

19세미만 구독불가



하늘가리기

Lucia

1

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JOCCA

Lucia

- 루시아 -

- Book 1 -

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Covering The Sky

하늘가리기

[**Sleepy Korean Translations**]

- STORY -

Lucia grew up not knowing she was a princess.

But when her mother died, she entered the palace and had the chance to see her entire future in a dream.

In her dream, when she reached 19 years old, she was auctioned off to the bidder who offered the highest dowry. Her life became miserable from then on.

When she woke up from her dream, she was determined to reshape her future, realizing that she had plenty of time before the crucial turning point.

Thus, she begins her journey to change her dark future.

Prologue

It was a hot summer day when she turned 12 years old. Lucia's world turned upside down. Everything spiraled down when her mother passed away and she had to enter the royal palace.

'Was I dreaming? Or am I still dreaming...?'

Lucia sat on her bed mumbling while trapped in a trance. She just had a very long dream. It felt like she had returned to the past, or maybe it was a precognitive dream. Inside the dream, she experienced her future life. It wasn't a peaceful life. Most of the days were stained with suffering and tears. But there were times she had felt happy and joyful. She had lived on hanging onto a tiny sliver of hope.

'Mother...'

She had had no idea. Her mother was of noble blood. While she had still been alive, she had never let out a single peep about it at all. When Lucia was 25 years old inside the dream, she had bumped into her mother's brother and came to know the truth.

Her mother, Amanda, was the youngest daughter of the Baden Earldom. The Baden nobles had once been influential margraves (count of a border territory). However, currently they were only nobles in name, overlooking not even a single plot of land. The will of the Baden nobles ran deep, but their name had more or less been forgotten by the majority of the population, and it was unknown how long they could keep hold of their nobility.

Amanda had run away at night after taking a single pendant, that had been passed down from generation to generation inside the empty rooms of the old-fashioned house at the border lands.

Lucia's uncle had bitterly stated that they should have gone out to capture Amanda at the time she had made her escape. He never imagined that it would be the last time he would ever see her. She had been a foolish youth when she had run away, and it had been foolish to think she would return. A month later, they had attempted to track her down, but it had already been too late.

Her uncle had had no way of finding her mother. She had run to the capital and that had made it close to impossible. Even Lucia didn't fully remember how they had lived through the hard times in the capital.

However, although Amanda had been unmarried, she had given birth to a genuine king's daughter. One could only assume the truth of the situation. When Lucia was born, the truth should have been revealed to the royal family, but Amanda had chosen to do what nobody else would have done. She had hidden her noble bloodline and had lived as a commoner together with Lucia.

Lucia's mother was an aristocrat, the daughter of the noble Baden family. More than that, Lucia was related to the king by blood. Lucia had never known the truth and had spent her childhood thinking of Amanda as a commoner.

Her mother had been beautiful, the townspeople had all been nice, and she had always played together with the other kids by the river and the forest. It seemed like only yesterday, but it was a distant memory now, and she could do nothing else but cry. Her happiest moments belonged to those early days.

All the suffering had come out of the blue. Amanda had fallen ill due to an epidemic that had swept throughout the city. In Lucia's memories, her mother had been a petite and skinny woman, different from the strong commoner women of the city.

She had grown up in a noble family and had never experienced any harsh days. Raising Lucia as a single mom had been taking a toll on her body, until she had turned into a sickly mess.

Her mother had seemed to know that she would die soon. A few days before her mother's death, Lucia had passed a message in her stead. It had probably been a letter meant to be delivered to the royal palace.

Lucia understood her mother's decision. She had done the best she could up until her last breath. The life of an orphaned girl could only spiral down into the depths of hell. If Lucia had never entered the palace, she would have had to become a prostitute and sell her body for the rest of her life.

A few days after Amanda had passed away, a guard had brought Lucia to the royal palace. The royal family owned a magical device that could confirm anyone's ancestry. It was the royal family's treasure, but occasionally other nobles would come and use

the device as well.

Even if illegitimate children flooded over, conflicts over blood relations would not occur due to this magical treasure.

The King had confirmed his daughter's face through the device and had bestowed a name upon her. That had been the first and last time she ever met her 'father'.

"Vivian Hesse."

That was Lucia's new name. Nobody had bothered to ask about her original name. Everything had been decided one-sidedly. She had lost her mother, had been forcefully dragged to the royal palace, and had been generously provided with a run-down palace detached from everyone.

After crying all night, she woke up early in the morning and realized that everything changed – her own self and her surroundings. She sat down hugging her knees and thought about her future.

Just because she had become a princess overnight, nothing in her life had actually changed for the better. The unrestrained king had spread his seeds all over the place. The news of a new prince, or even a princess, were not enough to become the hot topic of the palace rumors.

Lucia was the 16th princess. She had figured that out after a long time of residing in the palace. She had calculated the total amount of children who had gained the approval of the King, and had figured out she was the 16th princess. She had an obscure background and was born after a one night stand with the king. Additionally, she was a royal princess who had grown up among commoners.

'Even if I know my future.....'

Lucia sighed heavily. She only came to know how her future would unfold. Her future started in the border lands and ended here until its bitter conclusion. As it was, she had gained nothing useful from the dream. She had no means to mingle with the upper aristocracy, so even if she knew her future, it was futile.

After Lucia had entered the royal palace, her life had not been special at all. She had lived a quiet life without worries of starving to death. No one had cared to show any interest in her, but due to that, no one had come to bully her, either. Each day had been

the same as all the others. When Lucia had reached 19 years old, her life had changed once again.

The year Lucia had turned 19, Lucia's birth father, the nation's King Hesse the 8th, had passed away. She had only met him once, so when she had heard the news, she had felt nothing for his death. She had believed his death would not affect her life in any way. However, the succeeding king, Hesse the 9th, had drawn up a new budget for the royal palace. He had decided to clean up the consequences of the past king's uninhibited life. Hesse the 9th had started a project to send all of his half brothers and sisters out of the palace.

When Lucia had turned 20, only 6 princesses of the past king had remained in the palace. Lucia had no relatives. She had spent her life hiding inside the detached palace with no relations to the outside world at all. There was nobody who would volunteer to take her under their care. There wasn't even a profit to be gained by marrying her off to others.

Hesse the 9th had auctioned off Lucia, who was nothing but a dead weight to the royal palace. Lucia had been 20 years old when she was auctioned off to the person who had offered the highest dowry.

Count Marin, Lucia's new husband, was 20 years older than her and had two divorces in his past. He had three sons with the eldest one the same age as Lucia. The five years together with the count had been the most horrible period for her. Economically, Lucia had been doing much better than her time in the detached palace, but she had gotten destroyed mentally. The count was an old, fat, disabled pervert. He had fulfilled all his sexual desires through Lucia.

'I don't want to!!'

Lucia's body trembled. She never wanted to experience that again. Rather, she didn't want to experience the future. Even if she had to die, she didn't want to marry that bastard again.

'I must change my future. I will change my future no matter what!!'

The future she saw in her dream was already changing. Originally, Lucia had shown symptoms of autism the first few months in the royal palace. Her mother's death, the identity of her father, and being chased away to a place without an ounce of affection;

all these things had been too much for a young girl to handle.

There had been no one to care for Lucia, who had blocked herself from the outside world. In the beginning, physicians had dropped by a few times and palace maids had visited to make sure she didn't starve to death.

The extremely disinterested surroundings had worked as a catalyst for Lucia. She had been able to gradually regain her clarity little by little on her own. But this time, things were different. Lucia didn't experience any symptoms of autism. She had no grand dream of changing her life around. She only had one wish – she simply wanted the freedom to live the way she liked.

'I can do this. I can change it.'

She didn't know how to do it. As a 12 year old princess with no connections, there was nothing she could do. But she didn't despair.

'I still have a lot of time.'

However, time continued to pass coldly. Before she knew it, Lucia had turned 18.

Chapter 1

18-years old (1)

Lucia hated opening her eyes every morning

'Ah... this damn migraine. Why must I go through the same pain twice in a lifetime?'

Lucia held her aching head and got up. Her life followed the exact path of her dream. Once she started menstruating at age 15, she began suffering from massive migraines at least once a month and at most about three to four times a month. Though it wasn't serious, it would turn out to be a chronic illness tormenting her for the rest of her life.

By the time Lucia turned 18 years old, she truly believed she had seen her own future in her dream. She had put in a lot of effort. Many things about her future had changed already.

But sometimes, the future was inevitable and nothing could be done to change it. For example, in the summer when she was 13 years old, there had been a heavy downpour of rain, which had flooded the whole first floor of the royal palace. The following winter, a cold spell due to the flood had caused a shortage of firewood. She had spent the entire winter shivering with cold.

When she turned 15, she began menstruating and suffering migraines. Such was the power the future held. Even knowing what would happen next, it wasn't possible to change it.

When she turned 19, the King would die. Lucia would be sold to the piggish Count Matin. That was part of the future Lucia couldn't change. As she realized this, she fell in despair. What was the point of knowing the future? It felt like the heavens were pulling her leg, turning everything into a big joke.

She confined herself in her room in hopelessness, but she let it all go only a few days later. 'Even if I starve myself to death here, nobody will know.' It was like a breath of fresh air, she no longer felt the heavy burden of sorrow weighing on her heart.

Lucia opened her windows. The cold morning air flooded into the room. She leaned

against the window sill and let the icy wind blast against her entire body. It was as if she was facing against her own cold destiny.

She was now tall enough to place her hands against the window sill and lean out to look at the outside world. She took after her mother, so she had a small body frame. Her hair was reddish brown much like the rest of the population, but she had pumpkin orange eyes that glittered like gold and stood out from the rest. Other than that, she looked like any other person one could find on the street.

Even so, it wasn't like she didn't have any appeal. She had a pale but glowing complexion, so dressing up a bit let her display her charm. Usually, her allure remained dormant. She never needed a corset due to her thin waist. Her frail frame could incite most men's protective instinct. However, she didn't belong to the upper aristocracy, thus none of her charms could be appreciated.

"Let's see. I'm out of firewood and I'm running low on potatoes and eggs."

She was currently standing besides her creaky old wooden table, taking inventory of her life necessities. She had carelessly tied her long hair into a ponytail, and her plain poplin dress looked almost identical to the royal palace's maid uniform. In her current state, nobody would think she was a princess.

"I should go request for the necessary goods today."

It was improper for Princess Lucia to do this herself, but it had become natural after a few years. There wasn't a single official maid residing in her palace at the moment. Thankfully, the place wasn't that big, so it wasn't too much trouble. The top floor of the palace had been blocked off for safety reasons ever since she had first arrived here. Currently, part of the first floor was also closed off. The only living spaces she could use were her bedroom and a few other rooms.

At first, she had five maids waiting on her. But they were crude and could not be considered palace maids at all.

The royal maids had their own pride. The servants who attended to the esteemed nobles were all called 'maids', but there were different ranks among them.

A royal palace maid looked over the chores and miscellaneous tasks completed by the labor maids. Officially, Lucia, who was part of the royal family, had to have a housekeeper, royal palace maids, labor maids, and three attendants.

The problem was that there were too many royal descendants. The main problem being Lucia was ranked the lowest of the low among her brothers and sisters. No matter how hard the maids worked, there was no hope for any promotions and there was nobody who would go out of their way to volunteer for the position. There was no way for the servants to receive additional pocket money, so all the maids avoided her. As the years passed, the maids retired one by one and soon Lucia didn't have a single one remaining by her side.

Originally, once a maid retired, a new maid should have been hired. However, her palace had no hopes of good earnings, so any royal palace maid or labor maid would steer clear of this place. Royal palace maids received enough salary for their daily life. However, it was difficult for labor maids to survive on just their wages.

The maids hired to serve Lucia would quit after a few days or bribe high officials to be reassigned to a different place. Soon, maids stopped coming into the palace once and for all. The servants' names were recorded into the registry and received their wages, but they never showed up to do their jobs.

If Lucia formally registered a complaint, things would have been resolved. Although she had no power, she was still considered a princess. Inside the dream, she had personally gone to the maids and fixed the problem. This time as well, she had decided to go find the maids and straighten out the problem. However on the way there, she had bumped into a royal palace maid who had mistaken her for a labor maid and had assigned a simple chore to her.

A bright idea had popped into Lucia's mind and she had fulfilled the task without complaint. She had decided not to file the complaint, and had returned home to organize her thoughts instead. If she pretended to be a maid long enough, she would gain the chance to go out of the royal palace.

Lucia's last maid had left her at the age of 15, and what followed was her dual life as a princess and a maid. As a maid, she had to go request for daily necessities and do manual labor, but she had earned the freedom to leave the royal palace.

Lucia had been living alone in the palace for three years. It was probably still documented that Lucia was living together with five other maids.

No palace officials would bother to come and personally check whether the documentations were true or not. The complaints of the countless children of the king

were enough to make the officials' heads burst with pain. The officials had no time for Lucia who never expressed a word of complaint.

Lucia was returning home after she had requested for daily necessities this morning, while also receiving tips for a job well done. Whether it was the royal palace or the dirty back streets of the city, humans were all essentially the same. Money enticed people to to continue struggling forward.

There was a different door maids used to leave the palace. They were all standing in a long line waiting for their turn. The line gradually shortened until it was finally Lucia's turn. She showed the guard her permission to leave pass. It was a pass issued by Princess Vivian. However, even if Lucia showed her face to the guard, he would not recognize her. He quickly confirmed the authenticity of the pass and nodded.

"Are you taking anything out of the palace?"

The guard had already confirmed Lucia was empty handed, but he still asked anyway.

"No."

The guard nodded once again and let her out of the palace.

Lucia inhaled a deep breath of fresh air. She turned her head around and looked up at the giant palace walls that surrounded the place.

It was safe inside the palace walls. Outside the walls, it was hard for a young girl to safely walk around on her own.

The status of a low ranked princess worked in her favor to allow for a lot of freedom. The Lucia of her dreams had never realized that fact, but she had come to realize it now.

Still, the future made her unable to breathe. She wanted to escape that place as soon as possible.

'It's strange that there are so many people today.'

People were crowding the street in masses. Whenever she managed to squeeze through, the crowd of people would sweep her into another direction, making her run in circles.

After toiling through the crowd, she arrived to a small two story house, where a middle-aged woman opened the door. She had her eyebrows and eyes creased like she was mad, but that was actually her natural face.

“Welcome.”

“Hello, Ms. Phil. Is Madam Norman home?”

“She’s always home. She’s still sleeping sprawled on the floor after a long night of drinking. Hold on a second, let me go get some tea for you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Phil.”

The comforting fragrance of the tea filled the living room as Lucia sat patiently with a gentle expression, enjoying her tea. The sound of Ms. Phil clattering around drifted over from the kitchen, but this addition seemed like music to her ears. Lucia’s dream was to purchase a small house like this and enjoy her life. She would hire two people and let them do the minor chores, and she would enjoy life while peacefully drinking tea. She would do things like taking small walks or passing time while reading books. Though she didn’t know when that dream would come true.

A gentle smile could be seen on Lucia’s face. A skinny woman was clumsily stumbling down the stairs from the second floor, barely able to hold her own body up while her eyes looked glossed over in a haze. She let out a creaky voice.

“Ms. Phil, water~!”

Norman sat on the sofa across from Lucia and leaned down on the armrest. She had a thin body and a face which gave off an unfriendly atmosphere. She looked well over her 30s, but was actually very young. Norman chugged down the glass of water Ms. Phil had brought, and sighed as if she wanted to die.

“Aaah, my inside hurts.”

“You should ease up on your drinking, tsk tsk.”

Ms. Phil muttered in her unique blunt tone and returned to the kitchen. Her speech and attitude was always brusque, but Lucia knew Ms. Phil’s kindness – she was going to the kitchen to prepare some food that would quell Norman’s hangover.

“Why did you drink so much?”

“I thought I would be able to write one more line if I drank, but I couldn’t control myself. I’m sorry. In this state, I can’t properly take care of my guest. Thank you for coming all this way.”

“What do you mean by guest? It’s no trouble coming to visit you at all. Even if I didn’t have to come here, I would have gone out for a walk anyway.”

“There is something in the table drawer there. Open it, my latest book is there.”

Madam Norman was a writer; she was a famous romance author. Norman’s books were all about love, but people considered these books classy and intelligent. They were fun but educational; her books that killed two birds with one stone, had caused a sensation. Due to the many books she had released these past years, she could live comfortably without needing to earn a cent more.

When Lucia took out the book, she gasped.

“It’s finally done! I’ve been waiting for a long time.”

Lucia hurried to the last page of the book.

“You’re already ending it? Why? This series is very popular.”

“It would get boring if I add too much filler, this length is just right. My editor was on my tail, ordering me to lengthen the series by two or three more books. Hehehe.”

“It’s such a pity. I feel like it would have been alright if you followed your editor’s advice.”

“Look inside the book as well.”

Lucia flipped through the pages and found an envelope hidden within the book. Inside, there was a receipt confirming that money had been deposited. Lucia’s eyes popped out when she saw the amount of money.

“Norman, this is too much...”

“Take it. You deserve it.”

“But I’ve already received a lot of money...”

“This is a bonus since I’ve completed my novel. If you still don’t feel right, you can consider it a fee for helping me contribute ideas for my novel. The ideas for this novel mostly came from you.”

In the past, Norman was not a popular writer. She was a poor author who had trouble buying her daily meals. Her usual topic was a romance between a female commoner and a noble man. It was impossible for it to happen in reality, but people could always daydream about it.

However, what the readers wanted was not a female commoner, but an elegant noble woman. Commoners wished to experience a noble’s life through these books, while nobles didn’t bother picking up books about commoners. Even so, Norman had no way to write about a noble woman, because she didn’t have the tiniest idea about how they lived.

Norman, a commoner with no money, would have no way to take part in a social event hosted by nobles. She would either need to extensively read other people’s books, or interview maids who have served nobles before. However, she hadn’t had any money, so she couldn’t do anything.

Her books wouldn’t sell, so she couldn’t even pay her rent. Although her only talent was writing, she couldn’t see a way to break through into the novel industry. While Norman had been sitting in the empty streets of the central plaza, Lucia had appeared out of nowhere and had given her a loaf of bread. Norman believed that meeting Lucia had changed her life around.

Norman had never known, but Lucia had been keeping an eye on her for a long time. Norman hadn’t seemed like a homeless beggar, but she had looked so hungry. She had been sitting by the roadside, but never begged for food. Lucia couldn’t help but go up and talk to her.

That was how the two of them had met.

“The reason I’m here today is all because of you, Lucia.”

Lucia had taught Norman everything she knew about high society. Lucia had attended many social parties inside her dream. Her words could not compare to the simple maids who simply served the nobles by their side. Norman could set up a strong

foundation to her novels through Lucia's extensive tales of the noble women in the high society.

"It's because Norman's novels are amazing."

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been able to write a single sentence, so it's all thanks to you. I can continue earning more money now."

Lucia visited Norman once a week. They talked for a few hours and through this, Lucia had earned quite a bit of money.

Norman had paid her a hefty sum. Of course in the beginning, Lucia had to go visit her with a basket full of bread, but as soon as her books started selling, Norman had not been shy in expressing her thanks through money.

The roles had changed now. Numerous people, including widows, were coming to visit her. She had stabilized her footing. Norman could now collect as much information as she needed even without Lucia. But Norman could not become an ungrateful human being toward the person who had helped her when she most needed it.

Norman wanted to continue sponsoring Lucia and help her get married as well. They were not only connected through money. Norman regarded Lucia as her little sister.

"Thank you, Norman. My greatest luck was meeting you."

"That's what I want to tell you."

Lucia's eyes shook as she confirmed the amount of money she received. With the amount she had saved so far, she would be able to safely run away and smoothly begin a new life.

'No. The risk and danger is too big.'

No matter how little interest she garnered from others, she was still a princess. If she were to disappear, the palace guards would be deployed to track her down. Not out of worry for Lucia, but because their prestige would be tarnished. If so, they would find out about her past with Norman. It was very likely that Norman would suffer some injustice or punishment.

There was no guarantee she would be able to escape at all. In order to successfully

escape, she had to leave the capital and travel somewhere far. She was just a lone girl; nine cases out of ten she would suffer an accident of some sort. She had considered guards or escorts, but she couldn't trust anyone. Rather, it was likely that the guards would end up stabbing her in the back and stealing all her money.

If she wanted to plan an escape, it would be safer after getting married to Count Matin. She wouldn't be considered part of the royal palace anymore, so even if she went missing, nobody would care. She could close her eyes and suffer for just one year while looking for someone trustworthy and planning thoroughly, so that nobody would find her when she ran away.

'But... I don't want to, that guy...'

A chill ran down her spine just from imagining that person's face. Was there really no way? A way to escape from him.

"Lucia, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yea... what?"

"What are you so shocked for? I'm wondering if you have a boyfriend? If you don't know anybody, then I can look for someone very nice and introduce him to you."

"How old do you think I am? Aah, it's okay."

"You're only 18 years old. It's not like I'm telling you to get married. You should get to know a handful of men, so when you're around 22, you can choose someone among them to marry. Palace maids are very popular, you know. People think they are very modest. They view them differently from women who do manual labor or farming for a living. You guys have pale skin as well. Just go with the flow and tell me. What type of men do you like? Do you like older men who are dependable? Young and cute guys? I'll find them for you."

"How about you? Norman why are you still single?"

Norman's previously sparkling eyes turned bored once the topic shifted back to her.

"Well for me, I'm already too old."

"What's age got to do with anything? You just have no interest in it. You're deceiving

your readers. How can you not believe in love when you write romance novels?"

"Tsk, what do you mean deceive? I'm giving life to an everlasting love that does not exist in the real world. When my readers fall into my novel, they live in a dream."

"Then why are you telling me to get married?"

"Although there is no such thing as everlasting love, I think that when two people's hearts connect, they can become good friends for each other. Since you're always alone, I wish you would find a friend who can be with you until the end."

"Why am I alone? I have you, Norman. Norman, you are my friend and family."

Norman looked at Lucia with affected eyes and opened her arms wide. Hurry and come into your older sister's embrace. Lucia burst into laughter while Norman's eyes shined at her.

"You smell like alcohol, so I don't want to."

"Eh? How can you respond that way in this heart-warming moment?"

"I'll be going now. Norman, you should go and rest some more. You look like you will die any moment now."

Norman had dark circles hanging below her eyes, making her look like a corpse.

"Aah, I really should return to sleep. I feel like someone is twisting my organs inside of me. If you're not in a rush, feel free to rest a while longer and take your time going home. Anyway, there is a rush of people outside and it will be hard to get around."

"Now that you bring it up, is it a special day today? I saw a lot of people on the way here."

"You didn't know? I'm always buried inside my house, but you know even less than me. All the knights are returning to parade around the city."

"Ah..."

That was today. It was a rare chance to see the minister of state, so everyone had left their work for another day and had come out to greet the minister.

'In my dream, I always kept myself shut inside the detached palace, so I never knew these things.'

This was one of the biggest lifestyle changes for Lucia, compared to the past. While Lucia was pretending to be a palace maid, she was able to go out into the world and explore. Thanks to that, Norman had also made a lot of money.

'The war is over now...'

Compared to the detached palace, that was still, isolated, and without change, the outside world was very noisy. When Lucia was eight, she had experienced her first war. It had been a local war between two small countries. But as time continued to flow, the war had gradually spread, and soon the whole world had been split in two.

In the future, this war would be called the first stage of the continental war. By the time Lucia was about 11, her country – Xenon, had decided to join the war, and had become the main force of the Northeast Alliance. The next five years were the height of the war. The Northeast Alliance had gradually gotten the upper hand, and for the next two years, there had been a lull in battles. Around when she reached 18 years old, the war had ended in a ceasefire after much negotiation. In this war, Xenon was among the winning countries.

Norman, who was feeling sick, didn't want to be near such a big crowd, while Lucia decided to take a peek on her way back to the palace. It would be a pity to miss such an event.

"Waah!"

As the charismatic knights paraded through the city, people screamed and whistled so loud, one would go deaf in the crowd. Xenon was a combat state, but the war had not taken place inside the country, therefore most of its citizens had not suffered from the war in the least.

However, the war would still weigh heavily on the citizens' hearts. The happiness of winning the war, and the resulting freedom, had the citizens in high spirits. The uplifting atmosphere was contagious and made Lucia feel very cheerful as well.

The knights' armors differed between families, with their designated crests inscribed on their chest and back. Certain knight troops styled grand red capes along with their armors, while other knight troops had simple and crude armor. One could judge their

nobility and power from their family titles alone.

“Waaah!! Taran!!”

Screams that could not be compared to any others could be heard. Men yelled while stomping their feet, while women yelled on top of their lungs: Taran! Taran! A single knight platoon split the crowd as they made their way through the city. All the knights of this platoon had a black lion inscribed onto their armors. Commoners usually could not differentiate between the different noble family crests, but there was not a single person in Xenon who did not know of the Black Lion crest.

‘Taran...’

Lucia could see only one thing as the deafening sounds and lively atmosphere dissipated into the background. The knight leading the platoon, riding on top of a white horse and wearing pure black armor as he marched along the city. Although this knight had covered his face with a helmet, she could perfectly draw his face in her mind. She knew this man. Hugo Taran. He was not of royal blood, but still received the respect of the king. And although it was just a formality, he had the right to inherit the throne. The Duke of Taran. It was the young Duke of Taran.

The War’s Black Lion

He was armed with both discipline and strategy. The Northeast Alliance’s victory in this war was due to his fortification and domination. Xenon had engaged in the war last, but was the one to lead the negotiations that had lead to the end of the war. They had lost the least, but had gained the most. To be precise, Duke of Taran’s platoon always won, and it was the greatest foundation for the Northeast allies’ victory.

Truthfully, Lucia was not supposed to know about Duke Taran, or the Duke’s name, or of what he had done for the war. She knew of these things because of her dream.

Count Matin, whom Lucia married, was a very crafty man. No matter where Count Matin stepped into, he would always ensure an escape route for himself. Thus after the war, he was able to stick himself to the crown prince’s faction and live in luxury.

As a result, Lucia had attended many noble social parties together with her husband, or alone as his wife. She had to attend these parties like it was her job, so there were many instances when she had met the Duke of Taran. There was always a crowd of people around that man. It was as though a cackle of hyenas were fighting over a hunk

of meat.

Count Martin had tried all sorts of methods to earn the Duke of Taran's support, but he always failed. Up until that point, she hadn't known the man very well at all. She had assumed he was just a great knight of some sort. She had only come to know him better quite a long time later.

About two years after Lucia had gotten married, the Duke of Taran got married. His marriage had caused all of high aristocracy to go into an uproar. He had married a young miss from an unknown noble family without any sort of influence. She was just a cute young female. She wasn't pretty at all, and nobody could understand why the Duke had chosen that female as his wife. The Duke had never responded to anyone, so many rumors had flown around town.

The hottest rumor had been that the Duke of Taran was head over heels in love with the girl, but everyone was suspicious and nobody wanted to believe that was the case.

Lucia had come to know the truth a long while later. The information had come from the back doors of high aristocracy but it had a lot of credibility to it.

Like the rumors had assumed, the Duke was not in love with that young miss, nor was her noble family of rich background. The two noble families had made an agreement of some sort.

Her usefulness lay exactly in the fact that she was a noble without any influence or wealth. He'd needed a wife in name, who could not influence his dukedom. Thus, he had married that woman. The duke had remained unresponsive to the rumors, and soon the rumors became fact.

'Of course that would be the case.'

'Why else would the Duke of Taran marry such a woman.'

