

# **THE WOLF LORD'S LADY**

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## **- SYNOPSIS -**

The previous lords have committed as many atrocities as possible to fill their bellies. I, the only daughter of that house, had discovered that my servant and lover was a spy.

And as the people wanted, my life ended with my execution.

However, with the memory of getting beheaded intact, I began a new life.

I was planning to shoulder the sins of my past life and become a nun, but by some trick of fate, I came to work as a maid for the current lord. Under my former lover, whose name, age and even hair colour were all lies.

# CHAPTER 1

## ENDING LIKE THAT, YOU AND ME

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Our house rules over vast holdings, received for our ancestor's military achievements.

Territory received from the deeds of our ancestor. However, not all ruled benevolently, making the fief and the subjects cry. Especially, my grandfather and my father were very cruel. For their luxuries, they exploited their subjects and the affluent fief quickly grew gaunt.

Of course, the subjects were outraged. However, grandfather and father persecuted those who complained as if was the most natural thing, ruling through fear.

Our house was called heartless brutes of the worst kind.

Thus, it's no surprise that it would come to this.

I stared vacantly at the burning mansion.

The house that had a beauty like a palace was burning down.

When I glanced down, the beautifully maintained gardens, which were taken care of the numerous gardeners that were replaced at just one mention of mother's dislike for the colours, with sincere care..... no, with the will to not get murdered, were burning with white smoke that mixed into the pitch black smoke.

The flower I planted before, that I wished to gift to him, had not yet blossomed. It was pitiful to see a flower that would never bloom again.

Because someone like me planted it in this garden, that seed died without even having the opportunity to turn into a flower.

With my arms twisted up and my knees on the ground, in front my eyes, there were the heads of father and mother, who were calling their subjects pigs. Having locked themselves in the cellar, grandfather and grandmother will burn inside. When I hung my head, the scenery changed. However, even as I stared down, there were faces full of grudge and resentment, and I was surrounded by even more hatred.

In front of me, some soldiers came over.

Amongst them, the one wearing different armour is someone important in the rebel army..... no, the revolutionary army. The man nonchalantly wiped off blood from his cheek, blood definitely from someone I know, and spoke to the person standing next to me.

“I apologise for causing so much trouble for a long time, here and now.”

My hair that was combed neatly loosened and some strands obscured my view.

With the smoke and hair, it would have been nice if I could not see anything.

However, what I had wished did not come true.

“No, I should be apologising for the trouble I caused.”

Even as my poorly squirming heart had no normal parts, it came apart from that voice.

“Sir, you shouldn’t have had to play the part of a dog.”

“Don’t say that. There just wasn’t anyone else around the fitting age.”

“Is that so..... but Kaid-sama, it felt as though you were trying to stop our hearts. It didn’t feel like we were alive.”

The man stared at the other man as his bitter feelings oozed through.

His name is Helt, a year younger than me, sixteen years of age, brown hair and beautiful golden eyes.

Mother hired him because his face was pretty. During the two years of work, he did not get displeased at any trivial work, accepting every work with a smile. Everyone liked him. Among the frequently changing employees, he was very young, and during the two years he did not anyone's ire.

However, it's different. I smiled thinly.

Because the man called him Kaid. I don't even know if his age is real.

Everything I know about him is probably false.

Worrying about his short height, smiling sheepishly with a soot-stained nose from cleaning the chimney, liking animals, blushing because he received a flower from a town girl, being craven and kind to not kill a single bug, using his holiday to buy me, who could not sleep well, warm tea.

Being my lover.

All lies.

While kneeling, I silently averted my gaze from Helt who was consoling the men surrounding him.

I didn't even think of leaning against the cold stone walls of the cell, and sat down on a shoddy bed that looked as though it would collapse any moment, something which I saw for the first time in my life. How many hours passed? How many days passed? I knew that food was placed for me. However, I had counted the number of times, so I did not know.

I did not care. Counting did not mean anything.

I heard footsteps. They stopped in front of my cell.

*I knew you would come.* It would have been nice if I could say that.

While hanging my head down, I laughed at myself.

Helt would come. I could say that with confidence. But because I did not know where the Helt I knew was, I could not predict his actions.

Without tidying my dishevelled hair, I slowly raised my head.

It was like the night sky. Black hair and golden eyes. Even the colour was a lie? I didn't even have the energy to deride myself.

".....My lady."

I liked his calm and peaceful voice. I loved his kind and soft speech.

But I didn't want to hear it, never again.

"What could it be, new lord. Are you here to mock this foolish woman who ruined herself from getting seduced by a younger man?"

"My lady."

"Don't bully me too much. You had said that a lot, had you not? I am but a sheltered, foolish woman. What else do you need from this miserable woman who was ruined from giving everything to her first love that bloomed late? Mansion? Nothing. Dresses? Nothing. Jewels? Nothing. Family? Not anymore. Lover? Never was anywhere."

"My lady."

"Father's corruption? I never knew from the beginning. That's why it took two years. Sorry I didn't know anything, I ended up wasting your precious time, I'm sorry. How

pitiful, having to play along to an old woman's delusion, playing the part of a lover."

"My lady!"

From his shouting as he grasped the iron bars, I shut my mouth.

"My lady, you knew nothing. You did not do anything wrong. You were just living in the mansion. That's all you had to say. Why didn't you testify so. Why did you confess to sins that you did not commit. I can't calm the people at this rate."

"I knew that grandfather was buying paintings every week. I knew that father was buying more land yet again. I knew that grandmother was buying jewels every week. I knew that mother was buying dresses every week. I knew that the gardener was replaced, I knew that the maid was replaced, I knew that the stable was replaced. Without thinking about the meaning behind those, I led an extravagant life for seventeen years. Am I not a sinner enough?"

The lord's house that was worse than mindless beasts. That was what the people shouted. That must be true.

As rulers, as human beings, as men, as women, as adults. No matter what, we were the worst.

But they were my family.

As a father, as a mother, as a grandfather, as a grandmother. They were neither devils nor mongrels, just normal people.

I also have responsibility for not advising them. If my extravagant life coming from their sins is not a sin, then what could it be. From the point I was born out of their sins, I am atrocious sinner.

"Moreover, even if I say that, what would happen? Are you saying that you will let me go with no charges? Are you going to say that you will return the mansion, the garden, my family, my everything? Well, isn't that grand."

"You'll be living in a monastery in the mountain. You can never return to this land, but you will live."

“So you would like me to live and drown in abuse. How cruel.”

“.....I just want you to live.”

I ended up bursting in to laughter. I meant to laugh pleasantly, but it distorted into an ugly one.

“Liar.”

His expression froze. What a funny face.

However, the funniest thing was,

“It must have been funny. Seeing a woman’s heart pound and her lips curl from just your smile. Come to think of it, the handkerchief I embroidered poorly, I never saw you using them. Did you get rid of it the day you got it? I even baked cookies I never tried before. Though you did have them. Did you feed the rest to the pigs? I even planted a flower to give to you on your birthday. It probably turned into ash by now. What a relief, to not get a flower from someone like this woman.”

He did not say anything. He lowered his head with that funny face, and when he lifted his head again, there was no emotion in it.

“To make some time to talk to you, I earnestly listened to the lectures I disliked. It was merely espionage for you..... I did well, didn’t I? I stayed up to finish my homework..... I thought that it would be alright to abandon my house if I was with you, so I even studied business. Though I wasn’t very good at it. I learned to cook, do the laundry and clean in secret. You worried for my hand full of cuts and bruises, but I wonder if you didn’t care. Or did you think that it served me right? I wonder if you were disappointed that I wasn’t hurt more. Would you have smiled if a finger was cut off?”

Aa, what a stupid and ridiculous woman.

This stupid woman whose brain was worse than a mongrel.

“So that it won’t be a source of trouble, get rid of me cleanly. Isn’t that your wish? Let me hear your praise.”

Lovely dear.

When I said such things while giggling, he swallowed something. When those tightly shut lips parted, there was no longer anything.

“..... So that is your choice.”

As I laughed in response, I was never anywhere. Like someone that parted with his past, he never looked back.

Stones flew.

Curses flew.

Justified condemnations were rampant.

In the midst of that, in wooden shackles, I was walking down the road. I headed to my place of judgement while hanging my head down, only raising my head when I reached there.

Were there so many people in this town?

I did have the opportunity to go out often, but when I went out shopping with parents sometimes it was an eerily quiet town. In retrospect, the townspeople were hiding to not earn unnecessary ire, to not get killed on whim.

Unlike that cold town that reeked of death, a different heat was surging.

Hatred towards me.

I was forced to kneel by a soldier. My loosened hair was pulled so that I would be facing

forward.

The people were yelling with great rage deep down from their throats. However, for me, everything was jumbled up and I could not hear well.

“My store was confiscated!”

“Kill!”

“We were disallowed from honest trade!”

“Kill!”

“Children starved to death!”

“Kill!”

“My husband who tried to tell the king was murdered!”

“Kill!”

“Return the lands that were passed down for generations!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

“Kill!”

I could only hear that from here on.

Many different crimes flooded out of the mouths of the people.

I don't know if those are all my family's sins, or just misfortunes upon them.

