and the sound it made, there were no moans accompanying it. That was unusual. Normally, when you woke up after being knocked out by Master's intense lovemaking, you'd hear at least a few moans. But now, there was none.

I shifted my gaze beside me and witnessed Master vigorously fucking a woman. Yes, he was fucking her, but she wasn't making any sounds. For a moment, I wondered if she was already dead—had she been fucked to death?

"Aug, ug, ughh..."

But then, I discerned the faint moans, barely audible amidst the silence, as she teetered on the edge of collapse.

When did they start? I struggled to recall, my memory hazy from the haze of pleasure and unconsciousness. But it dawned on me that if I had blacked out, Master had been engaged in this relentless coupling with the woman for hours on end.

There was no way one woman alone could satisfy Master. That's why this was happening.

The woman lay there, unconscious, her body convulsing involuntarily, her eyes glazed over in a vacant stare. Meanwhile, Master grasped both of her legs, his hips driving forward with the force of a pile driver. She was completely coated in his essence, as if a deluge of it had been unleashed upon her. But it didn't end there. I couldn't fathom the amount that had been deposited inside her, but her lower belly swelled with it, distending as though she were carrying a child.

After a while, Master groaned and tightened his grip on both legs. Through the gap between her swollen pussy lips and his pulsating shaft, I could witness the overflow of his essence, spilling out uncontrollably from within her.

Instead of basking in the afterglow of his release, Master forcefully turned the woman's body over, her limp form offering no resistance. With a determined thrust, he resumed pounding into her from behind, his hips slamming against her relentlessly.

Seeing this, I simply turned onto my side, pretending to still be asleep.

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After I finished cumming inside Charlotte for the eighteenth time, I pulled out. The sensation of fucking her was intoxicating; her pussy was unlike any other, a rare gem among women. It was soft and inviting, like marshmallow, every time I plunged into her depths.

But I had to exercise restraint. Today was the day the idols were making their debuts.

I'll admit, I got carried away. I mean, I definitely went overboard. Eighteen times was unprecedented, even for me. I never pushed beyond ten with my other women. When I indulged in group sex, each woman would typically get five rounds at most. Enduring all eighteen shots of my cum turned Charlotte into a masterpiece herself.

As I withdrew, Charlotte's once-distended belly slowly returned to its normal state, my cum gushing out of her crack like a relentless stream.

"Maya, clean my dick," I commanded, aware that she was already awake and attentive.

"O-Okay..." she replied, her voice slightly shaky with anticipation. With determination, she moved towards me, her eyes locked on my cum-coated dick. Without a moment's hesitation, she engulfed it in her mouth, her lips forming a tight seal around my shaft as she eagerly sucked and slurped, her tongue expertly tracing every contour. Her gaze remained fixed on mine as she worked.

She left no trace of my essence untouched, even ensuring to suck out the remaining cum from my urethra. After a thorough cleaning, she withdrew, parting her lips to reveal the collected cum on her tongue.

"Good. Now swallow it," I instructed.

Upon my command, she obediently gulped down the cum, then presented her tongue to me once more, allowing me to inspect it. Satisfied, I flashed her a smile before ordering her to attend to Charlotte, who lay beside us. Without hesitation, she sprang into action, demonstrating her efficiency as my personal maid.

Once I had dressed, a knock sounded at my door.

"Come in," I called out.

With a timid creak, the door swung open, revealing the entrance of a woman. She was no ordinary visitor; she was the resident doctor, tasked with examining the women whose virginity I had taken, ensuring there were no complications. It was Natasha.

As she crossed the threshold, her delicate features contorted into a frown, her senses immediately assaulted by the unmistakable scent of sex that hung heavy in the air. Her eyes scanned the room until they settled on me, her expression a mixture of curiosity and disapproval.

"I-I heard you needed something from me," she murmured, a slight tremor in her voice as she bowed respectfully.

"Yes. Filia isn't available at the moment, as she's occupied with other tasks. Can I entrust you with her responsibilities?" I inquired, my tone firm yet polite.

She glanced at the woman, who appeared lifeless as Maya tended to her. When she noticed the subtle rise and fall of her chest, her gaze snapped back to me, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Y-You didn't rape her, did you?" she demanded, her voice tinged with accusation.

"No," I replied firmly.

While there was an element of coercion in what I had done to Charlotte, I wasn't about to confess to it. Admitting to rape would only invite further scrutiny, something I wanted to avoid at all costs. Besides, it wasn't a straightforward case of rape; she had willingly engaged in sexual acts in exchange for something.

You could argue that I simply had sex with a prostitute, which sounded far less damning in my mind.

I hoped Charlotte wouldn't say anything to Natasha during her inspection, just in case she woke up. Not that Charlotte could prove anything anyway. I had everything recorded. If she claimed I raped her, I'd simply show the footage of her spreading her legs for me willingly.

Natasha began her work as soon as Maya finished cleaning Charlotte. I, on the other hand, decided to leave the room. As I stepped out, my phone chimed. Pulling it out, I saw a picture of Charlotte with an ahgao expression. Ignoring the photo for now, I navigated to the notification that had caused my phone to ring.

The headline screamed, "Ex-Duke Sierra Found Dead in His Current Residence." The article was extensive, but the grisly details were unmistakable. The headless corpse, believed to be that of the former Duke Sierra, was discovered in a dingy apartment room by the landlord.

The head was nowhere to be found, but given that the duke had been renting the place, the landlord was certain of the body's identity. Authorities were currently investigating the motive for the killing and searching for the missing head.

I went to where Amon was currently situated. I opened the door to my office and found her there, bringing a teacup to her lips. In front of her was a pile of gold coins. She wasn't alone; the members of the Shadows were also present.

Sandra, the leader, along with Bernadette, Krista, and Juliette, were all there. Isabelle was on a mission with Gabrielle, which explained her absence.

When I entered, they all bowed their heads. Amon lowered her teacup, stood up, and curtsied with a bow.

The Shadows were the ones who killed the ex-duke. I didn't want him to spend a single ounce of money to get Charlotte, so I had him eliminated. His head was now displayed on a stake in the Capital City. With the morning light beginning to rise, I assumed some people had already seen it.

"Good work, all of you," I said.

At my praise, they all blushed, clearly enjoying the recognition.

Arianne's POV

The leader and I were in the Capital City, our faces concealed by hoods, blending into the crowd. Many onlookers were terrified and stunned by the sight before them. High above, gruesomely displayed on a stake, was the head of the former duke, Duke Gordon Sierra.

Some citizens murmured that this must be divine punishment for the terrible things he had done. Others speculated that his unhinged actions had led to this brutal end. This was punishment, a consequence of his misdeeds. I was in agreement with the crowd, of course, but even I found the display to be incredibly unhinged.