The noble women were talking with such passion, that they were close to coughing up blood. It was the only way to vent their anger for losing out on such a good deal.

'What's wrong with her? Aren't you guys all the same?'

A man would look for a woman with a healthy womb to continue the family line, while the woman would look for a man with great wealth in exchange. It was a form of

strategy bound by contract.

Although the process of the Duke's marriage was different, it was more or less the same as any other noble in the land. In any case, she was still an official wife of a duke. So what if she was only a wife in name; she was still his wife. The duke had not taken any concubines, and although it was unknown whether he had any secret lovers, no rumors about such a thing had gone around. At least the Duke of Taran was not such a bastard as Count Marin.



The Taran Knight Platoon had already passed while Lucia was stuck in a daze, and a different knight platoon were marching past. As Lucia watched the Taran Knight Platoon grow more and more distant, she had been gripping onto something very tightly. She looked to see what she was holding; it was Norman's novel.

'A contracted marriage...'

The theme of Norman's most recent hit novel was contracted marriage. It was an idea Lucia had proposed without much thought. She must have unconsciously thought of The Duke of Taran's marriage from her memories.

'Contracted marriage...'

A light began swimming in Lucia's eyes.

'A wife in name.'

Her body shook with a sudden realization. It felt like all the blood in her body had drained, leaving only a sinking coldness behind.

'The Duke's wife...'

Lucia bit her lips. This plan might be the key to successfully escaping her fate.

'Should I try?'

First, she needed to meet the Duke of Taran. But how? Just because she wanted to meet him, she wasn't a person who could do so. Even the King himself could not order him as he pleased.

‘That’s right... a party! There is a victory celebration tonight.’

From the 3rd to 5th there would be a ball every night. The Duke should attend more than one of these balls the first night being the most probable. Getting an invitation was easier on the first night, because the party location was grand, all in order to host the celebration of the victory of war. It was a good thing she was a princess.

Her identity was more than enough to attend a ball, so there shouldn’t be any problems.

There were too many things to prepare for tonight’s party. First, she needed a dress. The time to use the money she had saved had finally arrived. She thought of all the things she needed to do and quickly moved her body forward.

“There’s... none left?”

The female employee nodded her head apologetically. Lucia fell to the floor right there. She had run to this place without stopping; it was her last hope, but it was all for naught.

There were not many dress shops that made dresses with a good enough quality to suit such a ball, yet still within her budget. Normally, the shops would be stocked to the brim with dresses, but now was a special case.

It would be an extravagant ball hosted for the first time in a while. Every noble woman in the capital would attend, and carriages would be lining up to get in. There were many nobles like Lucia, who didn’t have much money, so buying these affordable dresses was like going to war.

It was too foolish to think that she could buy it last minute. She should have pre-ordered one a month earlier. She would have been able to obtain some malformed or barely passable dress a week before at the latest.

‘What can I do about it, when I only thought of going to the party today?!’

“There is... That one piece...”

The female employee must have felt pity for Lucia, who looked to be in great despair.

“There is one left?”

“Erm, it’s been a few years, so the style is a bit... Well, with a bit of repair work, it will do...”

“That’s alright! I will buy it. No matter what, it’s mine!”

“No, but the dress is a bit too small.”

“It’s too small?”

“If you will be the one wearing it, it will fit. But, you’re not going to be the one wearing it, right?”

“I will!”

Lucia hurriedly replied, but then reworded her response.

“I mean, the person who will be wearing it is exactly like me. She has my exact body frame, so there is no problem.”

“Is that so? Then please come in and try on the dress. Let me see if we need any extra mending.”

The female employee dug very deeply into the storage and came out with a dress. Lucia’s expression brightened up. It was a modest and simple pastel blue dress. Although it was a style from years ago, it didn’t give off a cheap feeling.

She changed into the dress and looked in the mirror. The dress didn’t have a corset or a panier (something that goes under a dress to puff it up), so it looked like a great mess. She had her hair tied in a messy bun and her make up was a mess, so nothing matched at all. The female employee twirled around her while fiddling here and there.

“Young miss, how can you have such a skinny waist? Probably none of our corsets will fit you. It seems we have to re-adjust the hips. The length is a bit short, so... you’ll probably need to cover up with something. The lace here is ripped so we need to cut it off and stick a new piece... We have to refit the dress a bit.”

“Can I do that here?”

“Um... It seems like a lot of work, so I’m sorry. We already have a lot of other dresses waiting to be refitted.”

“If I wear this without refitting it...”

The female employee shook her head with all her strength.

“That must never happen. You’ll only make a fool out of yourself.”

They said once you climb over a mountain there would be another mountain waiting for you. Once the female employee saw Lucia’s struggling face, she offered another helping hand.

“My mother has already retired, but... She has been refitting dresses for a very long time. If you’re okay with that...”

“Of course that’s okay!”

Chapter 2

18-years old (2)

When he took off his helmet, his black hair flowed down past his shoulders. The servants helped him remove the heavy armors from his chest, arms, and legs. He had never protected his body with so much during war. He had been marching through the streets dressed like a clown, while suffering through the endless people screaming their heads off. He had barely been able to endure marching in the perfect military formation, like the Emperor's dog.

"Why don't you hang some paintings here and there? It's so barren here."

However, that was not what was bothering him at the moment. An uninvited guest had followed him to his private quarters, being critical of everything. Although he was in the middle of changing, the other man shamelessly wandered around, engrossed in the surroundings.

"This is my bedroom."

"Strictly speaking, this isn't your bedroom. It's the living room that happens to serve as a bedroom. This place is perfectly suited for a guest."

"The guest living room is on the first floor."

"If not today, when else would I be able to visit your home. Don't be so stingy. I have some very nice art pieces. I shall send some over to you."

He endured the rising anger in his heart; one would never know what he was really feeling from his outward appearance. He had an icy expression, while his red eyes looked calm and at peace.

He stoically let his servants attend to him, as they dressed him in a tailcoat suit. He was preparing for tonight's victory ball.

He was originally going to rest, and only show up near the end of the ball. If it wasn't for this irritating uninvited guest.

“I will only be able to go to today’s ball,” he said as he buttoned the cuff of his sleeve.

“Fine. But the party isn’t three days, but five...”

“Are you going back on your words?”

“I got it. Look, Duke. Why do you hate attending social parties? We have delicious wine, food, along with beautiful women. Why don’t you enjoy your time here?”

“I already have more than enough wine at home. I don’t have much of a hobby seeking for delicious food, either. Even without attending these parties, I already have more than enough women.”

“Look here. That’s not the only reason for these functions. Duke, you must help me out here. You gave me your word.”

“I promised I would help you when you become the next Emperor.”

“Is that so? Who do you think will be able to become the next Emperor if not me?”

Crown Prince Kwiz stood up tall and confident.

“Let us talk after you become the next Emperor.”

One never knew how the world would turn. Kwiz didn’t seem bothered by his words, but simply sighed.

“You’re more difficult to win over than a coy young lady.”

“A clingy man is never popular.”

“Mmn? Uh? Duke, was that a joke? That’s a joke, isn’t it?”

Kwiz laughed in amusement, but the other man was less than enthusiastic.

“Let us leave.”

He wanted to kick this uninvited guest from his private quarters as soon as possible.



The dress shop's employee couldn't help but save the day for this pitiful young miss. Lucia had to pay more than double for the dress and refitting. According to the employee, it was 'today's' favorable price. She rationalized it by saying that the dress came along with a corset and panier. However, she wasn't able to hire anyone to help with her makeup and hair.

Fortunately, Lucia knew some basic makeup and hairstyle techniques. However, if any professional beautician had seen her, they would click their tongue complaining at the miserable techniques and overall feel of her appearance.

By the time Lucia reached the banquet hall, she was tired to her bones. Her legs hurt from running all over town. Also, she had redone her makeup and hairstyle many times due to her poor skills, causing her a lot of stress.

'All of today's investments must not go wasted...'

Although she had attended many social functions in her dream, she was still very nervous and worried.

'Ah... So many people. I'll be run over by people if I'm not careful.'

The most eye-catching point of the ball were the chattering people all over the ballroom. Though nobles loved parties and balls, they had been abstaining due to the war, so they looked very cheerful and lively now. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that all the nobles in the capital were attending today's ball.

High-class social parties had limited invitations. Nobles didn't socialize much with people outside of their social circle. It was nearly impossible for a low ranked noble to be able to attend the same banquet as the high ranked ones, unlike today. Therefore, any nobles looking to make connections with higher ranked nobles would be here. It was a good chance to get acquainted with other higher ranked nobles and make a name for themselves.

The chandeliers sparkled and the tables were overflowing with delicacies. The noble women were draped in fancy dresses and jewels, while men in sophisticated suits surrounded them. The music continued to softly play in the background, creating a pleasurable night experience.

She worried whether she would be able to find him among the huge crowd, but it wasn't very difficult. She simply followed everyone's gazes and footsteps, and naturally found herself in front of him.

'Ah... It's him...'

Hugo Taran.

Her heart started thumping loudly. He was more charming than when she saw him in her dream. Normally, people only heard of his renown name – the war's black lion. However, ten cases out of ten, people would be shocked over his good looks. He didn't appear rough and wild at all. He didn't just look outstanding, his handsome appeal was unequaled.

Their gazes would lock onto his pitch-black hair and blood-like scarlet eyes, then they would appreciate his sculpted face. His sleek tall bridge nose beautifully balanced his deep eyes.

When he opened his thin lips, everyone would turn silent to listen to his words. His strong jawline and his neck revealed his masculinity.

Lucia had been appreciating his handsome looks with a gaping mouth, when she quickly snapped back to her senses in shock, while looking around to see if anyone had noticed her unlady-like behavior. Thankfully, nobody was interested in the pitiful, ugly young miss.

'Contracted marriage...?'

Lucia swallowed hard.

'Will... I be able to succeed...?'

The level was too high. He's not a man you should dare look at, her mind sensibly whispered to her.

Kwiz, who was in high spirits, dragged Hugo all over the ballroom. He wanted to parade around as though he were wearing a priceless treasure. In Kwiz' view, the Duke of Taran was considered a treasure. He was doing everything he could to win the Duke over to his side.

Neither of the two had explicitly stated whether they had decided to support each other. However, the fact that the two of them were walking side by side and talking made other people's imagination run wild. Kwiz had used that to his advantage, while Hugo had overlooked his actions in silence.

Hugo was tired and simply wanted to go home. When Kwiz became the next Emperor, he would need to do these things to help him gain supporters, but that was something to think of in the future. He didn't find it necessary to put so much effort for the sake of the Crown Prince just yet.

'What can it be...?'

He had been feeling someone's furtive stare for a while now. He had been a perceptive hunter all his life. He could easily sense when someone was targeting him. He didn't feel any evil intent, but it made him feel outraged that he would be made into someone's target. He feigned ignorance and looked around for the other party.

'A woman...?'

It was unexpectedly a woman. She had brown hair and wore a blue dress; she seemed to be a young miss who had just stepped into adulthood. When Hugo looked toward the female, she avoided his gaze, but he had already found out the truth.

He was used to the yearning stares from other women. However, this brown haired female was not someone falling into that category. She looked like someone who had something to say; her eyes were filled with restlessness and sometimes very desperate.

'If she has something to say, she will come eventually.'

He brushed her interest in him aside. However, her tenacious staring continued to bother his senses without rest. Now, he was glancing over at her from time to time to see what she was up to. She did not converse with anyone in the ball, nor did she dance; she simply kept staring at him. For a quick moment when he was alone, he saw her take a single step toward him.

But as soon as somebody approached him again, she would step back. He frowned unintentionally. Eventually, the party was coming to an end and she had not approached him.

'It's utterly impossible to approach him...'

It felt like he was today's protagonist. People did not leave him alone at all. There wasn't a single normal person within his circle of acquaintances. Most of all, Crown Prince Kwiz, Hesse the 9th, did not step away from the Duke's surroundings.

'The main instigator for my horrible marriage is right there,' Lucia expressed toward her step brother. She didn't particularly resent the Crown Prince. Although the two shared the same blood ties, he had no responsibility to take care of her like a real family. They were born from a different uterus, making them no different than strangers.

The party finally ended, and she could not relay a single word to him. Forget about talking, she couldn't even get near him.

'Hhhaa... what to do. Will he be attending tomorrow's ball?'

She wasn't sure whether he would be attending tomorrow's ball and tonight would probably be the only chance she would get. Lucia decided she would attend the next day as well.

It had been five days. Today was the last day. Although the capital had been hosting the ball for five nights, nobody looked tired at all. Most likely, as soon as the party ended, most people would be tired and stay home for a while. It would be very quiet among the high society for some time.

However, compared to the first and second nights, quite a lot of people were not in attendance. Most of the ones attending tonight's ball were party addicts. Otherwise, they would be hunting for a partner to spend some alone time in the dark corridors or the garden.

Not everyone was there to enjoy the party. There were those with huge appetites feasting on the delicacies; those who wished to make new connections; and others giving flirtatious glances, looking for a discreet fling. Contrary to everyone else, was the loner Lucia, who was out of everyone's way against a wall, sipping on a glass of non-alcoholic champagne.

She had spent the last five days standing around all night while wearing heels, and it had given her an intense burning pain. Her corset wasn't too binding, but it was constricting her chest considerably, making it hard to breathe. Although she was

hungry, she could only taste a little bit at a time due to her corset.

Although the fragrance of the food was very alluring, she treated it like a background decoration. It was uncomfortable going to the bathroom, so she had made do with a single glass of champagne to wet her dry lips.

She felt how true it was that hunger intensified depression. Lucia was extremely depressed at the moment. She didn't know whether it was because she was so hungry it felt like her stomach was stuck to her spine, or whether it was because she couldn't approach the Duke these past five days. In any case, the two had equally caused much distress to Lucia.

She eyed the man in a black tailcoat in the distance. He looked superior compared to anyone else in this place, whether it be looks or status. He was tall with broad shoulders and a slim waist; his body had ideal proportions. Though one could not see his body underneath, anyone could tell he was well-toned.

There wasn't much time left now. She would not be able to even greet him by the time the party ended. She wasn't sure whether she would have a chance to meet him again afterward.

'At least I was able to look at his face to the point of no regret.'

She had been stalking the man discreetly for the last five nights. She admitted she had become way too obsessed doing that. It wasn't the least bit tiresome looking at him. He was a handsome man, who was pleasing to the eyes. It was fun observing the people around him as well. Especially when women would vulgarly press their breast against him...

He was a beautiful creation, but he didn't try to gain favors with his looks. His expression was always cold, without any joy, anger, sorrow, or pleasure. He sometimes slightly furrowed or raised his eyebrows. When he laughed, only his lips would cynically smile. Nevertheless, people would try their best to observe his reactions with just those responses.

His presence alone gave people pause. He naturally exuded an imposing presence that suppressed others. It was a ruler's dignity and the composure of the strong.

Those who looked at him from afar were surprised by the Duke of Taran's handsome looks, but those who conversed with him could understand why this Duke's was given

the title The War's Black Lion.

Dominant males, different from non dominant ones, always had women prowling around them, lining up with lust.

Lucia could understand the numerous females who kept trying to talk to the Duke. He held a high position and much wealth; he was handsome and young; he had everything one could ask for. He didn't have a wife nor a companion. Even searching around the whole world, it would be hard to find someone comparable to him. He was the rarest of the rare. If she had a higher position in society, she would not have hesitated to join those women right now.

'If I had bigger breasts at least.'

'Hhaaaaa.'

That sigh had many meanings held within it. It was not possible for her to shorten the distance between the Duke and herself.

There was another person equally fatigued as Lucia at the moment. His stress level had risen higher than hers. The useless dregs who stuck to him like glue were testing his patience as he wondered when they would shut up and get lost.

He sincerely missed the battlefield. He could shut people up as much as he liked at that place. His petty joy in life was to behead those who called him a devil. It was a good thing he currently didn't have any weapons on him. He trusted in his own patience, but not 100 percent.

Hugo shifted his red eyes toward a corner. Nobody noticed he had been observing a particular person all this time.

'Nothing has changed.'

The frail looking female with reddish brown hair had been standing in the same place, while holding onto the same glass all this time. For the past four days, she had not changed out of her pastel blue dress.

He did not regularly attend parties, but he was sensible enough to know that females did not wear the same dress the very next day. In a five day long ball like this one, they would own at least three dresses and rotate them. If they were so poor they couldn't

even afford three dresses, it would be better if they didn't show up at all. She couldn't even earn the belittlement of those around her. He didn't see her trying to converse with anyone at all, not even once.

'Is it money?'

If she was interested in his money, it would be better if she could tell him upfront. He was prepared to give her a sum of money with no questions asked. He admired her adamant spirit.

Originally, he planned to attend only the first day, but then decided to attend the next day as well. He was interested whether she would be there the next day. She had stuck to a corner in the same dress and had continued to stare at him. If she intended to catch his attention by wearing the same dress all the time, he wanted to relay the message that she had succeeded.

On the second day, she had not approached him. He could have gone up to her to start the conversation, but he had not. He had waited for her to approach him first. It felt like a game with victory on the line.

In the end, she had set a record by attending the party for five days straight. Kwiz was very happy, even though he hadn't attended all these days in order to curry favor with him. In the end, the woman could not approach him, and had maintained the long distance between them.

'It's probably because of all these dregs.'

Everyone was assured that they had done their best making an impression with the Duke, but as soon as Hugo turned his back toward them, he planned to erase all those people from his mind.

'It feels like she will approach me if I'm alone... Shall I try and find a place where people can't find me?'

He'd been attending the parties for the last five days and much of his curiosity for the woman had died down. Kwiz, who had stuck to him like a piece of gum all along, had gone off somewhere.

"Excuse me for a moment."

When Hugo requested their understanding, everyone expressed their reluctance and watched his back disappear. They assumed he would return after taking care of his business and waited for him while chattering happily among each other.

‘Huh?’

Lucia, who had been stalking him, was shocked by his unexpected behavior. He didn’t seem the type to wander around in parties. He would usually remain at the same place, and people would naturally surround him. It was the first time he was going off to some place alone. Lucia hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow after him. It could be her first and only chance.

Hugo walked leisurely. He sensed someone following behind him already.

‘What am I doing right now?’

He laughed to himself. He found it funny that he would go through so much trouble to hear what this female had to say. He wasn’t one to waste his time on useless things. It would have been over, had he simply ignored her.

He wasn’t interested in taking her to bed. To him, there were two types of women. The ones he wanted to take to bed and those he didn’t. It was the first time he was curious about a female of the latter type.

‘It has been quite bored these days.’

The high tension, the troops who were swept by madness, and the feeling of hot sticky blood. He was yearning for such things. He snapped out of his wandering thoughts about the war. In any case, he was very curious about this female’s goal.

He headed for the east garden. The moon shined the brightest there, but because of that, it wasn’t a good place for a secret love affair. It was probably the best place to be alone without having to hear some heavy moaning.

He got comfortable by a fountain that had yet to be filled with water. The place was out in the open to a certain degree. There were no people around, but it was not too desolate. He was satisfied with his choice of location. He turned his head at the crunching noise of dried leaves. When a woman appeared, the small amusement within his heart flew far away into the distance.

“Hugo...”

A well-endowed blond female sparkled like a jewel under the moonlight. His expression stiffened upon the appearance of the woman, who had an equally charming face.

“I’ve only allowed you to call me by name in the past, Lady Lawrence.”

The young miss fell into great shock as her eyes shook. He had drawn a line with his respectable cold words. He took away her privilege to call him by name and didn’t call her name like in the past. Sofia gazed at him with eyes glistening with tears as she bit her red lips.

“Please excuse my rudeness, Your Grace.”

“Did I disturb your walk?”

“No. I just noticed Your Grace walked my way and...”

“I’d be gratified if you could take your leave now.”

“Just for a moment... Just a moment is all I need. Your Grace, please...”

He sighed quietly.

“Are there any words left to say between us?”

“...You’re too heartless. Why do you cast me aside so coldly? I believed we shared our hearts at one time.”

He responded indifferently to the female, who was about to cry out a river.

“Lady Lawrence. I’ve never shared my heart with anyone. I only share my bed.”

Sofia couldn’t believe her ears as her eyes filled with tears. Her shoulders trembled as she wiped her tears away with her handkerchief.

Hugo didn’t bother comforting her and stood a distance away with his hands behind his back. He was beginning to grow irritated. That was precisely the reason he stopped playing with unmarried women. They always broke the rules.

It was frustrating to watch her, so he turned his back toward her.

“There’s nothing good about dragging this out with words.”

Sofia looked at the man who had put a wall between themselves with resentful eyes. She couldn’t believe his coldness. As she gazed toward his back, her resentful feelings slowly changed to something hot. Sofia ran and hugged his back.

She wrapped her arms around his firm chest and dug her face against his back. She was filled with emotion as his body heat permeated against her. She felt regret while thinking of their passionate night together. Her full breasts pressed against his back with hot passion, yet he closed his eyes and heartlessly tore her arms off him. Sofia’s body trembled seeing him turn around and step away in order to maintain some distance between them. He did not give her the slightest leeway.

“What did I do wrong? All I did was confess my love to my lover. Why would you send me roses of separation? You’re too much.”

“Lover you say?”

He clicked his tongue. How could this girl be so stupid?

“I’ve given you the truth since the beginning. I’ve told you to keep your heart to yourself. You promised me that you would do so. Are you feigning ignorance now?”

Sofia had not forgotten. She had not forgotten that she would be dumped as soon as she spoke of love to him. Sofia was well aware of that. All the women before her had experienced the same thing. But this cold man had called her name with such hot passion while holding her warmly that she forgot all about it.

— I’m different. I’m not your lover. I’m unique.

(note: this is the title of a new segment of the chapter)

Sofia followed in the footsteps of all the other foolish women before her. She fell into the category called ‘the past women’.

“Can’t we... start over again? Your Grace, I will not show you my heart again. It’s okay

if you embrace other girls. Please let me remain by your side.”

“You were a beautiful flower, Lady Lawrence. I broke off this flower and placed it in a vase. But the fate of these flowers is to wilt and nothing more.”

Sofia’s lips trembled imagining herself as a wilted flower. His every word mutilated her heart.

While she was his lover, it had felt like she had the world in her hands. He had been passionate and warm. He would not hesitate to spoil her with expensive gifts, either. When she said she had seen something pretty, he would gift it to her the very next day. She paraded all her gifted necklaces and earrings at all the parties she attended, and even when she hinted at their relationship, he hadn’t expressed any objections.

One day, a woman who had past relations with the Duke had warned Sofia.

“If you wish to remain by his side a day longer, don’t try to get closer. Enjoy your days until the day you receive those roses, Lady Lawrence.”

At the time, she had treated those words as nonsense. When she realized the truth, it had already been too late. Sofia had fallen too deep and he had already departed, leaving her with nothing but a bundle of yellow roses.

“Count Falcon’s wife had been picked by another, isn’t she nothing but a wilted flower?”

It had been a long time since they separated. But Sofia had approached him again after she had heard of the rumors flying around. Count Falcon’s wife was widely known for having three dead husbands. Sofia couldn’t handle the fact that she had been thrown away for such a woman.

As their meeting grew longer, Hugo gradually got more irritated. He quickly scanned the grassy forest up ahead. Somebody had been listening to the two of them all this time. Hugo was sure it would be that woman. His goal wasn’t to show off his past relationship to that girl. He had been curious what that hidden girl had to say to him, but now it had become too bothersome.

“You have no business deciding who I sleep with. Don’t think so highly of yourself.”

“She is a cursed woman, Your Grace. I’m simply worried harm would could to your

esteemed self.”

He had spent a lot of effort to bed Sofia. She had not approach him first, but it had been him to ask her for a dance and seduce her to his bed. He had enjoyed a fling in a different style than his past women. She was more beautiful and materialistic. In the future, he planned to find a woman opposite of her.

“Lady Lawrence.”

His voice was incredibly cold and startled Sofia a great deal.

“I hate to be consumed in emotion. Thus, I don’t get mad. It is a waste and unpleasant to be filled with anger. If you continue to make me any more angry than I am now, you will need to pay for it. Up until now, all those who made me mad have paid for it with their lives.”

Sofia’s face drained of blood and paled as white as a sheet of paper.

“Don’t make me angry.”

Sofia’s lips trembled as she gazed at him with a pale face for a moment, then she turned and ran away with all her strength. He watched her disappearing figure with cold eyes, then fixed his attention to a certain spot.

“Come out. It’s time to stop eavesdropping like a thieving cat.”

Chapter 3

Shall we marry? (1)

She didn't intend on eavesdropping, at first. She had busily followed after him in the same direction until he stopped.

'How in the world do I start this conversation?'

Her mind felt like it was stuck in a black hole as she imagined a dark future. She had neglected to prepare for this moment because she had been so fervently trying to simply meet him in person. However, her feet were already moving in his direction. When she discovered him, Lucia paused her steps and hesitated. Just then, she had lost her chance to another woman.

She was already much too close to leave. She was afraid of being discovered, so she crouched down behind a tall clump of grass. She didn't want to listen to their conversation, but she couldn't help hearing them due to such a close proximity.

'Lady Lawrence...? Is she... Sofia Lawrence...?'

Sofia was famous inside of Lucia's dream. Lucia didn't have any friendly ties with her, but Lucia had seen her a handful of times. There were many beauties in high society, but Sofia had reached the pinnacle among them all. If one were to use a comparison to nature's food chain, she would be among the top predators.

'Sofia Lawrence... was his ex-lover?'

Lucia was already aware he had numerous lovers. To make it worse, he switched partners frequently without hesitation. Every partner of his had breasts as big as watermelons, waists as thin as ants, wrapped up with a glamorous face. If one had to pick out a common trait among them all, it had to be that they were all beautiful morons. All the females had been nearly identical to one another, so Lucia had assumed this was his own preference when it came to women.

But Sofia Lawrence was different. Sofia was like a bouquet of white lilies. She had a grand beauty that stood out, even when she was among many other beauties. Her

father, a baron, took importance in educating his children, so she was known to be a refined and modest young miss.

‘She’s not modest at all. She’s a wolf in disguise.’

A marquis had fallen in love with her beauty and Sofia had already been married by the time Lucia was actively going around attending parties of high society. The marquis was a widower, but as a daughter of a baron, it would be a suitable marriage. In the distant future, Sofia would die giving birth to a stillborn. Lucia felt odd for some reason.

‘She’s clinging to him so desperately.’

Sofia, a glamorous young miss, had thrown away all her pride and begged. Listening to her words, Lucia felt such pity.

He’s not the only man in this world, you know? Lucia wanted to tell her. But if Sofia insisted that there was only one ‘Hugo Taran’ in this world, Lucia would be helpless and could only keep quiet.

Lucia would never have guessed that she would be able to witness his dating style in such plain view. To top it off, at the worst moment possible.

‘Haa... but still. To think he would be a man who would threaten death to an ex-lover...’

If Lucia was in Sofia’s shoes, she would faint on the spot.

‘This really... far surpasses what I imagined...’

Lucia knew many things about this man, but they were all rumors she had picked up here and there. She didn’t personally know Hugo Taran at all. Inside her dream, she had only greeted him a single time. She had always viewed him from afar. She had drawn an image of him while watching many people surround him during the ball, but all that had shattered into many small pieces. He was far crueler than what she predicted, and most of all, he had no sympathy whatsoever.

‘Contracted marriage...? What if he gets mad at me for proposing such a preposterous thing?’

If she made him mad, would he kill her as well?

'What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?'

When Lucia was worrying herself to death, he graciously put a stop to her actions.