For starters, the hatter couple, your daughter that's not returning home eloped with a travelling painter.

Even so, it's meaningless. Even if ten or twenty sins are added, nothing changes. I had committed so much sins.

I only moved my eyes and looked at the person sitting on a slightly elevated position. Black hair and golden eyes. The only things that did not change were the eyes, but not even a sheltered and stupid girl was not clueless enough to think that.

The soft, kind light I loved was no longer there in those eyes. After my gaze met his, I opened my mouth.

“Insolent fools!”

I had never shouted like this before, so I was worried if it would come out well.

However, my voice was not trembling, and I could speak better than I thought.

“How dare you lowly bugs even touch me! You must squeeze out money for me. It's an honour to be working for this beautiful and noble woman, but to be dissatisfied with that, how shameless! Who do you think let you live here! You brainless bugs live for the purpose of getting used by me! Now, kill this insolent fool and rescue me! The ugly woman there! Come here! I'll give you the honour of being my maid. The man there! Prepare a coach! Not the pitiful ones you use! Prepare the top-quality carriage father ordered from the artisan from the capital! Also, I'm feeling peckish. Prepare a meal. I'm sure you know it's not the pig feed you eat. Prepare a proper human's meal.”

Stones, curses, hatred,

Sticks, amazement, joy.

“Do it quickly! I am ordering you!”

While many different objects flew, from the corner of my eyes, I could see him, the

right hand of the new lord that the people truly want coming down.

Ending like this, you and me.

That which never existed, you, and me.

For the frozen heart to hurt the most, what a foolish woman.

## CHAPTER 2

# BEGINNING FOR SOME REASON, YOU AND ME

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Like so, the previous ruling house, the foulest villains, ended.

However, that sin was not forgiven.

The ultimate punishment and the ultimate liberation known as death was not given to me. I was reborn with memories of getting beheaded.

I don't remember since when I had those memories. From when I could think, I knew that I was beheaded.

I don't know if it's punishment, but I had no parents. There were many orphans around me, but I pondered inside the orphanage. *In this place full of orphans, am I orphan like them?*

From the point that I have memories of my previous life, I'm different. If this was my punishment, my parents might not exist at all. It's not that I don't want to think that I was abandoned.

If I did have parents, I can understand that I would be abandoned. However, did they really exist? Am I really born of woman?

Would my sins be forgiven with just one death?

Might I have been born from the rage and hatred of the people? I had such thoughts.

I was a child that did not smile. I was a child that did not cry.

It must have been disgusting. If I really did have parents, it's no wonder that they would abandon me in a roofless place as rain fell.

Would it have been punishment for me to be born again in the fief that my family and I caused much grief to. I was abandoned here, so I might not have been born here, but in the end so I was raised in this land. I grew up getting soaked with curses towards the previous ruling house, to which the hatred did not fade out yet, along with praises to the current lord.

As a result, I think it can't be helped that I became famous as a woman who had no speck of cuteness or sociability.

However, please don't blame me for not being able to anticipate that I would come to work at the lord's place from the connection of the orphanage director's little sister's daughter's three-blocks-away neighbour's teacher's older brother's grandson's neighbour's store regular's wife's parent's regular store's fellow regular's tea-drinking companion's little brother's colleague's crush's flower shop's passerby lady's husband's mother.

I was just a normal stranger, and on top of that I wasn't even related to any of them to begin with, yet how did it reach that? Everyone, you started minding other people's business. I see that there's leisure in your life and in your hearts. Long live the current lord.

However, it's a little too much, so I would be happy if you held back a little.

In the mirror, there was a woman withered away like a dead tree, with clouded and creepy eyes, truly a horrific sight.

For a blossoming fifteen-year-old maiden to be like this, how laughable.

I had a funny experience, but my mouth in the mirror did not twitch a bit.

Rebuilt after having burned down, the new lord's house is nothing like the previous.

If the previous one looked like a palace, this one looked like a box. It was one that could make one think that forts are more pleasing to look at.

The garden where I planted flowers together with mother was turned into a training ground for soldiers, and the fountain I watched while riding on father's shoulders was turned into a horse trough. The chair where I sat on grandfather's lap as he read picture books to me, the shade where I learned to sew laces with grandmother, they were no longer there. There was just a stump.

However, when I first visited, I could not feel even the most minute stab of pain. Everything was over already.

We were resented. We were punished in the name of loathing and justice. That was right. Justice was with you. We were just evil itself.

Many times, I told myself that I won't stand out.

I won't enjoy anything. I won't wish for anything. I won't make any friends. I am only here because the orphanage director told me with teary eyes to wait at least until I am sixteen. I'll become a nun the next year and spend the rest of my life as one.

That is the duty of the last of the ruling house that drained the land and drove people to death.

But how did it turn out like this.

I looked at the man hiding in the shade with me and sighed slightly.

Black hair and golden eyes. When I heard that he was turning thirty next year, I could only think, 'See?' Even his age is different. What do you mean sixteen, a year younger. Even though he pretended to be disappointed at his short height, if he was fourteen then it was a normal height.

I was being toyed around not by a boy a year younger than me but by a boy three years younger than me.

I am the epitome of stupidity.

Around the bush we were hiding at, a butler and a maid encountered each other.

“Might you have any idea where master may be?”

“Master? No, he wasn’t here. Hey, have you seen Shirley?”

“Shirley?”

*If it's the lord, he's right here*, I answered in my mind. However, if I say it out loud, I would get caught too so I observed silently.

The shrewd butler raised an eyebrow.

“Who’s that?”

“The girl that was assigned recently. The thin girl with brown hair.”

“Ah, that creepy…… pu!”

The rag that was in the maid’s hand was thrown at the butler’s face.

“What are you doing!?”

“She’s just pale because she doesn’t sleep well, and she’s just thin because she doesn’t eat much, not eating snacks too!”

“I acknowledge that I spoke improperly, so don’t throw rags at me!”

“It’s used!”

“That’s even worse!”

“I cleaned dust while chasing after Shirley so it should be full of dust!”

“Wash it! But why were you chasing after her anyway!? Is the new girl slacking around!?”

“Rude! Shirley is so perfect that you won’t believe that’s she’s being a maid for the first time! With that flawlessness, she finishes work quickly and doesn’t participate in recess tea, so I was searching for her! She didn’t eat enough breakfast either!”

The two went away while barking at each other. Even as they fought, they kept searching. They’re a superb pair of a butler and a maid. However, if possible, I’d like them use that excellence somewhere else..... someone else.

The girl I’m living with, Jasmine, worries for me about many things as she’s around my age, but since I’ll disappear in a year so I’d like her to leave me alone.

While thinking about such things, I confirmed that the voice of the two disappeared and took five..... six, seven steps away and bowed my head.

Of course, the person I am bowing to is the first that was sitting along with me.

“Please excuse me.”

Black hair, golden eyes, and sharp face like a wolf’s. The height that he lamented about so much grew a lot, and the body that was ridiculed as a girl’s grew bulky as if to say such past did not exist, and the flawless white child’s skin earned the shade of a grown man. The current lord of Laius fiefdom, Kaid Falua.

Improved the living conditions of the people who was devastated by the previous lord’s misrule and eradicating corruption, the adept young lord turned the land into one with the best economy and security in the country in the time span of just fifteen years.

He’s the man who recently became my master. I have no complaints about being a maid, but serving him..... It’s hard to swallow.

Kaid sat down and stared at me, who took two more steps away and was now standing at nine steps away. It's an unthinkable etiquette for a lord, but the man that did not seem like a lord is a wise man that appears maybe once a century, and father who taught me etiquette was the worst and the most evil lord, so etiquette might not matter.

"I thought that I didn't recognise you, so you're 'Shirley Hince'?"

".....Yes. I moved in the other day and started working in this mansion."

He remembered my full name.

I was thinking of slipping away like this, but think that he does not only differentiate the new maids and the veteran maids, but also knows the name of the newcomer, what a respectable lord. You are the consummate role model of a lord.

Though that doesn't help me a bit.

"Thank you, master. I am sincerely happy that I can work at such a magnificent mansion though I was just an orphan."

"That's good..... However, did my policy fail?"

"Excuse me?"

I was thinking of leaving after thanking him, but he said something strange so I ended up blurting out.

Kaid stared at me, scanning up and down with a piercing gaze.

"You, you said that you were at an orphanage until recently, yes?"

"Yes."

"You look so frail. Was it an environment where there was not enough food?"

Hands and feet like sticks, wiry hair, cracked lips. A creepy girl who only her dry eyes stand out.

After remembering how I looked in the mirror today, I hastily corrected him.

“No, that’s not true. Indeed, I was at a small orphanage in a remote region, but not only did I not starve, there was enough firewood and blankets for everyone in the winter. I lead a comfortable life.”

Not only was the official kind, but the villagers, and of course the orphanage director made sure of such things. Everyone could go to school without starving or trembling in the cold. There was enough so that even orphans could live comfortably.

Stories of distributed goods or funds ending up in some official’s pockets are relics of when father was the lord.

I can’t allow people who were kind to me to be mistaken just because I am thin.

“Then, why are you so thin. I must hear.”

