

The World 911

Chapter 911: Empire Of Rodonia (3)

We were walking along the dusty roads of the Empire's capital, the kind of roads that never seemed to quiet down. The sound of loud chatter, wheels grinding against sand, and hooves clapping against the uneven ground filled the air, echoing from every corner like the pulse of the city itself. The Empire still hadn't embraced modernity—even now, their roads were nothing more than sand-packed pathways, which explained why only carriages and horses moved through the streets. Not a single car in sight.

Well, horses weren't that bad. In fact, they had their advantages. They were easy enough to handle, efficient for travel, and unlike cars, they weren't restricted to smooth, straight paths. A horse could carry you up slopes, through rough and uneven terrain, places where a car would break down before even making it halfway. In a way, the Empire's stubbornness against modernity made sense here.

Inside one of those carriages, Aegis and I sat side by side. The wooden wheels creaked beneath us as the horses pulled steadily along the sandy road, sending up faint clouds of dust with each step. This particular carriage was taking us to one of the people who had specifically asked to meet me. They were the ones who sent the invitation, and because of that, infiltrating this place had been much easier than expected.

Still, Aegis looked restless. She shifted in her seat, her body stiff and her expression tense, like she was forcing herself to endure something she clearly didn't enjoy. But she had no choice. This was what she wanted, and I had told her to follow my lead. No matter how much she disliked it, she had to hold herself together.

She was the one who said she was fine pretending to be my lover. That was her decision. There was no room for her to back out now. She could have suggested something else, of course—she could've been my servant, my bodyguard, or just about anything else. But no. She picked "lover." And once she said it, I wasn't about to let her take it back. Honestly, letting her squirm in that role was far more amusing than I expected. Right now, the way her face twisted and her hands fidgeted, it was like she was crawling out of her own skin. I couldn't help but laugh inside.

"W-What are you staring at?! Do you want to get sliced?!" she snapped, her voice sharp, her glare practically screaming that she wanted to cut me down where I sat.

I leaned back casually, a smirk tugging at the edge of my lips. "No," I said smoothly. "I wasn't even looking at you. And besides, don't you think you should tone down the rough talk? If you keep

threatening me like that, people might figure out we're lying about you being my wife. And then what? The whole operation goes to shit. I'm sure you wouldn't want Artemis pissed at you for ruining everything, right?"

"K-Kuh..." She clenched her jaw, grinding her teeth so hard I could almost hear it.

This was fun. Too much fun.

After what felt like a long, bumpy ride, the carriage finally slowed and came to a stop in front of a massive manor belonging to one of the Empire's officials. The horses snorted as they came to a halt, and the door of the carriage swung open, held by a servant of the household.

"Welcome to Cross's Manor, Lord Faust," a maid said, bowing deeply.

I raised a brow. Interesting. Maids here were nothing like the ones in other countries. Normally, you'd expect a Victorian-style uniform—black and white dresses, aprons, that sort of thing. But this one? She wore garments that looked closer to Arabian or Egyptian designs, with light fabrics that flowed around her frame. And as I looked around, I noticed it wasn't just her. Most people here wore similar clothing. Of course. It was a desert country. The style was probably born out of necessity.

Stepping out of the carriage, I extended a hand to Aegis. She hesitated, but she knew the role she had to play. If she failed here, even for a moment, the whole thing could collapse spectacularly. And that would be the end of us.

As we walked toward the grand house ahead, Aegis gave me a look. That sharp, knowing glance told me she'd noticed it too. The maid behind us wasn't ordinary. No. Her aura was too strong and too refined for a normal maid to have. She wasn't a simple servant—she could very well be an assassin, perhaps even under orders to kill me.

I didn't react outwardly. Instead, I let a fraction of my own aura slip free, just enough to make my presence unmistakable. A warning. A promise. If she dared make a move, she'd be dead before she even realized she'd attacked. That's why she stayed still, why she couldn't see any opening, even though my back was turned.

It was always important to let your opponent know what kind of hell they'd be stepping into. Otherwise, they'd die instantly, clueless, never even understanding that their death came from their own ignorance.

Finally, we reached the entrance of the manor.

"Welcome, Sir Faust!" boomed a rotund man waiting for us. Of course. Why did all nobles look the same these days? Big stomachs, shiny clothes, acting all high and mighty. It was almost cliché now, like someone had painted them all from the same mold.

I shoved the thought aside and plastered a wide, practiced smile across my face, one that reached all the way up to my cheeks. "Hello there, Lord Cross," I said warmly. "I've come, as promised."

"Yes, yes! Come in, come in!" he said, his words loud and theatrical. "I've prepared everything for this occasion. I wouldn't dare let the essential king of business—the man who owns the largest company in the world—stand out here in this unbearable heat!"

With that, we were led inside.

The manor was surprisingly airy, the air moving freely through the halls. Clearly, the entire place had been designed to fight against the desert's punishing climate. It was practical and natural.

"You must have traveled quite a long way. I deeply apologize for the trouble," Lord Cross said with exaggerated politeness.

"It's fine," I answered smoothly. "Visiting a foreign country from time to time isn't such a bad thing."

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While I moved through the long, decorated halls, my eyes couldn't help but wander. Every corner, every corridor, I kept scanning for even the slightest hint that there might have been elven slaves here.

Cross was infamous for his collection of sex slaves. It wouldn't shock me at all if he had kept one or two elves tucked away somewhere, hidden like trophies. That man had the kind of reputation that made even the worst rumors sound believable. As I walked, it became more and more obvious just how many

slaves there were in this estate. Everywhere I looked, I saw them—servants carrying trays, cleaners kneeling on the floors, attendants moving like shadows. It was endless. As expected from a noble, everything here was powered by slaves. From the smallest tasks to the larger roles, every little thing in this mansion reeked of servitude.

And how did I know for sure they were slaves? It was the brand. The unmistakable mark burned into the nape of their necks. That scar told the whole story, like the ownership, humiliation, and the weight of chains they couldn't escape. The Empire had long enforced this practice, branding them like cattle, so that no one could mistake who was free and who wasn't.

One out of every four people in this empire was a slave. Just think about that for a second. Out of a population of eighty-eight million, that meant millions upon millions of people branded, controlled, and owned. The sheer scale of it was staggering and almost sickening.

That was why the dream of freeing them all... it was nothing more than a dream. An impossibility. There was simply no way anyone could save that many lives, not all at once.

But the maid behind us—that was different. She wasn't a slave. At least, not from what I could tell. I had already caught a glimpse of her nape earlier, and there was no brand there. Which could only mean one thing and that she wasn't what she appeared to be. My instincts screamed assassin. And knowing Cross, it wasn't far-fetched. He never did anything without layers of caution, and a woman like that at his back wasn't for pouring tea.