"Come out. It's time to stop eavesdropping like a thieving cat."

Lucia was scared witless. She held her breath for a short moment, but he was calling her out for sure. She decided it was too late to back out now and stood up from her crouched position. As expected, he was looking into Lucia's very direction.

"I'm... sorry, Your Grace. I didn't mean to eavesdrop..."

"Aren't you a little far for a discussion?"

Lucia hesitantly walked through the tall grass and stopped a couple steps away from him.

"Again... I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean to eavesdrop on your conversation. It wasn't my intention to listen and I won't say a word about this to others. I promise."

"It's fine. What is it that you have to say?"

"...Huh?"

"You've been following me around for the past few days because you have something you want to say to me."

He wanted to figure out this woman's goal and hurry home. His earlier entertained mood was no more.

'Oh my god.'

You knew all along? You knew I was stalking you all this time? Lucia was shocked, no, embarrassed. She didn't know what she was feeling between the two as she felt her eyes roll to the back of her head. She felt cold sweat drip down her back.

Hugo felt his mood brighten as he watched her freeze like a wax figure. She gave off a different feel up close compared to far away. Her calm voice had a soothing tone and her expressions were very animated. It seemed that her earlier limpy figure was due to the fatigue she had built up all this time. She wasn't a beauty, but how should one

put it?

‘Cute.’

She seemed like a tiny herbivore. Something like a squirrel or a bunny? He had never looked at a squirrel or a bunny and thought it was cute. They didn’t even have the worth of hunting down. However, he was a man that generously welcomed any contradictions of himself.

“Your purpose. Don’t make me repeat myself many times over.”

“So... it’s like this. Contract... I wanted to propose a contract.”

“Contract?”

Hugo was a little disappointed. It was something more boring than he had expected.

“Yes. A contract. A contract to change a life.”

My life. Lucia added inside her own thoughts.

“A contract to change a life, you say?”

That sounded interesting. He murmured ‘hmmm’ to himself.

“Aren’t you lagging behind on your self-introduction?”

“Ah, yes. You’re perfectly right. But as I’ve already told you, this is a very important contract...”

Lucia contemplated with all her strength for the correct method to relay this message. I want to escape from my current situation. As for future problems, I’ll deal with them as they come.

“This is an unsuitable place to bring up such a topic. Who I am, the contents of the contract, everything.”

She seemed suspicious, but he decided to acknowledge her request. According to his senses, there was nobody wandering around this place. However, if the information she needed to relay was sensitive information, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to be extra

safe.

As long as it was a contract that brought him benefits, he was always open to it.

“Where did you want us to go?”

“Will it be alright to talk at your mansion?”

He paused to ponder for a moment.

“That’s fine. When?”

“I will contact you in the future.”

Up until now, he had always been the boss of the contract. Until now, he had always been the one with the upper hand, and it would remain that way in the future as well. He did not bother with contracts that would tie him down. She was the one requesting a contract, so he would have the upper hand in this as well. But she had behaved as if it was the other way around. It was one of the two. Either she didn’t know any better and knew no fear, or she was trying to con him.

“Are you telling me to wait for your message that will be sent at an unknown date?”

A river of cold sweat began dripping down Lucia’s back. However, she put a dignified and brave front.

“You should be able to endure that much. It’s a life-changing contract, after all.”

He fixed his eyes on Lucia amusedly. Since he was born, nobody had behaved so senselessly. It was impossible to judge her character from her appearance but she didn’t look shameless enough to try and con him. However, the way she glared back with wide eyes, trying to feign ignorance to her own fear, had perked his interest.

“I hope your words are as you said. I’m not such a hospitable person.”

Lucia corrected in her thoughts that he probably never had a ‘moment’ when he had been hospitable to anyone. He was a man whose motto in life was to threaten other people. It could be that she had been completely off the mark judging the Duke of Taran as a whole. But she understood one thing. This man was no gentleman.

“...Yes. I will bear that fact in mind.”



Lucia needed someone who could advise her. She wanted to think this out thoroughly with another person. The only person that she could properly trust to advise her was Norman. Norman was older than Lucia; although Lucia had more years of life if one accounted for her dream. Norman had written many novels using the many hardships and experiences of her life. She would be able to help her.

She could not confess every single detail to Norman. Norman thought Lucia was a palace maid.

‘I’m actually a princess. I’m thinking of going through a contract marriage with the Duke of Taran. Do you think I will be able to succeed?’ There was no way she could say such things.

“Norman, I need to make an important choice in my life.” Lucia wanted to phrase it in an abstract way.

“There are two paths in front of me. If I don’t do anything, I will end up going towards the left path. I know what will happen to me on that road. I will end up suffering a lot and I will live a hard life. However, I can try and attempt going towards the right path. I have no idea whether this attempt will succeed or not. Even if I succeed, I have no idea what kind of road it is. The road to the right can lead to a better life, but at the same time, there is a chance I can end up living in a place worse than hell. Norman, which road would you take?”

“If it were me, I would take my chances with the path to the right.”

“...You didn’t even need to think about it.”

“Didn’t you say that you know what will happen to you if you go toward the left? To make it worse, it will be a life of misery. In such a case, you’ve got to take your chances. Even if the right road leads to a worse case, it will be something I decided for myself and I won’t feel any regrets.”

“Regrets...”

“And if you knew everything about your future, wouldn’t that be boring? Life is only fun when you don’t know what will happen. Even if one feels lonely today, what about tomorrow? People can only live on with this hope in their hearts.”

“Wow, Norman. You seem like a sage.”

“Puhaha. ‘Sage’, get out of town! I’m someone who lives on without even knowing what the word ‘tomorrow’ means. Life is a gamble. You only have one shot. There is no way you’ll gain anything without risking some dangers.”

As Norman put it, this was a gamble. A gamble with her life on the line. If she were to succeed with this gamble and become the Duke’s wife, her life would change completely. Even if she got married only to end up divorced, she would be guaranteed basic compensation to live on. Her dream to live in a tiny two-storey house was not such a faraway dream any longer. The life she had lived in her dreams had been terrible. She wanted to live a carefree and peaceful life.

‘Yes. Let’s just go for it. There’s only one shot in life.’

Before Lucia’s courage could dissipate, she left Norman’s home and went toward the Duke of Taran’s mansion. She could stop anyone on the street for directions to the Duke’s mansion and they would be able to point out the way. Everything was sailing smoothly up until this point. When she faced against the towering steel gates of the mansion, she couldn’t breathe. All the courage she had worked up shriveled up into a tiny pea.

‘Why isn’t anyone here?’

There wasn’t a single soldier guarding the Duke’s mansion.

‘Were my efforts all for naught?’

If a royal guard had interrogated her ‘who are you?’, she would have had to run away, yet she felt a strange emptiness seeing nobody there. She pushed on the gate to vent her frustration, but the gate swung open quite easily.

‘Oh my god... it opened.’

She peeked inside the gate many times and hesitated before carefully stepping into the estate. She assumed that since it was the Duke’s mansion, someone would spot

her as soon as she welcomed herself in. Unfortunately, no matter how long she walked around, she couldn't spot even a shadow of another person.

'Why is this place so poorly guarded? Did I arrive correctly at the Duke's mansion?'

"Who're you?"

A man suddenly appeared in front of Lucia who had been loitering around the mansion. Lucia gasped in shock, while pressing her hands to her chest to calm herself down. The man didn't look apologetic for shocking the girl senseless. Instead, he pressed closer and began inspecting the girl up close.

"You don't look like an employee of this place, what are you doing here?"

He swaggered around with a rude tone. The rude red-haired man was wearing an imposing armour that was engraved with a black lion. Lucia remained standing tall.

"Are you one of the Duke's knights?"

The man was amused, 'what is this?' He mumbled to himself while scanning Lucia up and down.

"I am, so?"

"Is His Grace presently inside his home?"

"I wonder. Why are you looking for His Grace?"

"I apologize for barging in, but would it be alright if you relayed to His Grace that I have a message for him? I request for an audience with the Duke of Taran."

"So then, who are you?"

"I... I have an important message for His Grace. He will be willing to meet me if you tell him that I'm the person who had proposed a contract at the Victory Ball."

"I don't care about that. I'm asking who you are. I can't invite you into our Lord's mansion when I don't even know your name. You don't seem like a noble. Are you a merchant?"

Lucia felt her ears burn hot. In her current state, it would be difficult to insist that she was a noble, let alone a princess. Even if he responded violently, she wouldn't have anything to say to him. She regretted that she didn't pretend to be an errand girl to relay a message. But it was much too late for regrets now.

"Although I am dressed this way and seem insignificant, I am a noble."

The man froze as he stared at Lucia for a while. Suddenly, he turned around.

"Follow me."



BANG BANG, he smacked his fist against the door. Not waiting for a response, he opened the door, 'I'm coming in.' The red haired man popped his head into the inner office, where a man with gloomy black hair was sitting behind a wide desk. The Duke glanced over at the man swaggering into the room. The next moment, he was reading over documents while signing his signature.

"Where is Jerome?"

If his righteous butler had witnessed this guy's brutal mannerism, he wouldn't have watched on in silence.

"He had to leave to take care of some quick business. He told me the reason, but I've forgotten what it was about."

It must have been quite an urgent task. Otherwise, Jerome wouldn't have left, leaving just this guy in charge.

He probably didn't need to leave for a long time, so he had decided not to bother the Duke of this matter.

"I don't have time to play with you. Play alone."

"...Sheesh. You always treat me like an immature brat."

You're not even that much older than me, the red haired man muttered under his breath.

“If you were an immature brat, I would have taught you a lesson long ago.”

“Wow, after beating me so much during our sparring sessions, how can you be so shameless with those words?”

“I did that because I thought you were cute.”

“Ah, shit...!”

He puffed in resentment. Hugo was amused; smiling slightly, he then returned to his usual cold expression. The only person Hugo would show emotions to was this brat.

“You have a guest.”

“I have no such things scheduled for today.”

There was an endless amount of people standing in line to meet him. If Hugo were to agree to meet everyone, he wouldn't ever be able to go to sleep.

A majority would be respectful and send in letters formally requesting an audience. However, there were a handful of people who barged in to meet him as well. They would ignore the guard's warning and force their way in. They would shamelessly make themselves comfortable in the living room and claim that they had already gotten permission since they were already in his home.

In the end, it was too much trouble and Hugo got rid of the guards altogether. If they crossed over the gate, he would report them for trespassing and breaking into someone's house. For those nobles, he would aim swords at their throats. When the sword sliced into the skin, a bit of a massive amount of blood would fall. Following such a show, nobody dared to barge into his mansion ever again. But at the same time, he became infamous as an evil Duke.

“She's a very amusing guest. Why don't you have a look?”

“Do I know her?”

“No. Although she seems like a shabby commoner she claims she is a noble.” The red haired man snickered.

“Rather than that, her clothes are crap and she has no servants. Even so, she has this

super confident air about her. Isn't she amusing? I'm dying to know why she has to meet the Duke."

Roy's, the red haired man's eyes shined while Hugo clicked his tongue. A shameless guy who had interrupted his work just to fulfill his own curiosity. If his butler, Jerome, was here, he would be jumping with anger. Roy knew Jerome would lecture and criticise him for at least two hours; even so, his immediate amusement was more important.

Roy had been going on nonstop about how bored he was. If he refused, Roy would annoy him to no end. Just at that moment, Hugo had felt fatigued over the neverending documents that needed to be looked over. It would be a good idea to take a short break.

"Were there any other messages?"

"What... else did she say? First of all, she's a girl."

Hugo had thought it would be a man all this time and furrowed his eyebrows in anger. Roy jerked back like he had suffered a burn, and ran away to the furthest corner of the office.

"She blabbered something about a contract at the Victory Ball. She said Your Grace would meet her no matter what."

Hugo's eyes shook. After 10 days of no messages, he had suspected the female's intentions.

"Where is the guest now?"

"In the living room. Oh, I didn't leave her in the room alone. I ordered a maid to serve her tea. I'm aware of basic manners." Roy's boasting figure looked painfully pitiful.

Two men sat directly across from Lucia. Lucia sipped her tea while glancing at the Duke every now and then. She couldn't believe she was sitting in the same room with the Duke like this. Although it wasn't the first time she had seen him, it was still very interesting to see the Duke in person.

'He's really... the Duke of Taran...'

The contrast of his raven black hair and blood red scarlet eyes would frighten anyone

who met his eyes. His presence was so strong that it left an unforgettable impression. This was their first meeting since the Victory Ball, and they were sitting across from each other in a brightly lit room.

“Did you visit knowing I was in the mansion?”

“N-no. If you weren’t home, I would have left a message.”

His voice reflected his physical appearance very much. His voice was a heavy low tone, but had a piercing commanding aura. ‘Even his voice is amazing,’ she had thought to herself while squatting by the tall grassy bush.

‘I... had no idea I would be so easily affected by a person’s appearance and voice.’

Inside her dream, she had been scammed numerous times but could never learn her lesson. She had lost all her life savings to a handsome man she had fallen head over heels for. No matter how bitterly one suffered in life, it was hard for such human feelings to change just because one wished them to.

‘It’s probably because of Count Matin.’

Lucia had never known or seen a man while she lived trapped inside the Royal Palace. The first man Lucia had met had been old, obese, short, ugly and violent. Following such an experience, she couldn’t help but have her heart stolen by a handsome man.

‘Although being handsome does not make him a good man...’

The man in front of her was the proof. This man was a bad guy. He had no problems stepping on a woman’s heart like a plaything. Although Lucia was aware of all this, she had no confidence that she would not turn into someone like Sofia in the future. If he whispered sweet nothings in her ears with that face and voice, she would lose herself.

‘Get a hold of yourself. You must get a hold of yourself.’ Lucia calmed her shaking heart.

“I’ve been rude, requesting an audience without prior notice. Please excuse me for my late introduction. I am the Emperor’s 16th princess, Vivian Hesse. It’s an honor to be able to talk to Your Grace.”

“Pfft.”

When Lucia introduced herself as the '16th princess', he burst into laughter. He was the red-haired man who had guided Lucia into the mansion. She didn't think much of his jeering laughter, only mindlessly observing how inconsiderate he was. Just then, she remembered who this man was.

'Roy... Krotin'

The Duke of Taran's loyal subordinate. He was known as the red-haired youth, Crazy Dog Krotin. Most of the stories that followed Krotin were exaggerated, but accounting for just half of the tales was enough to be qualified for the title of 'Crazy Dog'.

"In order to not waste any of Your Grace's time, I will get straight to the point. I've come... to ask for Your Grace's hand in marriage."

As soon as Lucia finished her sentence, she held her breath. It felt like her heart would explode from the stillness. After crossing the point of no return, she felt better having said it. Lucia continued to observe his expression. His brows had momentarily twitched, but surprisingly, he maintained his indifferent expression. The heated reaction burst from their side.

"PWAHAHAHA!!"

Roy laughed like he was dying. The Duke of Taran glared coldly, wondering if he had gone crazy. Even so, Roy's laughter did not stop. In the end, the Duke threw a punch to the back of his head and was able to make his laughter stop, and instead, Roy was yelping in pain.

"Uggh. Are you trying to kill me?" Roy held the back of his head and yelled in rage, while a lone tear hung at the corner of his eye. Lucia, who was observing the two, received a fright. 'Is that why he was known as Crazy Dog?'

"You're noisy. You, get out."

"Eh? Why? I'll keep my mouth shut and be quiet. Really~."

Roy clamped his mouth shut, while Hugo clicked his tongue and returned his attention to the young lady sitting across from him.

'A princess?'

Hugo observed the young miss who claimed herself to be a princess. In the past Victory Ball, she seemed like a noble lady. Now, at the moment, she didn't seem any different than any commoner woman you could find on the street. 'And she claims to be a princess?'

He had no interest in the royal family. The king himself probably had no idea what all his children looked like. It wasn't just one or two. He, therefore, assumed she really was a princess. The rank of her status was too low for her to go out of her way to pretend and lie about it, in addition, she was strangely detailed about it.

He loved women, but he had his own rules. He didn't go near anyone who would give him more trouble than necessary. He only needed a girl to sleep with, someone who he could toss aside while claiming he was just drunk. A princess ranked first among his no-go zone list. In the first place, he gave no room to keep in contact. If he had known she was a princess, he would not have agreed to this meeting.

"Who was it?"

"...What?"

"Princess, who was the person who sent you here? The discussion cannot continue further until the mastermind is present."

"Do you believe that I am a princess?"

Lucia had thought he would get mad for trying to deceive him. She had decided to receive any insulting and offensive words without complaint. But his reaction was too peaceful.

"Were you lying?"

"No. I am not lying. I... thought you would get mad."

"I would have gotten mad if you were lying."

She remembered his words from the past victory ball. A cold chill ran down her spine. There was nobody who could give more terror to another than this person whose weight of the word 'mad' held a different meaning.

"I'm not lying. Although there are things I cannot tell you... I am not someone who lies."

There is nobody else trying to pull the strings. I am the person who decides everything.”

“Princess, is there anyone who knows you’re here?”

“Nobody knows. Nobody is aware that Princess Vivian has left the royal palace.”

This was not a lie. She had left the royal palace as a maid who served under Princess Vivian. Currently, it had been recorded that Princess Vivian was quietly minding her own business inside her own detached palace.

“I will figure out how that is possible at a later date. Didn’t you request a contract last time? This is different than what you told me before.”

“This is not anything different. I am proposing a contract to you. A life-changing contract with marriage on the line.”

He was stunned with amazement that he lost the timing to get mad. A boiling heat was starting to rise from his stomach. A waste of time and total nonsense. She was doing everything he hated. He coldly jeered at her.

“Are you playing around with your nonsense words?”

“I know I am saying baseless words to you. I understand that you feel repulsed because of my abrupt words. I am here to present to you all the things that you will be able to obtain by wedding with me. After you listen, it will be fine to reject this offer. I will not take too much of your time. I will not bother you ever again.”

This woman who seemed like a frail rabbit looked nervous to her bones but she had been eloquent with her words. Her honest eyes looked straight ahead at him. These were the desperate eyes he had observed from the Victory ball. Her eyes seemed very desperate, but at the same time, they didn’t have any hint of greed. As a result, he had been interested in her the whole time.

The reason he was listening to these nonsense words up until now was purely because of those eyes. He decided to waste his time a little more.

“Fine. Speak.”

“Um... before that. Will it be okay if the person beside you leaves the room?”

“No! Why?”

Roy, who had been watching with sparkling eyes, suddenly raged. He protested against missing out on such an interesting show.

“Princess, you’re able to be here and discuss this only because of me. How can you stab me in the back after all this time?”

“Um, thank you. And I’m sorry. However, the words I will relay are very personal matters. This is information that can fatally harm me in the future. It’s not that I don’t believe you, but I believe you can give me this much understanding.”

“I’m not anyone to blab around town but... by chance, do you know me?”

“Ah? Ah... um... aren’t you a fa-famous person?”

“I am? Was I ever that famous...?”

Roy rubbed his chin and tilted his head while Lucia watched him, dripping with cold sweat. It was the truth that he would be famous in the far future, but that might not be true at the moment.

‘She controls him well.’

Roy, who had been jumping around with rage, had turned quiet and still, and Hugo laughed under his breath. Roy did not feel very comfortable trying to go against such a noble woman either. He was violent-tempered with a large build, he had no filters for his words and spoke his thoughts plainly -often coming out crude and impolite- and, to top it off, his loud voice seemed to oppress and bully everyone around him. But, if you got to know him, there wasn’t anyone more simple-minded than him. You could see him as a very large, stubborn dog.

One couldn’t put their finger on this young woman, but she was interesting.

“Leave the room.”

“...che.”

Roy quietly grumbled but he left without much of a fight. Now that they were alone, Lucia felt her nerves tense up once more. She retraced the last scenario in her mind

once more. This was a gamble. She threw the dice.

“I... am aware that Your Grace has a son that will succeed you.”

Chapter 4

Shall we marry? (2)

The single reason he required a wife-in-name was because he had a love child (child born out of wedlock). It was common to find illegitimate children among nobles, but the Duke wanted this love child to succeed him.

Xenon was a lenient country toward illegitimate children. As long as the love child was registered into the family registry, no unfair rules could be counted against them. However, in order to register the child, both parents had to agree. According to Lucia's memory, the Duke would not have another child with the wife-in-name. It had been unknown whether they could not make children or they had agreed not to have children, but it was most probably the latter.

"I have not planted any spies within Your Grace's faction of people."

To the Duke, her words were laughable. A spy? A mere 16th princess? If such a thing was true, the people in charge of security would need to pay with their lives first thing in the morning.

"Even if you had planted a spy, it doesn't matter. You may continue."

She was feeling uneasy because she believed he would press her for an explanation for all the wealth of information she had on him. However, his answers were surprisingly calm. Actually, he seemed amused at the moment. She looked at him with strange eyes; he was acting so differently than the last time she had seen him. He was surprisingly very patient and mild tempered. It was true that one could never judge a person's character by meeting them only once. A small hope had sparked in her; maybe she would be able to get her message across to him.

"Ah... yes. Like I was saying... If you wish to let your child succeed you, Your Grace will have to marry."

"Thus. Princess, are you implying I should marry you?"

"...Yes."

He laughed under his breath.

“It’s not a secret I have a love child. It’s an easily accessible information that could be found with little effort. Unless you’re trying to keep that fact a secret?”

“No! I’m not trying to threaten Your Grace. I don’t dare to have such thoughts. As I have told you, I’m here to propose a contract. I want to show you the benefits you can obtain by marrying me.”

He blankly gazed at Lucia and opened his lips.

“What is it? The benefits will I gain by marrying you, Princess?”

His tone was dry and business-like.

“I have no relatives. There will be no need for Your Grace to concern yourself with these things. My status in the royal family is very low as the 16th princess, so you will not have to burden yourself with an expensive dowry. But since I am a princess, I think it will be more outwardly appealing than a no-name noble from somewhere. Although I assume Your Grace does not care about such small matters. I will never interfere with your private life. You can play to your heart’s content, no, you may live your life the same way you have been living all this time. If you wish, we may even set up a time for a divorce somewhere in the future.”

He was listening quietly, but his expression was strange.

“Oh, lastly. I will not become a hindrance to Your Grace’s child. You see, I am unable to get pregnant.”

He let out a long sigh. He had to keep his mouth shut tight because he was feeling very uncomfortable at the moment. At present, this expression was the most she had witnessed the Duke display.

“What in the world?”

His expression turned frosty once more.

“Princess, I wish I could go into that brain of yours to see what’s inside. Really... no, just get lost. Do you really believe these are benefits to me?”

“...Huh?”

“Let’s discuss this one by one. Princess, you will become the Duke of Taran’s wife. My power isn’t so weak to be easily suppressed by some mere nobles. There is a branch in the government that deals with direct families versus relatives related by marriage, so there is no need for me to stress myself over such things. It would be a different story if they decided to commit treason. Even if that was the case, it’s no hard matter settling such an event. As for dowry... I’ve told you already, but the Taran Dukedom is not poor. There’s no reason for us to cut corners for some dowry. Things like appealing to other nobles, I have no need to stress myself over it. In the Taran family tradition, we don’t believe in such things as divorce. If you wish to separate yourself from the Taran family, you will only be able to do it after death. No, you probably won’t be able to even after your death. Anyway, that is the case. As for my private matters...”

He furrowed his eyebrows like he was suffering a headache.

“I can generally guess with what meaning you’ve proposed such a thing. However, are you telling me after I marry I should continue to play around with this woman and that woman, stamping my reputation to the dirt?”

“...Huh?”

Lucia’s mind blanked out into pure white.

“B... but from what I heard last time...”

“I’m not married at the moment. Nobody cares what an unmarried man does with however many women.” His words were considerably reasonable.

“It was immature to think you’ve got a grasp on someone for such simple reasons.” Although he wasn’t trying to be sarcastic, his words sparked a chord of anger at Lucia’s heart.

“Then, Your Grace, have you made a resolution that you will be faithful to only one woman after your marriage for the rest of your life?”

He could not answer for a moment. Of course that would not be the case. He would not make such a preposterous resolution. Wouldn’t it be fine to play around every now and then? However, he could not understand why he was trying to justify himself at the moment.

“That is not something you should concern yourself with, Princess.”

“Yes, of course not. But still, you don’t deny my words.”

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s the case or not. That’s not something a princess should concern herself with.”

“Of course it’s not. Did I ever complain about it?”

A silence suddenly fell upon the quarreling duo. Lucia took hold of her senses that had flown off very far away, and shut her mouth politely. She had said some pointless things. Lucia, who had been worked up just a while ago, turned sullen. If there was nothing he could gain from this marriage, then there would be no reason to settle this contract.

“Then... How about the problem concerning your child succeeding you? Is there no benefit that I’m unable to get pregnant?” Wasn’t it a grave problem that a woman couldn’t bear children? He fell into confusion at her tone; it seemed like she was asking which dress color looked better at a dress shop.

“It’s true that I wish this child to succeed me. It will become a slight pain if my wife were to bear a son, but... I don’t owe you any explanations regarding this point. Anyway, there is nothing to be gained regarding this problem. Also, is there a way you can prove that you cannot bear a child?”

“...No.”

Even if she were to get a diagnosis from a doctor, they would not be able to give a 100 percent confirmation. If she were to get pregnant, that doctor would have given a false diagnosis and he would need to pay for it with his life.

“If you cannot prove it, then you cannot list it as one of the benefits.”

“Hhaa...”

Lucia let out a heavy sigh. Everything she had prepared had been used up. Then in her dream, for what reason had he married that woman? There must have been a certain condition that they had agreed on. Could it be possible that the rumors of a contract marriage had all been a sham and they had both been madly in love with each other? Lucia, who had fallen into despair, suddenly thought of one thing and lifted her head.

“Then. How about this? I will not fall in love with Your Grace.”

“...What?”

“I will make sure to never love you. I keep my heart to myself.”

He suddenly burst out in roaring laughter. Lucia looked toward him with an empty gaze. It was the first time she had seen him laughing out loud. So he was a human being who could laugh like this as well. She thought how foolish she was to think that he would have never laughed before.

“From all the benefits, I like this one the most.”

How amusing. This woman was truly amusing.

“Fine. Let us consider that your merit. Then, Princess, you’re fine with me playing around with women, and it’s also alright to settle this marriage with a divorce. But Princess, what do you get out of this?”

“I’m fine... with just obtaining the title of the Duke’s wife.”

“I will not allow a life of luxury just because of that. Also, I will not allow you to use the Dukedom’s name in order to settle your petty personal power struggles.”

“I don’t wish for any such things. It’s just... I have already told you I am the 16th princess. His Majesty does not even know of my existence as he lives his life.”

He did not try to comfort her with words like ‘that’s not true’. Instead, a smile spread upon his lips.

“A princess must be prepared to be sold at a moment’s notice for the Kingdom’s sake. When a suitable dowry is offered, the kingdom will not bat an eye to sell me off to any place under the Heavens. It won’t matter how old he is or how many times he had married; it won’t matter how bad his reputation is. Your Grace, at least you are young and unmarried. Before the Kingdom sells me off... I wanted to sell myself. Then at least I would have chosen the position for myself. No matter what happens to me, I won’t feel victimized.”

Her eyes seemed like they were crying so sadly. He was not someone to easily empathize with others. He wouldn’t concern himself over others regardless of their

situation. Her proposal didn't have a plan or foundation of any sort; he didn't have an ounce of trust in it. Even so, this was the first time since he was born that he had felt so amused.

"Then it's time I have to leave. I've been under your care, I apologize for all my rudeness. Please forgive me."