It’s just one maid, it’d be better if he ignored it. I clicked my tongue in my head.

Before, I was a child that didn’t know anything, so I didn’t know what clicking the tongue meant, but in this life I learned that it’s done in disparagement.

I sighed and grabbed my index finger and my middle finger. It felt as though Kaid’s eyes widened somewhat.

“That is because I have memories of a previous life.”

This time for sure, unlike those golden eyes that opened wide, my eyes must be dark and clouded.

## CHAPTER 3

# YOUR CANDY AND ME

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“In my previous life, I have committed a grave sin. I did get punished, but that was not enough. Thus, I was reincarnated with memories of my past life. I must receive retribution. God has decreed it that it is not enough with just one life. I will end my as Our Father wills it. That is God’s will. It is my duty. Only after my redemption, I will be able to go back to Our Father. Until then, I must continue to repent. If I do not, I cannot return to Our Father in Heaven.”

I didn’t lie. I just used God’s will that I did not actually hear, to put up a facade that I wish to return to Him, though I don’t think that way.

I told him the truth that was slightly dramatised and waited for the moment that his wide-open golden eyes change colour.

There were many kind people.

There were plenty of good people.

Everyone worried for me who did not eat properly, and reached out for me who was always wearing patched clothes.

Every time that happened, I told that story. I witnessed so many times how the kindhearted people’s eyes change into a shade of horror, taking steps backwards as their expressions became strained.

I told the story to see that.

It’s catching two birds with one stone, as I do not have to lie, committing more sins, and get left alone.

I was seen as a fanatic. I was seen as a madwoman. I was seen as a pitiful liar girl.

Anyway, no one believed me. They did not believe me, but they left me.

Yes. I am insane. I'm strange in the head, I'm creepy and depressing, and I'm a miserable girl. I of course do not have family, friends, lovers nor acquaintances.

I don't need them.

So please leave me alone.

When I told that truth, in front me, Kaid placed his long fingers on his chin and narrowed his eyes.

Those eyes felt as if they were confirming something, so it felt somewhat disturbing.

If they were slightly sharper, it would really fit his nickname, 'the Wolf'.

It's amazing how he made those somewhat frail yet kind eyes back then, considering that those eyes are as sharp as fangs.

Not forgiving criminals, that is the same as the previous lord. However, he is admired. Because a criminal convicted not because one went against the lord but because one broke the just and ethical law.

The sycophants to the previous lord were gathered for a meeting on that day, where they were all caught and punished.

There were those who did not attend the meeting or those who barely escaped, but they were all caught in the end. No matter how thick the surrounding was, he would edge in and bite that neck. There was no mercy in that. Many were punished and banished, that the composition of nobles of Laius changed greatly. It can be said that

many who were replaced in grandfather and father's generations came back.

Laius, which was destroyed by grandfather and father, are being fixed by Kaid, who destroyed us. He was reclaiming the bountiful Laius.

He is a splendid man. Wise, bold and handsome. He is a charismatic man blessed by God.

A man that could not have liked an airhead, dreaming woman that did not try to see the reality.

It would be nice if he ends me himself with those fangs.

I had my hands gathered together and had my back straight, waiting for that golden shade to distort into an ugly one.

However, that moment did not come. Rather, he leaned in closer, out of interest. Please don't get closer.

"Now, that is an abrupt and unbelievable story."

"Of course. It's probably just that there's something wrong with my head."

Even though I know that it's rude to this as a servant, I cut off the conversation to end the story. If he fires me out of rage, then that is fine. I'm only sorry that the orphanage director's little sister's..... I forgot, but anyway, I only feel sorry that they might get caught up in that. However, if they get disgusted at me because of that and leave me alone, then there's nothing I'd like better.

When I was about to make a final bow, there were golden eyes in my sight.

Because I was stared at from below, I unconsciously took a step back. Standing up as if to chase after me, he grabbed my elbow with his long fingers. Seeing that his hand wrapped around my whole elbow, he frowned.

“However, when living in this place, it’s easy to tell if someone’s lying.”

He took his hand off my elbow and tapped my fingers with his.

“You’re too frail. I won’t let my subjects starve to death.”

“I will enter a monastery next year, so I have no plans to die.”

*Unless I get executed*, I added inside my head.

Seeing Kaid look from above as if to listen closely to that statement, I took another step back.

“This is more troublesome than what the rumours suggested. It’s even more amazing that it doesn’t seem like you’re lying.”

“It’s fine if you don’t like madwoman, so please kick me out of the mansion.”

“Insane people are insane because they don’t know that. Now then, why don’t we change your workplace?”

“Ha?”

Feeling cornered, I took another step back.

There was something behind me, so I could move anymore. When I flinched and checked it, it was just a tree. The tall tree must be older than me.

Objects of my memories are no longer there, but things I do not remember are still here. It was so unreasonable that I laughed, despite the situation.

“Shirley Hince, from now on, you are not a maid of the mansion but my direct maid.”

“.....Pardon?”

I didn’t understand what he meant, so I ended up asking back.

While grabbing my arm, Kaid started walking. Even if I resist, I could be easily caught.

“Samua!”

From his clear voice, Samua and Jasmine who were still nearby ran back here. Then, seeing me getting dragged by the arm, their eyes widened.

“What, Shirley! You were there!?”

“Erm, master. Did that person show disrespect? I apologise, sir! She’s still very new, so she does not know the house very well. I’ll teach her properly, so please overlook it this time. I’ll receive the punishment, sir!”

Bending hip and back at a right angle that was neither graceful nor beautiful. *Would this be how athletic people are*, I felt slight interest, but more than that I felt great surprise.

Really, he did not have to apologise in my place, nor does he have to receive punishment instead of me. Jasmine, who was next to him, was bowing too, so it was even more troubling.

It was such a situation, but I, the person in question, thought of something completely different.

He really has good people around him. It must be benevolence. My father had been kind to us, his family, but towards the maids and butlers he looked at them as though he was looking at livestock. Even though there were that many people passing by, that is.

*He did not have virtue*, I thought. Not just virtue, he did not have something he held precious as a person. Thus, only people like him flocked to him.

Even then, there was nothing. Thus, the end was inevitable.

Seeing the two bow at the same angle, Kaid smiled wryly. Ah, it's an expression I'm seeing for the first time.

"I don't know what you're misunderstanding, but there is something that she did wrong, it's that she's too thin. Now, Jasmine, what did she have for breakfast?"

"Eh, ah, yes, a piece of bread and a cup..... no, half a cup? of soup."

"To not feed even a single piece of meat to a servant..... I'm still lacklustre as a lord. Jasmine, take her to the head maid and please tell her that I apologise. Tell her that I'm sorry for taking one of her girls away. If it helps, hire more. Samua, tell the same thing to the head butler."

Isn't he the one going mad? One might have thought. However, as for the attitude of the two servants:

"Aah, I see. Again? Alright, I'll convey that, sir."

"Shirley, what a relief!"

.....What just happened?

My my, it's the usual. While saying that, the two of them started walking away, saying, "Then, we will do that."

Wait a bit. Explain at least a little.

"Ah..... P-Please wait, Jasmine-san!"

When I desperately called for Jasmine as my arm was held by Kaid, she turned her round with so much force that it felt as though her hairpins would fly out. Then, she pushed Samua aside and ran up to me with great vigour, after which she grabbed my free hand with both hands and smiled.

"No way!"

And then this “no way”. What am I supposed to say to this person full of smiles?

Jasmine shook my hand and jumped up and down while still saying “no way no way”.

“Samua, did you say that!? Shirley called my name for the first time!”

“.....You, even though you live together, you didn’t even call her n-blegh!”

The cloth flew into his face again.

Having thrown the cloth at Samua’s face, Jasmine smiled happily like a child that just had candy.

“You see, Shirley, serving master is the best position!”

“Pardon?”

“Well, you can have as much sweets as you want, as much snacks as you want, as much food as you want, and when he brings you when he goes out you can have unlimited food from the stalls! Also-also-also! You can even have the same thing that master has for breakfast, lunch and dinner!”

“I’ll resig-.”

“If it was someone else, there would be bloodbath from jealousy, but if it’s you, Shirley, everyone would be happy! You really are too thin!”

I wasn’t allowed to finished the sentence. Plus, it’s not beneficial at all, and what should I do about the story that suddenly turned scary.

Troubled, I pondered a little. Then, I reached the conclusion that I’d like my arms released.

I quietly looked up at Kaid who was still discussing something with Samua.

Before, when he was worrying about his short height, I took care to wear low heels and not have hairstyles that gather up.

Seeing him with such a bulky physique now, it was almost unbelievable that such a thing happened. I wasn't doing anything, but he suddenly turned around, that his golden eyes met mind.

To me who blinked unconsciously, he smiled.

A little, only a little, it felt like there was Helt there, that blood drained from my face.

“For now, I only have these on my person. Which flavour would you like?”

When his hand, which was in his pocket, slowly opened to reveal candies in cute wrappings, blood flowed back to my face.

I blinked once at those things that did not fit the lord's nickname, 'the Wolf', and politely refused. However, while I was complaining, a candy was placed in my mouth without my permission. Unable to spit it out as that would be rude, I could only stare at him reproachfully.