I still didn't know exactly what Cross wanted from this meeting, but I had my guesses. He was the kind of man who only moved when he smelled profit. Opportunistic to the bone. He'd probably try to muscle into my territory, push me to hand over my businesses, maybe even take it further and demand something personal. My wife (Aegis), perhaps. Men like him always had the same disgusting patterns, and I'd seen it play out before.

"Firstly, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to meet you like this," Cross said, his lips curling into a practiced smile. His voice carried a smoothness that reeked of rehearsed politeness. "You must be very busy yourself."

"I have some time," I answered, keeping my tone calm. "And I'm planning to expand my business venture, which is why I came here. Just like you, Lord Cross, I'm not someone who wants to miss an opportunity. Strike the iron while it's hot, as they say."

"Ah, yes. Of course. A man of such high capability in business—it's only natural you'd act whenever an opportunity presents itself," he said with a laugh that was just a little too loud, a little too fake.

At least it was starting on a good note. From where I stood, it looked like he was still probing me, testing the waters, trying to figure out just how much I'd reveal. I suppose I was still an enigma to him, and I preferred to keep it that way.

"Well then, why don't we get right to it?" he said, straightening himself.

"Alright," I replied, folding my arms. "What exactly do you want to discuss?"

"I think it would be best to talk about our partnership from now on, Sir Faust. You've been dominating the business and market world for two years straight, and already you're dubbed the richest man alive. Truly, I don't think anyone could rival your wealth—not even the royalties themselves."

"You're exaggerating," I told him with a faint smirk.

But deep down, I knew there was truth in his words. I had so much money piled up I couldn't even count where it all went anymore. Half the time, I didn't know what to do with it, which was why I funneled so much into orphanages, the needy, and making sure the financial cycle didn't collapse from imbalance. It wasn't fully kindness, not fully—it was necessity.

"It's not exaggeration," he pressed on smoothly. "Which is why I want to expand our friendship. I want you to see me as a partner, someone reliable, and someone you can trust to watch your back."

"A friendship, huh?" I said, raising a brow. "That does sound enticing, honestly. I wouldn't mind a partnership with you, especially with your company. After all, you specialize in breeding and distributing horses across the world, don't you?"

That was his crown jewel. Carriages, horse breeding, horse selling. He had it all. And not just for show—his horses were bred and trained for war, which made them invaluable. Because the Empire hadn't modernized, horses remained the lifeblood of travel, warfare, and trade. His empire within the Empire boomed because of it. He was clever, monopolizing horse sales across the country until every single

horse business bent under his thumb. And it didn't stop there. He had multiple ventures, far beyond horses, and it all tied back to him being the official Minister of Finance. The man had his hand in everything, controlling the Empire's finances like a puppeteer with strings.

And yet, beneath all that polish, I was certain he was the most corrupt out of them all.

"Well then, why don't we make it official? Put it in bind, so it's legal?" he suggested, his voice slick with confidence.

"Well, I'm definitely interested," I admitted, leaning back slightly. "But I don't see how this benefits me in the long run. It sounds tempting, sure, but tell me—what are you really offering me to make this deal worth binding? You don't expect me to just sign blind, do you, Lord Cross?"

He studied me carefully, his smile never faltering, eyes sharp as knives. "Of course not. How about this? I'll give you access to several of my ranches, along with sub-ownership of every business I own. That alone should be enticing enough for you, isn't it?"

That did sound enticing. Sub-ownership was no small offer—it basically meant being the second owner, one rank beneath him. It was as close as anyone could get to standing beside him in power. It was tempting, no doubt.

But I wasn't the type to jump at the first bait dangled in front of me.

I tapped my finger on the armrest and leaned forward slightly. "Hm. And what else?"

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When I told him I wanted more, something in his face crumpled. The easy smile that had sat on his lips evaporated like mist under sun with the expression that replaced it was tight, bitter, like iron folding in on itself. For a second the room seemed to lean toward that moment—as if my words had landed on some hidden fault line and finally cracked it. I must've pissed him off. I didn't mean to, honestly. That was because this was a negotiation, a thing that needed to be said. Still, when two people start pulling at the edges of a deal, one of them is bound to snap.

Really, it was only a matter of time.

Wanting more reads the same as greed. He knew that. He lived for opportunity and accumulation—always wanting the next piece as well as the next conquest. That appetite is what made him successful. It's what let him plant fingers into dozens of businesses and twist them into profit. But his hunger was also a lever I could use and I intended to turn his greed into my gain, to take advantage of his eagerness in a way he hadn't expected.

"I don't think that's enough to satisfy me," I said, keeping my voice steady. "Surely you still have things to consider, don't you? Business is never easily won. Partnerships are supposed to be mutual—if one side takes everything while the other gets nothing, that's not a partnership. That's theft. Don't you agree?"

He blinked like I'd said something impertinent. "So you want more of it? But, Sir Faust, aren't you being a bit greedy? I've already thrown all my businesses into this deal. What more do you want from me?" His tone tried for wounded, then shifted toward offense.

Truth be told, I didn't need sub-ownership of his petty enterprises. Snatching his holdings would have been trivial for me because they were mere loose change. What he failed to grasp was what Leonamon truly was. He was selling himself short if he thought the sum of his stables and corrupt contracts could buy even a scrap of our company.

"You don't even know the reach of Leonamon, Lord Cross," I told him. "You're underestimating its financial clout."

"What...?" he muttered, the word thin.

"Do you really think that making me sub-owner of your companies will make you a sub-owner of Leonamon?" I pressed. "Not all the horse trades, not all the side deals, even the corruption you profit from—it's not enough to net you what I want."

Surprise rippled across his face—wide eyes and a jaw that tightened—then anger flickered into being like a black flame. "It seems you don't understand my proposal, Sir Faust. I am offering something that benefits both of us. Sure, those assets may not match Leonamon's value by themselves, but you can't afford to be picky."

At that moment the air snapped. Soldiers erupted from shadowed corners, metal flashing—a ripple of uniforms and cold barrels. The sound of boots against flagstones filled the space. Cross's voice slid into relish as he spoke, cruel and smooth.

"It was a mistake to come here alone—with such a beautiful wife, and an elf besides. I've wanted an elf in my collection. Elven slaves are rare," he said, like he was naming a prize.

There was a sour, sick twist to the sentence and it made my skin crawl. Whatever he meant, it felt performative—an attempt to humiliate and to wound.

Also, judging by the way he said it, there probably wasn't an elven slave here at this place at all.