The royal knights made their way to the stake, their heavy armor clanking with each step. While they focused on retrieving the head, the leader and I slipped away, disappearing into the shadows of the alley. As the dim light faded behind us, we pulled down our hoods, the cool air brushing against our faces.

"This kingdom is really in decline," I murmured, my voice echoing softly off the damp alley walls. "Many nobles have been stripped of their titles, the Prince is rotting in jail, and there are happenings that even I can't begin to understand. It's unsettling." I paused, taking a deep breath. "I should be rejoicing, but there's this gnawing feeling inside me. Everything is just so... weird and strange.

It's like an invisible hand is pulling the strings behind the scenes. Someone must be plotting something."

No, there was definitely a scheme unfolding. Was this the cunning work of Moriarty? Or perhaps the machinations of Mephisto?

The leader remained silent, her eyes fixed on the worn cobblestones beneath our feet, lost in thought.

"Leader?" I called out, breaking the silence.

She snapped out of her reverie, meeting my gaze. "You're right," she murmured after a heavy sigh. "It seems this kingdom is destined for downfall, and it won't be at our hands."

"Should we... take action?"

"Do you think we can? I can't even trust my own soldiers anymore," she replied with a bitter edge to her voice.

That's right. We couldn't trust any more of the members of the Silver Blades. There was a traitor among us. No, we couldn't even be sure how many of them there were in our midst. But we knew there was a traitor. It was only natural for her to doubt everything.

Even Shredica was under suspicion by our leader. Though personally, I didn't think Shredica was the traitor.

"Anyway, I believe it's wise for us to keep a low profile for now," she declared. "After the incident in the King's Game where three of our members decided to act on their own and ended up dead, I think it's best to keep a low profile. The royal knights and magic knights are on our tails as well. If we don't fade from sight for a while, even our most covert maneuvers will not evade their gaze."

The leader turned around and strode deeper into the alley. There was a sense of resignation about her, something I couldn't ignore.

"Are you gonna give up, Leader?"

The Silver Blades were a band of rebels, fighting tooth and nail against the tyranny of the kingdom. We'd clashed swords with royal knights, executed daring raids, and left our mark on the annals of history. But with each setback, it felt like something inside our leader had snapped. Was she really considering giving up now, after all we'd sacrificed? What about our dreams of overthrowing the kingdom?

What about our fallen comrades, who'd shed blood for this cause? And what about my own burning desire to avenge my mother against the royalty?

"No way," declared the leader, her voice filled with determination. "I'll do whatever it takes to emerge victorious, even if it means striking a deal with the devil himself."

She glanced back at me, and I could see the fire of determination blazing in her eyes. Looks like the leader hadn't thrown in the towel just yet.

Chapter 215: Epilogue 4 - The Prelude-ish Epilogue (1)

???'s POV

The Kingdom of Milham is one of the most powerful human kingdoms in the world. Known not only for revolutionizing firearms and leading in innovation, it is also the largest and most economically gifted kingdom globally. Among the countries of this world, it is the most rapidly advancing.

Though it still can't compete with the Demonic Kingdom of Hell, which rules nearly half the world's land, or the Empire of Rodonia, which dominates the second-largest continent, Milham's technological advancements have positioned it to finally stand toe-to-toe with these giants.

However, in recent times, Milham has been on the decline. Just days ago, many nobles were stripped of their titles due to the exposure of their corrupt dealings. The kingdom is plagued by widespread corruption and various unspeakable activities within its political sphere. Additionally, it is known for having the highest number of terrorist groups aiming to overthrow the royal family.

Despite Milham's recent prosperity, I can honestly say that with just the right moves, it could easily fall.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was orchestrating this chaos, manipulating events from behind the scenes to ensure the kingdom's downfall. It was as if a master puppeteer had set everything in motion with one calculated move, pushing Milham to the brink of collapse like a line of falling dominoes.

"This has gotten interesting," I murmured to myself, my eyes scanning the detailed report from the ambassador I'd sent to Milham. The implications were clear: with just a few strategic moves, I could pull the strings and make the kingdom mine. It would eventually be swallowed by my country, a seamless takeover. The thought thrilled me.

"Isn't this kind of nice?" I mused, a grin spreading across my face.

I just have to outmaneuver whoever is behind this puppetry, and then I could conquer the kingdom without so much as moving a muscle.

Lilia's POV

"Your Highness, I beg you to reconsider! Please, I can't lose my title," pleaded a man in tattered clothing, looking like a pig that had just escaped from a pen. His voice trembled with desperation. "T-Those accusations are all lies. Can you really believe I would do such a thing?! Please, Your Highness, reconsider!"

He was groveling on the luxurious royal carpet, tears staining his dirty cheeks, while the king gazed down at him with icy, unforgiving eyes. The grandeur of the throne room contrasted starkly with the man's pathetic state, amplifying the gravity of his fall from grace.

His Highness sighed deeply, his gaze hardening as he looked down at man. "You really are a piece of crap, Teliu. Do you honestly think I'd reconsider the verdict I've given you? Do you have any idea how much damage your scandal has inflicted on our kingdom? The chaos you've caused goes beyond mere embarrassment.

Our associates are beginning to distrust us, and our trading partners are pulling out due to your idiocy. The citizens are losing faith in our leadership, breeding more terrorists and insurgents. This could even escalate into a full-blown civil war. There's nothing you can do to stop it now. The only thing left for you is to pay for the immense damage this scandal has caused or face the gallows."

"Hiiii!" the man shrieked in fear, pressing his forehead harder into the carpet. "P-Please, Your Highness, can you make the punishment a little less severe? Sending me to the gallows, even stripping me of my status, is going overboard! I am willing to take punishment, but not to that extent! Demote me if you must, and I will slowly pay the repercussions for my mistakes.

I will force my subjects to give me everything they have and hand it all over to you! J-Just please, don't take so much from me! And please, don't send me to the gallows. I can't pay for anything right now because all my properties have been burned down. Please, I'm begging you, Your Highness!"

The man couldn't sink any lower than he was at that moment.

His Highness sneered, "You're a sorry excuse for a man. Even after hearing about Sierra's execution by unknown thugs, you still strut around as if you have any right to speak. Well, let me make this clear: everything I've said, every word of my verdict, is set in stone. No amount of groveling will change that.

If you can't pay the price for your actions and won't lift a finger to make amends, then the gallows await you. Take this sorry excuse for a man away, and let his execution serve as a warning to all. We'll show the people that scum like him will face justice." With a wave of his hand, His Highness issued the order.

"W-What...?! N-No, please Your Highness, don't do this to me! I still have so much life ahead of me! I'm young! I can't die yet!"

The man continued to protest, but I waved my hand, signaling the magic knights to take him away.