Even though he received such a gaze, he laughed in a carefree manner.

I can't remember when the last time I had something sweet was.

The sweet flavour I tasted after a long time was strawberry flavour.

# CHAPTER 4

## THE PAST DAYS OF YOU AND ME

---

I was soon turning 17, yet I was not allowed outside very much, like when I was little.

However, the mansion was large and the land surrounding it was nearly endless to walk through. There was a place like a forest with a stream inside the land, so I did not have much complaints.

Because it was only after everything ended that I learned how small and closed my world was.

I hurried. The class ended later than expected, so it was already past the appointment time. I did not have anything scheduled until the dance class later, but since there's no knowing when he will have to return to work, we do not have much time to spend together.

Without minding my dress hems getting soiled, I ran through the gravel road. Though it was a low one, it was hard to run with heels. I would rather run barefoot, but when I did that before I was scolded harshly by him. Since I promised that I will not do it again, I cannot do that. Back then, he treated my slightly bruised feet.

As he did that, there was no trace of his usual shy smile, but a force that made me unable to make up excuses, that I could only apologise.

There was no one at the birch tree we arranged to meet at. I dropped my shoulders that were rising and falling with heavy panting.

He has work, so he has to go as soon as he is called. It's my fault for being late.

While brushing my now-dishevelled hair back, I gathered my breath. I wonder if he

will return if I wait. Or, will it take all the time until I am forced to return?

I pondered a little. I will wait even if it's useless. It's a rare period of time where the two of us can meet. There is no way we will give it up.

To spread open my handkerchief on the usual rock, I turned my back to the birch tree. Behind me, a cracking sound of twigs snapping echoed.

“Ah!”

“Kyaaa!”

It merely landed on my back gently, but I was extremely startled. Freed from my grasp, the handkerchief fluttered away. He grabbed it easily. He sometimes can be surprisingly agile.

However, I did not have room for surprise. I was already too shocked.

Though my heart always pounds when I am with him, this time I turned around as my heart pounded in a different sense.

“Helt, you!”

While desperately calming my heart that still pounded, I puffed out my cheeks. Helt handed the handkerchief to me and laughed.

“You surprised me!”

“Then it's a success. It's revenge for my lady coming late.”

Seeing him smile so happily from his trick working, my mood softened. For his cute smile, I forgave him while smiling wryly.

Because, it was him forgiving me in his own way, by trying to not make me worry about coming late. When he came late, I made him wear a garland of flowers I made in the meanwhile. The way he looked dejected as he said that he was a man was so cute, so

the punishment for his tardiness in the season of flowers was for him wear a garland of flowers.

Sitting in the shade, the two of us chatted about nothing. While holding his hand, I gently rubbed my shoulder against his. My heart pounded so much, but I could not lean against his shoulder like they do in novels.

When I glanced at him, his neck was bright red, but I was the same so I could not laugh. We did not laugh, but it was embarrassing, so the both of tried our hardest to keep a straight face or frown.

Since I did not want to show a strange expression, I desperately continued chatting to not show my red face.

“Hey, Helt, tell me about your homeland.”

“It’s boring though?”

“Today, I studied about the northern lands. Since it was your homeland, I got excited even though it was a class that I usually could not help but doze..... The teacher noticed that I was energised, so the class ended up finishing late though.”

He smiled wryly.

Then, he told me once again that it’s a boring story.

“Even though it’s the same Laius fiefdom, it’s an incomparably barren land compared to here. The Darrich fiefdom, our neighbour has been eyeing our lands to expand their lands, but even they do not want that land. Since such a place is at the border, even if there is a conflict with Darrich and Gimii, Laius is not affected much.”

“I heard about that.”

“Well, it’s a frozen land, so there is not much land that can be used for farming, and

even the period for sowing is short.”

There was a feeling of yearning and a loveliness as he talked about his homeland and then closed his eyes as he got lost in thought.

“.....Helt?”

The golden eyes that opened again looked at me in a shade that I never saw before.

“Children, adults and even livestock..... hunger is painful. Both for those suffering and for those watching.”

“Well, that is..... if the land is poor, I wonder if it is useless to use fertilisers..... Like people, would it be useless if there is too much? If you ask father, I am sure he can prepare some.”

It would have been nice to learn how to enrich the lands instead of how to dance.

Seeing him get depressed, I felt sad too. However, he grabbed my hands and leaned his forehead against mine. Surprised, I ended up closing my eyes. From his warmth, I could sense the smell of dirt, horses and iron.

“My lady, you don’t have to make such an expression. It’s alright. It’s not as though we are not doing anything. Everyone is trying their best to live well. So it’s alright. So, my lady, can you keep the story of my homeland a secret? I’ll be ridiculed by everyone for coming from the sticks.”

“Is that so, I am sorry..... However, I do not think such a thing will happen. Helt, you are loved by everyone. Where you come from is not important.”

“It’s only you, my lady, who says that. You are a kind person, raised preciously here.”

“I still think it should be alright..... did you just call me sheltered again?”

“Y-You could tell?”

“Helt!”

As I shook his hand off from annoyance, he laughed loudly.

The way his tied up hair swayed in the air like a horse's tail was cute, so I ended up laughing too in spite of myself.

I threw away some grass that I uprooted meaninglessly and reconciled with him.

The wind blew between the trees and lifted up the leaves. Flying past the high fences, the two of us saw off the leaves whose destinations were unknown.

There was some dirt stuck to Helt's sleeves. When I scraped some off with my fingernails, he panicked and hid them away. He told that he will do it himself, but I think his nails are too short for that.

"Come on, Helt."

"No, your pretty fingers will be dirtied, my lady."

"You can easily wash away dirt. And, that's not it."

"Pardon?"

"Erm, well..... I do think that it will be tough, since my father does not like me going out very much, so I do not know when it will be, but....."

"My lady?"

I grabbed my index finger and middle finger and closed my mouth, so he looked at me worriedly. Consoled by the golden light that was clearer and warmer than the sun, I lifted my face up.

"I want to visit Helt's homeland."

"My lady."

I loved how the golden light danced, so I ended up staring into it.

“.....It’s far away.”

“Then I can talk a lot with you on the way there.”

“It’s cold there.”

“Then I have a reason to buy a new coat.”

“There’s only one shop selling goods from vegetables to headdresses. The only scenery is the mountains and the rocks. There’s nothing to be seen there.”

“I want to see the tree that you climbed, and climb it myself. Will you help me?”

I heard that there is a big tree. I heard that he would sneak into the grotto, or sit on the watch the scenery while sitting on one of those thick branches. I heard that the fish swimming in the stream shined like stars.

“I always wished to see the land that you grew up in. Will you take me there sometime?”

Whenever he talked about his homeland, he looked younger and it showed how precious the land was to him. Every time he talked about it, my admiration for the land that raised him grew.

Someday, someday I want to go there.

To the northern land that is precious to him, with him.

When I stared at him silently, he opened his mouth as if to say something, but closed it again.

Then, he smiled softly.

“Let’s go sometime.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I can take you there.”

“I’m so happy!”

To my overflowing smile, he gave me a soft, tender touch of a kiss.

Subdued sunbeams peeked through the trees as the soft wind brushed my hair.

I woke up from the soft rustling of clothes. At the bed next to mine, Jasmine was tossing and turning.

For a moment, I couldn’t tell where I was.

When I looked at the place to my side, it seemed that she was moving a little too much as the blanket had fallen down. I walked over barefoot and lifted up the blanket. It did not compare to what I had been using back then, but this too was a clean and nice sheet.

Everyone says that this is a good age. I think so too. There’s leisure in life from work, and everyone was filled with happiness from paying just taxes and protecting their lives.

“Mm.....”

Jasmine’s hands wandered around for the blanket in her sleep. To not wake her, I gently placed it on her. The hands grabbed the edge and happily fell back to sleep.

After checking that she did not wake, I quietly trod back to my bed and let my weight fall on the small creaking bed.

It was a warm dream, yet cold sweat flowed at my back and the chills did not disappear.

With a deep sigh, I covered my face.

“Liar.”

The quiet muttering was not heard by anyone and melted into the silently fading night.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE WORKPLACE OF YOU AND ME

---

After having breakfast while being pestered by Jasmine that I wasn't having enough, I started moving to my new workplace although I wasn't even used to my original workplace.

I was originally employed as a maid for the lord's mansion.

However, there are two kinds of maids here.

One are the maids assigned to the house.

The other are the maids assigned to the lord's offices, the place I am headed to.

Unlike the mansion where there were many young people, there were more older people here. The servants I ran across were mostly in their thirties and forties, and there were barely any people under twenty.

Though we are now in a time of peace, Kaid became a lord through revolution. I heard that there were quite a lot of assaults from remnant forces.

Therefore, the people here are only people that can be trusted, or so the maid in her thirties who was guiding me explained to me. People from back then remained here, so the age bracket is high. It's same with the butlers.

Of course, all the people are hired after strict examination, but even then this place is special.

There's also that he's busy, but Kaid even sleeps here.

I was being told to not make any suspicious movements since it's that kind of place, but my head could only hear half. I knew I shouldn't, but my sight wandered to people passing by.