Aegis stiffened beside me. Her fingers clenched at the hilt at her side, knuckles white. The insult to her blood, to her dignity, set a vein in her temple pulsing. Cross had found a place that landed.

"You can still sign," he went on, oozing false magnanimity. "Sign here, put your name, and I'll accept co-ownership of Leonamon. I'll look after it for you."

"We both know co-ownership is not your endgame," I said, keeping the chill in my voice measured. "You want full control."

"That's right," Cross said, leaning forward as if sharing a delicious secret. "I sent you letters—hundreds, thousands—until you finally agreed. I planned everything down to the roots. I hired mercenaries and adventurers because I expected bodyguards. To my surprise, you came with only your wife. Chivalrous, perhaps, but foolish. Thank you for trusting me, Sir Faust. And because of that trust..." He smiled with a predator's patience. "...I will fuck your wife in front of you."

The words landed like a slap. They were vulgar, sharp, and meant to incite. My lips shaped a response I didn't expect to mean, but which carried a warning.

"Go ahead, then," I said.

For an instant he froze. Maybe it was the flatness of my tone, or something like a dark warning that emanated from me. My voice had allowed him to think he had the upper hand—but I'd let him know, just enough, that pressing further would be dangerous. There was an aura around the words and that was telling him to be careful. Push the wrong way and you will lose more than pride. Your cock could be sliced as well. There's a sliver of threat buried in the calm.

Cross's answer came as a sharp command. "Grab him. Don't kill him—yet. Make him sign. And keep the elf alive. She's mine to take."

The soldiers surged, certain of victory. They had numbers, steel, and arrogance. Just two of us—me and Aegis—against that tide. They lunged.

And then the scene ruptured.

Men who came for us didn't reach their targets. They fell mid-step, necks split in a brutal, grotesque ballet. Heads flew. Blood arced through the air like crimson curtains, painting the stones. Bodies collapsed simultaneously, limbs folding into grotesque poses as life left them. The sound was wet and final and the room filled with the metallic scent of blood and the hollow silence that follows sudden slaughter.

Where there had been a smug, contemptuous grin, Cross's expression unspooled into raw terror. The smirk cracked and dissolved, replaced by disbelief and a panic that spread like oil over his features. He had expected theatre and a show of dominance. Instead he found himself staring at a scene of utter, lethal consequence.

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Cross stood frozen, staring at the mountain of corpses piled before him. The stench of fresh blood filled the air, heavy and metallic, thick enough to make anyone gag. Crimson rivers streamed endlessly from the stumps of their necks, dripping in steady trails down onto the floor, spreading into a grotesque pool. Their heads had already fallen, bouncing and rolling across the ground with dull, sickening thuds after being flung through the air. The sound of flesh hitting stone still echoed faintly in the room, almost like a drumbeat of death that refused to fade.

His eyes finally shifted to me, and the moment he locked onto me, I saw the terror in his face. His body betrayed him instantly—knees trembling, lips quivering, and his eyes wide with disbelief.

"W-What...?" he stammered, barely able to force the word past his lips. His voice cracked, as though the air itself refused to let him speak. Then his legs gave out completely, buckling under his own weight as if the strength had been ripped right out of him.

He was shaking in his boots, completely undone by fear. And honestly, I couldn't blame him. Imagine thinking you had men who could crush any opponent with ease, only to watch them lose their heads in a literal blink of an eye. That kind of scene would drive fear deep into anyone's bones.

"W-What are you all doing?! Kill him!" he screamed, desperation coating his voice.

The mercenaries hesitated. Earlier, they had charged without so much as a second thought, blades drawn and ready for blood. But now... after seeing their comrades cut down like cattle with nothing but a flick of my wrist, their bravery had dissolved. Their movements slowed, their steps careful, wary, like animals creeping toward a predator they weren't sure they wanted to fight.

Ayuru pulsed in my hand, the weight of her hilt alive against my palm. I could feel her drawing at my mana, drinking it like water from a spring. The connection was sharp and intimate—I felt her hunger, her pull, but also her restraint. She wasn't draining me dry. And she was giving me strength in return, as though she knew exactly how much to take. Ayuru wasn't just a cursed blade. She was a living presence, conscious, and aware, almost breathing with me as we stood there together.

"Y-You're not getting away!" Cross's voice cracked, higher now, trembling like glass about to shatter. "I'll make sure you sign that paper! Leonamon will be mine! I'll own it! I'll become the richest man alive!"

"Do you think it's that easy?" I asked him calmly, my words cutting through his noise like steel.

"I'm a businessman! I can make an empire boom with just a snap of my fingers! Better than you ever could!"

I tilted my head, eyeing him coldly. "If that's the case, then why is your business still leagues behind mine? And more importantly—why try to steal the ownership of my company if you really can do it yourself? Why not build your own empire, with your own strength?"

His jaw clenched so tight I could see the veins bulging in his temples. His teeth ground against each other until his gums bled, the metallic tang dripping into his mouth. His whole body shook, trembling not just from fear but from rage boiling inside him. Slowly, I could see him unraveling, his composure shattering as my words pierced straight through him. He couldn't kill me, he couldn't outdo me, and now, he had no idea what to do.

"You don't understand!" he suddenly roared, spit flying from his lips. "I'm already old! That's why—I need wealth now, fast! I don't want to rot away, I don't want to become dull!"

So that was it. Pathetic. He just wanted an easy way, a shortcut. He wasn't driven by ambition, but by greed that knew no end. Even with all the taxes he had stolen, all the corruption he drowned himself in, it still wasn't enough. He was nothing but a hollow shell reaching desperately for more.

"Well, it's your own fault for dulling," I told him flatly. "Aegis."

The moment her name left my lips, Aegis moved like lightning. She pulled out her special arrows, concealed until now. They weren't ordinary weapons. Leonamon had crafted them specifically for her—compact, retractable, but deadly efficient. There was no need for a bulky quiver for her, and there was no wasted movement. Her bow was the same, sleek and hidden until needed.

With fluid precision, she extended her bow and nocked the arrows, unleashing a flurry in every direction. The air itself seemed to crack with the force as her shots cut through it. In the next breath, ten mercenaries collapsed, each one struck perfectly through the skull. One arrow, one death.

But one arrow strayed, slicing the air with deadly speed—straight for Cross. He froze as it whistled past, grazing his cheek before slamming into the wall behind him. A crimson line opened across his skin, blood dripping down in a thin stream.

"H-Huh?" he gasped, touching his cheek, staring at the blood staining his fingertips. His voice was a pitiful whisper, disbelief flooding every syllable.