"What do you think you're doing?! Don't lay a hand on me! I'm Earl Teliu! You have no right to touch me! Guah!"

His incessant screaming grated on my nerves, so I waved my hand again. One of the magic knights punched him in the face, causing him to immediately start bleeding from the nose.

"Someone of lowly status attacking or even verbally disrespecting the magic knights faces punishment. That's the rule. You have no right to speak again, you pig," I declared.

"Y-You! You have no right!"

"I have every right. I'm the commander of the magic knights, after all," I stated coldly. "If you utter another word, I could just kill you right here, and it would be far more painful than the typical gallows. But I don't want to dirty the throne room or the royal carpet." With a disdainful glance, I continued, "And can you stop acting like a child? You're in your fifties already. Grow up.

Well, I suppose that's not going to happen now, since you're going to die today."

I waved my hand again, and the knights seized him, dragging him away. His voice grew more desperate, echoing through the grand hall. "W-Wait, please! I don't want to die! Just please, even if you take my properties, even with just that, you can keep it! Just let me live!"

His Highness remained stoic, his gaze cold and unyielding. The pleas fell on deaf ears, the man's cries becoming more frantic as he was pulled further from the throne.

As the heavy doors closed behind him, his screams faded into the distance, leaving an eerie silence in the throne room.

An hour later, we received word that the man had been beheaded. A crowd gathered to witness his execution, and many jeered, saying he deserved to die. But what the Kingdom was doing wasn't true justice. The King knew this; he didn't aim for justice. He orchestrated the public execution to make people believe the Kingdom was still taking action against corruption.

His Highness wanted to maintain the illusion of authority, to show he wasn't just sitting on his throne.

This was the state of the Kingdom today—corrupt and decaying. I had no intention of changing it. I wasn't righteous, nor did I care if it fell. As long as I remained at the top, that was all that mattered.

Elise's POV

The scent of the wind seemed unusual today, making it impossible for me to calm down. Something was nagging at me, so I decided to go to Hell. I needed some kind of confirmation about a growing suspicion. Upon arriving, I headed straight for a noble house.

Riding in on horseback, I was halted by a large procession of demon soldiers.

"Hey, you! What are your intentions here?" barked a man who appeared to be the captain of these demon soldiers.

I dismounted my horse with a determined stride, facing the captain squarely. "I'm here to speak with your master," I declared.

"State your business! You seem suspicious!" he barked, his voice tinged with suspicion.

"I just did. I'm here to talk to your master," I replied firmly.

"I said you look suspicious!" the captain retorted, his stance unwavering. "If you have business with my master, you tell me first. My soldiers will relay it to her!"

"You clearly don't understand how sensitive this matter is," I said firmly. "It's too secret for a demon soldier captain, or even for ordinary soldiers, to know. That's why I can't disclose my business to your master through you."

"Then you're not allowed to pass," the captain insisted stubbornly.

This man was proving to be difficult. It seemed like my only option was to eliminate him.

"Eclair," a woman's voice called out. I glanced behind the captain and saw a woman with two horns on her head. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to talk to you about something. Mind if I come in?" I asked.

The woman glanced at the captain. "Ronald, allow her to enter."

"B-But Mistress!"

"Listen to me carefully. Your life depends on it," she warned with a sharp edge to her voice. "Consider yourself fortunate that I caught a whiff of her scent. If I hadn't, your head would be rolling by now."

The captain's shock was evident as he glanced between us, his gaze settling on me with a hint of accusation.

"Don't fret. She won't lay a finger on me," she reassured him, her confidence unwavering.

"F-Fine," the captain finally relented, his resistance crumbling under her authoritative presence.

With his consent, I stepped into the noble house of the demon servants, facing the formidable figure of Mammon, the current head of the household.

Chapter 216: Epilogue 4 - The Prelude-ish Epilogue (2)

The house of the demon servants. It was the birthplace of all those creatures who served the high and mighty. These demons usually served someone of high status, sometimes even acting as sex slaves. This was the place where these beings were bred. Known for their obedience, loyalty, and stunning looks, they were the epitome of beauty. Everyone around here, regardless of gender, was a sight to behold.

But unlike many demon breeds, they lacked power. Without a specific skill, they were only good for one thing—being useful. They couldn't even muster the strength to fight, let alone wage war.

Mammon, the current head of the demon servants, was a bit of an anomaly among her kind. Unlike the others, she was a half-blood, being one of the demon lord's daughters. This lineage gifted her with horns atop her head, a feature rare among demon servants who typically resembled humans without horns or tails.

"What do you want to talk about, Eclair?" Mammon asked, settling into a chair at the round table.

"You've already got a hunch as to why I've graced your doorstep, don't you?" I remarked.

She sighed, a weighty exhale that hinted at the gravity of our impending discussion. "Well, why don't we indulge in a glass of wine to lubricate this conversation? It's bound to be bitter, so perhaps a touch of sweetness will soften the blow. What say you?"

"Sure thing," I replied, shrugging.

Mammon snapped her fingers, and two demon servants swiftly entered, bowing before us. She ordered them to fetch wine, and with practiced efficiency, they poured us each a glass before discreetly exiting the room. Their professionalism was commendable.

"Alright, let's get down to business," she said, settling into her seat.

"I'll cut to the chase," I replied. "The demon king is gathering troops for a war against the humans, isn't he?"

"That's cutting right to the heart of the matter, even for someone as prepared as myself," she remarked, her tone tinged with a hint of surprise. "But you're absolutely right. His Highness is marshaling troops, and he's managed to rally the demon lords to his cause. They've been restless for a while now, discontent with the centuries-long stalemate we've faced against the humans.

It's been a constant struggle, a tug-of-war between our kind and theirs. If it weren't for a woman named Jeanne, who held back the tide of human conquest in the past, demons might have overrun this world by now. The current demon king is fed up with the deadlock and is determined to change the status quo by going to war against the humans."

"I suppose you're hitting the nail on the head there. It's been an eternity since the demon race found themselves at a standstill. With that woman out of commission for centuries now, the demon king isn't about to twiddle his thumbs. No one dares to challenge the raw power of the demon race anymore. Sure, if the humans stumbled upon another hero like Jeanne, they might have a fighting chance.

But someone like Jeanne only comes around once every million years. The odds are stacked against them now."

"The current demon king seems determined to see it through, even if it means disrupting the natural order of things," Mammon remarked solemnly. "He fails to realize that extinguishing the humans would disrupt the delicate balance of this world."

That was right. Each race in this world plays a crucial role, and if one were to vanish, the delicate balance holding everything together would crumble. I'm baffled as to why the demon lords are suddenly on board with this idea. Some of them used to show compassion toward humans, even advocating against plunging into another war with them. So, what's triggered this change of heart?

"Do the seven princesses support this plan?" I probed.