I felt a sense of déjà vu. It's not because of the place. There's no more trace of my family home here. That's natural, since it all burned down that day.

Then, why am I feeling this déjà vu.

The way my eyes wandered around to servants passing by seemed to look as though I was fascinated at a place I never saw before, that the woman made a bitter smile.

"The word of the lord was that it should be practical since it's an office, but it indeed must be surprising to see at first. To think a day when we would ask for a room to show off be made came, I often chat about that with the butlers."

Durable objects rather than fine ones. Since there aren't decorations, it can be thicker. As if to say that, the building was tough. The window frames were iron, and the gap was narrow that even if the glass was broken it would be impossible to get in without removing the whole frame. The things that can be seen on the iron bars must be there out of necessity. It's in the same grounds, but it's very different from the mansion over there. That was rather bland, but compared to this that was luxurious..... or rather, playful. That building was at an out-of-the-way location, while this building was shown to people. If I'm going to the other side, I'm going to do it after I destroy this place, I felt.

*But it's strong*, I thought as I narrowed my eyes at the mansion that was like a fort. I silently stared at a man in his late thirties that passed by behind. However, I can't be sure. Because I was not a good master like Kaid.

"You'll get used to it soon. So, it's your first time meeting the head maid, yes?"

"No, I met her the day I was hired."

"My, really."

“Yes, Hilda-san.”

She was a slightly plump and kind lady with a soft smile. Mid-twenties, maybe. She didn't scold me for not smiling a bit, but said, “If you're greeting a guest, you can just bow and hide that you're not smiling,” even touching me how to get past things without smiling.

When I told her that I met Hilda-san before, without describing the above, she let out an “Oh my.”

“Sorry, it's different. Hilda was a temporary head maid.”

“Substitute.”

“Right, the head maid was on a short break..... aah, good timing. She's over there.”

The man I was staring at stopped and was talking with someone. They were looking back and forth between sheets of paper and each other, checking something and jotting things down.

Facing this way, the man noticed us. He said something to the woman in front of him who had her back to her. The woman folded the sheet of paper and turned around to us.

The woman in her mid-thirties opened her mouth in an “Ah,” after seeing us.

“Thank you, Dahlia. So she is Shirley Hince. I heard the story.”

The woman who held her hand out with a smile on her slightly freckled face was,

“Caron.....”

“Eh?”

Caron who put on slightly thick makeup because she was bothered by her freckles.

Caron who was slightly clumsy but playful and amiable.

Caron who cried that her parents did not acknowledge her lover and forcefully decided on a fiancé.

Caron who bowed and asked us stay healthy when she left.

Caron, the only daughter of the hatter couple.

My maid, Carolina.....

Seeing Caron tilt her head after I murmured that, I hurried bowed. The man that was just as puzzled was a temporary butler. I remembered.

The servants changed so many times. They were scolded and fired for petty things, I heard in this life.

I didn't remember new people's names like Kaid. Rather, I couldn't even remember people who served for long times. I thought that should be the case for people who changed in a blink.

It must have been frightening. I must have been terrifying.

I thought so after hearing the horrors of the mansion in this life.

One mistake might cost their lives and even their family. In that hell, they were working hard.

It was always somewhat dark and grim. Even so, the maid Caron always flashed an energetic smile to me. I wished for her happiness with that thin and seemingly unreliable but elegant painter.

Unlike the people that kept their distance from me, the bright and kind Caron cared for me and told me many stories.

I thought of her as a friend. I never confirmed it though, and it might just have been an extension of work for her. Still, I really liked her.

So she was back.

Then, I could finally grasp why I felt a this déjà vu. I wasn't just feeling it that there were people I saw before.

They all aged after fifteen years, but their appearance remained. They were all people who used to work at the mansion. Of course, there were quite a lot of people I didn't know. Maybe there were servants at other places I didn't know.

"Carolina, is it someone you know?"

"No..... Sorry, have I met you before?"

The man was not wearing a butler's suit. Thus, he is not a butler right now. Still, he had documents in his hand, so he must be helping the new lord Kaid in another way.

They looked a little haggard maybe from the work, but everyone's eyes were different.

As for Caron, it looked like she attained a calm state, but everyone else had strength in their eyes.

It felt as though they were not the people that cowered that they may be destroyed from mother or grandmother's whims.

Ah, these are good times.

The white mansion that was like a palace.

And the building that looked incomparably tough, like a fort.

Even then, it was better than our heaven. Our paradise was Laius's nightmare.

Just from seeing the faces of people working, I can tell. Now it became a place where people can lead proper lives as people.

".....You reminded me of someone. Please excuse me."

"My, really? Fufu, how strange. I also used to be called Caron."

Yes, I called you that.

Your smile was lovely, so I wanted to call you with a cute nickname that was like a ringing of the bells.

"Erm..... I heard that you were on a break, is your body.....?"

"Ah, no, no. There was a bit of family trouble, so I had a short break. Thank you for worrying about me, I'm fine."

"Your husband's family?"

"Yes, he's travelling to many places as a painter, so it's quite troublesome trying to contact him..... Ahh, anyway, it's been a long time since I heard 'Caron'. I'm envious of the person you know. I loved that sound."

Caron smiled in nostalgia. The makeup that was less thick now suited her very well.

So you liked that nickname too. Then, I'm happy. For saying that you were happy, hearing that truth makes me so happy. And, I couldn't be happier, seeing you living happily.

It's nice that the people here did not end up unhappy. That kind man must still be with Caron, making her happy.

It was sad to see you go. However, it was good that you left.

It's a great relief that I didn't have to show you my end to you.

There was someone surrounded by a few men approaching with quick steps.

Tall, his hair black as the night fluttering, watching the world with those golden eyes shinier than the sun.

We went to the end of the corridor and bowed.

The others all finished greeting him. Caron urged me with her eyes, so I greeted him.

"Good morning to you, master."

"Ah, hello..... you have dark circles under your eyes. Did you not sleep well? Should the pillow be changed?"

"No, I did sleep well."

These are good times. It's a good place now.

Kaid in front of me was proof of that.

Kaid gave out orders and documents to the men around him and turned around.

"Carolina, it may be sudden, but I need you at work."

"Yes."

"Still, you could have relaxed a little more without returning so quickly. Didn't you work on a strict schedule?"

"However, I ended up causing a lot of trouble by suddenly taking a break. It will get

busier, so I can't have any more breaks."

"Well, it will get busy. However, don't strain yourself. It's different from before, nothing good will come if you ruin your body."

"I don't want to hear it from you, master, but are you implying that I'm old?"

In reaction to Caron who took a step forth, Kaid took two steps back in panic.

"No, no no, that's not what I mean. I wouldn't say something so rude to a woman."

"With all due respect, there's only three years of age difference between you and me. If I'm old, then you're old too!"

"Sorry!"

Caron smiled kindly to me, saying, "Work hard," and bowed gracefully before leaving with Dahlia. The remaining men stared at Kaid with compassion. They were full of compassion, but no one tried to help him. They all slightly avoided Kaid's gaze that seemed to be pleading for help.

".....I just wanted to say that we shouldn't be running the place with barely enough people like the old days."

".....Yes, sir."

After hearing Kaid's murmur, the men patted his shoulder.

These, are, good..... times.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE TOAST OF YOU AND ME

---

There were many people entering and exiting the lord's room. That felt fresh for some reason.

One after another, people passed and there wasn't any time for them to greet each other. They had documents, and after they finished checking something more people came in. There weren't many people during the days of father. Also, since the meetings were all scheduled, who and when they came were being properly managed.

Everyone was used to it, so they went straight to the point without greeting the lord properly. I guess they're familiar faces. Kaid processed the flood of issues in succession. Sometimes, he would stand in front of the huge bookcase and fetch some books and then discuss the issue with the person who brought it.

The morning was spent like that and it became noon in a blink.

Somehow, a little past lunch, we could get a short break.

Kaid had been signing and drawing slashes on documents some hundred times.

As he leaned back against the chair, I served him tea.

"Thank you."

He made a carefree thanks and drank it, so I ended up frowning.

What if I had put in poison?

They probably make strict inspections before hiring people, but it's still careless. He shouldn't be having something from someone that hadn't been hired for long. Rather, I shouldn't even be the maid of this building to begin with.

Even if I didn't do it, if there's poison in the tea I brewed I'll be caught. I don't want to

be framed and executed, and if Kaid's not here anymore, everyone will be troubled.

"Do you want to say that I am too careless?"

Noticing my gaze, Kaid shook the empty cup at me.

"When I didn't have anything to eat, I ate even leather soles and sometimes even slightly toxic plants to substitute food. It's better if I try it than if people without resistance have it. So I won't die from a little poison. I recall getting scolded, 'Why won't you die!' from a spy. I almost died from eating a worse mushroom than that, he should mixed that in."

Kaid coolly said something absurd. I gulped and gripped my index finger and middle finger.

It's a poor land already, but when there are heavy taxes, the land becomes impoverished beyond prepare. They end up having to eat the seedlings for planting next spring and have to dig up the roots of their fruit trees to survive from starving to death. The trees wilt and the untilled land becomes harder, and the land become even poorer.