That was the breaking point. The remaining mercenaries cracked. Their weapons fell to their sides, fear etched deep in their faces, and then they ran. They didn't care about their contracts anymore. Normally, abandoning a mission would mean suspension, disgrace, and punishment. But none of that mattered

when the choice was between humiliation or death. They scattered like rats fleeing a sinking ship, tails between their legs.

"It looks like you're out of cards, Lord Cross," I said, my voice low, cutting and final. "Now then..."

I stepped toward him, but before I could reach him, the maid we had been watching closely since we entered the mansion suddenly sprang into action. She hurled something at us, fast and precise. I reacted instantly, deflecting both with Ayuru's blade, sparks flying as steel met steel.

My eyes narrowed. Just as I suspected—she wasn't a maid at all. She was an assassin.

"T-Thank goodness Leonora sent you," Cross blurted, his voice dripping with relief. "If that woman hadn't assigned you to protect me today, I'd already be dead."

Leonora? So she knew I was here. It didn't matter much if she did. As long as she didn't know my true objective, everything was still under control.

"Kill them! I don't care about Leonamon anymore!" Cross screamed, spit flying from his mouth, his finger shaking as he pointed at us. "That company, that country—it's all going to burn when the Empire invades anyway!"

The assassin didn't hesitate. She dashed forward, twin blades flashing in her hands as she began hurling them at us in a deadly rhythm.

She was fast. Her movements were fluid, sharp, and deadly precise. She twisted, spun, and leapt like water flowing around rocks, unpredictable yet controlled. For a moment, it almost felt like she was using a skill, her speed too perfect to be natural. But no—she wasn't drawing on any ability. This was raw talent and raw training. She was simply that good.

And for some reason, instead of anger, what I felt was interest. She was dangerous, skilled, exactly the kind of opponent Leonora would send against me.

Now then...

It was time to see just how strong this assassin really was. By playing with her.

Chapter 915: Empire Of Rodonia (7)

???'s POV

I have admired Lady Leonora ever since the very first moment I joined the imperial army. To someone like me—a daughter of a slave, born into chains and destined for nothing but servitude—I never imagined my life could change. All my life, I thought I would remain nothing more than property, something to be ordered around and used by those with power. That was the fate I had accepted. But then Lady Leonora appeared. She wasn't just anyone—she was one of the Emperor's closest aides, someone respected and feared. And yet, instead of passing me by like the rest of the world always did, she stopped. She looked at me. She saw something in me that I didn't even know existed.

"Do you want to join the army?" she asked.

At first, I didn't know what to say. I was skeptical—confused, even. Why would this powerful woman even bother with me? Why offer me such a thing? My thoughts were racing, full of doubt, suspicion, and fear. It felt natural to think like that. But even with all the uncertainty, I also felt something else... a gnawing realization. If I didn't take her hand, if I didn't follow her, then I really would have nowhere to go. No future. Nothing but a lifetime of being ordered around like a dog with no purpose.

Her hand stretched toward me, steady and certain, and in that moment, it looked less like an offer and more like salvation itself. That hand wasn't just skin and bone—it was a lifeline. A chance to crawl out from the dirt I was born into. I knew if I didn't take it, then my fate would consume me. But if I did... then maybe I could live for something more.

So I grabbed her hand.

The moment I did, she gave me a small, amused smile, her eyes gleaming with something I couldn't yet understand, and said softly, almost teasingly, "Good girl."

I didn't realize it at the time, but something inside me shifted that day. The world around me started to feel different, sharper, and clearer. I was becoming more in tune with everything—the air, the sounds,

the way my heart beat faster in her presence. Just by holding her hand, I felt I had already defied the fate that had chained me since birth.

Not long after, she gave me knives to wield.

"Throw them," she said with that same knowing smile. "Aim for that target over there. Don't just hit it—make it a bull's-eye."

A bull's-eye... the very center. The mark of perfection. The target was so far away, and this was the first time I'd ever held throwing knives. My palms were sweating, my heart pounding. If I failed, I would look useless to her. But if I succeeded, maybe—just maybe—I could prove myself.

I steadied my breath. I raised the knife. And then I threw.

The blade cut through the air, whistling sharply before embedding itself right in the center. A bull's-eye. Then another. And another. All of them hit dead on, like I'd been born to do it.

Her laughter, soft and low, reached me. "Fufufu... very good. Even though you're only fifteen and you haven't awakened your ability yet, you managed to do something incredible. As expected, you really do have some game in you, don't you?"

I didn't fully understand her words, but that didn't matter. From that moment on, she began to train me in earnest. I learned the discipline of an assassin—the silent steps, the quick hands, the patience of waiting in the dark. I trained until my body obeyed without hesitation, until I could kill swiftly and cleanly. I mastered the basics, and then the advanced skills, honing them again and again until they became second nature.

Before I even realized it, I had become a weapon. A full-fledged assassin, capable of carrying out anything Lady Leonora commanded. An official, a lord, even a foreign ruler—I could end their lives before they even knew death was upon them.

Killing became second nature. Too natural. And that was how I earned the title of a master assassin, one feared for precision and swiftness.

Lady Leonora noticed everything. She praised me often. And those praises... they were everything to me. Every word from her was like sunlight warming the frozen wasteland of my heart. She was the one who had pulled me away from the miserable path I was born to, and I couldn't stop myself from feeling proud. I had strength now. I had the ability to destroy those who once mocked and hurt me.

To me, killing wasn't just a job anymore. It was salvation. If I hadn't learned to kill, I would still be chained, still be nothing. Killing freed me. Killing made me worth something. So now, whatever Lady Leonora asked of me, I accepted without hesitation.

One day, after I finished training, she came to me unexpectedly. She hadn't visited in an entire month, so the moment I saw her, my body moved on its own. I rushed to her like a loyal puppy desperate for attention.

"You really are a good girl, aren't you?" she said, smiling gently.

"Do you have a job for me, Lady Leonora?" I asked immediately, my voice betraying my excitement.

"Well, yes. A very important one, in fact."

If I had a tail, it would have been wagging furiously. A job meant worth. It meant importance. It meant I was useful again. And the more important the task, the greater the praise I could earn.

"What is it?" I asked, unable to hide the eagerness in my tone.

"You really are excited, aren't you?" she said with a soft laugh. Her expression turned warm—motherly, even. That smile of hers... it wrapped around me like a blanket. It was comforting in a way I didn't know I needed.

"Well, it's been a while since the last time you gave me such an important mission, Lady Leonora. Of course I'd be excited," I said.