Lucia stood up and bowed her head. Once she lifted her head, her expression looked refreshed. She had done her best to fight against her own fate. Whether everything sailed smoothly was up to the heavens now. She had done all she could.

"I will think about it."

Lucia's eyes opened wide.

"I cannot give you my definite answer yet. As you've put it, Princess, this is a contract that can change a life."

"Ah..."

It was hard to believe. It felt like a dream.

"I only agreed to think about it. I haven't agreed to do it yet."

"Ah... I understand."

"Your expression looked like you were proud to accomplish something great, so I was just confirming your understanding."

Lucia frowned slightly and pouted her lips. Was he teasing her? Anger started rising inside her chest out of nowhere. Other than his outer appearance, there wasn't a single thing about him that she liked.

"Then, first..."

When he stood up and reached his hands toward her, Lucia stood dazed without any reaction. He grasped her chin with his big hand and mashed his lips against hers. Up until that point, Lucia had no idea what was going on. A hot piece of flesh invaded her lips and touched the deeper parts of her mouth. She tightly closed her eyes. Her hands were gripped into a tight fist to the point that they were shaking.

The sudden deep kiss didn't last long. His tongue lightly grazed inside her mouth before he parted from her trembling lips. Upon seeing her flushed red face, he laughed.

"I was just confirming."

"What... for...?"

"At least we should not feel any rejection toward physical contact as a married couple. Thankfully, that's not the case for us."

"Oh... I see..."

"Please wait a moment. I shall prepare a carriage to escort you back to the royal palace gates."

He turned around and left, while Lucia plopped down onto the sofa. She massaged her burning cheeks with her hands. As a married couple, of course there would be times when such moments would be required. The physical contact from a moment ago was something so matter-of-factly. However, Lucia held both her hands into fists and began hitting herself.

"You idiot. You're really a hopeless idiot."

It really was unbelievable, but Lucia had thought nothing further than the word 'marriage'. She really had no further thoughts on the status of a husband and wife. 'Even married, he will have a lover of his own,' she had assumed. She couldn't see it any other way. She didn't think that she would have to sleep on the same bed as him at all.

"...I won't be able to get advice on this from anyone."

She fumbled around thinking of her humiliating immature senselessness.



For a change, a problem had arisen that required some thinking for him.

"Marriage..."

He was currently 23. He was already at his optimal age for marriage. Even so, he didn't

have any thoughts of getting married. Aside from marriage, he already had more than enough problems to settle. He didn't want to waste his time on such an annoying thing like a wife. In the first place, he didn't want to deal with a wedding. He was never in short supply of women.

But if he wanted to let his son succeed him, he had to get married. The only people who could inherit his position were those, who were in his family registry. It didn't matter whether the Duke would be separated by death or divorced, he had to get married to officially adopt his son into the family registry. According to Xenon's law, single men were not allowed to adopt children or officially admit them into the family registry.

The brat was still young. Such a thing like a wedding was not urgent. But someday, he would need to go through it. He would need to find an understanding woman who would agree to let the brat register into the family. With that point in mind, the princess that had come searching for him was quite appealing.

"Freedom in my own private life, you say? That is a nice addition."

He burst out laughing. He had shown the princess a cold reaction, but these factors were all very appealing. He had teased her with a kiss and he laughed once more thinking of her flushed face. She was indeed cute. It was a refreshing change of pace.

However, there were too many doubtful aspects. He had to confirm whether she was truly a princess. He had to figure out who the real mastermind was. What was her goal with this proposal? He had assumed everything she had said today was a lie.

He assumed the worst of situations when he felt any ounce of suspicion. It was his motto in life.

"Your Grace, this is Jerome."

As soon as he replied, 'come in,' his faithful butler walked in.

"I'm at a loss for words, Your Grace. I will make sure an event like today's will never happen again in the future."

"It's not your fault. Even so, you can't hawk over Roy every second of your life."

"I will do so from now on."

Jerome never expected he would cause such a huge accident in the short amount of time he was gone. How could he leave His Grace alone with another person of mysterious background?! Jerome was cautious not to cause any trouble for His Grace, while carefully treading on thin ice in the capital. At the moment, it felt like someone had whacked him in the back of his head very hard; an uncontrollable amount of anger was rising inside his chest. Jerome gritted his teeth while flaring all his anger toward Roy.

“Order Fabian to report to me as soon as he arrives.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Hugo decided he would dig up everything he could about this princess.



Late into the night, Jerome greeted Fabian, who arrived in the Duke’s mansion. Fabian was the Duke of Taran’s personal aide. Fabian tried his best to avoid work outside his regular hours no matter how busy things got. If it wasn’t such an urgent business, he would not have made the trip there this late into the night.

“What happened?”

Fabian patted his brother’s, Jerome’s shoulder, whose face looked as stiff as a rock. They were twins born from the same mother on the same day, but they looked nothing alike, other than their midnight blue eyes. Those who find out were all shocked by the fact.

“It’s not such a serious case, so relax a bit. It’s just that His Grace has been greatly curious on this topic for a while now. Tomorrow is my day off, so I decided to drop by tonight. Is he still awake?”

“He’s not in.”

“What’s this? Did he leave for a night trip? Now that I’m here, everyone’s already gone. Of course that would be the case for me. There’s no helping it. Ah, please don’t tell His Grace that I’ve dropped by. Tomorrow is my day off, so I don’t want him to call me over.”

Fabian was an earnest subordinate, but he was always half a step short due to his laziness. Jerome clicked his tongue, but he didn't rebut him as he had trust in Fabian. If his job was urgent, he would've made sure to finish it as soon as possible. Fabian turned around to leave but suddenly stopped.

"Where did he go?"

Jerome hesitated for a moment.

"Countess Falcon place."

"Falcon... Falcon... Who was... what? He still goes to visit her?"

"Lower your voice. Everyone is sleeping."

"That's not the problem! What are you doing?"

"...What should I be doing? I don't have any qualifications to care who he sleeps with."

"Why shouldn't you care? Three of her husbands died! She's most definitely a cursed woman!"

"...Are you a kid? A curse? Is there such a thing?"

"How are things going with Baron Lawrence's daughter?"

"I've already sent her the roses according to His Grace's wishes."

"Why didn't you tell me anything? If I knew ahead of time..."

"What could you have done? Were you planning to let women into his bedroom? Don't overstep your boundaries, you'll lose your life. Do you know how many necks you have on you?"

"Ah, seriously."

Fabian's whole body shook with frustration as he furiously scratched his head.

"Why do you get so sensitive whenever you hear that woman's name?"

“I already told you. That woman is a witch. There shouldn’t be such an unlucky woman sticking so close to His Grace. He has maintained a relationship with that woman for over a year already. He has never acted this way with any of his other women. There’s no mistake about it. His Grace has already fallen for her!”

“...I guarantee if you say such words in front of His Grace, you will lose your life.”

“I know! That’s why I’ve been quiet all this time!”

The direction of this guy’s loyalty had strayed off to a sour direction, Jerome thought. Although Jerome didn’t loathe the situation as much as Fabian, he didn’t feel very comfortable about that relationship, either. All of her husbands had died a year following their marriage due to unknown causes. They were perfectly healthy yet suddenly an accident would fall upon them. Thus, everyone in high society believed that she was cursed.

Also, the relationship between Countess Falcon and The Duke was different from the others. He would maintain sexual relations with Countess Falcon even while dating other women. He didn’t send her expensive gifts like he usually did. Even so, their ties remained strong. Now, it had been over a year.

Three months ago, he had broken up with Baron Lawrence’s daughter. So now, Countess Falcon was his sole bedside partner. If Fabian knew of this fact, he would be jumping around even more enraged than now, so Jerome kept it to himself.

“I’m going.”

“What are you going to do?”

Jerome took hold of Fabian. He had a bad feeling Fabian wouldn’t be quietly going home.

“I’m going to report my findings to the Duke.”

He wanted to force himself between the two no matter what. He received orders to do a background search on a princess a month ago. He didn’t understand why the Duke required such extensive research on this princess, but in any case, she was a girl. He planned to use his report to resist the witch.

The Duke hadn’t relayed any particular words to him while giving out the job, but he

had asked about the progress two times already. It meant he was very interested in the report.

“You stay here. I’ll be back.”

“...You will go?”

“I will go and tell him that you have something important to report to him. If he is willing to return home, I will bring him here. If he wants to listen to it later, you go home quietly. How does that sound?”

“...Fine. Tell him it’s the report that he has pressed me about many times already.”

“I got it.”

Nine cases out of ten, he would decide to return home. If the Duke decided to listen to the report later, he would put some serious thought into the current situation. But those odds were slim. As Fabian stated, they had maintained a relationship for a long time. Before the Countess, there were no other cases like hers. But just for this small reason, he didn’t believe the Duke loved her in any way.

The Duke was a cold and heartless person. There had to be a reason why the Duke went to find the Countess, but that reason would not be an emotional one. That was why Jerome didn’t worry for the Duke like Fabian did.



On top of a wide bed, a man was slightly sitting up with a big cushion to his back, while he was reading some documents. On top of the man, a nude woman held his wide chest while she moved her hips.

“Ha... eung... ah... How is it?”

She seductively moaned while moving her hips and taking in his hard penis, but the man’s face, who was looking over some documents, remained unchanged.

“Useful.”

“Un... yes. You’re... too much. It took me... two months... to make it...”

Anita scowled at the man's calm assessment, but he had not said it was 'trash', so it could be considered a compliment. Anita's head jerked back as she continued to move her hips up and down. Whenever his hard length dug into her deepest parts, she let out a sharp yelp.

"How... is it?"

"It's useful."

"I'm... talking about that."

He threw the documents to the floor and laughed. He squeezed her buttocks with his huge hands making her insides squeeze his length.

"This is useful too."

"Yes... ah... You're... too stingy with your scores. Don't... think that I never judge you either..."

"How is my score?"

"You're... useful. Too."

"Hmm."

He smirked and took hold of her hips as he got up. The woman laid on the bed while he rode on top of her. He began thrusting his hips into her with great strength. As their flesh smashed together, loud slapping sounds filled the room while the woman screamed.

"Huuk! Aah! Aak!!"

The smooth female body clung onto him. He didn't let the screaming female rest as he continued to thrust nonstop. He didn't stop until the woman said she felt like dying. It was always the female who would raise the white flag to concede her loss.

The smouldering air remained hot around the whole bedroom. Anita giggled, snuggling into his wide chest with a satisfied smile.

She could feel the battle scars under those firm muscles of his. His appearance was

hypnotizing; his experienced kisses and fondling technique made her burn with heat. He could easily last the whole night with his insanely strong endurance. There wasn't a single flaw about him. She had met many men, but he stood out from the rest.

At first, she had been charmed by his background. He was the ruler of the North, the Duke of Taran. When would she ever get the chance to sleep with such a man? She had thought that way at first, but his identity was no longer important now. She was rather very frustrated by his high status in society.

Anita already knew he had ended his relationship with Sofia. When she bumped into Sofia at the Victory Ball, Sofia had glared at her like she was her mortal enemy, and she guessed the situation. Anita felt no enmity toward Sofia. Ironically, she felt pity that Sofia had turned into one of his past females. Anita anticipated that maybe Sofia would be able to gain his heart. Anita's mind was split in two – she wished that he would fall in love with another female, but at the same time, she didn't want it to happen.

The Duke of Taran wasn't a famous playboy among high society. Unexpectedly, people did not know of his harem of females. He almost never maintained a relationship with those holding power. Sofia had been a rare case, where they had met through friends.

Sofia was a well-known woman, but she did not hold much power. The Baron of Lawrence did not have a strong family background, either. In other words, she was someone he could play around with and throw away whenever he wanted. Anita understood he always calculated to this extent.

Those, who had shared a sexual relationship with the Duke, never ended up in a happy marriage. Anita could understand the reason now. He was very good at sex. He could send a woman to heaven many times over on the same night. After having a taste of it once, no other man would be able to satisfy them.

Most would approach him being charmed by his power and high status, but as time passed, they would all fall for the man as a whole. Thus, women would continue to cling and obsess over him. In the end though, they would all be trashed.

He was like an icy cold fire. He may give a woman his body, but he would not give her even a little shard of his heart. When had it started? In the beginning, Anita had intended to enjoy the bodily pleasures, by the time she realized, she had already given him her heart. But as soon as she revealed her heart, he would throw her away like all

the other women before her.

Therefore, Anita never revealed her own heart. She behaved like she needed him for material needs; it would remain as a give and take relationship. She never asked when she could see him again. She never contacted him first. That was how she could last over a year.

“You’ll sign a contract with me, right?”

Anita ran a merchant group. From time to time, he would tip her off and she would have fun investing here and there. Now, her merchant group had grown to a bigger scale and she had drawn up a contract, so he could become one of the investors. She behaved as if she needed him for her merchant group. In reality, she did have thoughts of profiting through him.

“I will review it.”

“What is this? I revealed all the core secrets of my merchant group! Must I offer more good will than this?” Anita slid her hands down his chest and rubbed his hips. She smoothly moved her hands toward his center and took hold of it.

“Aren’t I the one showing good will?”

“Oh my. How could you be so confident?”

Due to Anita stimulating him, his manhood began to stiffen once more. She brought herself to his chest and sucked his nipples. She licked around the nipples as she massaged his hard length.

“Can you insert it back there?”

When he raised his body, Anita hurriedly raised her butt. His hand pressed against her back as he drove deeply into her.

“Haa... Ung...”

He entered and pulled out vigorously, while she licked her own lips imagining what was to come. Right then, someone knocked on the bedroom door.

“Madam, I have an urgent message for you.”

The voice from behind the door trembled. Anita gritted her teeth. Who dared to interrupt her precious time together with him? She had to whip her and chase her out first thing in the morning.

“I’ve informed you not to interrupt our time! Be gone!”

“The guest is looking for His Grace. He has requested an audience for some urgent business.”

A guest of the Duke? Anita looked at him with shocked eyes. She hoped he would reject this person, but after a brief moment of thought, he slid out of her. Anita yelped shortly from the momentary stimulation.

“Enter.”

Anita hid her disappointment and looked outside.

“Show him in.”

A moment later, a man opened the door and entered. The woman was dressed in a see-through gown, her chest in plain view as she lay in bed. Behind her, the Duke sat with his chest exposed. Jerome observed all this with a bored expression without blinking an eye, then bowed his head.

“Your Grace, I apologize for interrupting your time off.”

“What is it?”

“Fabian is waiting for you in the mansion with the report that Your Grace has requested. I am here to ask Your Grace’s opinion on the job you have inquired after many times before.”

“I understand. I’ll leave, so wait for me.”

Jerome left and Hugo got up from bed, while Anita’s face paled.

“You’re... leaving?”

“Where are my clothes?”

Her heart felt like it was being torn. She wanted to hold him back. She wanted to ask him to stay. Would the sky fall if he listened to the report tomorrow? He did not hesitate to return to work one bit. But she could not hold him back. If she clung onto him, he would push her away. Then, he would never come here again. He had frequented her home many times and her heart had unknowingly grown confident.

She wanted this man. She wanted this man so bad. Although it was her own wishful thinking, it felt like all her blood was drying up inside her.

“Are you still leaving when our bodies are aroused to this state?”

She smothered her large breasts onto him. His eyes did not shake upon her coquettishly seductive technique. He wore a light smile and lightly kissed her lips.

“Order them to bring me my clothes.”

Anita pouted her red lips. Still, she ordered her maids to bring his clothes, that had been neatly stored away. Anita personally assisted him while he dressed. She purposely touched him in certain places while fondling others.

“That’s enough.”

Upon his words, Anita recoiled in fright. He was looking down at her with such icy cold eyes. Usually, when Anita seduced other men that way, they would hastily undress and throw themselves on her. How could he cool down his body so fast? It seemed like his passion from before was a lie. Anita bit her lips with a bitter heart. She didn’t want the man to leave her life forever.

“You’re all done.”

Anita took two steps back and appreciated his appearance with a happy heart. His tall stature and proportionate body were accentuated by his clothes. Anita loved his body equally to his face. Just watching him made her feel delighted.

“I won’t be home for the next 10 days.”

Anita said with a conceited tone. If one were to try and tie such a man down, he would escape faster. Sometimes, one had to put some distance like this. Her response was a petty revenge for the man who left her with a cold shoulder. But she quickly regretted her petty behavior. He laughed quietly like he could see right through her.

Anita followed him out to her bedroom door. She never followed him out of her estate. When he came to visit her, she never met him by the door. It might have just been an action to protect her own pride.

After a while of standing in the darkness, Anita slowly made her way out to her balcony. His carriage was already a distance away. Even after the carriage had long disappeared, she stood motionlessly gazing in the distance.

Chapter 5

Shall we marry? (3)

“That’s it?”

Hugo asked as he flipped through Fabian’s report, that consisted of only a few pages. It had been a month since the Duke had ordered him to investigate the princess. No other investigation had taken that long. He had come all this way in the dead of night; for all the effort he had gone through, he was very disappointed.

“There was barely anything to be investigated, so I was exercising my precaution. I’m sorry for not meeting your expectations.”

It was the first time Fabian had felt the limit of his own skills. It wasn’t the first time he did a background check on someone, but this time around, no matter how much he dug around, it was all for naught. She had been hidden away deep inside the royal palace, so it wasn’t easy to interact with her in the first place. Nobody knew about any Princess Vivian, so there wasn’t a starting point for his investigation.

Hugo no longer reprimanded Fabian. He understood Fabian’s skills well. He wasn’t a subordinate who would do a mediocre job, then make up excuses to hide his shortcomings.

The princess had grown up as a commoner until she was 12. Afterwards, she had entered the royal palace. On the surface, she had never left the royal palace since, neither had she made a debut among those of high society. However, once a week she would pretend to be a palace maid and leave for an errand. That was the information Fabian had collected this whole time.

‘Since she’s never made a formal debut in high society, how was she able to act so naturally during the Victory Ball?’

She had not made a name for herself in the Victory Ball, but it wasn’t a place any normal person could easily take on. She didn’t stand out in the party; at the same time, she did not make any mistakes or cause trouble for herself either.

“She wrote a permission slip of leave for herself and left just like that? Since when had it been that easy to escape the royal palace’s security?”

“The palace gate guards know her as a maid. There are too many royal children in the palace, so the amount of maids that enter and leave are too many to keep track of. They simply check whether they are taking anything out of the palace and that’s about it.”

He had wondered what she was doing each week, but she always went to the same place. She was going to a famous female novelist’s house every week. The female novelist lived a hermit’s life as well, and knew only one other person – the house maid.

“And I assume she has gotten the brat’s information from her?”

The existence of his son, Demian, was not a top secret, but it was not something a mere princess could come to know on a whim. Hugo had been suspicious over how the princess had come to know of it, thus he’d ordered the investigation.

“She is a famous author. It’s known through her novels that she understands high society very well. It seems she has some kind of connections with an informant, who delivers all the latest rumors of high society. I have not been able to confirm the identity of this person, but if you wish, I shall continue my investigations.”

“That’s fine. It’s not important. In the end, what I wanted to confirm was whether she’s really a princess or not.”

Most of the report was made by speculations. She was a princess with nothing to her name, but at the same time, everything about her was unclear. He skimmed through the pitiful report once more.

“Why are there no maids residing with her?”

“There had been many palace maids that had worked by her side... But most of them left or were reassigned after a few days for an unknown reason.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anyone pulling any strings behind the scenes?”

“There’s no mistake. I’ve investigated high and low, but she has no connections with any factions within the royal palace.”

There was no way to get a more thorough report than this. Hugo was lost in thoughts

for a moment. It didn't take him too long to make his decision. He had gone about this like any of his other responsibilities, in a quick and orderly manner.

"Since she leaves the palace the same time every week, she will probably leave tomorrow. Bring her here."

"Huh...? Tomorrow...?"

It was his day off tomorrow.

"Is there a problem?"

"...No. Your Grace."

His stubbornness had resulted in karma taking away his day off. Fabian gritted his teeth, absolutely certain that this was also a part of that witch's curse.



"How did that thing go?"

Norman quietly inquired while peeking at Lucia.

"What thing?"

"The thing about the two paths you asked about last week. Wasn't it about you? I don't know the details very well, but is it something that's difficult to talk to me about?"

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

"It's fine. Everyone has a secret or two. There are times when you must keep a secret from your loved ones and family. It just seemed like you were struggling with something... I just wanted to know if you were okay."

Norman's job was to understand other people's emotions and thoughts. She could see into others easily with great accuracy. Although Ms. Phil always had a sour expression, Norman had no trouble understanding her; whereas Lucia, no matter how many times she met Ms. Phil, she couldn't see anything past that sour expression.

"Your words from last time helped me a lot. I decided to take the gamble. Currently,

I'm waiting for the results."

"I see. If you hear good news, you must tell me."

"Yes, I promise to do so. But Norman, these days, sometimes my heart doesn't feel like my own heart. The person that is related to me... I will tell you the current situation. It's my father."

Including the time she'd met her father at 12, adding to it the event in her dream, she had only met him twice. Her father was but a mystery to her.

"My father neglects me. He doesn't starve me to death, and feeds me well. However, I've only met him once when I was 12 and that was it. All this time I never thought much of it. I thought it wouldn't matter because it's no different than having no father at all."

One year. Only one year was left. After one year, the Emperor would die.

"I've always thought that person had nothing to do with me. But these days I can't help but feel endless loathing for him... Or something similar to that."

She wanted to enter the inner palace where the Emperor resided and say to his face, 'You will die soon.' She kept feeling the atrocious desire to see his face contort.

She was but one of his many children. It was not like she was born out of love. If only he had shown a little bit of care, she would not have been sold off into such a marriage.

"I feel like if that person dies, I will feel very gratified. Even though he is my father... I really shouldn't be thinking this way, right?"

"What are you talking about? You call that kind of person a father?"

Norman gazed at Lucia with calm and sad eyes.

"It's okay to hate him. It's okay to pour a cup of water and curse him away(1). As long as the pain in your heart goes away, that's fine. As long as that feeling doesn't eat away at your heart, it's okay to hate that person."

Lucia's eyes gradually grew red. It was all Norman's fault. She had never known affection in her life. A total stranger like Norman had showed so much affection and

care to Lucia, she couldn't help but compare Norman with her father. Through Norman's care and friendship, the seed of hate for her father had grown. Norman carefully sat next to Lucia and embraced her tight with both arms.

"Lucia. You always act older than you really are. Life is short. Even when you live your life doing what you want, you won't be able to do everything. As long as it's not killing someone, don't hold yourself back, but do everything you want. This is my advice as your senior in life."

Lucia burst out laughing. Technically, Lucia was Norman's senior in life. Lucia opened her arms and hugged Norman. Although Norman was very skinny, her embrace felt cozy and snug. Lucia felt happier in this life than in the life within her dream. Just by getting to know Norman, Lucia believed she had succeeded in her second life.



She was making her way back to the royal palace. A man casually blocked the road in front of her. He was a young man with dark brown hair. Bowing his head towards Lucia, he handed her a white envelope.

She hesitated for a moment before she received it. Inside, the envelope was empty. But on the front side, there was a black lion emblem.

At this point, he would have finished his investigation of her. It wasn't surprising they figured out her regular schedule of leaving the palace.

"I've come to escort you."

She could recognize who this person was due to his cold midnight blue eyes from her dream.

'Fabian.'

He was the Duke of Taran's personal aide. There were only a few powerful nobles sitting together at the center of power within the Dukedom of Taran. The Duke limited the power of everyone around him and disallowed any room for concession. Roy Krotin was among the top well-known nobles of the Taran Dukedom, and just below him was Fabian.

He managed all of the Duke's daily tasks; he was the highest ranked secretary and aide. There was a widespread rumor that Fabian held the responsibilities for accepting or rejecting social party invitations. Therefore, no matter how high and mighty a noble might be, they would bow down and prostrate themselves in front of Fabian.

"Right... now?"

"Our Lord has requested a more in-depth discussion than last time's. You may reject this invitation, I will return alone."

Lucia looked over to the two people waiting for her by a carriage. The carriage didn't have a single window nor the duke's emblem. If Lucia were to get onto this carriage and disappear, nobody would be able to find out that she had been done in by the Duke of Taran.

'How thorough. I'm a little scared.'

Lucia stepped into the carriage without another word. The carriage took off and a short while later, it stopped. Someone opened the door from outside. Lucia recognized that it was the Duke of Taran's mansion. She had been there only once, but she could recognize some familiar landmarks.

"Please come this way."

A different man with the exact same midnight blue eyes as Fabian escorted Lucia into the mansion.

While Lucia waited in the receiving room, Fabian went to knock on his Lord's door.

"We've escorted her here."

"Is she alone?"

"Yes."

"Did she follow peacefully?"

"Yes."

Hugo chuckled. She was a humorous lady. She looked like an uncommon person from

the moment she welcomed herself to the Duke's home on her own; today as well, nobody would know the fact that she had been escorted to the Duke's home. She seemed to have no fear as to what could happen to her.

Hugo was supporting his chin with one hand while drumming his desk with the other. The marriage with her had perked his interest, but he was not desperate to get married at the moment. Although he had ordered a thorough investigation, there remained many mysteries about that woman. She didn't seem too suspicious, but that didn't mean he could easily overlook this fact. At the same time, it wasn't much of a problem. He never put his trust in anyone in the first place.

It didn't change the fact that he had to get married. Whether he got married now or later didn't change anything. It wouldn't matter who that person was. Therefore, Hugo tossed a coin. If she rode the carriage and arrived at his home, it would be heads. If she rejected, that would mean tails. He preferred heads. He had decided on his life changing decision that way.

Currently, Lucia was enjoying the crackers and tea that were served by the man who had escorted her here. The tea was very fragrant and the crackers were seriously delicious. Lucia thought she would be able to live a happy life if she had just these two things.

"You are a very good cook. These are the most delicious things I've tasted in my life."

Following Lucia's compliment, the man momentarily paused before answering.

"I'm glad they suit your taste."

She had already finished half of the crackers he'd served very happily; Jerome looked at Lucia thinking she was a unique young miss.

He had served many guests before, but it was the first time he met someone as relaxed as her. Generally, they would be too nervous to touch the food and barely sipped the tea. If he knew she was a princess, he would have been even more surprised.

While Lucia was happily stuffing her mouth with crackers, the receiving room's door suddenly opened. She quickly stood up when she noticed it was the Duke of Taran. He greeted Lucia with his usual frosty expression and took a seat directly in front of her. He waved his hand and Jerome nodded, seeing himself out of the room. Now, only two people remained in this wide receiving room.

“Please have a seat.”

Lucia plopped herself down in shock. Her mouth was stuffed to the brim with crackers at the moment. She had no way of spitting them out, so she started chewing them as fast as she could. She had swallowed too quickly and felt herself choke, so she started chugging down her tea. He waited quietly without a word, but that made her even more embarrassed, causing her face to flush.

When she finished ingesting the crackers, he placed a huge envelope onto the table and pushed it to her side. He nodded his head, signaling her to look inside. She did so and took out some documents. She pushed down her embarrassed feelings and calmly read over the documents.

‘She should be 18 now.’

Her physical appearance fit her age, but at times she seemed much more mature than her age. It was true that those from the royal family and high society matured quickly, but there was something different about her.

Hugo began truly inspecting the young miss for the first time. Before, he had simply confirmed her physical traits like her hair color and general face structure. This time, he took his time inspecting her as a woman.

She wasn’t ugly, but she wasn’t an impeccable beauty either. The only thing that stood out was her eye color. At first glance, it seems golden, but it looked more like an orange pumpkin colored jewel.