Mammon shook her head. "Nope. They seem indifferent to the notion of expanding Hell. Their sole focus is on locating the one who brought you and your siblings into existence. It's like they're on a relentless quest to find her, no matter the cost. They won't intervene in this matter, nor are they inclined to offer their support. That seems to be their stance, through and through."

The seven Princesses of hell. They're on a relentless pursuit to track down Leon, me, and the others. All because their sister, one of the former princesses, our creator, had done something against them, which I still had no idea about. Essentially, that creator was our parent. Their only lead to her was us, that's why they are hunting us.

"You've gotta watch your back too, Eclair. Those Princesses mean business. They're thirsty for the blood of anyone tied to Lilith. And I mean everyone, even your innocent siblings."

That's the reality. With the demon king fully immersed in his war against the humans, he's too preoccupied to reign in the Princesses. The only thing keeping them in check was the demon king's hesitancy to provoke the humans. But now that he's gearing up for war, the Princesses will be unleashed to wreak havoc as they please. And that's what terrifies me the most.

Why do the Princesses want to find our creator, Lilith? Even after all this time, it's still a mystery to me.

As I pondered that, I noticed Mammon's hands trembling as she clenched them into fists. It seemed like she had something on her mind, but was struggling to voice it.

"What's on your mind, Mammon?" I inquired.

She looked at me hesitantly. "Y-You've been venturing into human territories for a while now, right?" she asked.

I won't boast, but I've actually journeyed across the entire world, exploring every nook and cranny. I can honestly say that the only place I haven't been is the Labyrinth City, rumored to be underground. So when Mammon asked, I nodded.

"Then, have you ever come across a child... Specifically, a demon servant child. One with brown hair?"

Despite my years of travel, I've never encountered anyone fitting that description, so I shook my head.

"Why do you ask?"

"M-My daughter. She's been kidnapped for 2 years now," Mammon said, her voice quivering with a mix of desperation and sorrow. "Humans took her two years ago. I tried to follow, but I don't know the human territories well enough. Would you help me find her? She had a short, bobbed brown haircut when she was taken, but it might be longer now."

Unlike me, she doesn't have horns. She looks like a typical demon servant. I'm not sure what her skill is, since she was taken when she was just 18, but I believe it's similar to mine. I'm not asking you to make her your top priority, but if you come across someone who fits that description, please tell her to come back home. Her mother misses her dearly."

I closed my eyes, feeling a pang of empathy. I knew all too well the agony of being separated from loved ones, unable to find them. Leon, Veronica, Leonora, and Estelle—all were missing pieces of my heart. I had lost my three younger sisters after using teleportation magic to send them away, without knowing their exact destinations, to keep them safe from the Princesses.

I had to send them to unknown locations as a precaution against the Princesses. If I had used specific coordinates, they would have detected the magic and found them instantly. Sending them to random places was the only way to keep them safe. I found Leon when he was three, but I didn't reveal myself because the time wasn't right.

I was shocked when I discovered he left the orphanage where he grew up, and I lost track of him for a long time after that.

I had found Leon again now, but Veronica, Leonora, and Estelle were still lost to me. The triplets—Leon, Veronica, and Leonora—were born on the same day, and Estelle was the youngest among us. The

sudden loss of close relatives was a pain I understood deeply, making it easy to sympathize with Mammon.

That's why it was only natural for me to accept her request. I opened my eyes and said, "Alright. I'll look for your daughter. I can't prioritize her, though. I still need to find my other siblings."

"T-Thank you, Eclair," she sighed, relief washing over her.

"What is her name?" I asked.

"Amon. Her name is Amon."

An insignificant female villager's POV

We were just minding our own business, going about our normal day of farming on the outskirts of the Bethlan Kingdom, when suddenly, the sky lit up in a brilliant, unnatural way.

It wasn't the kind of light you see when lightning flashes through dark clouds. No, the sky was clear, and this light was different—an eerie, glowing circle, like some kind of portal. Something came out of it, hurtling down fast, crashing into our crops.

Panic spread through the village like wildfire. We grabbed whatever we could use as weapons—staves, pitchforks, anything to defend ourselves. There was no telling what might come from the sky, and we were ready for the worst.

But what landed wasn't a monster. As the dust settled, we saw her—lying there amidst the ruined crops—a woman. She looked otherworldly, out of place, yet undeniably human.

Chapter 217: Epilogue 4 - The Prelude-ish Epilogue (3)

Leon's POV

Charlotte's eyes blazed with fury as she unleashed her wrath upon me.

"You rapist! How dare you violate me like this?! How dare you degrade me in such a manner?! You've defiled my innocence, again and again! I refuse to be treated like your plaything!"

Her words cut through the air like a sharp knife, each accusation laced with venom. She was fully awake now, her body no longer under the spell of our shared desires, and her anger was palpable.

I couldn't help but sigh in response. "Is this how you repay me after I've just delivered the news of your father's passing? Charlotte, I never imagined you capable of such callousness."

She seethed even more, her eyes blazing with fury. "I don't care what happens to him now anyway, now that I know his true colors. Besides, I was never close to him. All he cared about was politics and committing countless misdeeds. I've hated him since I was a child."

"Well, you could at least show some sadness," I retorted, trying to provoke a different reaction.

"If he felt any sadness about selling me off, then maybe I would. But he had no remorse. At this point, I don't care if his death was brutal or not," she spat, her voice dripping with venom.

Her words were laced with venom, and it was clear she wasn't going to break down over her father's death. I knew she'd despise me if she ever found out I was the one who ordered his death. But that secret was safe—only Amon and my Shadows knew, and they were as silent as the grave.

"Anyway, what's your plan for me now? Am I going to be trapped here until I've paid off every last cent I owe you?" Charlotte's voice trembled with uncertainty, her eyes searching mine for answers.

Truth be told, I could easily release Charlotte now. The money her father received when he sold her to me had already found its way back into my possession. In essence, Charlotte didn't owe me a damn thing anymore. Yet, surprisingly, she didn't seem to grasp this fact. Perhaps she assumed the money had vanished after her father's demise.

Or maybe, just maybe, there was a part of her that desired to remain here. A part of her that longed for another round of passion.

I smiled at her, my eyes glinting with a mix of amusement and desire. "You don't have to do anything special. Sure, you're in a maid outfit now, but you're not really a maid. You can still go to the academy as usual, meet your friends like always, and even flirt with Professor Sesillian like you always do. The only thing you need to do is come when I call you.

And make sure you're wet and ready when you do."

"You pervert," she hissed, glaring at me with a fiery defiance that was incredibly enticing. Her resistance only fueled my desire, like navigating a fierce labyrinth that no one else had managed to conquer. Each act of rebellion, each sharp retort, was another step toward breaking her down, slowly but surely, until she was completely mine.