"This one, though... it may be the most dangerous task I'll ever give you," she said slowly. "Are you sure you want to accept it? You don't have to. It's okay to refuse. If you don't take it, I'll give it to someone else."

Her words made my chest tighten. To refuse meant losing the chance to hear her praise. And that praise... I lived for it. I craved it. I wanted it more than anything else.

"I'll do it," I said firmly, without even a second of hesitation.

Her smile twisted then, curving into something darker. But I didn't mind. To me, it felt natural.

"Oh, I see. Well then..." she said softly.

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And she explained the task.

On the surface, it seemed simple. I had to protect Lord Cross, an imperial official who oversaw Finance. From my perspective, he was nothing but a debauched man, unworthy of the position he held.

But the real issue was the threat against him. Lady Leonora warned me about a man who called himself Christopher Faust.

At first, I didn't see anything strange about him. He looked so normal. Just a man traveling quietly with his wife.

And yet, Lady Leonora's tone when she spoke his name told me one thing—there was far more to him than what I could see.

I stayed wound tight, every muscle coiled and ready. Christopher Faust looked ordinary at first — the kind of man you'd pass on the street without a second thought — but the way he held himself, the quiet economy in his movements, told a different story. There was a practiced ease to him, like someone who'd spent years learning how not to be noticed until the moment to strike arrived. Whether he could actually stand against me in a fight? That was still an open question.

From where I stood, there was nothing flashy about him. Just a traveler with a wife at his side. The kind of façade that made a predator feel comfortable in plain sight.

Then he let something out — not a word, not a shout, but an aura. It rolled off him like cold wind over smooth stone. The world narrowed for a heartbeat and the air tasted metallic. I felt it in my bones, a chill that crawled up my spine and threatened to freeze my limbs in place. It wasn't just danger — it was a presence that said, I know how to end this.

Lady Leonora had warned me. When she mentions someone, it's never casual. If she'd pointed him out, there was likely reason. Still, stubbornness is a fire I fed. I told myself I could handle it. I had to protect Lord Cross. That was the order. That was the line I wouldn't cross.

I let my mind go to the plan I'd sketched out earlier — take his wife as a hostage, force him into a position where he had to choose between fighting and bargaining. Efficient. Clean. Brutal if it had to be. It should have worked.

I was an idiot for not considering one obvious possibility: his wife could fight too.

That small detail twisted the whole equation. If Christopher was stronger than me and more skilled — if he could read my movements five steps ahead — then getting close enough to land a killing blow might be impossible. And a second fighter at his side? That'd turn a manageable objective into a chaotic, unpredictable mess.

But Lady Leonora's orders were on my shoulders. I squared my jaw and moved.

I hurled a blade at Christopher Faust. It felt good in my hand — weight balanced, edge whispering through the air. He didn't even flinch; he lifted his weapon and the blade glanced off like it hit a shadow. The clang of steel against steel sang in my ears and something in the air shifted. A sticky, crawling sensation crept across my skin, like insects walking under the surface. I had no name for it, only the knowledge that it made me uneasy.

"So you're sent by Leonora, huh?" he said, voice calm, like he was commenting on the weather.

He knew her. Of course he did. Figures. The irritation that flared at the casualness of him calling her by name cut sharper than my blade.

"There should be a 'Lady' in there somewhere," I snapped, because if I didn't show teeth he might smell weakness.

"What? Are you some kind of lovesick fangirl?" he volleyed back, and the words were light but edged like a blade.

I didn't bother to untangle his insult. Instead I drew kunai from the sheath at my hip and launched them, one after another. They weren't toys — the tips were laced with poison. If they found flesh, they would do their work swift and without mercy.

He dodged. He blocked. He made those moves look effortless. Or did he? I had a trick up my sleeve: the kunai were threaded with ultrathin strings, invisible unless you caught the light just so. After they flew past and were deflected, I tugged the lines, planning to make them whip back and find their mark.

"H-Huh?" I muttered under my breath.

He cut the strings.

"Don't you think those strings are a bit too shiny? I can see them in the light," he said, as if commenting on the prettiness of embroidery.

Heat crawled to my face. He was mocking my techniques — the techniques Lady Leonora had taught me. How dare he make sport of them. I gritted my teeth hard enough to hurt and felt a hot coil of anger tighten my limbs. He would pay.

I kept trying. Throws, feints, angle changes — every trick I had, I threw forward. It was like throwing stones at a fortress. Nothing landed. Every kunai glanced off, snapped aside, or simply failed to find gap or seam. His timing was wrong in the worst possible way for me... he was perfectly on beat. It wasn't brute force that protected him. It was finesse and anticipation. He read the rhythm of the fight like a musician.

When distance wasn't giving me the advantage, I closed it. I yanked two blades from either hip and launched myself at him in a blur, like a praying mantis strike, blades aimed inward to trap, cut, and finish in one cruel motion. My feet left the ground in a rush of momentum, wind whipping my hair, adrenaline sharpening my vision to razor focus.

He lifted his blade once. Just once. My attack pinged off it like a wave hitting a cliff. The single motion was too easy and too composed. The clang echoed in the space between us, and the weight of that sound told me I was being toyed with.

Frustration turned tight in my chest. I tried a midair kick, aiming low and merciless for his crotch, the sort of strike that would ruin the balance of any man. He slid out of the way like water finding a crack. I spun, drove the blades down in a slicing arc, followed with a sweep of my leg with all the choreography I'd practiced a thousand times. He stepped aside as if stepping around a puddle.

He was playing with me. With the patience of a cat. With that casual, infuriating certainty that comes from someone who knows they can afford to be graceful and still win.

"What are you doing?! Kill him already!" Lord Cross barked, voice rough and urgent.

His shout cut through my spiraling thoughts. I glanced at Lord Cross with his face taut, expectation burning in his eyes, and felt the twin weights of duty and desire crash into me. I wanted to prove myself. I wanted Lady Leonora's approval to wash over me like armor. I wanted it so badly my teeth hurt.

This wasn't going to be easy. Not with a man like Christopher Faust standing in my path and a wife who might not be the helpless hostage I'd assumed. The fight had shifted from something I could manage to something I might barely survive.

Chapter 917: Empire Of Rodonia (9)

I swung relentlessly, my blades cutting through the air in a storm of steel, each strike aimed at tearing through him. With every motion, I felt like I was clawing my way toward some kind of breakthrough, some fragile chance that I might actually defeat him. But the more my blades clashed and scraped, the clearer it became that no matter how hard I fought, the gap between our abilities wasn't shrinking—it was stretching further and further apart. Each strike only hammered in the reality that this fight was hopeless for me, that I was being forced to realize just how powerless I truly was against him.