I can't imagine how it would have been during the two years he's been with me. He wouldn't cross such a dangerous bridge while he was infiltrated.

That's in the past. It's when he was fourteen. No..... it's two years before that, so it's when he was twelve.

".....When,"

"Hm?"

Kaid who was narrowing his eyes at something raised his head at my voice.

"When had you been close to death?"

"Even if you ask when..... it's not once or twice..... The first time was when I was

six? There was an epidemic so there were not many workers available, but there was an increase in taxation. Having to face winter without enough food, I almost didn't make it. However, thanks to that I ate a mushroom that was thought to be inedible. It's only the stalk that can't be eaten. The cap was harmless. We managed to survive that winter with that, so it ended alright. Well, I was scolded quite harshly though."

Ending with just a scolding is a miracle. Not getting surrounded by sobbing people in black clothes is a miracle.

He was someone that infiltrated the lord's mansion that might get him for a petty reason even without getting found out as a spy. So he was reckless from a long time ago.

The force that clenched my fingers grew tighter.

Kaid stood up and poured some tea into another cup and offered me that.

"Plus, you're not a spy, am I correct?"

".....Why not?"

Where does that confidence come from.

Seeing my puzzled look, Kaid made a completely exasperated face.

"What can a spy do if she stands out? Normally, spies blend in to not get noticed. There aren't any spies that say 'don't approach me' from the beginning"

He's indeed a former spy. It's very convincing.

"I've no idea about saying something about reincarnation to get out of trouble. It's unheard of. However, if I've offended you, I could hold an investigation. Maybe you might be able to do something amidst that."

After hesitating a little, I took the cup that had no pulling strength to it. Slightly cooled, it gave off a foreign scent. Kaid fixed himself a cup of tea too. The clear red-brown liquid slopped back and forth.

“Whatever you are, it doesn’t change the fact that you are my subject. I wish for all the people to be happy. Even if that might be a reckless dream and an idiotic wish, I still think that. If I don’t, there’s no point in robbing this land from the previous lord. I’m not wishing for everyone to have enough money to play for the rest of their lives. But at the least, I wish no one will starve. I wish that people won’t have to feel worried about surviving the winter. I wish that people won’t have murder their babies from despair. I wish that there won’t be a need to judge people for the crimes they committed to survive. Then, after there are no more worries, I wish that people can live while smiling.”

His wish are the minimum rights. The rights that people should have at the least.

That which did not exist in Laius before.

“I believe that it is a very wonderful idea. For the sake of Laius, I will serve as you, my master’s hands for a year. However, I have already been blessed from your wish in my previous life. Please offer your wish to someone else that had not received it yet.”

“That’s unfortunate, Shirley. I’m arrogant. Two rather than one, three rather than two, the more the better. At the least, I won’t forgive you if you starve to death in front of eyes. Anyway, I would like to begin by putting some fat on you, but well, I guess I’ll make a toast for now.”

“About what, sir?”

“Right.”

Kaid pondered a while. I looked up at that. He really grew tall. It’s almost unbelievable that I wore low heels to match his height. Rather, my neck hurts.

The cups clashed.

“To the happy future of the young lady in front of me.”

“To the future of our Laius. “

With Kaid who made a bitter smile, I sipped some tea. It was a tea that I didn't have back in those days, but it was easy to drink, not too bitter and with a sweetness.

Seeing me blink, Kaid laughed.

"Is it good? It will become the special produce of a village to the east. It seems like that land is poor for other crops, but good for these tea leaves. Next year, it will spread to other places in Laius. It would best if it could spread to other fiefdoms, but that might be tough. There's too much rain in those lands so the ground is unstable, making it hard to expand farmlands."

I wonder if I ever heard about such things from father, or from grandfather.

My family bought only from the royal capital and from famous stores. The money exploited from Laius was not spent in Laius. I could have easily understood what would happen then if I pondered a little, I thought.

Isn't it pretty, isn't it cute. It's a top-quality good.

It looks good on you. It looks nice. It's cute.

I had trusted the smiles of my family without considering the process leading up to it.

Aa, you are right.

Seeing Kaid, I wanted to burst into laughter. I couldn't tell what these feelings that sprang up after a long time were.

Pleasant, cheerful, dismal and unsightly. I forgot the name of this emotion.

I wonder what kind of face I'm making. The golden eyes widened and murmured something, but I couldn't even catch that.

Fifteen years after gained a new life, feelings started gushing out, bursting out. It swirled all around my body and it was worse than blood. Blood gives life but this will kill me.

We were unclouded evil, evil so pure that it almost shone. We were the parasites bleeding Laius. We were the evils that rightly had to be murdered.

His resolve was a wise one that rescued Laius from ruin, raising it back to glory and protecting the people.

You are right.

You are strong, wise and kind, fit to be called a hero. You truly are the saviour of Laius.

That is why, you made a mistake.

# CHAPTER 7

## PREPARING TO GO OUT, YOU AND ME

---

A piece of bread and half a cup of soup.

When I finished my usual lunch, Jasmine puffed her cheeks.

“Shir~ley~”

To me who stood up with the empty dish, she called me in a strange and soft voice. When I turned around while tilting my head, a large chunk filled my mouth.

Inside the mouth I accidentally closed, the sweet chunk melted away. A deep sweetness filled my mouth.

“.....Peach?”

“Yesyesyes. If it’s a fruit like peach, it’s easy to eat and get the nutrients, right?”

“.....I’m surprised you managed to get it in this season.”

“It’s near the festival, so there were many things coming in, and the chef said that this would be good for a young lady.”

When I turned my head towards the chef, the ever stoic, frowning man quickly disappeared into the shade of a deep pot. The senescent man had always given me the amount I asked for, but I learned for the first time today that it wasn’t that he didn’t care.

While returning the dishes, I bowed my head slightly. I saw the white hat that could not hide shake.

“It’s been a month since you started working for master, but Shirley, you’re still eating here. I heard the food over there’s nice too.”

“She’s here today because she has work!”

In response to Jasmine who drew closer to him with great momentum, Samua took two steps back and whispered to the boy next to him.

“.....Did I say something wrong again?”

“I think obstinately being around her might have been a bad idea.”

Their conversation could be heard from over here.

The boy is a butler-in-training hired three months before I became. With eyes like the ear of rice, he is called Tim.

“E-Erm, Shirley-san, if you’re in plain clothes, does that mean you’re going out somewhere?”

I learned during this one month, but it seems like Samua speaks a word too much, or isn’t very good with choosing words. Before Samua could anger Jasmine more, Tim quickly told the story.

From the usual maid uniform I’ve been wearing just before, I had changed into plain clothes. A grey one-piece dress. It’s one of the few property I have.

“Master said that he will be going down to the town, so he requested that she change into plain clothes.”

Since going out as a lord causes problems and takes time to prepare, he sometimes goes out secretly. So his attendant is also in plain clothes. According to Caron, he’s been busy recently so she thought it would be soon.

A simple one-piece dress made using a sheet of fabric. It’s one of the only personal belongings I have, but seeing that Jasmine stared up at the sky.

Having got closer to Samua, Jasmine pounded the table with a fist with a face full of trouble.

“I-I wanted to her lend her my clothes.....! To wear at the festival, I bought this cute pink dress. I wanted to lend her that, but the size.....!”

“Aah, you did eat three extra snacks- bu!”

“The clothes slip from her shoulders!”

“That was a slip of the tongue- ka!? It’s the truth..... Sorry, sorry I know that I’m in the wrong so please stop hitting me! It hurts! If the size doesn’t fit her, you can lend her something else, right!?”

“.....Ah, w-wait a bit, Shirley! I’ll be back soon!”

“Ow!”

Turning at a sharp angle while having Samua seized by the collar, she threw Samua and started running.

If she’ll be back soon I don’t need to sit. I leaned against the wall and gathered my hands together in front my body.

In the dining hall, there’s a little less people than at noon. There’s a big festival once a year in Laius, so it’s busy getting ready to receive guests from other fiefdoms. So there’s not as many people as usual during meal times. Once we actually start receiving guests, it will get even busier compared to before.

Since it’s not as crowded as usual, I might not have needed to stand up. I already stood up. Anyway, I don’t plan on staying for long.

Not leaning against the wall and standing tall, Tim approached me with a wry smile.

“Those clothes look composed so it’s nice.”

“Thank you.”

Though Tim is a young person like me, he volunteers for errands with a smiling face and is very sociable. He is still very boyish, so his sweet and kind expression is probably another reason for him getting loved. He’s also good with women, being able to compliment people refreshingly like just before.

Standing next to me, with similar height to me, Tim tilted his head slightly and stared at me.

“Shirley-san, everyone’s saying that your complexion has got better.”

“Thanks to somebody.”

When I said that, Tim chuckled. He managed to see through the person I obfuscated. Then what he said next was about that person.

“Do you know what master’s recent orders about the snacks were?”

“.....No.”

“He asked for things that could eaten in single bite.”

That was the first time I heard it.

I thought he had been able to place snacks into my mouth recently. I just thought Kaid liked small snacks because he’s busy. But to think that it was to easily put it into my mouth.