After glaring at me, she gritted her teeth, her inner turmoil written all over her face. The conflict was palpable. Even though she didn't have an actual relationship with Sesillian, it must feel like she was cheating on him behind his back. But her body, which had already tasted the ecstasy of being a woman, was betraying her, urging her to stay with me. The struggle within her was fierce.

Her only hope of reversing this pull was to have sex with Sesillian. When the vacation ended, I was certain Charlotte would go straight to him and reclaim some semblance of control over her desires.

I wasn't worried, though. Mainly because I knew Sesillian wouldn't go through with it. He had some bizarre fixation on preserving her chastity. I'd had Gabrielle and the Shadows investigate him after his strange behavior during the joint training session. It turns out he's the leader of a cult organization called Eclipse.

There were likely two reasons, either one or both, for why he hadn't touched Charlotte, even though she practically threw herself at him. That's why I wasn't concerned about Sesillian fucking her, even if Charlotte begged for it. No matter how desperately she tried to convince him, Sesillian wouldn't cave. I was certain of that.

After waiting a bit longer, the door to my Love Nest finally creaked open, revealing five stunning women in pink, eye-catching idol uniforms. Their outfits hugged their curves in all the right places, making them look both innocent and provocatively enticing.

Amon, exuding an air of confident authority, followed closely behind them.

"They're ready, Master," she announced, her voice carrying a hint of anticipation.

"Good," I replied, a slow, satisfied smile spreading across my face.

Charlotte's eyes widened as she took in the sight before her. "Hmm? They look so familiar... W-Wait a second! Aren't they the Starry Knights? W-Why are they here?" Her voice trembled with a mix of surprise and confusion.

"Well, what else? The Starry Knights are the idol group made by our company," I said with a grin.

Charlotte stood there, jaw slack in disbelief.

I turned my gaze to the five women, all poised and ready. Their debuts were imminent. It was time for them to take the stage and shine.

Martha's POV

Karina was pushing my wheelchair through the familiar halls of the home I once lived in, back before I lost my memory. This place, I learned, was a brothel. The women here, dressed in revealing outfits, were prostitutes, selling their bodies for money. I used to be the manager of this establishment before Grandmother took it back from me.

"Are you fine with staying the night here, Miss Martha?" Karina asked, her voice gentle but tinged with concern.

"It's fine," I replied, looking around at the familiar yet distant surroundings. "I'm sure Leon is swamped now that Erica and the girls are getting ready for their debut. I don't want to bother him with anything else right now."

"I don't think Mr. Leon would be bothered by you, Miss Martha," Karina reassured me.

"I'm sure anyone with a heart would feel burdened caring for an ill woman like me," I admitted.

Karina's expression softened. "I'm not bothered by it," she said. "But if you're okay staying here for the night, then I'm okay with it too. Some of the prostitutes you used to look after miss you. They're here."

We entered what looked like a canteen, where women dressed in alluring outfits sat chatting. As they caught sight of me, their faces brightened with genuine affection.

"Oh, it's Martha!"

"It really is! It's been ages since we last laid eyes on you!"

"We heard from Karina that your bastard of a brother did something unspeakable to you. Thank the stars you're alright!"

They gathered around me, enveloping me in their warm embrace. Some whispered words of comfort while others hugged me tighter, their worry evident in every touch.

"I'm sorry for not reaching out sooner to let you know I'm okay. I've been slowly piecing myself back together after what happened. And I'm sorry for not remembering all of you."

"It's fine," one of them rubbed my back reassuringly. "We're just glad you're okay."

As they comforted me, another woman rushed towards us.

"L-Lica...!" she shouted. "Lica's dead!"

"What?!"

The women were stunned.

"What happened?!"

"I-In her room!"

As soon as the woman uttered those words, the others dashed towards the room where the supposed dead person lay.

"Wait for me here, Miss Martha," Karina instructed before joining the fray.

It felt all wrong to stay put. Someone had just died, possibly someone close to me. I couldn't just sit idly by. So, with determination, I took control of my wheelchair and propelled myself forward until I reached them.

In the dimly lit room, the scene unfolded before me—a woman suspended from the ceiling.

Hanged.

The sight of the woman hanging from the ceiling by a rope sent a shiver down my spine, triggering a haunting vision.

In an instant, I found myself engulfed in darkness, my hands gripping a noose while my feet teetered upon a sturdy stool. The air was thick with a sense of foreboding as I watched my hands methodically place the noose around my head, drawing it tight around my neck.

"I'm sorry, Tsubasa..."

The voice, eerily familiar yet distant, echoed through the void as if it were my own. With a heavy heart, I felt my feet propel the stool away, leaving me suspended in the air.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

My scream tore through the silence like a banshee's wail, reverberating off the walls. In a frenzy of panic, I clutched at my own neck, as if I were the one being strangled. With trembling hands, I clawed at the invisible grip, desperate for air. Before I knew it, I was out of the wheelchair, my body convulsing with terror.

Chapter 218: Idol Debut (1)

Rose's POV

I woke up with a splitting headache, feeling like a hammer was pounding inside my skull. Holding my head, I struggled to sit upright.

"Ugh... This is one hell of a hangover. How much did I drink last night?" I muttered to myself.

I remembered everything up to the point where I started drinking, but after that, my memory was a blank. Last night, Irene and I went to the idol debut, but I was also working on something—investigating the cult organization called Eclipse. I got sidetracked by the debut, but I think I made some progress on the investigation. Then, there was that fight... and then...

Ugh. My head feels like it's been tossed into a blender. Where the hell am I, anyway? This definitely isn't my room, and it sure as hell ain't Irene's either. She bailed after the idol debut, leaving me to fend for myself. I tried to get some work done, digging into that Eclipse cult business, but now my memory's all scrambled.

Damn, why did I have to drown myself in booze last night?

As I became more aware of my surroundings, I noticed I was completely naked. A pleasant yet slightly painful tingling sensation radiated from my groin. Flashes of the previous night started coming back to me. Didn't I have some company while drinking last night? What happened to him? I turned my head and saw an equally undressed man sleeping beside me, his chest rising and falling steadily.

"Hmm?!"

My eyes widened in surprise as a shocked gasp escaped my lips. W-What the hell is this? Why am I in bed with him? Why the hell are we both naked? And why does my hips feel so sore? N-Nothing happened between us, right?

I mean, there's no way I'd just give myself to a man I barely know in one night! And besides, we haven't even exchanged diaries yet!

What the hell is going on?!

I tried to recall the events that led to this moment. To understand exactly what brought me here, I needed to remember everything from the very start.

I had been given an official mission by the Administration to investigate an organization called Eclipse. This group was said to have been established ten years ago, but it was only now that they were starting to emerge into public awareness. Their objectives were unknown, but there had been reports of them kidnapping female villagers, after which those victims were never heard from again.