"Guh, useless...!" Lord Cross's voice cracked from behind me. I caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye as he staggered, clutching his trembling body before trying to bolt away like a cornered rat.

But before he could even take two steps, an arrow cut through the air with a sharp whistle and buried itself into the ground in front of him, blocking his path.

"You think you can just run after doing something like this to us?" the wife shouted, her voice filled with rage and disgust.

"Hiii...!" Lord Cross shrieked, his knees buckling, his legs giving out beneath him as he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

But I couldn't spare him another glance. My fight with Christopher Faust swallowed my focus completely.

The harder I pushed, the clearer it became—the distance between us wasn't closing, it was widening like a canyon. Each move I made, each skill I'd trained my body to execute flawlessly, broke apart against him like waves crashing uselessly against a cliff. I couldn't even leave a scratch on him. Years of training, nights spent grinding my body to its limit so that every assassination technique I knew would be executed without flaw—it all felt like empty practice now. In this situation, everything I had was useless.

It was maddening.

He wasn't even trying. I could feel it. The way he moved, the casual ease in his steps—it was like he was simply playing with me. Every time I swung, he slipped away effortlessly, as if my blades were nothing but toys. It felt less like fighting a person and more like hacking at air and there was no substance as well as no weight.

No—worse. It was like striking against a mountain made of stone, one so vast and unyielding that the idea of breaking it was a joke. Impossible, even.

I forced myself to move faster, my muscles screaming, my lungs burning—but in that exact moment, he moved faster too, so much so that it warped the flow of the fight. It was bizarre—unnatural even—that despite being the one to accelerate, it felt like I was the one left chasing him.

That's when it hit me. Every time I moved faster, he matched me in perfect sync. He wasn't going faster on his own—he was mirroring me, deliberately, matching my pace to the exact fraction of a second so that no matter how much I tried, I'd never feel ahead of him. Was he refusing to let me take the lead? Or was he just toying with me, testing me, finding the limit of my body and dragging me along just to see how far I could push before breaking?

The thought made my blood boil. It felt like every teaching Lady Leonora had drilled into me, every lesson I'd treasured, was being mocked to my face.

But anger couldn't change the truth. No matter how furious I was, the reality was that I couldn't do anything to him. He was too strong.

I felt it creeping in now—the heaviness in my chest and the burn in my muscles. My stamina was bleeding away, every ounce of strength trickling out no matter how much I tried to hold it in. The exhaustion I'd been trying to push aside finally clawed its way up, weighing me down.

"Even with the minimal movements you've been making to conserve your stamina," he spoke with calm certainty, "once you exert yourself beyond reason, the body will always give out eventually. It's only natural that you'd feel it sooner or later. But still—" his eyes narrowed, a flicker of approval in them, "I'll admit, I'm impressed by your grit. Most assassins would've been crushed by the aura I emit long before reaching this point. Yet you've endured. That's probably why Leonora put her trust in you."

"I said... put a Lady before her name!" I roared, fury exploding in my chest as I launched myself at him once more, blades gleaming.

He sighed. "Well... I've had enough of this. It's getting boring now."

My twin blades sliced through his body cleanly. A smirk curled on my lips—finally. But in the same breath, dread hit me. There was no resistance. I didn't feel any weight. I didn't feel the flesh. It was like cutting through mist.

My heart sank. It wasn't him.

It was just an afterimage. A trick.

I whipped around desperately, but my reaction came too late.

"You're good," his voice came from behind me, smooth and calm. "I commend you."

Then pain exploded at the back of my neck as his hand struck, and the world collapsed into blackness. My consciousness was ripped away in an instant.

Leon's POV

I looked down at the unconscious assassin lying at my feet, her body sprawled, her face slack with the forced sleep I'd dropped her into.

She was good—very good, actually. Not flawless, not polished enough to call truly exceptional, but she had potential that shone like a flame in the dark. Her movements were sharp, her techniques mastered to perfection, but in a way that felt... bookish. She fought as though she had memorized her skills from a manual and practiced them until her body became a copy of the page. But even that—done so well—was dangerous.

If she expanded her repertoire, learned beyond the confines of what she'd been taught, she could become a serious threat. I could even see it—if she grew stronger, there might come a time when not even Bernadette could compare to her.

If Leonora ever became my enemy, then I'd need to reinforce the shadows, prepare for someone like this assassin. Because letting her grow unchecked would mean dealing with a nightmare later.

"Now then..." I muttered, turning my eyes slowly toward Lord Cross. "Why don't we have a little chat first?"

He looked at me, his face twisted in sheer terror, his fear impossible to hide. His body shook so violently that it was almost pitiful. That was how terrified he was in that moment.

Chapter 918: Reunion With Artemis (1)

We tied Lord Cross down in his own basement, his body shaking with fear, sweat dripping down his temples as the ropes dug into his wrists and ankles. The air down there was damp and cold, the faint smell of mold creeping into my nose as I turned away.

And just like that, we left him there.

The assassin, on the other hand, was placed under Aegis's custody. We bound her tightly, making sure there was no way she could wriggle free no matter how skilled she was. Her wrists were strapped so firm that even her small movements made the bindings creak, yet she still glared at us as if she hadn't been defeated.

Aegis, however, didn't look pleased. She frowned at me, clearly unhappy about being assigned guard duty. Her voice carried a bite of complaint when she asked why it had to be her. I met her gaze and explained that for now this was one of the most important tasks. Since we were still making preparations for what lay ahead, someone had to ensure the assassin was kept under watch. That was the reason I put her on guard duty.

She still seemed dissatisfied with that answer, her lips pressing together in frustration. So I gave her something else—an incentive. I told her that if she handled this properly, Artemis would commend her. The moment I mentioned Artemis's name, she scowled at me, telling me to stop dragging Artemis into everything whenever I wanted her to do something. But despite her words, I saw the flicker in her eyes as well as the slight lift in her shoulders. She went to her duty with new resolve. Aegis might deny it all she wanted, but she was really easy to manipulate.

The manor itself had quickly filled with the people for this mission, so much so that we decided to make it our base of operations for now. The halls that once echoed with the pride of its lord now carried the weight of strangers. Of course, I knew suspicion would eventually fall upon us. After all, a manor without its master would naturally raise questions, and the disappearance of Lord Cross couldn't be hidden forever. That, too, had to be factored into the plan.

The slaves inside the manor were another matter. Their faces, weary and hollow from years of mistreatment, brightened faintly when I promised them freedom. I swore to them a clean slate after all

this was over. In exchange, they agreed to cooperate with me. My plan was to send them back to the Kingdom of Milham. To do that, I intended to set up two magic circles with one that would send them to Milham, and another that would lead to the Kingdom of Elves.