Next time, it might better if I cover my mouth when speaking. I made a wry smile as I pressed my lips with my finger, while Tim put his hands behind his head as he went, “A—ah.” A gap appeared between his sleeve and his glove. There was a mole on his wrist, which for some reason I stared at.

“Master’s snacks must be nice. I want to try some too.”

I silently stared at him as he felt disappointed that it might have been his turn. I thought so too.

Apparently, people who got used to work are put to work over there. So he was thinking that it would definitely be his turn soon. Even if it’s the same faces, people are replaced out of necessity. I wonder if that’s there to watch the person that the next person could be shifted in without delay.

Maybe he’s holding a grudge against me, who was barely here for ten days while he

was here for three months. But, that doesn't mean a thing.

"It's unfortunate that it wasn't me, but if it's Shirley-san."

To Tim who winked and smiled mischievously, I let out a sigh. Seeing that, Tim made a bitter smile, but not wanting to change the subject he placed his lips near my ear and lowered his voice.

"Everyone says that you two look good together."

".....Please tell everyone that's being insolent, no matter how kind master may be."

"You are the one he takes most interest in though."

"I do know that I am unsightly."

".....Master's marriage is the wish of all the servants."

Tim covered his face to hide tears. It's me who feels like crying.

"He's soon turning thirty, but he's refusing all marriage offers and there are no rumours either. The head butler's hair is growing greyer by the day!"

I wonder about a fifteen-year-old butler-in-training lamenting about that.

I sighed again. Hearing that sigh, Tim dropped his shoulders sadly.

"It's a good story for Shirley-san too, right? You don't dislike master, right? You'll be marrying into riches! We servants are your allies! Truth be told, I think the head maid is at the centre of it, but fortunately she seems to like Shirley-san!"

"Master is a very charming man, so if he feels like he will soon find a partner. Stir him up. He'll surely find a lady of proper status. Then the peace of Laius will be protected better, and there's nothing to be disappointed for me."

I took a step away and bowed with my hands together.

“Oi, Tim.”

Then, Samua who had been rubbing his bruise opened his mouth.

“Stirring things up is fine, but pressuring is not.”

Tim dejectedly dropped his shoulders and shut his mouth. The way he knows when to stop must also be a reason why is likeable. But please know that stirring things up is not good either.

Tim apologised and laughed bitterly.

“So you like Laius.”

“It is the land I was born in.”

“But then, will you not be here when you turn sixteen? This is the best place to work for Laius though.”

“.....I’ll do my best during the short time here.

To be honest, I am a bit thankful to the orphanage director.

For the opportunity of being able to do something for my first and second homeland. No matter how petty, that I could help. In my last life, I could not help, but only harm. I was unnecessary.

There’s no way I can’t make up for everything in the short period of a year and then I’ll be spending the rest of life in prayer for the future of Laius. However, that’s still not enough. What has already been destroyed cannot come back.

Every time I learn about things lost in the times when death always hung around, I think that.

Lands, stores, people, Laius, they all fell to ruin. Those who were rich in that period have more work than one death can solve.

So when I got a second life I wanted to return it to the people who were murdered unjustly during that age. Just that would have been the salvation for the people who were lamenting their losses. I wouldn't have squandered it away, not knowing what I should do for redemption.

How will I use this second life? How should I use it to atone for the sins of my family against Laius too.

As I sighed, I heard pitter-patter sounds of footsteps. When I turned around, there was Jasmine panting with her face slightly red.

“Shirley, look at this!!”

What she showed me was a necklace with a blue decoration. When I closely examined what was shown to me, there was a small flower.

“Hyacinth?”

“Right, I bought it because it was cute. But then, it didn't go with the one-piece dress so I had kept it in a drawer. I'll give it to you, Shirley.”

“I,”

“I do think I am being nosy, but for a maiden my age to not have any luxuries... Fufu, Shirley, you always tie your hair up, so it's easy to put on a necklace.”

After saying that, she quickly put her hands behind my neck and then backed away. Then, a blue ornament was hung on me. Jasmine, who put the blue colour on me, looked at me up and down.

“I did have a white one, but I accidentally snapped it some time ago.....”

Come to think of it, there was a white flower on a necklace whose chain snapped. I picked up as Jasmine was screaming, so I remember it well.

I did that quite a few times in the past. With the thin chains, it was too late when I

realised it. It had already snapped. Feeling the touch that I was not used to know, I unconsciously stared at my fingers.

Jasmine grabbed that hand with both her hands.

“Then, maybe for living together, or for getting closer, whatever reason’s good, so it would be nice if I got anything from Shirley..... To be honest, I thought that it was the same colour as Shirley’s eyes, so I ended up buying it immediately. Sorry, I bought it without knowing what your favourite colour is. This time, I want to go to the village together with you. So, tell me what your favourite colour is or what you like the most!”

“Jasmine-san.”

“You always say you like Jasmine..... Shirley, your skin is cute. Eh? Master’s snack? Is it because of the snacks!? Can you ask him what’s in those!?”

I blinked hard as her face got closer to me than her hands gripping my hand and the topic changed quickly. I stepped back a bit and desperately jogged my memory. If there’s something, there’s only one thing.

“.....I think it might be the tea.”

“Tea confectionery!? Oh my, that must be good for the body!”

“No, not a mix.”

“Then something made with tea?”

“No, not solid but liquid.....”

Liquid. Tea is fundamentally had in liquid state. I noticed that it got unnecessarily complicated from trying to explain it and thought a little. Easy explanation, easy.

“It’s just normal tea. So it has such an effect? Then we won’t have to worry about the profits. I think I should investigate a bit.....”

From the voice that came from behind, everyone flinched and turned around.

“Master!”

To Kaid who was waving from outside the window for some reason, Samua hurried over.

I stared at Kaid on the spot and was unable to move from the spot. His hair colour was different. He looked like a minor noble too. Though he doesn't wear luxurious clothing usually. He's closer to a villager than that, though.

Kaid's hair, which was brown like Helt's, glistened in the sun. He put a hand on Samua who was panicking.

“If you had called, I would have headed there, sir!”

“There's someone bothersome, so I'm heading out through the back. I'm sorry, but please return the prepared horses.”

“Eh..... a bothersome person, sir?”

“He will probably come here looking for me, but please act as though you don't know where I am. Shirley, shall we go?”

I was called, so I detached my hand from Jasmine's. Actually, my hand was gripped. Well, doesn't matter either way.

From that action, the blue flower on my chest swayed. Each other's gazes overlapped on that. Feeling the glance, I thought a little.

“.....Thank you.”

“Y, eah..... Yeah! Thank you!”

She took my hand again. With that hand as the axis, Jasmine hopped about. My field of vision was suddenly turned around and I was pushed on the back.

“Enjoy yourselves!”

Seeing Jasmine who looked more excited than me who was going to the town, Kaid who was leaning against the windowsill with his elbow smiled wryly.

“It is still work though?”

“But it’s still more fun cleaning or preparing the guest room, sir!”

“Mn, true.”

I was pushed again and stumbled. Grabbing my hand that almost crashed into the window, Kaid smiled wryly again.....

So the flow is that I’ll be exiting through the window. I wonder if Kaid will look the other way when I lift my leg. It will be a little difficult if he’s looking over here.

Would it be rude to ask the lord to face the other way? But at this rate, it will be rude in another sense.

While I was pondering what to do, Kaid leant over using his tall height.

“Did you have lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have a lot?”

“.....I had the usual.”

Kaid smiled wryly.

He makes this expression often. Not just him, others too. It’s probably because of my attitude.

“Well, you don’t lie.”

His hand that was extended along with the wry smile took the place behind my knees. I clung on to Kaid's head in surprise as he leant over. His dishevelled hair was stiff compared to the past. It did not compare to a fourteen-year-old's hair, but it feels very familiar to my fingers for some reason. The warmth I felt in the past did not change for some reason, so the emotion that started moving again brought pain.

I hugged Kaid's head as he lifted me up through the window and muttered something next to his ear.

".....I told enough lies already."

Kaid stopped mid-movement as he was crouching over to let me down. I laid my hands on those shoulders which were supporting me awkwardly and got off on my own.

I stood up, took my hands off his shoulders and mumbled.

Noticing the strain, I curled my lips. It wasn't just that my facial muscles which were out of use for a long time was frozen. There were many things mixed in.

It's a good thing I had my back towards Jasmine and the others. This face should not be shown for those who don't know that period.

I grabbed my index finger and middle finger and silently bowed.

"Thank you."

"Eh, what?"

"For helping me out the window."

To Kaid who was absentmindedly staring at my distorted face, I held my palm out to his left. The stable was to that direction.

"Let's go, sir. Shall we get going to the town?"

Master.

When I called him that, he looked at me with a very strange expression.

So I furthered the distortion.

I smiled.

As we walked without conversing about anything special, we arrived at the stable. Kaid stopped. I was looking down at my feet, so soon I bumped into him. When I hurried to the side, I could see what was ahead.

There was a young man leaning against the entrance of the stable. He had his golden hair tied up and had on the casual clothes of a minor noble, ruffled on purpose. The man that I remember seeing somewhere, winked his beauty spot next to his eye and smiled.