But that was it. Her looks or body did not entice him at all. It was probably for this reason that he agreed to take her as his wife.

Inside the envelope were two documents. A parental custody waiver and a family registry agreement. Those were the two most precious documents for a female. Usually women had no knowledge of the law, but they were educated on those two things to the last dot. Including divorce papers, they were never to sign those things so easily. Those documents symbolized all the power a woman held.

“As per Princess’ request, these are the two documents that you must sign.”

“...This is it? How about the other things we’ve talked about last time...?”

“Other than these two, there is nothing else we can officially document.”

“Really? Do you not need freedom in your personal life? Will it be okay to cling onto you and love you?”

She had her eyes opened wide while asking these questions like an ignorant child, and he instantly felt a grand amount of stress build up inside his chest. He abhorred nonsense conversations or lame jokes. He hated it when people tested out the waters uselessly. He had no thoughts to leave any loopholes in this contract.

“Then I shall add those two as well as a verbal contract.”

Unexpectedly, she wasn't shocked by his words at all. She nodded while in serious thought and held a pen to sign the documents, inversely shocking him.

“Hold on. What are you doing right now?”

“You told me to sign it...”

“I've told you my conditions of the contract, so you must have your conditions as well, don't you?”

“It's okay to add my own conditions as well?”

“Of course. A contract only beneficial to one side cannot be established in the first place.”

He wanted a contract, not to swindle someone. Lucia fell in deep thought. She'd never thought of this at all. Her only goal was to marry him. Since he offered, she didn't want to reject. It would be too wasteful.

“Do you need time? Just for your information, if this contract isn't completed today, everything will be canceled.”

“Why?”

“Whether this will be a profiting contract is not for certain and there are too many variables.”

He had to reorganize everything to meet the princess again and reschedule everything

in his life around her; it was just too troublesome. This marriage agreement was on a whim. One never knew how his feelings might change tomorrow.

“Is it okay if I ask you one thing? Why do you hate a woman’s love?”

He gazed at her without word and Lucia wondered if she’d stepped on a painful memory, while returning a meek gaze.

“Did I... ask something you didn’t want to talk about?”

“It’s the first time a woman has asked me such a question and I just found it interesting. I don’t hate it. Usually, women hope for their love to be returned. I am unable to do so, thus I told them not to love me.”

What painful memory? He was just egotistical to the bones. If the women didn’t expect their love to be returned, then that meant it would be okay to love him one-sidedly. He should try and suffer a love that would make him cry out in blood.

To her regret, she did not have such skills. It seemed impossible to change his way of thinking. He was a man who had the whole world in his hands.

“I thought of something.”

“There’s a blank document you may use to write the conditions for this marriage.”

“That’s fine. I don’t need documentation. All I need is your promise with the Duke’s honor on the line.

He feigned a laugh.

“The Duke’s honor, you say? That’s a level higher than something like documentation. So what are your conditions?”

“There are only two conditions. First, please promise me you will not abuse me physically or mentally. I am not saying this to insult Your Grace at all, please don’t misunderstand.”

Because of the memories inside her dream, Lucia wanted a safety wall to protect herself.

His facial expression as he had been looking at Lucia all this time, turned a great degree uglier. Did she believe that he was a man who would physically hurt and insult his own woman? It felt a bit unpleasant, but she stated she wasn't trying to insult him, so he decided to believe her. It was a simple condition of the contract after all.

“How about the second?”

“Secondly... I will do my best. However, sometimes humans are unable to control their hearts. Maybe it is easy for Your Grace. If you believe that I am unable to control my heart, please give me a rose.”

What in the world... It was impossible to know what this woman was thinking. Hugo thought once more that he really wanted to pry open her mind to see what was inside. He could understand that she had never formed a contract with another party before.

This was clearly a contract intended to benefit both parties. Up until now, he had only agreed to contracts that were beneficial to himself. It had always been that way. He had the upper hand in this contract. But it was not because of his negotiating skills, but because the person in front of him was too immature to notice this.

It would be her own fault if she signed a contract that would be beneficial unilaterally. He had no reason to become her adviser nor a morally righteous person. It was not anyone's obligation to be morally right. He had thought so his whole life.

But he had at least a little bit of conscience while dealing with her. He decided to advise her on this unilaterally beneficial contract.

“Why don't you decide on some more realistic conditions? Princess, you're not aware of the price of these documents.”

Usually, when a man asked his wife to sign a parental custody waiver and a family registry agreement, a grand amount of money would need to change hands.

“I am aware. These two documents are expected to be priced very high.”

“...That is so.”

“I will be the Duke's wife, so all my life necessities will be taken care of. Other than life necessities, I have no need for other things.”

For the words ‘life necessities’ to come out of a princess’s mouth was refreshing but shocking.

“The first condition... fine. But what is the purpose of the second condition?”

“To me, there is a purpose. In life, there are many times when things you cannot touch become much more important than any materialistic things. Though that doesn’t mean I dislike materialistic things; I’m not taking money lightly. Money, of course it is important. We all need money. Without money, living becomes very hard. But as long as one has enough money to get by, there is no difference between the people that have a little more and those that have less.”

He feigned a laugh.

“You talk like you’ve already lived a lifetime. Princess, this is my conjecture based on your age and experience, but that’s not possible, so where did you learn this rubbish philosophy?”

Lucia jumped upon hearing, ‘like you’ve already lived a lifetime’.

“It’s fine to call it rubbish philosophy. Anyway, these are my conditions. I believe these are not too difficult.”

Not too difficult? They were ridiculously simple. No matter from which angle, this contract was unilaterally beneficial.

“...Fine. I understand Princess’ conditions and I agree to them.”

Lucia had been nervous and had held her breath. She let out a long sigh of relief. She immediately signed the two documents in front of her and slid them back to him. He looked over them quickly and put them away.

“With this, our engagement has been completed. If you wish an authorized...”

“No. I don’t need them. Um, I got it. I will assume that we are now engaged.”

The word ‘engagement’ seemed too grand. Lucia felt strange.

‘Then... now I am... Duke Hugo Taran’s fiancée.’

It was not like they were married yet, but it was doubtful that he would break the engagement. She had made it through to the end, although the success rate was very low. Her deeply moved emotions showed plainly on her face. Hugo, who had been watching her, wondered, 'Is she the type to obsess over honor?'

(t/n: Hugo had been talking in polite form all this time. Suddenly at this point, he drops any polite forms of speech)

"The sun is down, you should return. You didn't obtain a two day permission slip, did you?"

Was it her own imagination? His speech pattern...

"Slipping out by pretending to be a maid. Don't think of doing something as cute in the future."

...It was not her imagination.

"Why are you suddenly..."

'...Talking down to me?' was too straightforward. Then how about 'talking so rudely'? He seemed to have read her mind before she spoke out, and relaxed his back on the sofa.

"With my woman, I don't speak formally nor with honorifics."

Lucia's face flushed.

"...When did I ever become Your Grace's... woman?"

"Ever since you were promoted as my fiancée."

"But we haven't married yet! Before marriage, anything could happen!"

"Don't you understand the definition of an engagement? In the Taran family's tradition there is no such thing as a divorce. Of course, that means there is no such thing as a broken engagement, either."

If his retainers were around to hear this conversation, they would have wondered whether there was such a tradition.

“E... even so. How come you can’t speak to your fiancée with honorifics? Why not? Is that your Taran family’s tradition as well?”

“I will not.”

“...”

There was no way for her to understand that man. At first, she thought he was a scary man. She thought he was a playboy who liked playing around with women’s hearts. Then, she believed he was a man with basic manners. She wondered whether he could be a more honorable man than her first impression. After meeting him today, she saw that he was very logical and didn’t let his emotions run over his decisions. But now, she had... no idea.

“I’ve said you’re not allowed to leave the royal palace with a maid’s permission slip. Why aren’t you listening?”

“...What if I still leave? What will you do?”

“If you’re curious why don’t you try?”

“...”

Yes. There was nothing more accurate than a first impression. Threatening other people was his life motto. She wondered why she had believed in this man to marry him. The amazement from before had turned into unease. Whether she had hit the jackpot or hit a landmine, her gamble results were still a mystery.

“...This is so sudden... Can’t I meet just one person one last time?”

Rather than ignoring his request, she asked for his permission. She had decided it was the best way to go about this.

“What is your plan after meeting her? That female author doesn’t know that my dear is a princess.”

Lucia was shocked twice in a row. First, because he knew of Norman. Second, because he had called her ‘dear’ so naturally.

“Still... I want to say my last goodbye.”

“I’m not asking you to leave her forever. Our engagement has yet to be announced. Before everything is official, I don’t want to deal with any unnecessary rumors floating around.”

“Then is it okay to go meet her after our wedding?”

Lucia looked up at him with sparkling eyes, causing him to flinch.

“...Yes. It’s fine later on. But don’t spill a word about today’s contract, ever!”

“Of course, I never had such intentions. Your Grace, you are much more understanding than I originally thought.”

“...Last time you thought of me as a promiscuous man and this time it’s understanding? How pitiful of a human being am I inside that head of yours?”

“...Sorry. That wasn’t my intention.”

Hugo watched Lucia, who had been hesitating all this time, with eyes of wonder. After spending time with her, he understood why he had felt incompatible with others before. In general, people feared and shrank away from him. Whether they were female or not didn’t matter. The women he dated would act coquettishly on the outside, but they remained distant in their hearts. This girl however, conversed with him with much ease.

However, nothing was definite yet. Maybe it was because she was unfamiliar with him. He thought she’d never heard of his rumors before. If she’d heard even a little fraction of his rumors, the way she looked at him would change. People considered him a monster. But most of all, he had no thoughts of refuting those rumors.



Five days after her return to the Royal Palace, Lucia found out an amazing fact.

‘He hasn’t stated whether the wedding would be six months or a whole year later. Until I get married, I won’t be able to go visit nor talk to Norman... She will be so worried about me.’

After a lot of contemplation, she decided to write a letter.

'I'll ask him to deliver the letter for me. He could read it over before delivering it. He would probably agree with these conditions.'

– Norman. I'm sorry to send you my message of goodbye through a letter like this. Please don't worry about me. I'm living a very healthy and good life. However, due to some important issues in my life, I won't be able to contact you. Please don't try to find me, and wait for me. We will be able to meet again one day for sure. I promise it won't be for too long. We've shared a friendship that will last our whole lifetime together.

I worry when you stay up too late writing your novels. It's not good for your health for your days and nights to be inversed. Please be wary of your health.

With eternal friendship.

Even if someone other than Norman happened to read this, they wouldn't be able to obtain any new or important information. Norman could recognize Lucia's handwriting, so she would feel relieved after receiving this letter.

After she finished writing, she looked out her window to the blue sky; there wasn't a single cloud in sight.

"It seems like a good day for laundry."



Lucia was drenched in sweat from working all morning. She removed all the beddings and curtains from her palace for cleaning. She carried large wooden basins and filled them with soapy water at the front of her detached palace. She placed all the blankets and curtains in various basins, stepping on them to rinse out all the impurities. She busied herself all morning with manual labor and she was feeling quite refreshed. Lucia was stomping on the laundry while humming a tune through her nose.

"Are you a child working here?"

Lucia lifted her head upon a strange woman's voice. She looked like a palace maid judging by her uniform. Labor maids and palace maids wore different colored uniforms, though their overall design was the same.

'What is a palace maid doing here?'

Lucia stared at the palace maid with shocked eyes, not knowing what to do, while the palace maid spoke with a cold interrogating tone.

“Why aren’t you answering? It seems you are a child that works here, but this is the first time I’ve seen you. Is the Princess inside?”

‘She’s looking for me...? Why? Actually, what am I supposed to say in this situation?’

Almost nobody knew of Princess Vivian’s real face. In her current state, the palace maid would never believe that Lucia was the princess.

“Alright. Hurry up and answer. Are you unable to speak? We have an honored guest here who wishes to meet with the princess.”

‘Honored guest? A guest for me?’

It was the first time a guest had come to visit the detached palace.

“I never knew that laundry was one of the requirements for a refined lady.”

It was a familiar low-pitched tone from somewhere. There was no way it could be that person, so Lucia froze in place. She craned her neck up with much struggle. It felt like all her bones had suddenly rusted in place. A person who shouldn’t have been here, was standing right there. Raven black hair and scarlet red eyes. He wore a black coat over a blue shirt that complimented his black hair. He gazed at her without much of an expression.

Lucia’s soul had left her body at the moment.

“How terrible that a servant is unable to recognize a princess. It’s because you have such a strange hobby, Princess.”

When the truth dawned on all the palace maids present, their faces turned into a black ashen tone. Lucia saw and was sure she looked just like them at the moment.

“H... hello... What are you... doing here...?”

“First, let’s talk after you get out of there.”

Lucia was shocked senseless. In the process of trying to rush out, she slipped and

flopped onto the floor. She didn't fall in an unsightly matter nor did it hurt, but she was seriously embarrassed.

Her face felt hot; she looked up with a wary heart. He was staring down at her with his arms crossed. He remained emotionless as usual, but she couldn't help thinking how pathetic she seemed to him.

As he drew closer, Lucia froze from his sudden presence. He stood next to the wooden basin and offered a helping hand. She stared at his hand with a confused expression and looked up at his face. She had to crane her neck very far to see his face. He was already tall to begin with; at the moment, he felt like a giant. He was very tall with a large frame, but it didn't affect his quick reflexes.

He wondered why she wasn't accepting his hand and wrinkled his brows with a scolding expression. Lucia grabbed his hand quickly in the spur of the moment. His hand was huge. Her hand looked like a child's inside his palm. He easily hoisted her up with one sweeping pull.

Lucia escaped the wooden basin, but now she was barefoot. All this time, his gaze was stuck to her feet. Lucia followed his gaze down to her own feet, her ears going red with embarrassment.

"Aah!"

When her body rose in the air, Lucia screamed in shock.

"You'll get soapy water onto your clothes!"

She yelled in fear that his expensive clothes would be dirtied, but he acted like he hadn't heard her at all as he headed inside her palace. Lucia didn't struggle in his hold and meekly left her body in his care. Hugo glanced down at her, who looked like she wanted to cry, and a slight smile spread upon his lips. But it disappeared the same moment.

Chapter 6

Shall we marry? (4)

Lucia let Hugo wait in the receiving room, while she returned to her bedroom to change.

“Princess, where are your maids?”

“Um... You see...”

When she mumbled out the reasons to the maids following behind her, their faces paled into a blue hue. The top palace maids were usually the ones responsible for assigning palace duties among themselves. Thus, they would be the first ones to be punished following today’s events.

While she was changing, the maids put in all their efforts to care for her. They were doing anything possible in order to lighten their punishment.

Lucia feigned ignorance. They were the ones who chose not to carry out their duties. She didn’t have any intention to call them out for this, but she didn’t intend to protest if they were to be punished.

The palace maids who were here today were not here because they were worried about her. They were here because they feared the honored guest who was visiting. In other words, they were afraid of the princess who had the backing of a powerful Duke.

In the receiving room, Lucia looked at the tea served by the palace maids with amazed eyes. They actually had such skills. There was no tea in this palace, but they managed to get a hold of some and prepare it so fast. How long had it been since she’d drunk tea served by the palace maids?

He looked to the corners of the receiving room; two palace maids were standing in each corner. They were ready to carry out any orders and they were here so that an unmarried princess would not be alone in a room with another man.

“Have you been well? From your strength before, you seemed to be well.”

Lucia's face flushed red upon the Duke's greeting.

"Yes, Your Grace. Have you been well? I was shocked from your sudden visit."

"I've just followed your example."

He was currently pointing out her previous action of suddenly visiting the Duke's mansion. She was the one in the wrong, so she couldn't say anything. This guy really held his grudges.

'So when there are other people around... he will speak formally to me.'

It was not a surprising action, but it felt like he was being very kind toward her. It seemed his sudden change of tone shocked her quite a bit.

"I have some important things to discuss with you, so it would be better if you could replace those maids with your most trusted servants instead."

"Huh? Ah... I don't have any maids with me at the moment..."

"Did they leave for a task? There isn't a single one?"

To be precise, she didn't have any maids at all. However, Lucia just nodded her head. He thought silently for a moment, then stood up.

"Would you be alright with going for a light walk?"

Lucia glanced at the two maids on standby and stood up as well. The only place they could walk around was the tiny garden by the palace, but if they distanced themselves a bit, they would be able to talk without being overheard.

"Why are you personally overseeing your maids' duties? Have you mistaken yourself as a maid? You even leave the palace with a maid's permission slip."

As soon as they were alone, he dropped all formalities. It seemed it was his own style to talk casually when they were alone. It was shocking last time, but listening to him talk that way a second time, it felt like they had grown a bit closer and it didn't feel so bad.

"...There's no one else around to do it."

“What are the maids doing then?”

“Um... That is... Truthfully... I live here alone.”

“...You don't have maids?”

“I don't.”

“In this detached palace, you live alone?”

“Yes.”

“How about your meals and cleaning? Do you take care of those yourself?”

“...Yes. It's not too tiring. I'm not looking after others, I only need to take care of myself after all...”

“Do you think that makes sense?”

He had been suppressing his voice all this time. He suddenly burst out in roaring laughter.

“Since when?”

“...It has been several years now.”

“Unbelievable.”

So that was what it meant when Fabian reported that she had no other maids residing in the palace with her. He had assumed she had a unique personality that caused people to run away.

Although she was low in rank, she was still royalty. It didn't make sense that a person of royal descent wouldn't have a single servant. That was a major mistake on the administrators' side. It was mind-boggling that they would handle the administration of palace workers so poorly. If the subordinates working under him carried out their duties in such a manner, they would be killed by him on the spot without another word.

“What important things did you want to discuss with me?”

“His majesty has given his permission for our marriage. When the exact date of the wedding is decided, I will let you know ahead of time. You won’t have to wait longer than a month.”

He felt fatigued after a long morning struggling with the Emperor to get the upper hand. The Emperor had never bothered himself with the princess before, but during the exchange he had spoken of her like the most precious daughter of his royal palace. The Emperor’s mind was full of greedy intentions as the intense war of nerves had kept going for a while. In the end, they had compromised on terms they both agreed with.

She had said the Emperor would not remember her existence. During their discussion, it was clear as day that the Emperor didn’t know who she was. His lies were too obvious. Hugo had referred to her as ‘the 16th princess’ from beginning to end, being careful not to reveal her name. The Emperor as a result, referred to his daughter as ‘the 16th princess’ until the end, without being able to bring up her name once throughout the whole proceedings.

Right about now, the Emperor would be busy trying to find out the identity of the ‘16th princess.’ Though in reality, it would be the servants under him that would be running around the palace like their feet were on fire.

Hugo didn’t understand why, but he felt great irritation toward the Emperor. He never liked him to begin with, but held no grudges against him either. Even though he was a father, how negligent could he have been that a lone girl had to walk into a man’s house for his hand in marriage like that. Inside her own palace, she had to do her own laundry and clean with her own two hands. She was clearly being discriminated against even with her royal identity.

He empathized with her distress a little, while agreeing with Kwiz’ malicious criticism of the Emperor; the Emperor only knew how to piss his seeds in the palace.

“...You’re incredibly... fast with taking care of business.”

Lucia had to take some time to understand his words. She had thought it would take at least half a year to finalize everything. This speed was astonishing.

“I will look into what happened with the maids.”

“You don’t need to. Even if you don’t act, someone will be punished eventually. If Your

Grace personally gets involved, everyone will end up with a harsher punishment. I don't wish for such an end."

"The people who didn't properly carry out their duties should be rightfully punished. You're being uselessly tolerant."

"You might think so, but I liked living alone in this palace. I had complete control of my freedom. In the end, you've also benefited as a result."

"...How so?"

"This marriage. Aren't you satisfied with our deal? I believe it's the reason you were able to close the deal so fast. If I remained quietly in the palace, I would have never been able to offer this marriage, either."

She had a strong spirit. Where could such strong willpower come from such a small body? She seemed like a good candidate to become the lady of the house. Hugo dazedly started picturing her future as Taran Dukedom's lady of the house.

"As soon as our marriage becomes official, I plan to return to the North. We will remain there for a while."

The Duke of Taran's territory was located in the North. It was a wide, barren land with unending wars.

"I don't plan to hold a wedding ceremony. What are your thoughts on this?"

Without the ceremony, all they would need to do was get a couple of people to witness the two sign their names onto a marriage certificate. She didn't want to walk down the church aisle holding her father's hand. The only person who would want to congratulate Lucia for her wedding would be Norman, but because of her commoner status, she wouldn't be able to attend. Lucia didn't care how their marriage would be settled.

"Yes, that's fine."

Any other woman would have been jumping with anger if their wedding was composed of signing documents. A marriage was something women dreamed of their entire lives. However, this wasn't a common marriage, as one party was shamelessly leading it, while the other party agreed like it was some trivial matter.

“Your Grace, I have one request. It’s about Norman... the female author you’re familiar with. I’ve written a simple letter to her. Would it be alright if your people delivered it for me? There isn’t any significant information in it. It’s alright if you read the contents as well. If we are going to the north, it will be some time before I’m able to contact her again. I don’t want her to worry about me.”

“That’s fine. Hand me your letter, I will deliver it for you.”

It became strangely quiet and Hugo looked away while his eyebrows twitched. Lucia had been staring at him with eyes that were flowing with overwhelming gratitude as she held her two hands together. Those were the same eyes he would get from females after he gifted them expensive jeweled necklaces. In fact, Lucia’s eyes were sparkling with even more blinding joy.

“Thank you, Your Grace. Your Grace is much more considerate than I thought- I mean you are a gracious person as I originally thought.”

This female didn’t fear him, but she had thought of him as a shameless villain. It seemed very simple to change her prejudiced view of him as a villain to that of a good human being.

He was confused whether it was something to celebrate or not. Anyway, he felt very strange at the moment. However, it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.

‘It seems I won’t have to spend too much money.’

He lightly cleared his throat and spoke.

“You will need to move out of here. This place is too isolated and with poor security. The news that I’ve come by will travel quickly. Those who are interested in me won’t leave you alone. Many guests will come to find you.”

“...I see.”

“Don’t stray off on your own, be good and stay home. Don’t agree to meet everyone who wants to see you.”

How was it possible for a person to speak so unkindly? As if she were a stupid girl, like he was speaking to his subordinate. Earlier, Lucia had seen him in a new gentle light, but now all those feelings were no more. All the charming points he’d managed to

gather, had gone in the negative.

'It's weird... that I don't hate him... '

Was this the charm that had all those women clinging onto him? He was selfish and rude, but he didn't feel disagreeable.

"Yes. Do you have any other commands?"

He paused for a moment and answered, "No," with a smile.

This woman was definitely different somehow. She always spoke her mind about everything, but remained dutiful during the important moments. Yet at the same time, she wasn't servile. He found the shameless and proud bunch unpleasant, but he disdained those who groveled while licking his shoes. It was difficult to find the perfect balance between those two points. She was a satisfactory person for the contract.



The Duke returned to his mansion and made his way to the receiving room. Jerome and Fabian followed him in. Hugo took off his coat, while Jerome took it and left the room. Fabian, who had been keeping quiet all this time, suddenly opened his mouth and a flood of words spilled out.

"Where did you go? I've told you that you shouldn't go off alone in secret. Is it so hard to at least let us know where you are going?"

Fabian was the only person brave enough to nag at Hugo. Even the vassals whose hair turned gray from old age didn't have the bravery to do so. Hugo would often imagine slicing this guy's chest open to see it filled with nothing but guts(1).

"Didn't you say it was your day off today?"

Fabian kept to his scheduled hours like it was the law. After working five days, he would make sure to get a day off. Fabian stated his family was as important as his duties under the Duke. He was the only person who would shamelessly state that to the Duke's face.

Even so, Fabian never hesitated to follow the Duke into months long wars. Fabian wasn't an underhanded or calculating fellow by nature. He never refused important

duties, but still made sure to get all the additional side benefits in the process. In this manner, Fabian and Jerome, although brothers, were complete opposites.

“You didn’t say anything about leaving the house yesterday. If you brought it up, I would have assisted you.”

“I went to the palace.”

Fabian let out a sigh. How could a Duke enter the palace without a single attendant by his side? He wasn’t like this because he was worried dangers would befall the Duke. There probably wasn’t an existence that could get rid of the Duke by physical force under the heavens.

This wasn’t the battlefield. Even without a sword, this place had countless other ways to kill a person. A small pretext to an event could snowball into a huge disaster.

The Taran family was originally neutral to all political factions. But it was different this time. It was the first time in history that the Taran family decided to support a side. It wasn’t publicly announced as of yet, but holding hands with the crown prince was the same thing as stepping into the whirlpool of power struggles between the different factions.

The crown prince had many enemies. Everyone was eyeing them, looking for the smallest fault in order to create havoc. The nobles with strong political power never went around alone. There had to be an eyewitness around, in case something happened.

There were times when the Duke would be too callous. The person who would have to run around tying all the loose ends was Fabian. The Duke didn’t show any care to the circumstances at all. After ordering Fabian to settle the problem, he wouldn’t put his mind on the topic again. There wasn’t anything more annoying than finding the Duke going around by himself.

“...Did you go visit the Crown Prince?”

“Hmm? Ah... I should have done so since it was on the way.”

“If you didn’t need to visit the Crown Prince, what was your reason...?”

“I’m getting married. I just got permission from His Majesty.”

“..”

Fabian took deep breaths. He had his mouth shut tight as only rude words would come out at the moment.

“With that princess?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Probably within a month’s time”

One month? Fabian tried his best to suppress his chest heating up with anger.

During war, he was his adjutant. During regular day to day life, he was his aide. He had always known this about the Duke, but the Duke would often throw him into a random situation without a single explanation. In other words, the Duke would make all the decisions, then he would be responsible for making it all happen.

“Don’t let this spread around the Kingdom.”

“...Huh?”

“As soon as we finish the necessary documents, we will be leaving for the North.”

‘And when did you decide this?’ Fabian was despondent over having to organize a moving company to the North. Fortunately, he had one month to take care of everything.

“There’s no reason for people from the Dukedom to come over for the wedding. A simple note of my marriage will be enough.”

He had decided that none of his retainers needed to attend the wedding. Fabian thought of the few people who would be shocked senseless and felt pity for them.

The current Lord and Duke of the Taran family ruled like a dictator. There was nobody else that could act as prideful and self-righteous as Taran’s Duke.

Fabian honored his Lord as the Duke, but as a human being, he wanted nothing to do

with him. The Duke easily stepped over people's lives. One should not even hope for something like consideration or benevolence.

He felt great sympathy for the princess who would become the Duke's wife. If the Duke's wife was hoping for anything out of this marriage, she would live a very sad life.

"Didn't we have an island? With a mine?"

"...Are you talking about the diamond mine at archipelagos islands at Saint?"

"Yes. Prepare that as the dowry."

"...Your Grace, that is too much..."

Fabian couldn't keep quiet as usual. This wasn't just extreme, this was severe. Fabian had been in charge of investigating, so he was aware of every detail of the situation. That was a lowly princess whom the Emperor could not even remember. Her birth mother's identity was ambiguous, and she didn't have a single relative.

"I've already concluded the discussions with the Emperor. We won't hold a separate wedding. We will settle everything with documents."

"..."

He was at a loss for words. This wasn't a simple bill; how could the nation's Duke not hold a wedding ceremony? Although he was not someone of royal birth, she was still a princess. Wouldn't it be the same as mocking the royal family? All the same, he was just as equally speechless regarding the father who exchanged his daughter with a diamond mine so easily.