Since most of these slaves weren't elves, sending them to Leonamon seemed like the better choice. I could've sent them to the Elves' lands, but that would only stir resentment. The elves despised other races—especially humans—for having enslaved them. Sending the freed slaves straight into that territory would've been throwing them into hostility. Leonamon was safer. And Milham, with its reputation for fast progress and modernity, would give them opportunities to rebuild their lives, to find work and perhaps even start anew.

Some of them lit up with hope, smiles breaking through the scars of hardship. But not all of them were convinced. Doubt still lingered in their eyes.

And who could blame them? Out of nowhere, a stranger appeared before them, promising freedom with no cost. It sounded too good to be true, like there had to be some hidden catch waiting to crush them. Their skepticism was natural. Considering how rough and cruel their lives had been, I couldn't fault them for expecting the worst.

Two days passed after our confrontation with Cross...

I returned safely and attended a meeting with the officials who had invited me to dinner. Their request was simple and it was that they wanted smoother trade routes. The roads across the sands were brutal—harsh winds, shifting dunes, and endless resistance that made travel hell for traders. Even horses struggled with their hooves sinking and their breaths labored. They wanted my company to cooperate in building more efficient paths, faster and easier to travel.

But naturally, Cross had opposed this from the beginning. His fortune was built on selling horses. A new trade route meant less reliance on his animals, and less profit for him. Greed had made him stubborn. I couldn't say I didn't understand his reasoning, but it was still shortsighted.

I told the officials that I'd consider their request. I gave no promise, only that I would weigh the matter carefully. That alone seemed to satisfy them. Relief softened their expressions—they were happy enough just knowing I was willing to listen. That was enough for now.

Day three came.

The assassin Leonora had sent was still full of fire, her spirit unbroken despite her restraints. She spat curses under her breath, her sharp eyes narrowing every time they landed on Aegis. When I finally descended into the basement where she was being held, I saw her bound body and met her glare with a smile. Her eyes burned with hatred, as if she truly saw me as her mortal enemy.

I decided to search her properly, to see if she was hiding anything. And sure enough, there was something. A device. It was so small that you wouldn't even notice it during a thorough search. And where was it hidden? Leonora must have thought I was too much of a gentleman to check that part of her body. She wasn't wrong—but I had someone with me who wasn't bound by that same restraint.

With Aegis's help, we found it—tucked deep inside the assassin's vagina.

When it was pulled out, it was drenched, incredibly wet, slick with her arousal or perhaps just her body's reaction. I had to put on gloves just to handle it.

The assassin never broke her glare during the process. Her eyes stayed locked on me, defiant and furious. And I'll admit—it stirred something inside me, that fiery defiance of hers. It was a little arousing, in a twisted way.

As I studied the device, it flickered to life. A small light blinked repeatedly. At first, I didn't understand, but then I caught the rhythm. The blinks followed a pattern, almost like Morse code. It spelled out letters, pausing ten seconds between sequences, until finally it gave me a location.

That's how I learned where to go.

A pub.

When I entered the dimly lit pub, the air heavy with the smell of ale and smoke, my eyes immediately caught her. She sat at a table in the far corner, her posture calm, a quiet smile on her lips. Leonora.

I approached slowly and took the seat across from her.

"You're here. Finally. I've been waiting quite a while, you know?" she said, her voice smooth, teasing, as if she'd been expecting me all along.

Leonora. Another fragment of Lilith. After meeting Elise just weeks ago, I hadn't thought I'd run into her this soon. But maybe it was inevitable. Maybe fate had already woven this encounter into place.

"Well, I had to search the assassin you sent thoroughly," I said evenly. "Didn't expect you'd hide something like that inside her. But I'll admit—it was clever. I commend you for it."

Her smile curled into a smirk. "Did you enjoy it?"

"I did," I answered without hesitation.

"Fufufu... I designed it so that once it dried, the device would activate and blink the pattern to reveal my location," she explained, amusement lacing her words.

Well... that was one way to do it. Though honestly, she could've just sent me a letter.

Chapter 919: Reunion With Artemis (2)

I looked at her, letting my eyes linger for a moment, and I couldn't help but wonder... what could Lilith have really looked like? If I had to make a guess, then out of everyone, Leonora might be the one who resembled her the most.

Back in that white world where I had encountered her, she could bend her body however she pleased—changing her appearance at will, shifting from older to younger in the blink of an eye. It had been mesmerizing at the time, almost beautiful in a surreal kind of way. To see someone sculpt themselves so freely, as if age and form were just clothing to wear and discard, it was honestly something admirable. But deep down, I knew better. That world wasn't real. What I had seen there was only a fabrication and an illusion. Her appearance in that space couldn't possibly reflect reality.

I remembered the questions I had carried with me since then, the ones that weighed heavily every time I met one of the others. I had already asked Elise, after meeting her again for a while, about the reason

for my existence—why I had been born, and more specifically, what role I was meant to play in the larger picture. But even Elise, the firstborn, claimed she didn't know. She had only shrugged off the question with a faint smile that gave me no peace of mind. Maybe the others knew something. Maybe we were being prepared for a purpose none of us wanted to face.

I turned to Estelle afterward, asking her the same thing, but her response was no different. She had no idea either. As for Veronica... I had doubted she would be of much help, so I avoided going into the underground world to seek her out. Something about her always felt more like trouble than clarity.

And now, fate had brought me before Leonora—another part of Lilith. Someone tied to me in ways I still couldn't fully understand. We had been born on the very same day, but I had no idea how or why. Elise had once explained that Lilith's fragments weren't born all at once. She herself had been the first to come into being. But in my case, and Leonora's, and Veronica's, it was different. We had all been released at the same time, in the same breath of existence. Only Estelle had come after us, the last one.

I didn't know what it meant. I didn't even know if it meant anything at all. But something inside me kept gnawing at the thought that there had to be a connection, that there had to be some greater reason behind it all. And with that thought digging into my mind, I opened my mouth to ask.

"I came here for the sole purpose of asking you something. Regarding Lilith."

Her lips curled slightly, as if amused. "Oh? You're not going to ask why I deliberately sent an assassin after you? Or why I hid a device on her so you'd be able to track me down?"

I met her gaze without flinching. "I've been turning over something in my head for a while now, something that's been bothering me. I figured it was better to just come straight to you instead of dragging it out any longer. That's why I'm asking this now—an important question I probably won't get the chance to ask the next time we meet."

Her eyes narrowed, studying me carefully, and then she gave a small laugh. "Impatient, aren't you? I never thought you'd be that type. Out of all the things you could've brought up, I didn't expect you to go straight for Lilith. That's... surprising."