For some reason, the kidnappings had ceased nearly a year ago, though members of Eclipse were still spotted occasionally. There was even an instance where they attempted to abduct a female academy student.

This report was given to me by an unknown tipster, who mentioned that the student in question was named Charlotte Sierra. I knew of her, of course. She was the girl who was always trailing behind Sesillian like a little duckling. Perhaps I should question her about the incident. Additionally, there was another student who had fought off the kidnappers. His name was Leon.

I knew of him as well. He was infamous in the academy for being skillless.

"I guess I should look into him too," I mumbled to myself.

While I was buried in the reports, a sharp knock broke my concentration. I made my way to the door and opened it to find a woman standing there. Her purple hair caught the light, and her outfit was remarkably casual. She looked like a stereotypical nerd, with a floral top and a long, flowing skirt that reached her ankles. Her round glasses sat perched on her nose, completing the look.

"Pft!"

The sight of her almost made me burst into laughter.

"Don't laugh," Irene warned, her eyes narrowing into a glare. "I hate running into students when I'm off work. That's why I'm dressed like this."

"Is that so? Well, it's definitely going to work, considering it's a million miles away from how you usually dress. No one at the academy has seen you like this, except maybe our old friends."

I couldn't help but be transported back to those days. She was always so uptight, her skirts so long they practically swept the floor. If she braided her hair into twin tails, she'd look exactly like she did back then. The sight of her now, so different yet so familiar, brought a rush of memories. The contrast between her current casual look and her typically strict attire was almost surreal.

"Anyway, why the early visit? Didn't I tell you to swing by around sunset? The concert isn't kicking off until nightfall, you know?"

"I'm bored," Irene announced casually, striding into my house as if she owned the place. "With the academy on break and no work to occupy me, I'm starting to feel like I'm climbing the walls. It's funny, isn't it? Back then, I yearned for a break, but now that it's here, it feels like anything but."

I couldn't tell if she was bragging about having a break or not. Didn't she realize I'm not only an instructor but also working for the Administrators? "I wish I were you," I said, settling back at the table where I had been working.

"What are you up to?" she inquired, curiosity lacing her tone.

"I'm delving into some reports that an anonymous tipster sent me a while back regarding this cult called Eclipse," I responded, my focus glued to the documents in front of me. "Maybe if I dig deeper, I'll uncover something significant."

"Eclipse? That's a name I haven't heard in ages. What's got you interested in that?" she asked, her interest piqued.

"Hmm? Well, one of our students nearly fell prey to them," I explained.

"Hm? Who?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Charlotte Sierra was the one. Luckily, another student stepped in. It's a guy named Leon," I explained.

At that, I heard the sound of her standing up, the movement sudden and swift.

Turning to face her, I noticed her expression filled with worry. What had prompted this sudden concern?

"Is he alright?" she asked, her voice tinged with anxiety.

"Uh, yeah. He's the one who fought off the kidnappers," I confirmed.

"I see..." she mumbled to herself, her brows furrowed in deep thought as she sank back into her seat.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" I asked, noticing the sudden shift in her demeanor. There was an air of unease surrounding her.

"Nothing," she stammered, her voice trembling slightly. It was evident she was hiding something beneath the surface, her eyes darting away in avoidance. Did she share a personal connection with this young man? Or was it simply concern for a student under her care? Regardless, her evasiveness spoke volumes.

But if she insisted it was nothing, then I supposed I would have to take her word for it, though doubts lingered in the back of my mind.

Pleasure City was where the concert was taking place. We arrived there near sunset, the orange sun casting a warm glow over the surroundings, its rays kissing our skin.

The venue was bustling with people, which was to be expected. This was their chance to see the singers behind the beautiful songs they had been listening to on their smartphones. Everyone was eagerly anticipating the performance, and I was no exception. I couldn't wait to hear the Starry Knights perform live, and I was especially excited to hear Amon's enchanting voice.

Her songs carried a melodic quality, filled with a sense of longing and dedication to someone she loved. While the Starry Knights' songs were undoubtedly heartfelt, there was something about Amon's music that resonated with me on a deeper level. That's why I was most looking forward to her performance.

"I don't really get the hype since I rarely listen to music, but I guess it must be really amazing if so many people would come all this way just to listen to their songs," Irene remarked, her eyes scanning the bustling crowd with a hint of curiosity.

"Well, I can honestly say that once you immerse yourself in their music, you'll be captivated," I replied with a smile. "Their songs carry a haunting beauty, with a melancholic undertone that tugs at your heartstrings. Yet, there's also a unique energy to them that draws you in. I'm genuinely excited to experience it firsthand!"

"It looks like it's not just the general public who will be listening, though."

That was true. Among the crowd, there were also individuals of high status. Sons and daughters of esteemed nobles and courtiers mingled among us, and I even spotted the head of a noble house in attendance. The presence of influential figures added to the anticipation of the event. I also caught sight of Celia Song.

As I surveyed the scene, a sudden burst of upbeat music echoed from the stage, capturing the attention of everyone present. Lights flickered to life, casting a vibrant glow across the stage. It seemed the show was about to begin.

Chapter 219: Idol Debut (2)

Leon's POV

The venue was packed with people who had each paid one gold coin for entrance. With so many attendees, we had nearly amassed a total of 5,000 gold coins. It was a significant amount of money.

My Shadows were on high alert, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious. There had been numerous reports of bastards planning to pull some stunts to get close to the girls. As expected, weirdos were starting to crawl out of the woodwork now that idols existed in this world. There was also a risk of kidnapping, which was why I had stationed them here.

I noticed some interesting people in attendance at the concert. Professor Irene was there with Professor Rose. I also spotted the actor who played Jeanne in the theater play I watched with my sister. Among the crowd were several other important figures. The fact that so many people, including some high-profile ones, came to see the Starry Knights' debut showed just how popular they had become.

While I was mulling over the crowd, Amon and Maya approached me. They were both set to be the masters of ceremonies for the night. Instead of their usual maid uniforms, they were dressed in elegant, formal attire that highlighted their stunning beauty.

Amon wore a sleek, black dress that hugged her curves, with a slit up the side that hinted at her shapely legs. Maya, on the other hand, wore a flowing, red gown that contrasted beautifully with her white hair and fair skin. Both of them exuded a graceful allure that drew the eyes of everyone around them.

As a side note, they were both filled to the brim with my cum, having fucked them earlier. They were about to step on stage with my cum nestled inside their wombs. The thought heightened my sense of domination.

"Master, everything is ready," Amon said.

"Excellent. Let's get started then," I replied. "Make this night unforgettable so our name spreads even further."

Both of them nodded and curtsied gracefully. "As you command, Master."

With that, the debut began.