It wasn't unusual for a marriage to be concluded informally. Sometimes the situation was too urgent, like during warring periods; informal marriages were common. A single thought passed through Fabian's mind.

"Is that why you are returning to our territory right away?"

The Taran territory bordered a very violent group of barbarians. There was never a safe moment. They always had the excuse of urgent business in the Kingdom.

“It’d be good and we might as well.”

“...Is there really something going on in our territory?”

The Duke answered with a light laugh. Fabian understood him well. There wasn’t anything going on in the Taran territory. The reason they were skipping the wedding was because the Duke thought it was too troublesome. A proper wedding took at least half a day. He definitely didn’t want to do something so annoying.

“I will pass over some things for you to take care of. I don’t like annoying things so make sure rumors don’t spread.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Fabian easily submitted to his Lord’s decisions. He knew his place very well. He simply needed to assist in tying the loose ends of the Duke’s decisions. He had no place assisting the Duke in making those decisions. He never crossed the line while working together, thus he was able to continue serving under the Duke for so long.

‘Is it... because of his son...?’

It was the only reason the Duke would think of marriage.

‘What a pitiful princess.’

He drew a mental image of a lonely princess crying every night while trapped inside the mansion of the monster Duke. If Jerome knew that Fabian considered their Lord a monster, he would punish him to death.

It was because Jerome never saw their Lord in action. If he saw the Duke fight for himself... Fabian suddenly shivered as a cold chill ran down his spine. But it was not like Fabian wished for Jerome to ever see that side of their Lord. He hoped Jerome would see the Duke of Taran as nothing but their noble Lord.

How long would the princess be able to endure under that selfish and heartless man? Women were beings who lived for love. That was what Fabian’s wife had taught him all these years. She would become like a flower slowly wilting away as the Duke continued to ignore her.

She would probably become an alcoholic to endure her loneliness. Maybe she would

try to fill the emptiness inside her heart with luxuries. There was only one thing that would be guaranteed. No matter how much the Duke's wife changed or despaired, the Duke would not care one bit.

The day the Duke visited Lucia was the day she was told to move out. She was moved from her detached palace to a beautiful small palace that was within the central palace, where those of high status resided. Although the place was considered small, it was more spacious than the detached palace she had lived in for all those years.

It was a small corner of the central palace known as the Rose Palace. The Emperor had great affection for that place. The palace represented the respect and honor he held for his loved ones. The small palace was surrounded by a huge rose garden. In the late spring, every sort and color of roses could be seen in full bloom. The plentiful roses would spread a gentle fragrance far out into the distance.

Lucia would probably not be able to see that view. It was such a pity, she thought.

Her life in the inner palace was very comfortable. All the palace maids acted as her arms and legs, and she felt like an extremely important person, whose life was drowned by nothing but luxury. Different from his warning, guests did not come and visit her. There was only one person who consistently came to bother her.

"Please tell them I am ill."

Today, the Grand Chamberlain was here. Lucia was sitting at a table on the terrace and drinking tea like always. No matter how one looked at this situation, she was feigning illness at the moment. The Grand Chamberlain was having a hard time.

"Princess, His Majesty is not feeling well and hopes Princess could come visit him."

"What a pity. Please send him my regards. I hope he will regain his health soon. I'm feeling ill as well and am unable to move.

"Princess."

"Please see yourself out. Let's not waste our energy here. You already know I won't go there."

Lucia didn't care that the Grand Chamberlain would be getting an earful from the Emperor. Although it was trivial, it was her own way of exacting revenge.

‘Since you’ve never turned around to see me, I will not look for you, either.’

When the Emperor had sent some people to her, that was what she had decided in her heart.

The Emperor didn’t want to see his daughter. The person he wanted to meet was The Duke of Taran’s fiancée. That position held high prestige. Although she was a mere 16th princess, the Emperor couldn’t forcefully drag her out.

The maids didn’t seem to be aware that she was the Duke of Taran’s fiancée yet. Even so, she was able to treat the Emperor so rudely yet nothing happened to her. The palace maids all struggled to perform their best as to avoid offending her.

It was laughable. Her status had changed overnight. She began to understand why the Duke was so arrogant. If anyone was surrounded by such people all their life, anyone would turn out like the Duke.

Time passed; no one knew this girl would be getting married the next day. Lucia thought he did not wish for senseless rumors, so she didn’t say a word about it to anyone. No matter how much the palace maids sucked up to her, Lucia maintained her distance from them.

It was already late into the night, but she couldn’t fall asleep. She sat by the window and gazed at the moon in the night sky. Her heart was restless.

All this time, he had not come to visit again. From time to time, he would send some people to check if she needed anything. She already had everything she needed in this place, but just one time she requested for something.

‘I don’t want to meet with the Emperor. Please protect me from him.’

She was afraid he would appear as a witness during their informal wedding. She had requested this two days ago and she had yet to receive a response. However, it seemed he had gotten the message and had sent out his people to make it happen.

The moon was very bright today. She felt a bit regretful. One of her wishes in life was to live out a happy life together with her future husband, surrounded by their children.

‘I’m the one who chose this road.’

She was not going to regret anything. No matter what came rushing into her direction, she would not do such a thing as regret. She had already regretted more than enough inside her dream.



“Will you really be this way?”

Kwiz yelled at the top of his lungs. The smooth gentle approach had not worked, so it was time to use anger. If he failed once again, he would try the gentle approach one more time. These days, it was a repeat of this situation.

“Whatever you say is useless, I’m going.”

Hugo calmly drank his tea while Kwiz continued to jump around in his seat.

“Why now? Don’t you know how many people are aiming for my throat...?”

After Hugo informed Kwiz that he was returning to his territory, he had been acting like a begging child. ‘You can’t go like this, you’ll have to kill me before you can go, how can you be this way?’ If anyone heard, they would think he was trying to court a lover.

The Crown Prince’s servants were embarrassed, but like Hugo, they maintained a blank expression.

“The Taran family has owned that territory in the North for tens and hundreds of years already. Just because the Duke takes a leave for a while, the land won’t disappear.”

“A store owner who leaves his shop empty will be in trouble.”

He had left his territory for too long due to the war. If he wanted to rest a bit, Kwiz would hold onto him without letting go. He had promised to help the crown prince, but he had no thoughts of protecting him from each and every political enemy. His base was in the north.

“Then you’ll leave in two days?”

“I’ve told you many times already.”

“Even when I beg you in this state?”

“Please stop with your crying. Just because I’m not here, it doesn’t mean anything will happen to you. Even if I remain here, there’s nothing I can help you with.”

“Why not? Just by standing there, people will feel wary of me!”

“And you like that? They should feel wary of the Crown Prince. Why should they feel wary of me?”

“It’s better that way. Since the war has ended, people will start officially making their move. Do you know how much they are fighting over the spoils of war at this moment?”

“The spoils of war?”

Hugo laughed through his nose.

“Everything is mine.”

“Yes, everything is mine.”

“I’ve told you it’s mine.”

“Everything that belongs to the Duke belongs to me.”

Hugo let out a small sigh. His mind was probably filled with nothing but devilish snakes. But Hugo did not dislike the crown prince’s character. It was better than the ones who were overly cautious.

Among those with power, Kwiz was the first person to treat him the same upfront and behind his back. Up until now, he was the only person with such a personality. Thus, he had decided to hold hands with the Crown Prince.

“I’ll remain there for only two years.”

“Too long! Only one year!”

“Two years. Who knows what will happen after the next Emperor is enthroned. His Majesty’s health doesn’t seem good these days.”

“With all the chronic illnesses, his body’s age should be in the 80s. Just a few days ago,

he had a girl by his bedside. That old geezer. He only has energy for such things.”

The Crown Prince’s lieutenant faked a cough from embarrassment. The Crown Prince glared at the lieutenant for interrupting his chatter.

The Crown Prince always referred to the Emperor as: that old man, old geezer, horrible vice-emperor. No matter how many times they heard this, they could never get used to it. The only person who could listen with a blank expression was the Duke of Taran.

“I’ll take my leave.”

“Why don’t you eat dinner before you go?”

“I’m busy.”

“You never let anyone hold you back.”

“Oh. I’m getting married tomorrow.”

For a moment, silence hung over the room. The Crown Prince and everyone else in the room was frozen solid.

“...What will you do...? Duke, what will you do?”

A diamond on a dunghill was still a diamond. As an Emperor, he was one through and through. The Emperor had promised his wedding date would not be known to anyone. Until the end, not even the Crown Prince had been aware of the marriage. Although the Crown Prince spoke badly of the Emperor, he never took action to go against him. If he acted rashly, he would only suffer a backlash.

“I’ve already discussed it with the Emperor. The wedding will be held informally, so there is no need for you to attend. Oh by the way, the person I’m marrying is a princess.”

“Duke!”

The crown prince shouted, but Hugo just bowed and left the room. Once Hugo left the room, the spoiled brat-like behavior of the crown prince disappeared at once. His expression was as fearsome as a demon(3). He roared at his adjutant.

“What are you doing?! How is the Duke of Taran getting married tomorrow, yet I wasn’t aware until he personally told me?”

“I apologize.”

The adjutant’s face paled.

“Hurry and figure out what the hell is going on!”

“Yes! Your Highness!”

His eyes burned with rage as he fumed, breathing roughly.

“Princess? Bullshit. How many princesses are in this place? If he was interested in princesses, he should have told me sooner. I would’ve gladly given him my sister.”

When Hugo informed him that he would be getting married to a ‘princess,’ he could imagine what had happened.

“...That wretched old geezer.”

Kwiz gritted his teeth. The Emperor seemed aloof from worldly affairs as he kept to himself within the inner palace, but behind closed doors, he controlled everything from the dark shadows. He imagined the Emperor’s smug face, ‘No matter what you do, you’ll remain in the palm of my hands.’

Kwiz loathed the Emperor. He hated him to the core of his bones. Although the Emperor was aware of this fact, he still gave Kwiz the position of Crown Prince while laughing mockingly, as if asking for a fight.

‘Let’s see how long you’ll be able to remain this way.’

Kwiz’ blue eyes burned with rage.

Foot Notes:

(1): Hugo would often imagine slicing this guy's chest open to see it filled with nothing but guts. – In Korean, Guts/Liver/Bravery is spelled the same. In the Korean text, it said his chest was filled with nothing but liver. This is a sarcastic pun implying Fabian is stupidly brave.

(2): “Taran Family” – I don't want to spoil the story. But as we already saw, Hugo pretty much lives alone with servants in his mansion. But still, I add 'family' for the sake of including all the past people before him.

(3) (Kwiz') expression was as fearsome as a demon: The Korean text said 'a female demon.' But, it just doesn't translate too well.

Chapter 7

First Night (1)

There was no wedding procession(1), no guests to congratulate them, nor any blessings. They sat facing each other at a table, where Hugo Taran and Vivan Hesse signed their certificate of marriage.

She signed her full last name, 'Hesse', on the documents while writing down only the initial for her first name, 'Vivian.' That was the norm for marriage certificates. But for this marriage certificate, she signed her full name on top, and used the standard signing method just below.

Vivian. That was her name. She had lived as Vivian while she was with Count Martin for over five years. Following her divorce, she had lived the rest of her life as Lucia. But now, she would need to live the rest of her life as Vivian.

She had never thought that the name Vivian belonged to her. When she had lived by this name, she had felt nothing but agony and suffering. Lucia and Vivian felt like two different human beings. She was distressed whether the name written on the marriage certificate really belonged to her, or not.

She was frustrated that her fake shell as Vivian would be stuck for the rest of her life due to this marriage, but at the same time, she felt a sense of relief. On one hand, she felt a small hope that she would be able to break past her outer shell and escape to the outside world. On the other hand, Lucia could not see the lowest point of the dark hole she was about to fall into. Lucia could not express her feelings with one word.

Two men she had never seen before in her life stood as their witnesses; the process was simple and she was quickly promoted as the official Duke of Taran's wife. That was how their wedding ended.

Lucia didn't have any attachment toward things like weddings, but she was a little sad that the classic kiss upon marriage had been omitted. Following that first kiss, he had never made any sort of physical contact with her. She pretended to look somewhere else as she stole a glance at his lips.

His closed lips lied in a straight line, his stubborn nature seemingly reflected upon them. They weren't too thick; when his lips had pressed against hers, they felt very soft. He had sucked onto Lucia's lips as his tongue had entered her mouth...

"Tomorrow morning we'll leave for the North."

"Yes... Okay!"

When his mouth suddenly opened, Lucia jumped in shock. He watched her with strange eyes, so she quickly distracted herself by looking into another direction. She worried whether her face was flushed red at the moment.

'Aah, I must be crazy. What are you doing? Seriously.'

"If you wish to remain in the capital, that's fine."

Her racing heart suddenly died a little, and a cold wind blew past, howling into the distance. The ink on the marriage contract had yet to dry, but he was already thinking of separating as something trivial.

She realized he didn't see her as a woman. She didn't have any expectations of a warm and loving married life, but she couldn't help feeling bitter.

Her heart squeezed with pain. He was declaring that their marriage would never become something that would tie them together. Lucia, who had a little bit of hope at first, threw all that away. There wasn't even a bit of frustration in her heart at the moment.

"...I will follow you. But if Your Grace wishes that I remain here, I will do so."

She lowered her eyes to the floor and spoke in a soft voice, trying her best not to mix emotion into her words. She wasn't trying to defy him or anything. There were no benefits to staying here. She felt his gaze on her with her whole body.

Lucia hoped to live with the flow, calm and relaxed as much as possible. She didn't see him as a man who would physically abuse a woman, but there wasn't anything bad about being extra careful. She had already experienced how hopeless a woman would be against a man who was physically abusive.

"There's nothing fun over there, unlike the capital. You should make a firm decision so

you don't regret."

"I'll be fine."

'I've never found anything enjoyable in the capital in the first place.'

Once their carriage took off, they didn't converse until they reached their destination. As soon as they arrived, he got off and shut himself into his oval office. Lucia was left alone at the front gate and only Jerome remained to show her around the estate.

"Greetings, Mistress. I am the current butler serving the Duke of Taran. Please call me Jerome."

He seemed to be around his 30s. She was familiar with this man, who had midnight blue eyes while sporting a neat and tidy overall presentation. He had once served her tea when she had visited the Duke. 'So he was the butler.' He seemed too young to be the Duke's head butler.

"Nice to meet you. The tea from last time was very delicious, Jerome."

Jerome watched Lucia strangely, but all traces of his feelings were quickly erased. He answered with an amiable and gentle tone instead.

"Thank you. Please speak without formalities, Mistress."

"I'm most comfortable speaking this way. Oh, if this isn't appropriate as the lady of the Duke's house, I will fix my bad habits."

"That's not the case. Mistress, whatever you say will be Taran's new rules. Will you dine first or rest? Would you like me to show you around the estate?"

She had heard something really unbelievable just now. But she was currently suffering from a bad headache and she couldn't dwell on the topic for too long. Lucia related what she wanted most at the moment.

"I want to rest first."

"I'll show you the way to your bedroom."

Jerome escorted Lucia to her bedroom and introduced her to two middle-aged

women.

“These will be your two maids who’ll take care of your needs for your convenience.”

Jerome quickly introduced their names and experience. The maids attended to her while she undressed. She wore her under dress to bed, while waiting for her painful headache to pass.

She fell into a deep sleep, then awoke from a voice after a long while. Thankfully, her head didn’t ache anymore.

“Mistress, why don’t you eat a little before returning to sleep?”

Her maid asked her with a very careful tone. She did not know her Mistress’ temper and she feared whether her Mistress would yell and hit her.

“Um... How long was I asleep?”

“You’ve been sleeping for about six hours now.”

“...I’ve slept for a long time.”

“We are preparing dinner right now.”

“Has His Grace already eaten?”

“He will have a light meal at his oval office later. He frequently has his meals in the office when he has a lot of official business to look over.”

In conclusion, it meant that Lucia ought to eat alone. On the day of Lucia’s marriage, she sat all alone at a grand table full of delicious treats. She felt a little bit disappointed. Eating together wasn’t such a hard thing to do. They lived in the same house after all.

She was a little sullen, but she quickly did her best to forget about the whole thing.

‘Don’t hope for anything. Let’s not hope for anything at all.’

If she were to get disappointed due to every single small detail, her married life would soon become hell.

‘I’ve obtained a comfortable home for myself and I won’t have to worry for the rest of my life. Also, I’ve escaped from that man.’

Those were the things she had originally wished for. But a human’s desire was truly unending. She had only gotten married, but she had already planted some expectations in her heart.

“Jerome, about the maids who are attending to me...”

“Yes. Have they made a mistake of some sort?”

“That’s not it. It seems they are the most experienced and oldest maids, is there a reason they need to be in charge of serving my trivial needs?”

Inside her dream, Lucia had once lived as a maid of a noble’s family. Therefore, she understood the type of tasks a maid would be in charge of depending on their age and experience.

“I apologize, I did not explain to you ahead of time. Mistress, you will sleep here just for today. Tomorrow, we will leave for our territory. While we are moving from place to place, they will be attending to you. When we return to our territory, the maids who will serve you will be different.”

“Oh, the other maids in this estate are based in the capital and they are unable to leave with us. Correct?”

“It is so.”

“Then what will the maids be in charge of, once we return to our domain?”

“They will be given appropriate tasks depending on their age and experience.”

“I understand. Thank you for your explanation.”

“It’s not a problem.”

Following this event, Jerome judged Lucia would have no problem managing basic household affairs. If Lucia were to find out, she would have adamantly denied his claims.

Lucia got familiar with the Duke's mansion as a maid showed her around. The mansion was so huge, she could not tour the entire place. The mansion itself was huge, but the surrounding garden was many times more spacious.

"Has this mansion been with the Taran family for a long time?"

"No. The Taran family never had a mansion in the capital. This mansion was prepared several years ago."

"Is that so? Who was the original owner of this place? The mansion and the garden are so huge. They must have been a very prestigious noble family."

"Our Lord owned many mansions. He must have bought about 10 of them. This was the only mansion he kept, and the rest were destroyed."

"...Ah."

He had to be a far richer man than Lucia had originally thought.

The washroom was spacious and luxurious. The bath wasn't made of porcelain like usual bathtubs; they had built up a wall starting from the floor, making it into a spa. The maids didn't need to fill the tub manually; there was a heating water tank connected to this place, so hot water was only a turn of a faucet away.

She had heard of such washrooms before, but it was her first time seeing it in person. Usually, it was the servant's job to draw and drain the water. No matter how much effort they spent to heat the water and fill the tub, there wasn't a city-wide water system. Therefore, many people didn't go out of their way to spend their money to improve a facility to this level.

'I doubt he built this type of water system to make the servants' lives easier...'

As Lucia thought, this wasn't something the Duke had ordered. Jerome, who was in charge of the house facilities, had sought to create an efficient system. One of his only hobbies was to destroy and remodel parts of the house.

After her bath, she returned to her bedroom. The maids attended to Lucia with great care. They helped dry her hair and gave her a flower essence used to make the skin soft and smooth. This would be their first night together after their wedding.

'That person... He won't come to my room tonight.'

Lucia was sure of that. Tomorrow morning, they would be returning to his domain, therefore he would choose to have a good night of rest instead. There was no guarantee he would visit her bedroom at all, even after returning to the North. He didn't wish for a child in the first place. It was possible that he would never visit Lucia's bedroom in this lifetime.

'He already has a son.'

He went through a this marriage just for his son's sake. If Lucia were to bear a son, matters would get very complicated. Although his son had been legalized through the law, the direct child of the legal wife would hold more power.

He would probably do everything in his power to prevent such a situation. He had stated that to her like it was a trivial matter, but those statements probably held a lot of weight to them. There was no way for her to prove that she was unable to bear children, so he would always suspect her.

The bedroom grew quiet once all the maids left. She laid herself onto the bed once more. However, she had been napping for so long, she didn't feel sleepy at all. She twisted and turned in the bed, lost in her own thoughts.

'It's better this way...'

She had promised never to love him. That promise would be easier to fulfill the more distance he put between them. They had only shared a short kiss and it had caused her heart to beat so fast; if they did anything more, then... Lucia's face gradually grew hotter and hotter. She quickly fanned herself with both hands, trying to blow all her thoughts away.

'Let's think about something else. Something else... What should I do now that I'm the Duke's wife...? What's there to do...?'

The first thing on her list that would benefit her husband would be to actively participate in the noble social gatherings. Count Matin had always placed all his efforts into getting Lucia to mingle with high society. But she could never achieve his expectations. She was always tired, and all she could do was stand still and count the time ticking by.

‘Haa... Participating in the noble social parties. I have no confidence in this aspect...’

By hiding that fact, would it count as a breach of contract?

The Duke’s original wife (in her dream) was very talented at making connections and mingling in those social events. She purchased all the latest and most expensive dresses, while accessorizing herself with all sorts of jewelry. The Duchess went all around town participating in social events with a charismatic poise. The noble women around her would all drown her with endless compliments.

‘But behind her back, they would do nothing but criticize and badmouth her.’

The Duchess had no amazing background. She was nothing but a pitiful rock that had somehow rolled into this place. There was nothing pleasant about discovering a rock. She had nothing in common with the noble women of high society who had grown up with a silver spoon in their mouths.

Of course, nobody would be so blatantly rude to the Duchess’ face.

Lucia had never gone out of her way to actively participate in the social parties of high society, but she had diligently participated every now and then. That was how she had come to know and see many things. She would stand a single step behind everyone, so she had many chances to observe others with objective eyes.

She had never been jealous of the Duchess’ glamour. From time to time, it seemed like she was struggling. At first, the Duchess was humble, but as time passed by, she became drunk off her own high pedestal.

After her marriage with Count Martin came to an end, she distanced herself from these social parties. Then, Lucia worked as a maid for some nobles and she came to know of the Duke of Taran.

The Duchess had not changed all those years later. Her reputation had gotten much worse with time. When the truth of her marriage was revealed, all the noble women laughed and jeered at her, spreading the news far and wide. The Duchess had dug her own grave. She had made far too many enemies throughout the years.

‘After that...’

She was not sure what happened to her afterward. Lucia had worked hard, saving

money while working as a maid, in order to buy a small house for herself. She had led a quiet life after quitting her job. She had all the noisy and glamorous high society social parties behind her.

Very rarely, she would come across some gossip from her co-workers. Among all the gossip, there was information on the Duke of Taran, but the contents seemed a bit blurry.

‘Why... did I marry him?’

Lucia frightened herself.

‘Then... What would happen to the Duke’s original wife...?’

She only thought of it now. She shocked herself as she realized her own selfishness.

‘There is no helping it.’

Her guilty conscience didn’t last long.

‘If I had to mind everyone’s worries and struggles, I wouldn’t be able to survive in this dog eat dog world.’

Lucia jumped, realizing her selfish and cruel personality once more. However, it wasn’t like she wanted to fix that personality into a kind one. She had learned that nice people would be stepped on the hard way.

After thinking of this and that, she didn’t feel sleepy at all. If anything, she felt more awake. After flipping from side to side, she got up and turned on the lights in her bedroom.

‘Let’s look around the room.’

Everything in the bedroom was huge. Her bed, the sofa, all the furniture was this way. It was a creepy looking room and it seemed too cold and chilly for a female. If she had to stay in this place more than a single night, she would like to redecorate. Overall, there was a nice balance, but one thing threw the whole place off.

‘What in the world... is that painting...?’

A giant avant garde painting was hung in the center of an empty white wall. She had no idea what this painting was trying to convey; it didn't fit with the bedroom at all.

It was one of the paintings Crown Prince Kwiz had sent. Hugo had cringed upon seeing the picture. When Jerome asked what he should do with the painting in a meek matter, he had answered like so:

'Hang it up.'

Lucia, who had no idea of the situation, wondered if it could be a famous painting. Her guess wasn't far off. The crown prince had always had a mischievous personality; he had made the effort to personally choose a painting that he especially liked for the Duke.

'A wine closet.'

There were dozens of wine bottles displayed according to class against the wall. Lucia examined all the wine bottles displayed behind the glass door. It was rare that a woman's bedroom would have a wine closet. Maybe there would be one in an aged woman's room.

Lucia didn't know about wines very well, but she remembered a particularly sweet luxury wine that perfectly suited her taste. It was the memory from her dream. Lucia jumped with joy when she discovered the same brand. She hesitated for a moment whether to take it out or not.

"This is a drink in celebration. I can at least reward myself this much."

It was a wedding with no blessings given, but she had the right to congratulate and bless herself.

Beside the wine closet, a small table for two was nicely set. There were also a few wine glasses and an opener in the wine closet, already there for her. The setting was just right. Lucia opened the cork and drank little by little while toasting her glass to the air.

"Delicious... Huh? Already empty?"

She had only drunk a few glasses, but the bottle was already empty. She felt she hadn't had enough, so she smacked her lips and stood up for more, but she was so dizzy that she sat herself back down.

“Ah... Why is it like this?”

She took a few deep breaths and tried to get up again. Her stomach felt hot and the walls kept spinning.

“Ah... I... must be drunk...”

Lucia barely made it to her bed while stumbling across the room. After a few breaths, she fell asleep. But even with the help of alcohol, she could not fully fall asleep. She woke up feeling very thirsty a little while later.

‘So hot... And I’m so thirsty... ’

It was the first time Lucia drank alcohol. The wine she had drunk had a low alcohol percentage, but for a first timer, it was pretty potent. Although the bedroom was chilly, her body felt like it was burning from the heat.

Lucia twisted and turned in bed until she decided to take off her pajamas. Anyway, she was the only one in the bedroom. This was her bedroom.

‘I’ve succeeded. I don’t have to marry him anymore. I’ve changed my future.’

The alcohol helped exaggerate the sense of freedom inside her heart. She became braver and took off her undergarments as well. Her whole body was burning hot and had a pink hue all over.

Lucia rolled around enjoying to cool feeling of the bed sheets against her skin. A short while later, she got up and struggled toward the table at the center of the room. There was a jug of water and a glass set on a silver tray there. She poured herself a glass and chugged it down to quench her thirst.

Click.

In the silent bedroom, the sound was like thunder. She turned her head half a beat late toward the sound. When she looked across the room, the door that was connected to the receiving room was already open. The moment she saw the person standing by the door, she dropped the glass of water that was in her hand and froze into a statue.

Hugo had just bathed and entered the bedroom in a robe. He paused as he saw the stark naked uninvited guest. A heavy, stifling silence fell upon the bedroom. He

squinted and casually inspected her body up and down.

He was fatigued after working for several hours straight without rest, but he felt his head lighten instantly. At first he wondered, 'Who is this woman?' The next second, he remembered, 'Ah yes, I got married.' Then he figured that the woman had to be his wife.

She had a long slender neck and round shoulders, her smooth breasts displaying pink nipples looked sweet, and she had a slim waist, while her hips curved into a nice hour glass figure. The bedroom light was on, so he could see every detail of her body easily.

But to his regret, the place right below her belly button was hidden behind the table and he couldn't see it. He wondered whether he should order her to step to the side a bit. Those were his thoughts.

Ksh, shatter.

The sharp rupturing sound broke the peace of the room. She had frozen in place and the glass slipped out of her hands, instantly shattering against the marble floor. Lucia jumped and lowered her eyes. She tried to move, but he firmly demanded:

"Don't move!"

Lucia's body froze in place again. She didn't move a muscle and simply watched him walking closer to her. She unconsciously shrank away, but he continued to glare at her and she once again froze. When he reached her, he placed his hands against her back and her legs and swooped her up.