"You're the only one among Lilith's parts that I haven't really had a proper conversation with. So I want to talk to you about it."

"Sorry, but even if you ask me, what makes you think I'd know anything? If even the oldest of us doesn't have answers, do you really think I would?" she asked, her voice calm but edged with irony.

"Well... I guess not," I admitted, sighing. "Still, I can't shake this feeling. I'm starting to believe Lilith didn't create us solely for her resurrection."

Her smile faded into something more serious. "If that's what you think, then shouldn't you be more worried about it? You're the main vessel, after all. You're the one who'll eventually become Lilith. Not us."

"Yeah... I guess you're right," I said quietly.

"In that case," she said, lifting her drink and taking a slow swig, "you should avoid meeting with us like this. If you ever complete the requirements for her resurrection, then it'll be over for you."

Her words lingered in my chest like a cold weight. The requirement to resurrect Lilith, I had to dominate the other parts and take their abilities. All of our powers originally belonged to her. If they were gathered back together, Lilith would return, and when that happened... my body would cease to be mine. She would claim it as her own.

I didn't even know what would become of me then. Would I be erased? Would my soul wander the world endlessly until it dissolved into nothing? It was more than possible—it was likely.

"Well, I don't plan on fulfilling those requirements anyway," I told her, keeping my voice steady. "So for now, I think I'm fine. And I'm not about to go around seducing the other parts of Lilith. That would be the same as inviting her into my body."

She tilted her head, her lips curling again into that sly smile. "Fufufu... so seduction is part of the process. Don't tell me it actually involves... sexual acts?"

She had picked up on it instantly. I didn't bother dodging. "Well, yes. I have to sex in order to copy an ability."

"I see..." she said, her smile lingering, eyes glinting faintly. "Which means, between you and me... it's possible we might end up doing it, isn't it?"

Chapter 920: Reunion With Artemis (3)

I let out a faint exhale. "I guess so. But if it happens, it won't be because I want to revive Lilith," I said, raising my glass and taking a slow drink.

"Fufufufu..." her laugh was soft, dangerous, wrapping itself around the air. "As it happens, I'll be staying in this city for a while. Lately, I've been sleeping in a very soft bed. But tonight... for some reason, I feel like lying down on a rough one."

Her hand slid across and rested lightly on my thigh. The meaning was obvious. She was too obvious.

She was practically inviting me to have sex with her right there.

I could've gone along with it. I could've let her pull me in. But this woman had a poisoned tongue, and I knew if I allowed myself to be swayed, the consequences would be dangerous.

"Sorry, but I'll pass," I said, cutting off her advance.

At that, she slowly withdrew her hand, her smile never fully leaving. "Is that so? What a shame. I thought maybe I could've given it away, you know? Honestly, I wouldn't have minded if it was you."

I frowned slightly. "Given what away?"

"My first time."

The words hit like a lure, tempting in every sense. For a brief moment, the thought lingered and it was heavy and enticing. But as I had said before—this woman had a poisoned tongue. If I was going to deal with her, I had to keep my guard up. I had to hold onto some sense of decorum, no matter how alluring her words sounded.

"That did sound enticing for a moment," I admitted with a dry smirk, "but unfortunately, I don't plan on getting myself in trouble. I don't want my neck split in half while I'm in bed with you."

"You take me for that kind of woman? That hurts a little, you know?" Her tone was light, almost playful, but the glint in her eyes said she enjoyed every second of this game.

"Well, I don't really like putting my cock everywhere, so I think it's only natural for me to disprove this," I shot back casually.

"Fufufufu..." Her laugh returned, soft and dangerous as before. "Well, you're more cowardly than I thought." She smiled, but just as quickly, her expression shifted, sharpness cutting through the mask. "Now then, what should I do with you for my little bird to be returned? Although I'm not particularly related to her, I was very fond of her, you see. She was such a good girl—willing to do anything for me. Kind of like a dog, honestly."

"So you see her as more of a pet than a person?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. The way she spoke was almost amusing, casually slapping such a label onto another human being. But then again, with someone like her, I couldn't exactly say whether laughing at it was appropriate or not.

"Well, I could say the same about you. The women you've fucked thoroughly—were they really people you loved? Or were they just there because you wanted their skills?" she asked, her words cutting like a knife.

She wasn't wrong. Honestly, I could admit that there were times when I thought like that. Maybe, at first, I only saw them as a way to vent my frustrations, to release my stress, and the added pleasure of sex blurred my feelings. But with time, I grew to love them. That was the truth. That was what I believed in—and I was confident in that.

Still, blurring that out here would've been stupid. The Empire loved leverage, and I wasn't about to hand them another chain to wrap around me. I already had too many as it was, and dealing with them all was impossible. So I held my tongue.

"That's a trade secret," I said instead.

"I see..." she replied, smiling faintly as if that answer amused her.

"You don't need to worry about your little assassin. I wouldn't hurt her so badly as to kill her. But I'd prefer if you didn't get yourself involved in my business here either," I said firmly. "Besides, this might even benefit the Empire in the long run, don't you think?"

"I really have no idea what you mean, and I don't see how freeing slaves could possibly benefit the Empire. But oh well, I suppose I'll remain silent about this to the Emperor," she said with a dismissive shrug.

"Can I trust you, though?"

"You don't have to trust me," she replied lightly. "Besides, I'm only here because a certain someone asked me to be."

And with that, she stood up and left the bar, her presence lingering like perfume long after she was gone. I had no clue who that "certain someone" was. But for now, I figured I could put a little trust in her—at least enough to believe she'd keep a blind eye on me in the Empire.

Artemis had been in this country longer than we had. She'd already slipped in before summer even started.

She found work as a bartender at a bar near the slave market and that was an excellent spot for our mission. From there, she could observe routes, track movements, and map out escape paths. It was the perfect vantage point to smuggle slaves out without drawing too much attention.

Now, I was on my way to meet her. It had been a while since the last time I saw her, and the thought of it made me feel oddly restless and I was almost giddy. She had already graduated from the Academy. Despite finishing in the Gold Class, she didn't go on to become a magic knight. It seemed like she changed her path after meeting me.

When I finally stepped into the bar, the first thing I saw was a nearly flat-chested girl weaving through a crowd of ragged-looking mercenaries, balancing trays of drinks in her hands.

She was as beautiful as ever, dazzling even in the dim, rough setting of that tavern. She wore a simple waitress's uniform, an apron tied over her shirt, and yet she stood out.

It was Artemis, and she was as beautiful as ever.