Rose's POV

Two women stepped onto the stage, radiating an almost ethereal beauty and sexiness. Their presence was mesmerizing, even to someone like me, who usually doesn't care about appearances and focuses solely on getting stronger. But seeing them, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy. So this is the power of a real woman, huh?

One of the women took the microphone and announced, "Hello, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for attending tonight's debut of the Starry Knights! We're thrilled to introduce you to the five members of the Starry Knights, who will be performing their songs for you tonight. Additionally, I, Amon, will be singing some of my own songs!

We hope you enjoy the show and fall in love with the Starry Knights' music and mine even more in the future!"

So this was Amon. As expected of someone with the voice of an angel, she had the face of one too.

"That's right," added the other woman. "Not only will the Starry Knights be performing for you tonight, but Amon, who has revolutionized the new age of music and singing, will also grace us with her songs! Isn't this exciting?"

The crowd erupted in cheers at her words.

"That's right. I hope that with this, all of you will be able to support our company, Leonamon! Oh, speaking of which, our company is about to unveil another one of our products!"

"Are we announcing it right now?"

"When else could we do it if not at this moment? The timing couldn't be more perfect!"

"I suppose you're right. Yes, it does seem like the ideal time to reveal it."

"Alright, everyone! Before the Starry Knights kick off their first performance, we'd like to introduce you all to our latest product."

A rhythmic sound of drums echoed through the venue, adding a dramatic flair to the introduction. After a moment, the large curtain behind them parted, revealing their newest product.

The product looked like a small cabin on wheels, displayed in various colors. I had to admit, it looked pretty cool.

"This is our groundbreaking new product, a revolutionary mode of land transportation. It's akin to a horse-drawn carriage, but without the need for horses. Instead, it runs on a rare substance called gasoline. Picture a smoother, more comfortable ride without the horse's trot. For just 999 gold coins, you can own this incredible vehicle.

And fret not about refueling—it's easy to find gasoline at designated spots for just one silver coin per gallon. Safety's our top priority, so we provide hands-on driving lessons with every purchase. It's essential to learn how to handle this vehicle properly, as misuse can be risky, even deadly. We strongly advise caution. Despite the risks, the rewards are huge.

If you're ready to embrace the future of transportation, visit any of our branches nationwide to get your vehicle. Leonamon is dedicated to solving transportation issues and leading the way in modernization!"

Many people were captivated by this new product, myself included. If this vehicle became the norm, it wouldn't just boost modernization—it would be the biggest innovation of all. The thought of it alone sent a thrill through me. Leonamon was pulling off incredible feats of innovation in such a short amount of time, and it was almost unbelievable.

First, they introduced the smartphone, a device that changed communication forever. Then, they produced that godly wine, which quickly became the talk of the town. Next, they revolutionized the music industry, bringing a new era of sound and entertainment. And now, they were making waves in engineering and architecture with this groundbreaking vehicle.

The crowd's murmur grew louder, a mix of excitement and disbelief. The energy was palpable. As I stood there, I couldn't help but admire the sleek design of the vehicle, its modern lines and bold colors making it stand out.

Despite my awe, a nagging suspicion lingered in my mind. Where were all these ideas coming from? How did they manage to develop them so rapidly? It was as if they had access to knowledge and resources far beyond what was available.

How were they able to scratch the surface of these inventions and bring them to fruition seemingly overnight?

Hmm... Well, no matter. As long as the Administrators don't get suspicious of them, it wasn't going to be my problem. I didn't need any more work piled onto my already overloaded plate.

After the vehicle's grand introduction, the two women on stage started speaking again, but their words were lost on me as I suddenly felt something odd.

"Irene, can you hold the fort for now?" I asked.

"Hmm? Why? They look like they're about to start," she replied, her brow furrowing in confusion.

"Yeah," I replied. "But I have this nagging feeling that something's going to happen."

"Is that your intuition kicking in?" Irene asked.

"Yeah," I confirmed.

My skill was named Intuition. It allowed me to sense things that might lead to certain outcomes. It was a passive skill that made me aware of potential events before they happened. That's how my skill worked.

"If things are going south, that's worrying. Alright then, I'll keep an eye on the fort for you."

"Thanks," I replied before slipping through the crowd, making excuses as I went. There had to be a reason why my skill was acting up now. Unfortunately, I could only sense it but had no idea why.

Honestly, it felt like a useless skill. But with my training, I was more adept than before, able to make educated guesses about what might happen. Right now, though, I was stumped.

I had no clue what was going to go down. Maybe someone was going to get assassinated. That seemed likely, but who?

Gotta think, Rose, gotta think. Why the hell is my skill kicking in right at this moment? Why now? Is there really going to be an assassination ploy here? Or maybe...

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted someone standing out like a sore thumb in the crowd. He was draped in a dark hood, his presence ominous. Then, catching a glint of light, my eyes locked onto his wrist. There it was—a tattoo of a half-moon. No, not a half-moon, but a symbol of something overlapping, like the moon eclipsing the sun or vice versa. Lunar or solar eclipse.

Eclipse. The name resonated in my mind like a chilling echo—a cult organization known as Eclipse.

I bolted towards the figure, closing the distance with lightning speed before hurling myself at him, sending both of us crashing to the ground. He struggled, but I had the advantage, my strength overpowering his feeble attempts to break free. All those hours in the training hall weren't wasted after all.

The surrounding crowd erupted into a chorus of gasps and murmurs as they witnessed the sudden takedown. Ignoring their startled reactions, I raised my voice, my tone commanding attention, "I'm an agent of the Administrators, and this guy looked suspicious as hell. No need to fret now that he's in my grasp. Just give me some space to handle this, folks."

A hush fell over the onlookers, their eyes fixed on the scene unfolding before them as they obediently parted to create a path. It was a stroke of luck that I managed to apprehend him. If I hadn't, who knows what chaos could've erupted at this concert. And I sure as hell wasn't about to let that happen.

Chapter 220: Idol Debut (3)

The concert had started, and I was pissed because I wasn't there to witness it thanks to my job. This really sucked. My frustration made me rougher than necessary with the man I was dragging across the floor.

"P-Please, wh-what have I done to deserve this kind of treatment?!" he screamed.

"Sorry, but you're under suspicion and need to be questioned," I replied. "You should have hidden that tattoo better."

"Tattoo? Which one? Don't tell me you think I'm a cult or terrorist member just because of a tattoo?"

"My intuition is telling me you're up to something bad. So no matter how unreasonable it seems, my suspicion stands."

"You're telling me you grabbed me because of something as stupid as a woman's intuition? Come on, you can't be serious! I paid with my own money to be here and watch the idols' first appearance! And now, because of a woman's intuition, I miss it and waste my money?!"

"You can yap all you want. I don't care."