Kssh kassh, the sound of glass scraping against one another.

With every step, the glass shards would dig into his slippers and make a sharp sound. The few steps toward the bed felt like eternity.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

At his low voice, she realized she was sitting on the bed.

"N... o."

Lucia shook her head and quickly escaped from his hold. She promptly twisted the

blanket around her body and hid her face under her pillow. The places he had held her felt hot and her mind was a complete blank.

He observed her with amused eyes, while she twisted herself into the blanket like a caterpillar and escaped to the furthest corner of the bed.

“You welcome me with your nude body and now you’re pretending to be an innocent girl?”

She wanted to dig herself into a hole from embarrassment, but upon his mocking voice, she got a hold of her senses. He was too evil. He should have been apologizing, while asking whether he had scared her, but nope. Lucia popped her head out and shouted.

“You came in without any notice!”

“That was rude of me. In the future, I’ll be sure to notify you from just outside the door.”

Lucia wasn’t sure whether he was making a joke or mocking her. However, her reaction just now was too over-exaggerated, and she felt awkward again. He was only worried that she would be hurt by the glass shards. If it weren’t for him, she would have many pieces of glass stuck to her feet.

“...I never thought you would come here.”

She didn’t wait there naked to seduce him. Lucia went the roundabout way to express those thoughts.

“This is my bedroom. Of course the owner would come here.”

“...The butler told me to sleep here. He never told me it was your bedroom. Is it in your family’s tradition for couples to share a bedroom?”

Hugo recalled a vague memory. Jerome had said something about the Mistress’ room not being prepared yet, and he had just nodded along. The marriage had been too sudden, and they would stay here for only one night, so the butler had said he would let the Mistress stay in his bedroom.

Jerome was a perfectionist. If the preparations were not up to standard, it would be the same as not having any at all. He thought that since they were married, there

would be no harm in sharing a bedroom for a night.

“There are no such traditions. It seems there was an error somewhere.”

“Then... You’re not misunderstanding me, right?”

Lucia worried whether he would view her as a vulgar woman, but in the first place, this man didn’t even bother with such thoughts. He didn’t view women that way. To him, there were only two types of women in this world. Women he wanted to sleep with and women he didn’t want to sleep with. There was no meaning in judging whether the girl was vulgar or modest.

“Is it your hobby to sleep naked?”

She didn’t look to be the type, and he found this new discovery amusing. Lucia’s face flushed and she glared with arrogant eyes.

“No. I was feeling hot...”

Her answer didn’t make any sense in this cold chilly room, but when his eyes fell to the empty bottle of wine by the wine closet, the corner of his mouth perked up.

“Did you drink wine?”

“...Yes.”

She answered with a meek voice. If this was his bedroom, Lucia had taken out a bottle of wine without the owner’s permission.

‘Aah. Why did I do that?’ For the first time after awakening from her dream, she imagined how good would it be if this moment was a dream.

“A drunk, naked woman waiting for me in my bedroom... This coincidence is too clever.”

His entertained voice made Lucia feel upset. Her mood was ruined from his constant jeering. ‘Do you think all the women in the world will be head over heels for you?’ Lucia wanted to say this to his face, but suppressed her feelings and spoke reasonably.

“I’ve already told you. I didn’t know this was your bedroom and I never thought you

would come here. I don't know how many beauties have waited for Your Grace in the nude, but even if I did have such thoughts, I'm probably the only woman in this world who has the right to be in your bed. After I signed my name on the contract this morning, that is."

Once Lucia finished her words, she bit her tongue. She spoke such bold words. What if he was a male supremacist who didn't sit by quietly and watch a woman talk back to him? She was worried about his reaction.

When she had lived together with Count Marin, the only way she could answer was with a 'Yes' or 'No'. They held no other conversations that would stray outside of that boundary. She felt strange to her newfound personality that talked back and rebuked.

He watched her rebelling and chuckled quietly.

"I apologize if my thoughtless words made you feel upset. I'm sorry."

"..."

"Do I have to get on my knees?"

"Ah, no. I was just shocked... I never thought... you would have ever said 'sorry' in your life."

Again with that. He wanted to pry open all her thoughts of him one by one. He would go over each one and say, this is wrong so get rid of it.

"What kind of man am I in that head of yours? Are you saying this after listening to all the rumors?"

"There are no rumors that judge you. I base my thoughts and feelings on what I see and observe for myself. Rather than an apology, I thought you would command others."

"This is the first time to hear such a biting remark in person."

"What do you mean by biting remark? This is only my opinion. Don't denounce me like that."

Her expression was very serious and open. She had been that way since their first

meeting. Her eyes were upright and honest, and it was the reason why he took the time to listen to her unreasonable offer; it was those eyes that had led to their current situation.

Hugo turned his body without much thought. At his action, her blanket jumped noisily. ‘Hmnn’, his eyebrows raised. He moved his body once more, and again her blanket ruffled.

‘Is she scared I’ll jump her?’ The tiny animal in front of the savage predator was shivering in fear. A satiated predator would probably not look twice at this small animal. If he always had his fill, he wouldn’t see the benefits to hunting down this small animal, but today this small animal increased his appetite. His mood was good, so he took hold of the blanket she used like a shield and pulled the round sushi-like figure.

“Kya!”

Lucia let out a short scream and rolled across the wide mattress. When she regained her senses, Lucia was defenseless and nude. He looked down at her as he trapped between his arms. Lucia held her breath. She was scared her body would brush against his hands, so she didn’t move a single muscle.

“If you believe you’re the only woman who has the right to sleep in my bed, why do you believe I won’t visit you? This is our first night together after all.”

Most probably, if they had separate bedrooms, he would not have gone to hers. If Lucia was sleeping on his bed, he would not touch a hair on her body, and sleep by her side.

The reason was simple. He simply didn’t have any heart to do such things. She was very different than the girls he liked. He liked voluptuous beauties. In one word, he was immune to her. But even when he thought that way, he was curious about her thoughts. Ever since a long time ago, he kept wondering what in the world that woman was thinking. He wanted to know.

Lucia often took something simple and made it very complicated through her endless musings. This was not a marriage accompanied with affection. She was not an amazing and glamorous woman that men would covet. But most of all, there was his son.

He didn’t wish for his wife’s pregnancy. He would never believe that she couldn’t bear children without proof. But she didn’t want to bring up the topic of pregnancy. If she were to bring it up, it felt like he would leave the room without any hesitation. She

didn't wish for him to leave. Although it was a contracted marriage, a wedding without even a first night seemed so miserable.

"Tomorrow... You said we would go to your territory..."

Although she didn't lie, it was the same, since she had hidden many facts from him. His gaze seemed to be interrogating her.

The fact that she was nude and defenseless kept growing bigger and bigger in her mind. She felt her body gradually growing hot. Lucia moved a little bit at a time while covering her breasts with her arms. This action had no use or meaning, but it was a reflexive action for any woman suffering from humiliation.

'What a refreshing reaction.'

He had always spent time with women that would throw themselves at him; it was interesting seeing someone so modest for once. There was no doubt this woman was a virgin. A very innocent virgin. The suspicion that she was purposely hiding and waiting here disappeared completely. But in another sense, he lost his interest.

Virgins were bothersome. They didn't know what to do with their body and it was no fun. They were his last resort when it came to fulfilling his sexual desires. A night with an experienced and skillful woman was more enjoyable. He enjoyed fruits that had ripened to the degree of falling off the trees.

What to do... She looked terrified. He had no intention of sleeping with a woman who didn't feel the same.

"If you don't want to, I won't."

"...But the first night... We're not allowed to refuse."

The first night was a right and an obligation. In fact, that had been stipulated by law. Since long ago, two noble families in war would come together in matrimony for peace, and there had been a time when that law was required.

At present, the borders of the different territories of the Kingdom were set, and it was rare to see such an event. The reason the law remained was because there could be a time when it would be needed in the future. If it could be proven that they had never spent their first night together, the marriage could be annulled. That was sometimes

applied when one side of the party passed away due to some reason. Within several years, it had only been applied once or twice.

‘To bring up the law. This princess is really clueless.’

“If this was not our first night, would you refuse?”

“...I will think about it after tonight.”

He had flatly let out a response, but upon her reply, he burst into laughter. She looked pale with fear while shivering, but even so, she didn’t disappoint him as she gave some daring responses. Was she truly clueless? Maybe she was doing it on purpose?

“Look here, Princess. If we start, it’s impossible to stop midway. Are you determined that you won’t regret?”

Lucia’s first night in her dream glimmered. Count Martin had climbed on top of her with his heavy body and tried to enter her forcefully many times, but he could not get it up, and failed. He could not get over his own anger and had drunk himself silly until he passed out.

He snored all night, while she trembled in fear sleeping next to that husband no different than a stranger. There was no way her situation could get worse than that. Looking at things in such a perspective, she had nothing to fear.

“This isn’t something you can settle with determination. I’m not trying to start a war with Your Grace.”

He fell into silence for a moment and chuckled. Then suddenly, the mood turned a full 180 and she felt nervous once again. A chill ran down her spine and she was frozen into a statue. That person was a man; she had only realized such an obvious fact now.

A man who would never lose in strength, and under him was a naked woman. It wasn’t a situation where she could resist. He lifted his body up and took off his outer gown. Lucia saw him and closed her eyes. When his hand brushed against her hips, she quickly held her breath.

Footnotes:

(1) wedding procession: Random fact, in Korea they call this walking down the 'Virgin Road.' Omg I took so long trying to figure this out. I was like... Virgin Rod? Wtf... what does that have to do with a wedding? It's literally the English word 'Virgin Road' written in Korean.

Chapter 8

First Night (2)

Lucia closed her eyes as if she was waiting for her execution while he watched her with calm eyes. He wondered whether he should gobble up this little rabbit at once, but then he changed his mind. He would probably end up losing his appetite midway. He decided to give this innocent princess a pleasant service to teach her a little bit about a man's body.

"Name."

Lucia, who had her eyes shut tight, slowly opened them again.

"...Huh?"

"I don't want to hear 'Your Grace,' in bed. Call my name instead."

"Your name...?"

"Don't tell me you don't know my name."

"It's not that. I know it. Umm... Hugh?"

When he didn't answer, Lucia inquired once again.

"Or maybe Hugo...?"

His silence was uncomfortably long. 'Did I get his name wrong? His name was not Hugo?' She had seen him sign that name on their marriage certificate. Before she could grow more nervous, he answered with a hesitant voice.

"...The first one."

"The first one... Then, Hugh...?"

In that short moment, his body shook. She caught his scarlet marble-like eyes tremble.

Lucia felt he had a special attachment to the name 'Hugh.' Could it be a nickname that somebody had used to call him? His mother? Or maybe... The woman he loved...?

Had he loved a woman before? He had a son. Who could be the child's mother? Had he loved that woman? Where was that woman now, why had they separated?

"Vivian."

As she wondered whether it would be alright to ask about that woman, she jumped upon hearing her unfamiliar name. He seemed to have noticed her oversensitive reaction, so she made up an excuse.

"Nobody... really calls my name..."

"It will happen very often from now on. Vivian."

"..."

His low voice quietly caressed her ears. Her unfamiliar name had come out very naturally from his lips.

"Vivian."

"..."

She had her mouth shut tight, and he watched her as he let out a laugh that seemed like a sigh.

"Darling, do you know you're quite stubborn?" (Hugo)

"...Since when have I ever been?" (Lucia)

"Just now." (Hugo)

"...Do you know you are very good at forcing your way?" (Lucia)

"I don't force anything. Everything I say happens to be correct." (Hugo)

His shameless pride made her speechless. His face drew closer until she could feel his breath upon her lips. When his lips pressed down onto hers, she closed her eyes. He

lightly kissed her tightly closed mouth a few times and then gently sucked on her lower lip. He pulled away for a moment.

“Open your lips.”

He commanded in a low voice. She swallowed a hard breath from nerves; her throat hurt. Her face was tinted in a pink hue as she hesitated, but in the end, she let her lips fall apart a little. His eyes seemed to laugh for a moment. Soon, his lips firmly pressed against hers and a soft piece of flesh entered her mouth.

‘Ah...’

His tongue smoothly ravaged the inside of her mouth. He slowly made his way around her teeth and the sides of her cheeks. She felt a jolting pleasure when his tongue met hers. As their lips parted the tiniest sliver, he spoke.

“You taste like wine.”

Lucia felt her blush burning through her cheeks. He changed his position and locked lips once more. Just as he’d remarked, their kiss tasted like wine, dizzying her with rapture. Their tongues wrestled while their saliva mixed. He was focused on exploring the inside of her mouth through kissing. His tongue twisted and sucked on, then let go of her.

“Hu.....”

A moan escaped from deep within her throat. The soft kiss gradually heated up. His gentle tongue suddenly pressed firmly inside her mouth, and when he continued to massage a sensitive spot, she unconsciously ended up firmly grasping the bed sheets. He kept making Lucia breathless until she reached limit. Then he parted his lips from hers, and after letting her catch her breath, he started once again.

Their kiss continued that way for many more rounds. Lucia’s shoulders, which had been stiff from nerves, gradually relaxed. His kisses were sweet and soothing. When he parted from a particularly long kiss, Lucia lightly gasped for breath. With only this much, it felt like they had done more than enough already.

“The li-... light. It’s too bright...”

“I like being able to see you well.”

“But...”

Hugo kissed her eyes, which were on the brink of spilling out tears.

“Your body is very pretty. Let me see.”

Her cheeks were rosy as she bit her lips; she looked adorable. It wasn't empty flattery; her body was truly very pretty. Her height was just right against his, and her nipples at the top of her round breasts had a pretty, flower-like pink hue. The line that connected her slim waist to her pelvis was beautiful. She was not voluptuous, but her body had a lot of charm.

He pecked her lips a few more times, and gradually moved his kisses to her cheek then to her ear. His moist lips kissed behind her ear then down her neck. Lucia blinked slowly as her sense of self became hazy. Whenever his lips brushed against her skin, she felt strange.

‘Is this the wine’s fragrance...?’

Her body’s aroma was unique. It wasn't the pungent smell of perfume but her body’s natural scent. At first, he thought it was just the smell of wine. But, this scent was a little different from wine. It was very faint and somewhat refreshingly sweet.

‘The smell of an unripe... fruit... ’

It was a natural scent. It was her unique scent. He realized for the first time that someone could smell so good. Hugo didn't rest as he continued to get drunk from her aroma, kissing her, and licking her. Whether his taste buds or sense of smell was making him feel drunk was unknown. Her skin was soft like silk. When he licked her skin, it was perfectly smooth and delectable.

It was not his usual style to be so gentle. However at the moment, he was enjoying himself very much. Whenever his lips pressed against her skin, she would tremble in the most lovely way. He took hold of her thin wrist and sucked onto the inner side.

The slight pain caused her to slightly recoil. Confirming the pink mark upon her skin, he kissed her other wrist. He laughed a bit as Lucia stared at him with confused eyes.

He traced his lips from her neck down to the vicinity of her breasts.

“Ah!”

A jolting pleasure from her breasts forced Lucia to let out a short moan. He took a mouthful and sucked on it. As if milk was coming out of her breasts, he licked her nipples meticulously.

“Hk!” (gasp)

He lightly bit her nipple and tickled it with his tongue. Lucia got breathless as he licked around the areola before sucking on it once more.

Her breasts were soft and tender. It was like consuming a mouthful of whip cream; he was worried they would melt in his mouth. She was quietly laying down in bed while grasping onto the sheets, but her body would tremble while her hips jolted up from time to time. Gradually, he felt his lower half starting to grow hot.

He let go of her breast, which was now wet with his saliva, and moved to caress the other one. He licked, sometimes lightly bit, swallowed, and from time to time sucked with great force. Whenever his tongue moved, a tingling sensation would travel up her spine, and she couldn't help but moan in pleasure.

After he teased her breasts to his content, his kisses traveled down to her abdomen. Lucia wondered where his lips would advance next; she was a little scared, but she felt anticipation at the same time. She was gripping onto the sheets so hard, the tips of her fingers turned pale white.

“Hah...”

His lips proceeded down to her lower abdomen and then to her inner thighs. They moved toward the places nobody else had touched before. His lips brushed against the deep portions of her inner thighs and began sucking. She felt a sting.

He kissed from her hips to her calves while making light lip smacking sounds. Upon hearing them, Lucia's face grew hot. His last kiss ended on her heels. When she snapped out of her dazed state, his lips had returned to her neck.

He took her breast in his hand and brought his other hand to her abdomen. He slowly let his hand brush down her abdomen and naturally slid it down to her inner thigh, pressing his fingers toward her inner thigh. Lucia was shocked and stared at him with wide eyes. At that moment, her gaze locked with his. His red eyes were filled with

something hot and sensual.

He seemed to be observing her reactions, while exploring into her lower regions with a slight pressure. Her breaths became faster and her pumpkin orange eyes started to tremble. Watching her, he felt his body burn up.

“Ah!”

His long and firm finger slowly entered her. She yelped, not from pain but from surprise. When his finger slid out, she sighed in relief. But the next moment, he inserted his finger deeper into her.

“Uuh.....”

He repeatedly moved his finger in and out of her, but it wasn't deep enough to hurt her. She had never let anything inside of her before, so the foreign object felt strange. As the stimulation continued, her lower region became slippery with moist juices, and the sound of wet noises grew increasingly louder. Her whole body was burning with heat and she felt her back shiver reflexively. A few more of his fingers pressed and rubbed against her.

A strange, indescribable sensation took over her body whenever his finger entered her. It was a bit ticklish, maybe a little naughty, but good. It seemed a little painful at the same time. Her breathing turned sharp, and she couldn't think of anything but the feelings that were brewing inside her chest.

“Ah...”

At that moment, a tingle surged up, flooding into her body and causing her muscles to spasm and her neck to jerk up as euphoria circulated through her entire body for a few seconds. The short moment of bliss passed and her senses dulled, while her body had no strength left in it. She enjoyed the feeling of his fingers smoothly combing through her hair.

“How was it? My innocent Princess.”

“...But it's not the end yet.”

She understood that sex would only end when the male ejaculated into the female. Though it was only a dream, no matter how crazy of a life Lucia had lived, she had been

married once before. She had never experienced the entirety of the sexual process, but she had slept on the same bed as her husband for all those years.

Hugo's hands, that were stroking her hair, paused.

"So you know."

"I'm not stupid."

"You entered the palace at a young age and you lived all those years without a single maid. Who did you learn this from?"

"Oh... From a b-book..."

"A book... What a boring method of learning. What did the book say?"

"It said I would end up crying and screaming, but... I think it was all a lie."

Hugo had been smiling teasingly all this time, but upon her words, his expression stiffened at once. He let out a sad sigh while chuckling quietly. This woman was like a raw gemstone. She was naïve but truthful. In a way, she could be more dangerous than many of the skillful women in the world. Originally, when he had initiated sex, he had no intentions of going further than this.

"I should live up to your expectations then."

He was moderately relieved. His lower half had gotten very firm since awhile ago, and it was starting to hurt. His body had grown excited the moment his fingers grasped her bare body.

He held her hips with his hands. Her pale hips were tinged red from his hands' pressure just now. *Fuck*. He swallowed back his curses. His lower body felt numb. Why was this woman's skin so soft? He wanted to leave his marks all over her pure body.

"Put your legs like this."

He said in a low voice. Her long slender legs clumsily wrapped around his hips, bumping here and there through the process. His body temperature rose and his lower half panged from the constant stimulation. His body's reactions were to the extreme. He had thought she was not his type of woman at all.

'...It's been too long.'

He had abstained from sex for too long. From the time the topic of marriage was brought up, he had not had sex with another woman for over a month. He was currently pent up with sexual frustration. He had a very healthy body for a male. He had never gone over 10 days without the pleasures of a woman's body. Abstaining for over a month was a new record.

It wasn't that he wanted to honor his wife or anything. He had been too busy preparing for the return to his territory, and before he knew it, a month had passed.

He placed her tired arms around his shoulders.

"Hold onto me. Don't be nervous and relax your body."

Lucia hesitantly wrapped her arms around his shoulders, being careful as if she was touching something she shouldn't be. His muscles felt firm but flexible. He chuckled and smiled to compliment a job well done, making her heart start thumping loudly.

"If this isn't your first time, I promise it will be a blissful night."

Lucia suspected her hearing. He spoke with such a gentle smooth tone, but somehow she felt like he was teasing her.

"What if it's my f... first?"

Hugo had intended to tease her with these words, but her response was so innocent, it amused him as if he was listening to a joke.

"Probably, it will hurt a little bit."

He fiercely raised his upper body and centered himself against her, gradually adding his weight onto her. An aching pain shot from between Lucia's legs, and she furrowed her brows. 'If it's this much pain, it will be bearable.' Lucia gritted her teeth.

"...Relax. I haven't even started."

Even a half of half of his thing had not entered her yet. He had only slightly pushed the crown in, but her body was too tight and it didn't seem it would be able to stretch out further. The pleasure felt more like pain and it was very hard stopping himself from

just thoughtlessly pushing himself into her.

“Uue... How to do this...?”

He lowered himself onto her and locked lips. He sucked on her small soft lips, taunting her with his tongue. He squeezed and massaged her breasts with his hand. Once he soothed her a little, her tense muscles relaxed. When he could feel some room to move again, he pushed himself forward a bit more. A sharp pain shot through her body and Lucia gripped onto his shoulders with greater strength, to the point her fingertips paled.

“Hha... Hha...”

Lucia’s breaths became rough as if she was lacking air. He kept moving forward bit by bit without pause. He gradually filled her more and more, until he reached a thin wall(1). Once he broke through that frail wall, he was able to slide himself in with ease.

“...!”

Severe pain. It felt like her body would split in two. How was this only ‘a little bit of pain’? The pain from her lower body consumed her entire mind. Everything in front of her distorted, and her jaw trembled. She realized at this time that when the pain was too severe, one couldn’t even scream. The pressure and the accompanying pain from his length inside of her was too much for her to handle. They were connected completely as his body pressed down onto her.

Even if she were to try and shake him off, his body was pressed firmly down onto her so that she couldn’t even tremble. She shook her head from side to side as she tried to lessen the pain. When her lips touched his arm, she bit onto him.

He furrowed his brows from the sudden ache in his arm. He had been supporting his weight with his arms so he wouldn’t have to put his full weight onto her, but she had bit his arm heavily. Her teeth were lodged onto his thick muscular arm, while tears welled up in her eyes as she glared at him with resentment.

He scowled, but his lips were smiling. Her struggling form seemed ridiculous yet cute at the same time. He didn’t allow women to bite him as they wished, but he let her be. The pain was stimulating his pleasure at the moment. His mind was off in another place right now.

‘This feels amazing...’

It felt out of this world inside of her. It wasn't just tight. There was a syrupy texture that squeezed down onto him.

‘Is it because she's a virgin?’

But the last time he'd embraced a virgin, there hadn't been a single thing he found particularly pleasurable. He couldn't enjoy himself at all, and midway through, he had gone limp. But why was this woman different? His sexual desire hadn't calmed down at all, but burned with greater intensity. He was drenched in sweat.

After feeling and caressing her body, he very much appreciated her petite frame. Her body was small and her bones were thin. It seemed he would be able to easily break her bones if he squeezed too hard.

He went on carefully as if he was handling glass, fighting against his heart that wanted to rough up her body to his full desires. He had originally intended to make her feel good for a bit, but his kisses had continued without stop for too long. He had become fully absorbed in licking her skin, and he had gotten too worked up while caressing her naked body.

‘This is not my fault,’ Hugo thought. His young wife had blindly instigated him.

She had grown tired from biting him, so she let go of his arm and sniffled. Her pitiful crying form was adorable. Her face was directly stimulating his endless sexual desire. He started to doubt his conviction in the type of women he thought he liked before. He clamped his mouth shut while breathing deeply. He had never been this sexually aroused before.

His firm member was stiffening to its limit and she was squeezing him tightly. He felt very apologetic, but he couldn't endure any longer. Raising his body, he thrust his hips so that his length could be fully wrapped inside her.

“Hk...”

Lucia's body twitched from a new-found shocking sensation. He saw her red blood flowing out of the moist junction between her thighs as he pulled out. Her eyes, that were glaring at him coldly, gradually melted with warmth. He once again thrust deeply into her.

“Uck!”

She moaned out loud. She looked to be in pain, but her body twitched with pleasure. When he pulled out, she felt a burn from her inner walls, but once he pushed in again, her entrance swallowed him hungrily. Her soft inner walls continuously stimulated his shaft. He felt a surging sensation that was about to burst at the back of his neck.

“Ah! It hurts! Stop moving! Please!”

As Lucia cried and begged, he paused while inside of her. He had great willpower to stop in such a situation, but she wouldn't be amazed at this aspect at all.

“I've told you, once we start it will be impossible to stop midway.”

As he suppressed his own urges, the veins on his arm bulged.

“It hurts. I feel like I'll die.”

Upon her crying, he replied in a cold and collected tone.

“You won't die. Otherwise you wouldn't have been able to be born into this world.”

She looked like she was suffering an injustice, making him want to tease her.

“Hasn't your fantasy been fulfilled? I've made you scream and cry.”

She didn't give him permission to move, and upon his shameless answer, she continued to scream.

“Ah! Aah!”

Lucia had no knowledge of a man's body. He was too big and skillful. An aggressive, skillful woman would have been able to receive him well, but to Lucia, it was overwhelmingly painful. The smooth and relaxing kisses that had covered her body just a while ago seemed to be a lie. He cruelly thrust his hips without stop. Whenever he penetrated deep into her, her breath ceased and a speechless pain followed.

“Uuh! Please a... bit... slower!”

“I am... going slow.”

He was not lying. He was currently holding back to the best of his abilities. If he didn't, she would have fainted from pain long ago. Even so, he hadn't intended for events to flow that way. He didn't want their first night to go like this, but his body spoke of different actions. *Fuck*. What were her insides made out of that they felt so good? It felt so damn good.

Blood flowed out from their point of union, staining the bed sheets. His sensitive sense of smell picked up the scent of blood. Half of his rationality was already gone. Wet sounds reverberated through the whole room as he kept thrusting vigorously.

“Ang! Ah! Hk!”

She screamed without minding the situation. Her face was pale and her eyes trembled. She looked to be in great pain.

She hung onto his shoulders tightly and her nails dug into his back, creating scratch marks. He really hated it when other people inflicted wounds to his body. Originally, he would have cast the woman aside and left her. However, he didn't have the slightest intention to leave at the moment.

When he saw her eyes well up with tears, his appetite for her intensified even more. He wanted to hang onto her and bury himself into this soft and petite woman so madly, and ravage her while licking her entire body.

‘It hurts...’

It felt like a blazing fire was burning inside her. Her body moved up and down along with his strong thrusts. Everything was so different than what she'd imagined. She thought he would thrust a few times and that would be the end. This was painful, hot, and drawn-out.

The pain was there, but it was at the back of her mind right now. She had long realized it wasn't the pain that was making her so tired; something was surging within her and she couldn't take it. His firm shaft sunk into her, thrusting in and sliding out. The terrible pain gradually dulled.

“Hha... Hha...”

Lucia's screaming lessened. Instead her rough breaths increased, flooding the room. Her eyes were still stained with tears, but they were filled with something warm. It

wasn't due to pain but something different, which made her knit her brows.

It hurt. It definitely hurt, but... Something felt strange. From the tip of her toes to the top of her head, an overwhelming euphoric shock engulfed her body. She swallowed back her scream and let out a low breath.

“Your insides are shaking like crazy.”