I threw him down in a dark alley, his hands and feet now tied to prevent any chance of escape. If he could run even in these circumstances, it would be pointless anyway.

"Can you be a little more gentle?!" he shouted at me.

I stomped my foot beside his face, making him flinch.

"Hi!"

"I've got some questions for you, you bastard," I said. "Does the word Eclipse mean anything to you?"

I saw the slightest wavering in his gaze. Gotcha. This man was definitely affiliated with that cult.

"...I don't know what you're talking about," he stammered, his voice betraying a hint of panic.

"You don't have to deny it. I already know because of that crescent tattoo on your wrist," I said, my tone icy and unyielding. "Tell me, what exactly is a member of a cult doing in a public place with so many people around? Are you planning to assassinate someone?"

"What?! No!" he protested, his voice cracking.

"Then what exactly are you here for?" I demanded, my eyes boring into his.

"I've already made it clear—I have no idea what you're on about! Haven't I emphasized that I'm here to indulge myself?"

"Do you fancy getting hurt?"

"Tsk. There you go with those worn-out lines. Agents of the Administrations ought to afford the benefit of doubt to those they suspect wrongly. I fail to comprehend your intentions here, but your assumptions about me are entirely misguided."

"Hmm? Pray tell, precisely what have I done to warrant your suspicions?"

"For one thing, you dragged me all the way here and threatened me based on nothing more than a woman's intuition. And for another, you're suspecting me without a shred of evidence! If you want to arrest someone, maybe try bringing some proof instead of relying on baseless hunches."

With a sharp stomp, I drove my heel into his crotch.

"Ack! W-What are you doing?" he gasped, his voice cracking in pain.

"If you don't tell me exactly what you're doing here, I'll crush your balls so thoroughly that your line ends with this generation. How does that sound?"

"T-There's no way you're going to do that...! If you do, you'll tarnish the reputation of your organization! Do you even realize the consequences if this gets out?"

"My organization's mission is to maintain peace in the country. That's why we're tasked with eradicating threats that jeopardize that peace. Just like any other pest, if I crush these and end your lineage right here, even the Administrators won't bat an eye. To them, you're merely a nuisance."

To emphasize my point, I gradually apply pressure with my foot, slowly compressing the sensitive area between his legs.

"Gah! Don't!"

"Don't what?" I responded with a steely calm, increasing the pressure steadily.

"I-I'll tell you, okay! Just don't take my family jewels from me! There are things a man can't afford to lose, you know? And these certainly are!"

I eased off slightly, but kept my heels poised threateningly over his groin. Any sudden movement could spell the end for him.

"Speak."

"O-Okay... Jeez, you're terrifying, you know that? If you'd just ease up that scowl, you'd look stunning. Ow, ow, ow! S-Sorry, I'll talk now!"

I lessened the pressure slightly, watching him wince under my heel. With a sharp breath, he began to speak.

"I used to be a member, but I'm not anymore. If you're searching for them, I guess I should tell you what it's all about. It's a cult that worships an evil god. A friend of mine, one of the first to join, persuaded me to come. I was hesitant at first, but eventually I went along. He promised there were rewards for being part of it.

However, once inside, it felt like any other cult. All we did was chant praises to the evil god they worshipped. That was the extent of it."

His words painted a picture typical of cult behavior: devotion to a malevolent deity, luring members with promises of benefits. So far, there was nothing particularly nefarious apparent in their practices.

He continued, "After a while, though, I started experiencing something eerie, like a turmoil in my mind. It felt as if I was being coerced into actions I never imagined. The cult leader would issue commands, no matter how irrational or bizarre, and I found myself obeying unquestioningly. There was a moment when I realized I had taken someone's life, yet I felt no guilt or remorse.

Even in the aftermath of such a drastic act, I remained disturbingly composed. Gradually, I sensed a profound change in my moral compass, as if something was manipulating my thoughts. It was like a sinister whisper guiding me toward deeds that revolted me."

So, the members were initially normal until they became victims of brainwashing? It certainly mirrors tactics used by some cults.

"I was terrified of the person I might become, so I made the agonizing decision to break free from the cult. It wasn't easy; escaping their grasp took immense effort and courage. Eventually, they ceased their pursuit, and I dared to hope I had eluded them for good. That's the extent of what I know. I want no part of their darkness anymore.

I used to live as an A-rank adventurer, embracing life's challenges to the fullest, until the cult ensnared me. Now, if I've satisfied your curiosity, can you untie me and let me go? "

"Not yet," I responded firmly.

"Why?!"

"There's something crucial I still need to understand."

There was something critical I needed to ascertain before making a decision about the man's fate. Despite my initial urge to incarcerate him, it seemed he had genuinely repented for his sins as a cult member and turned a new leaf. That's what my Intuition was nudging me towards, anyway. But I had to probe further.

"What happened to the women who were abducted by the cult?"

He averted his gaze, guilt flashing across his eyes. "I already told you, didn't I? The cult leader ordered us to carry out many reprehensible acts. That included kidnapping women, and then..." He faltered, biting his lip. "...sacrificing them in front of the statue of their evil god. I don't know their ultimate goal, honestly.

I only joined for the perks. But looking back, I think I grasp their agenda now. Frankly, I believe they were attempting to awaken that evil god. It's mere speculation on my part."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, because all the women we killed in front of the statue were virgins. They believed virgin sacrifices would nourish the evil god and somehow bring it to life."

So that explained the wave of kidnappings targeting women. But if that was truly their aim, why did they suddenly cease their activities for ten years? Hmm? Perhaps they lost faith, but why was their name resurfacing now? It didn't add up. No, that wasn't the priority at the moment.

To unravel this mystery, I needed to be direct.

"Do you have any idea who the cult leader is?"

"Hmm. Oh, yeah. I know him. I've seen his face many times," he replied, his voice carrying a hint of recognition tinged with unease.

Good. If he disclosed the leader's name now, we could bring this investigation to a decisive close. We could capture the leader and put an end to their depravity.

"What is his name?"

"His name is..." Suddenly, he fell silent, his eyes staring ahead but vacant, turning milky white. "...name is..."

"Hmm? Hello?" I called out, but he remained unresponsive. What had seized him?

As I approached, intending to shake him back to awareness, I noticed blood trickling from his nose and then from his eye sockets. The crimson streams ran down his face, staining his features.

And then, abruptly...

Plop!

His head exploded with a nauseatingly wet sound. Blood and fragments of brain sprayed across the dark alley, splattering the walls and pooling on the ground. The visceral scene unfolded in grotesque detail, yet I felt no revulsion.

Everything around me seemed to blur into a haze, and a piercing, high-pitched ringing filled my ears, drowning out all other sounds.

The ringing was so intense, I couldn't even hear the distant sounds of the concert anymore.