He firmly held onto her hips as he bore deeper into her. Her juices, mixed with bits of blood, flowed out from her down to her buttocks. As he continued to thrust, the viscous fluids created a constant moist slapping sound. Their point of connection had residual blood splattered here and there.

“Ah, hu...”

Her lips no longer let out cries of pain. Instead she mewled and moaned in pleasure. He slowly changed the direction of his thrusts as he penetrated deeper. He concentrated on her panting and groaning, and stubbornly hammered into her most sensitive spot.

“Ah! Aah...”

Her insides squeezed and started to spasm. He saw that she was about to climax and plunged deeper into her.

“Hhk!”

Her body froze and she cried. Her entire body began to tremble. He was far from reaching his limit, but if he continued further, she would faint. He did not have the disgusting hobby of ramming into the body of an unconscious female. His breath was rough as he let himself finish. inside her body.

Shit, he slowed his breath and frowned. It was his first time cumming inside of a woman.

Lucia's body grew limp as something hot spilled into her body. She panted as her chest rose up and down.

‘Is... it over...?’

Her thoughts didn't last long. She felt his large hand caress her forehead and just like that, she instantly fell asleep.

It felt like her body had melted into the blanket as fatigue washed over her. When she opened her eyes, a sliver of the morning sun was peeking through the curtains. The soft breathing from the man next to her gave her a strange feeling.

'That's right... I'm... married...'

She was thirsty, so she got up carefully, trying not to wake him.

"Uuh..."

A groan escaped her lips unknowingly. It felt like something was drumming on her body. She struggled out of the bed, and as soon as she put her feet on the floor, no strength gathered in her legs and she fell down. Thankfully, there was a rug on the floor and she didn't hurt her knees too badly.

Her body hurt like someone had beat her up all over. Every muscle in her body felt sore. Deep between her legs, a constant throbbing pain persisted. It didn't help that it felt like something was still inside of her. She hurt inside and out, just everywhere.

Lucia massaged her own shoulders and arms and discovered a strange mark there.

'What's this?'

A reddish purple bruise was stained there.

'How did I get bruised here? When did I bump into something?'

She pressed the bruise with her finger, but it didn't hurt. On her other arm, a similar bruise was there. She stared confused for a while and a memory from when he had painfully sucked on her wrists shot through her mind.

She carefully untied her robe and observed her chest. She discovered more similar bruise marks. Shocked, she quickly tied her robe again. Her face burned from embarrassment and she covered it with both hands.

'Aah. Oh my god. Oh my god. Just let me die. What to do?'

Embarrassment started flooding in like a tide. She was a pitiful child, whose heart beat wildly from just a kiss. In one night, a grand event had occurred.

‘So this is what it is?’

She experienced sex for the first time in her life. The husband inside her dream, Count Marin, had been impotent. He would roughly rub against her lower body and in a few moments he would gasp wildly and that would be the end. It gave her goose bumps. She could not understand why people loved to do such a thing.

She understood why Hugo laughed, saying she had learned sex from something so boring. Something like yesterday night, she would never find in a book anywhere. It wasn't something meant to bear children; it was something more mysterious than simple pleasure. They had connected physically in the deepest level possible.

‘How do people do this and... break up? How is a divorce possible?’

It was a conversation. A deep, heavy conversation that only two people could share.

It was odd. Before, he had seemed like a stranger, but this morning she felt a bit closer to him.

‘Just a little... No, it hurt a lot, but... ’

If he asked her to do it again with him, she wouldn't want to go out of her way to refuse. It hurt a lot, but that wasn't the whole experience. The feeling of his heavy body pressing down on her, the way he caressed her as he kissed her, his breath and the way his red eyes shook with heat... That sensation that had flooded into her body... Was that what people called pleasure...? As she went through her memories of last night, the inner side of her thighs began to heat up.

‘Stop!! Stop thinking! Something else, something else, something else... ’

Lucia shook her head left and right trying to shake off her thoughts.

‘Did I ever dress myself back into my pajamas...?’

She had no memory of it happening. Had he dressed her? Had he ordered a maid to do it? She remembered she had sweated a lot, but her skin felt soft and fresh.

Lucia gazed at the bedroom door absentmindedly. That was a very wide and extravagant room. A high ceiling, marble pillars, the horrifyingly luxurious decorations...

'I might have... done something amazing.'

She wondered whether she had the skills and confidence to live on as the Duchess following her marriage. If she was being greedy for something beyond her reach, in the end she would be the one to suffer.

'I won't... regret.'

She decided she would not. She would bear whatever ending resulted from her actions. If she had to pay the price, she would do so. She decided she would not do something like cry. She wasn't sold off to this marriage. It was her own choice.

Chapter 9

First Night (3)

Note: In the Korean raw when people are sharing verbal dialogue, it's very easy to differentiate who is who without extra explanations because one will talk in polite form while others do not (or they have their own style of talking). But this does not translate well because of many reasons. Thus, I include (name) after quotes to help you out. This portion is not part of the raw. It's just extra notes so readers will have a smoother experience.

Hugo, who was still lying in bed, slightly furrowed his brows and opened his eyes. His eyes were clear, as if he had been awake all along. He was sensitive to his surroundings and had been awake from the moment Lucia began struggling in bed.

'What in the world is she doing?'

After she had fallen off the bed with a thump, only silence followed. He threw off the blanket and got up. He moved his body lightly, unlike a person who had been asleep till recently. Getting up from bed, he walked around to her side.

She was sitting there in daze as she started frantically shaking her head from side to side. She grasped onto the mattress and struggled to stand up. Though not accustomed to personally helping others, he couldn't sit quietly and do nothing. He walked toward her with a slow pace, being careful not to scare her.

"Oh..."

Her pumpkin orange eyes opened wide as she viewed the empty bed and his upright figure.

"You have bad sleeping habits. How could you fall off such a wide bed?"

He had woken up just now, so his voice was lower than usual. Even so, he was handsome. Lucia, who was staring at him with dazed eyes, quickly snapped back to reality.

“That’s... not it!”

His arms, that held her up, made her body heat rise, so Lucia tried to push him away with embarrassment. However, his body was as solid as a rock and wouldn’t budge. She decided to quit fighting against him when she saw that any further efforts would be futile.

“Then do you sleepwalk?” (Hugo)

“I woke up to drink water and...” (Lucia)

Lucia felt a little shy for some reason, and looked at the floor while muttering the rest of her words in a low voice.

“Walking is... a bit difficult right now...”

He let out a soft sigh. Putting on the slippers that were under the bed, he moved his feet with light steps. When they reached the end of the rug, the sound of glass shattering under his feet could be heard.

‘Ah... I broke a glass cup yesterday...’

She had forgotten all about it. If it weren’t for him, she would have walked right into the floor strewn with glass pieces with her bare feet.

He easily carried Lucia up with one arm and stopped in front of the table. Pouring a glass of water, he handed her the cup.

“Don’t break it this time.”

“...Yes.”

He never stopped teasing her. Tsk, she mumbled silent complaints to herself and obediently accepted the cup.

He wasn’t just tall, he was also very strong. He was handling her easily as if she were a small child. He was supporting her buttocks and hips with only one arm, but she felt very well-balanced and at ease.

“Thank... you.”

He took her empty cup and placed it on the table.

“Anything else?”

“...Huh?”

“Shall I take you to the bathroom?”

“No!!”

Lucia yelled while her face glowed red. Her gaze met his, and it felt like his red eyes were laughing at her. His black hair was usually styled neatly, but currently his hair was tossed in its natural form and it seemed amazing to her. Lucia raised her hand and combed his hair out of his face. His brows twitched slightly.

She was embarrassed of her impulsive action and his fierce stare felt burdensome. She followed his line of sight down and was startled with shock. Half her breasts were out in the open with her nipples peeking out a little. She had tied her robe carelessly before, but it had come undone. Her ears felt hot.

Lucia hurriedly held her robe and attempted to cover up. Unfortunately, her robe was caught between his arms and her body, and pulling at it didn't do anything to help cover herself up. Just then, his hand firmly grasped her breast.

“Hp...” (breath in)

Lucia gasped in alarm and quickly darted her eyes to him. His red eyes seemed to trap her and she couldn't move. He had been staring at her all this time, and she could feel his gaze turn heavier. She was scared, but she couldn't turn her eyes away from him.

As soon as he grasped her breast with a bit of strength, Lucia took a breath and moaned. He laid her on the table and took a mouthful of her breast.

“Ah!”

An electrifying sensation ran up her spine. His lips were sucking on her breast while his tongue stroked her nipple. He lightly nibbled on it, then dug his tongue in.

“Ah! Hk!”

Lucia gripped his shoulder while her body spasmed from the stimulation. The hard table supported her body as he pressed down onto her. Greedily seizing her breasts, he teasingly licked, bit, and sucked on them without pause. The sucking sound that escaped his lips flustered her, and her body burned up with heat.

The belt had long fallen to the floor while her robe laid completely undone on top of the table. The cold air brushed against her skin as her naked body was exposed to the open. He spread her legs by propping one of them up on his arm. His finger rubbed against her as he slowly made his way in.

“Uu...”

A burning pain made her cry out. She was still hurting from the aftereffects of taking in his huge length at once. Even so, after his finger pushed and pulled from inside, her juices started flowing out, causing an embarrassing sound to echo throughout the room. Thanks to that, his finger could glide in and out easily. However, she was still suffering from pain.

“Does it hurt?”

Lucia hurriedly nodded. She stared at him with a helpless and desperate crying look. *It hurts. I don't want to do it.* She sent this message to him with her eyes. But when his finger left and instead his hardened member prodded her, she paled completely white. When his length entered her tender insides, she started to cry.

“Ssh...”

He tried to calm her down while kissing her, but he pushed in deeper. Her insides were burning and painful.

“Uuck...”

It was a different pain from the time he had first entered her. Her insides were painful and the muscles all over her body were sore. Huge droplets of tears fell one after another from her eyes.

He put his strength behind his thrusts as he pushed into her on top of the table. Really... It felt too good. Her insides firmly wrapped around his member and stimulated him in all the right places. Feeling like he was tasting something sweet, he lightly licked her lips.

‘She really... makes a person go crazy.’

Her tears, her expression, her sniffling cries, the screaming, her sweet body and skin, her innocent reactions, her insides that firmly hugged his erection... Everything about her caused him to become exponentially aroused. It was as if he had turned into a starved vampire who had caught the scent of blood. The demon inside him hissed to release his inner beast and rough her up until his sexual hunger was satisfied.

‘I can’t.’

If he acted on his inner demon, that frail woman would die. His young wife was frail and weak; with a little bit of strength, she could easily break. She was still too inexperienced to fully accept a man. It would be bad if he killed his wife the first night after marriage.

He lightly kissed Lucia, who was crying. He tangled his tongue inside her small mouth and thoroughly investigated. While doing so, he composed his sanity that was about to fly off into space. Their kiss continued until she looked to be out of breath.

His length was fully sheathed inside her. He slowly pulled out and Lucia groaned. She squeezed her eyes thinking it wasn’t over yet. However, he simply helped Lucia dress and lifted her up once again. Lucia watched him with big eyes.

He laid her onto the bed. Lucia looked at him suspiciously while keeping very quiet.

“Are you regretting it?”

Lucia quickly shook her head from side to side.

“I won’t touch you anymore, so go to sleep.”

She relaxed, letting her tense muscles loosen. She was behaving so noticeably different, that he had to swallow back the bitter smile forming on his lips.

‘So she’s that kind of person.’

He let out a sigh. His circumstances were laughable and pitiful. His very stiff piece of wood was starting to hurt from pent up sexual frustration. It would take too long to let it cool down on its own, but he was irked that he would need to take care of it himself. He never had to masturbate as he’d never had a shortage of women; thus he

never had to resort to such means.

He sighed, confused over how to go about this situation, while Lucia admired him. The room was brighter now, and she could see his face more clearly. It would be difficult to find someone else as handsome as him.

His sculpted face was well-balanced; his features perfectly harmonized with one another. He had a high bridge nose and sharp eyes. She could not find any flaws on him. Even so, people didn't refer to the Duke of Taran as 'charming'.

'Because... of his facial expressions...?'

He was always indifferent and cold. It was impossible to read his inner thoughts by observing his expressions. One would have a hard time guessing whether he was feeling good or bad.

He was well-known for his military prestige and frightful presence during war, making others fear him.

He got up and disappeared somewhere. She watched her handsome husband leave with a sad heart, without the slightest clue that he was going to the bathroom to take care of his rigid member.

'Why did he agree to marry me...?'

She had no idea. A lot had happened between them, but not enough to justify such a result. He would be able to find many women who would agree to the same terms as her. Back then, she had chosen the best path possible, but thinking back, it didn't add up perfectly. It would be correct for him to laugh at her like a joke and brush her off like a bug.

He returned from the bathroom with a foul temper. He was able to release the pent up sexual frustration, but he didn't feel satisfied at all. If anything, he felt awkward. He had just married; there was a perfect female in front of him, yet he had to resort to jerking himself off. He had decided to act like a gentleman because of her, but he couldn't help boiling with anger on the inside. He hid all his anger within his heart and returned to bed.

She didn't go back to sleep, simply rolling in bed. When her pumpkin orange eyes watched him, he couldn't help but feel annoyed. However from his expression alone,

one would never know his true feelings. He seemed to be wearing a cold and unconcerned mask.

“You’re not returning to sleep? If you don’t sleep, you won’t be able to gather any strength for later. In a few hours, we’ll be leaving for the North, it won’t be an easy ride.”

“I will not become a hindrance to your daily affairs. Please do not worry.”

Her voice was firm and strong, and he couldn’t help but scan her body condition up and down.

“You can’t walk.”

Lucia looked defensive while pouting her lips. When he continued to stare at her face, she mouthed a silent ‘What?’

“...You were thinking of doing it again, weren’t you?”

She caught him off guard with that question, causing him to burst out laughing.

“So you’re saying it’s my fault you can’t walk.”

“...It is not like I cannot. It just feels... a bit weird...”

“I’ll call for a doctor in the morning.”

“Huh? I’m fine. I’m really fine.”

Lucia was shocked and politely refused. How was she supposed to explain that embarrassing pain to another person? Although that person would be a doctor, she still didn’t want to.

Lucia stood up to prove her perfect body condition, but her muscles were stiff and her lower body was shooting with pain. She let out a silent scream inside her heart, while beads of cold sweat formed on her forehead.

Tch. He clicked his tongue and smoothly helped her return to bed.

“If you’re tired, clearly explain it to me. From my point of view, it will be impossible to

leave today.”

“I am really fine. Please do not feel you must change your schedule because of me.”

“It will be a carriage ride of at least three or four days. There will be no villages or towns you can rest in on the way there. You’ll need to spend all those days inside a carriage. Are you telling me you’re fine with that?”

“Yes, I’m really fine.”

“Don’t be stubborn about stupid things.”

One must take responsibility for one’s words. It would be troublesome to shout out proud words, then make a lot of petty excuses later. He needed to understand her mentality clearly in order to plan for any changes, so he could minimize any sort of trouble that would emerge later on. Preventive measures would become impossible once problems were blindly left for the future because ‘there’s no helping it.’

There was no difference with women as well. They would say ‘I’m fine, don’t worry about me.’ But later, they would tell him that wasn’t what they’d meant. They would complain that he could not understand their feelings. Whenever that happened, he would break up with them on the spot. Anyone who hid and harbored complaints within their hearts would end up stabbing him in the back one day.

“I am not trying to be stubborn... I understand you have urgent business in the North. It is true that I am suffering a bit of discomfort, but I feel I must bear it for now.”

A slight crack formed on his frosty expression. The urgent situation in his Dukedom. That was the excuse he’d given to settle the marriage in an informal matter. He hadn’t shared explicit details on the matter, and anyone would conclude that the next step would be to hurry back as soon as possible.

Of course he couldn’t explain, ‘I settled the marriage this way because it would be too troublesome otherwise. There’s nothing going on up North.’ He tried to hide his embarrassment, so his voice sounded friendlier than usual.

“...It’s not so urgent that problems would arise by being a few days late. I’ll delay our travels to a later date.”

Lucia observed him once more. The man was not as overbearing and cold as she had

originally believed. He didn't ignore any of her words, and conversing with him didn't feel uncomfortable at all. The more she got to know him, the more she didn't understand. He wasn't such a bad person, but he wasn't a good person either. Whenever she settled on one, the next moment she would think a different way.

"Is it okay... to ask you one more thing?"

"No. Go back to sleep."

"When the urgent business in the North is settled, will you return to the capital?"

That woman was really... He glared at her with cold eyes, but she didn't seem scared or meek at all. She was like that from the beginning; she didn't have any hesitation when dealing with him. She was quiet, but she expressed everything she needed to. It would be fine to ignore her if he was so annoyed, but he felt strange that he didn't mind answering all her questions.

"There will be many things to do. I haven't made any plans to return to the capital any time soon."

He had told the Crown Prince he would be back in two years, but there was no explicit date set up. It would be fine to extend the deadline as much as he wanted.

"Will that be okay? I mean... did the Crown Prince gladly agree to your request?"

That was a question he didn't expect. Hugo met her gaze with interested eyes. It was true that he sided with the Crown Prince, but he didn't do anything for him personally. There was nobody who could give a concrete confirmation that it was definitely so. It was a sensitive topic. Was this woman interested in power? He stored that information with interest.

"He didn't gladly agree."

Kwiz had tried to tie Hugo down with both threats and bribes. But he hadn't felt tempted at all. He had formed a perfect administration system in the North, so even if he wasn't there, the Dukedom would be fine in the long term. However, there was a need to make his presence as the Duke known.

"I see that... you stick with any decisions you make until the end."

Lucia had grasped that one tendency of his. Once he made a decision, he would promptly advance forward. It only took a month for them to hold an informal marriage. Without a pause, everything had happened so fast. Before she realized, she was already signing her name on the marriage certificate.

“Have you ever had a time when you regretted a decision you have made?”

His silence felt painful.

“...If the question was too personal then...”

“Never. I have no attachments to anything of the past. It’s useless to hold onto something that’s impossible to change.”

It was so. She felt a chilling tug at her heart.

‘Once he throws me away, he will never look back. Whether it’s his work, human relations, or girls.’

He was a strong and arrogant man. He had been that way inside her dream, as well. He had always been confident and received people’s praise as something matter-of-factly. Many yearned for him. It wasn’t easy to approach him, and the most people could do was sneak glances at him from afar. It might be that Lucia liked that man far more than what she’d imagined.

It was amazing that he was within her reach. She had become his wife. It was unbelievable that she was his woman now.

‘Such bright eyes.’

Hugo thought to himself while watching her pumpkin colored eyes gazing back. Her eyes sparkled with desire, awe, and fear. Usually, the women who desired him had no such emotions. The many women who tried to seduce him desired his wealth and authority. He hadn’t seen a woman whose eyes were so clear.

Was she so different because she had grown up in such unique circumstances? If she had grown up like normal royalty, surrounded by servants, she wouldn’t have been any different than the others. This was probably only possible because she had grown up believing she was of common birth.

His theory of life was that the world couldn't change. Someday, her clear eyes would be polluted by this world's greed. She could only remain so innocent until now, because she hadn't experienced the true world yet. She was just a late bloomer.

She didn't seem dull-headed, so at least she wouldn't be annoying in the future. In addition, her body didn't just feel good, it felt amazing. He was perfectly satisfied with those results, although it was a rushed marriage.

"It seems you'll go to sleep only after I leave."

"How about Your Grace? You are not sleeping anymore?"

"I wake up around this time everyday."

"This... early?"

Count Martin had only woken up when the sun was up high – mid day. She suspected he hadn't lived to see such a thing as the morning throughout his life. But in his defense, it was not because Count Martin was particularly lazy or anything. It was common practice for nobles to go to sleep far past midnight and wake up late in the morning. The reason being, nobles frequented various balls, social parties, and dinners late into the night.

"I told you not to call me 'Your Grace' in bed."

"...Yes. But it is... not so easy. It doesn't feel right..."

Other women were always impatient to call him by name. But this woman was not so easy. Although he was sitting close to her, she didn't place one finger on his body. After a night of heat, women would cuddle and cling onto him like a piece of gum.

'Was yesterday unpleasant? Maybe it was a bad idea trying to touch her just now?'

She was different from other women. Other women didn't cry from pain like her. For the first time since he was born, he started to suspect his own self-pride.

"Vivian."

He never kept questions inside his heart, but facing such clear eyes staring back at him, he couldn't muster up the courage to ask, 'How did you feel about our first night

together?’ It might be that he was scared of what might come out of the girl’s mouth. In her case, she would not reply ‘it was nice’ for the sake of the man’s pride.

“...Rather than my name, practice not getting shocked hearing your own name. Maybe it’s just that you don’t like it when I call your name?”

“...I’m uncomfortable... with the name...”

“I have to call you by something.”

“There are many ways to call me.”

“Many ways? What other ways... My wife? Honey? Darling? My love? Cutie?”

Lucia’s face glowed bright red. How did he speak such words so naturally?

“Choose.”

When she remained frozen with her mouth shut tight, he tilted his head.

“Do you hate the common ways to be addressed? What about my sunshine or my soul mate?”

“My name! Please just call me by my name.”

“Mm. I think that’s the best too, Vivian.”

Lucia became sulky seeing his sneaky smile. As expected of a player. She had no expectations that he would remain faithful to her because he was married. Inside her dream, although he had no public girlfriends after marriage, he would have had many girls to play around with hidden somewhere.

“Let’s stop here. Go back to sleep.”

“But...”

“Vivian!”

Lucia’s eyes grew wide, then giggled the next moment. What to do? He mumbled to himself while watching her with gentle eyes as she laughed.

“How many hours do you usually sleep?”

“About three to four hours.”

“Everyday?”

“There are times when I can sleep for only one or two hours, too.”

In shock, Lucia’s mouth gaped wide open. Being a Duke was not an easy job that anyone could handle. It was only possible for someone as hardworking as this person.

“...I’m sorry. That will be impossible for me. I might die sleeping only three to four hours a day.”

“...Did I ever ask you to do the same?”

“Your Grace... Hugh... How can the Duke’s wife sleep while her husband is working...?”

It was confusing whether he was laughing from amusement or from being at a loss for words.

“I appreciate your sentiment, but there’s no need. Just close that mouth of yours and sleep.”

His hand covered Lucia’s eyes. His huge hand covered most of her face. He wasn’t particularly fond of talking with women, but he didn’t find conversing with her annoying. Actually, she had a very nice voice. She didn’t have the typical fake and high-pitched nasal voice but a clear and gentle, soothing one.

“I’m sorry for annoying you.”

“ ... ”

He didn’t feel annoyed. But he didn’t bother to deny her statement.

Within the darkness, Lucia blinked a few times and soon returned to sleep. He watched her breathe in a slow and relaxed rhythm, and quietly chuckled.

He watched her sleep peacefully for a short while before he got up. He walked around the bed to her side and bent down, then lightly kissed her cheeks as her breath tickled

his cheek. He gently sucked on her soft lower lip and separated with a lick. When he straightened up, his expression looked very complicated.



Jerome and three maids were on standby in the receiving room. There was no way they would disturb the newlywed couple in their own bedroom. Following the death of the last generation's Duchess, this golden rule had been ignored. However, since the appearance of a new Duchess, it had been reinstated.

When Hugo finished his bath, the three maids moved swiftly to aid him. They patted down the remnant water on his body, while taking off his robe to help him into his regular clothes. They discovered a round bite mark on their Lord's arm and red scratch marks on his shoulder, however nobody spoke of them, and promptly hid them underneath his clothes.

The three maids moved like they were a single entity with perfect harmony. The youngest of the three siblings was 17. Their parents had passed away due to an epidemic from the slums and the siblings were the only ones to survive through the ordeal.

The three had become orphans and had lost their voices due to the epidemic. Jerome had taken them under his wing and had educated them personally. The three were smart and loyal. Many years had passed, and they currently excelled at their job to the point that Jerome didn't need to look out for them at all.

"All the preparations to leave are complete. Would you like to do the final inspections one last time?"

"I'm pushing our trip to tomorrow."

"Yes, Your Grace. The palace maids came for a visit late last night. When we informed them that you were sleeping, they said they would return this morning."

Kwiz was quite stubborn. He hadn't given up at all. He would most likely continue to pester him with letters, asking for him to return to the capital. It was also a talent to pester him to the highest degree possible without causing an annoyance.

"The next time they visit, let them stay the night. I should visit the palace today."

Since there was time, he should visit and pacify him a bit. The battles within the inner palace for the title of the next Emperor were fierce. The Crown Prince was everyone's target due to his title alone. The Crown Prince at this time had no power to suppress anyone; he was simply a huge flashy target for everyone. Although the situation was intense, Kwiz had yielded to the Duke's decision of returning to the North.

"While I'm away, call for a doctor."

Up until this day, the Duke had never called for a doctor once. The person with the most free time was the Duke's family doctor. Thus, everyone was able to understand why the doctor needed to be called.

"Is the Duchess ill?"

"No. Don't call the doctor yet. When our Princess wakes up, ask if she requires a doctor. Follow her decision."

The Duke didn't forget any detail of last night.

"Be sure to call for a female doctor."

"...Yes, Your Grace."

A female doctor? Jerome's brain spun dizzily. He decided he would try to decipher his Lord's hidden message later. Where in the world would he be able to find a female doctor? He decided he had to carry out an investigation for the best female doctors ahead of time.

"Your Grace, this is Fabian."

Hugo furrowed his brows once he heard the voice from outside the door. It was too early for Fabian to show up. If it was anything so urgent that he would show up, it was never good news. Once Fabian received permission to enter, he observed courtesy to the Duke and passed an envelope.

"An urgent message has arrived from the North."

Hugo's expression darkened as he read the message. It seemed he jinxed it. Things had turned out for the worse in his territory for real. That had resulted from the long absence of the Duke.

If the owner didn't properly discipline his subjects, whether they be animals or humans, they would eventually forget their standing. The barbarians were very faithful to this logic. They wouldn't dare act out of line, as long as they were properly kept in check with fear.

"Haven't I been pretty generous when they weren't thinking of annoying me?"

His low growl caused a chilling atmosphere. Jerome and Fabian kept their mouths shut and attended to their Lord with cautious eyes. They understood he didn't ask that question waiting for an answer.

"Fabian. Inform throughout our Northern territory that I will grace them with my presence. I should make my rounds with everyone since it's on the way."

"But, Your Grace, then..."

"It doesn't matter. I'm looking forward to seeing how much they can struggle. It will make me very happy to see them burning with fighting spirit. That way, stepping on them will be amusing."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Fabian gave a short and firm response.

"Jerome. I'll depart soon. You remain here and escort the Duchess home. Don't feel you must rush home."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Jerome followed behind the Duke, who was already leaving the mansion. Hugo left one last message before saddling onto his horse.

"This is the Taran's Lady of the House. Give all your respects to her."

"We will follow your commands, Your Grace."

He kicked his horse and raced into the distance. The knights who were on standby followed behind him. Jerome stood still, watching the Duke until he couldn't be seen anymore. Before he opened the door to the mansion, he turned once more toward the direction that the Duke had disappeared.

“...The Taran’s Lady of the House.”

The Duke hadn’t said any great words. ‘Give all your respects to her’. He had conveyed words that were so obvious. But those obvious words spoke volumes by the mere fact that they were spoken by Hugo, the Duke of Taran himself. The Duke wasn’t someone who looked after others. He didn’t even bother to keep the appearance of doing so.

‘Am I reading too deeply into something he casually said?’

Only the future could tell.

(end)



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