“It’s been a while, but you’re being rather cold to me, Kaid.”

“I’m seeing hallucinations. Looks like that tea does not work for hallucinations.”

Completely ignoring that young man, Kaid had his body turned towards me. Ignored even though he was on our path, the young man raised an eyebrow and approached us with quick steps.

“Is that any proper attitude for the next lord of another fiefdom that came from far away for Laius Liberation Festival?”

“I received the news that the guest from Gimii is still in Gimii just yesterday. The arrival should be at least ten days later.”

“Well, it should be empty inside.”

“Dammit.”

After shaking off the arms behind him, Kaid faced that young man.

“Why can’t you just come normally.”

“No, I heard that Fatlin is aiming to meet up with us near the entrance to Laius and I couldn’t be bothered so I took only a few and came by horse.”

“The lord of Darich is Joblyn.”

“About Fatlin, did you know that he got inflated even more?”

“From there?”

“Right. The carriage floor fell out I heard.”

In my memory, the lord of Darich was twice as wider than my barrel-like father. If he got even fatter, the floor would fall out, I absentmindedly thought.

And then I understood why I felt like I saw him somewhere. Though, all I remember was how he was a lovely doll-like ten-year-old boy. I hadn’t met him often.

“Now, won’t you introduce that lady to me? Lord of Laius, Kaid Falua.”

“If you wanted me give introductions as a lord, you should have come through an official meeting.”

“That’s true.”

The young man, as his thin cape fluttered, laid a hand on his chest and bowed gently.

“Heir-apparent of the House of Gimii, Isador Navarro. Pleased to make your acquaintance, lady.”

“Master’s maid, Shirley Hince, at your service, sir.”

I neatly gathered my hands and bowed deeply without bending my back.

“.....Nice, her posture’s fine and there’s nothing unnatural to her tone either. Has it really been just a month since you hired her?”

“Don’t lay your hand on my maid.”

“I’m not stupid enough to fool around with women in Laius where the scary wolf lord resides. Just what did you do when the guest from the fiefdom of Wyfar tried to hit a maid at the mansion? The lord of Wyfar still hasn’t come to Laius. According to rumours, he faints from just the mention of the name of Laius.”

“It’s just because he tried to fool around in my mansion. I just made doubly sure so that there won’t be a second time for lords. Shirley, you can raise your head. Rather, the heir-apparent of Gimii is not in Laius yet, so this person is just a suspicious person.”

“Not someone suspicious. You could at least have said that I am your bosom-friend.”

“Let’s go, Shirley.”

When I raised my head, Isador who was ignored in the flow slightly puffed his cheek. Then he shrugged at me and looked at Kaid who went to prepare the horse. He’s definitely coming along. Kaid looked displeased but just sighed at his stubbornness.

“You, if you follow you’ll have to help me.”

“If it’s carrying things, please spare me. I haven’t lifted up anything heavier than women.”

“Then, you can carry most things.”

“.....You’ll get stabbed if you say that.”

Glancing at me, Kaid shook the saddle a few times, lost in thought.

“Shirley’s heavier than a saddle. That’s a relief.”

“You should be saying that she’s light as a feather, what are you being all serious for.”

“If she’s light as a feather, that means she’s about to starve to death. Then I’d hurry and send aid and a medical team.”

“.....You know there’s something called figurative speech, right?”

There were the two men who are shouldering Laius and the future Gimii.

I fixed my posture and looked at them talking to each other.

No matter how many times I blinked, I could only see the brown hair that once existed on this land and the blond young boy that once visited this land, playing together.

# CHAPTER 8

## THE GUEST OF YOU AND ME

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Laius had never been occupied in the past.

Yet, the name of the biggest festival held every year is called 'Liberation Festival'.

It's not the day the previous rulers fell. It's a few days after that. It's the day when the bloodline went extinct.

The day I died is the day the nightmare of Laius ended, a day of blessing.

There's still 2 weeks until the festival, yet the town was already full of decorations and people from many different places, as if to say that the festival had already begun.

There were numerous large pillars erected in the street, with paper flowers linking the flowers and adorning the road to the square.

At the grand square, there was a stage of about four steps high set up. The wall section had a blank space for something to decorate it. It's likely a painting, but maybe from the thought that it might rain, or maybe for leaving it until the last day, it wasn't there. I watched the hurried movements of the curtains from afar.

Not just the adults, the children too were gleaming their eyes at their days that were different from usual. Excited from the atmosphere, they boisterously chatted.

"I'm Kaid-sama!"

"Eh—! Unfair! I wanna be Kaid-sama!"

"No, I was faster! You be the previous lord!"

An especially big boy crowned himself Kaid while swinging a stick about. There were complaints from the other children, boos echoing out. Amidst the rowdy boys, a lovely

pink colour swayed. Someone's little sister, perhaps. The youngest, the girl frantically wandered in between the boys.

“What about me? Hey, what about me? Onii-chan, what about me?”

The smallest hand tugged at the biggest boy, her brother's hand. He buried an end of the stick he was wielding in the ground and started thinking.

“Eh—! You'll cry if you're not the princess, right?”

“Pwincess!”

“Princess.”

The boys put their heads together and started discussing. It seems that their complaints are of less concern than if the girl cries.

“Then, the lady?”

Hearing someone mutter the role, the girl's eyes glinted.

“Wady!”

“Lady. But, the lady's an enemy though?”

“She was a outrageous villainess, my dad said.”

“Eh—, my mum said that she was a good person.”

“My dad too.”

“Eh, my dad said that she was a really scary woman~”

At the feet of the boys that were groaning from thinking, the girl was happily going,

“Wady, wady.”

“Children are innocent, huh.”

Next to me, Isador waved at a woman passing by. The woman giggled and waved back. Probably not an acquaintance. He indiscriminately waved her hand at other women too. The lovely, angel-like boy had grown up.

Feeling the flow of time, I stepped aside slightly but that continued.

We stood at a corner of the square.

There are stalls surrounding the square, then behind those there are people who bought food sitting down or leaning against the wall.

We mixed into them and waited for Kaid to come back.

Kaid left me to Isador before leaving off to the back alleyways.

“Their hero is currently on the lookout for ruffians in the back alleyways.”

“.....Ruffian?”

I did know he had work, but seeing that I didn't know what it was, Isador slightly narrowed his eye with the beauty spot.

“Right. It's not just good people gathering to the Liberation Festival. The people who want to kill him, they of course gather too. He confirms and arrests them himself without others' help. Well, if someone wants to do something to the guy, manpower will be needed and that would draw attention, so they can be crushed beforehand. He's a man I don't want to make an enemy out of.”

“.....May he not just receive reports?”

“Of course he can just receive reports, but he thinks that he has to do everything himself. He believes he has to bear everything. A lord's work, the grudges, the scars,

the victims. Even the infamy of murdering royalty.”

Murder of royalty.

It's not something that should be said casually like commenting on the weather. Especially for a future lord.

Ignoring my gaze, he continued as if nothing happened. His gaze was pointing towards the children from before.

“It's already been fifteen years, yet the chaos ‘the Treasure Flower’ of Laius brought still lingers..... she must have been quite something.”

His flowing gaze headed to the lord's mansion. From here only the box shape of the building can be seen. Yet, his eyes seemed to hold the white building that used to be there.

A wind passed through the square, rattling stalls' roofs, scattering paper and stealing flowers from children.

As I reflexively shut my eyes from the passersby, Isador held his hair down so that it would not be ruined and faintly narrowed his eyes.

“I wonder if young people like you might not know. Before, in Laius, there was a princess who was called ‘the Treasure Flower’”

“.....The Fruiteless Flower of Laius.”

“My, so you knew that? Right, she was quite the villain. Even now, people who say that she shouldn't have been killed and people who say that it was the correct action argue. Especially more so since she was very beautiful. Some say she was innocent, some say that ignorance is sin too and some say she was a notoriously wicked woman. Now there's just the stories, all mixed up. But, back then, she shouldn't have been left alive. Kaid did the right thing. If she was alive, definitely, somewhere, someone would have lifted her up. Since there are no policies that can satisfy everyone, there is bound to be dissatisfaction. If there was a pretender, then Laius back then would not have been

protected. The people are selfish and quick to forget past pain. Once their past pain and wounds heal, then they start hurting from things in front of them. But looking at their scars, they still bark that the past wounds hurt. This hurts, that hurts. Once all their pain is gone, then they start attacking up, saying that other people's injuries hurt. It must be convenient to be able to say such things. How envious. Especially more so since they can ignore other people's pain. They say with fury that nobles don't see people of lower station as humans, yet they do not think of nobles as humans. *There's no pain for them*, they say. It's because they don't think we get hurt and cry the same like them. Weakness is privilege enough. Those are the privileged class. They don't need to make choices nor take responsibility, yet they complain at the results. They are allowed to whine and hit others. It really is enviable. If they do it, it's called complaining, but if we do it it's called abuse. It's discrimination."

".....People gather if there is something to put up, so I also believe that master's decision was correct."

"Ah, sorry. That got off topic. Also, you are smart. Indeed, even if it was a provincial school, I can see how you were always at the top of your class."

I wasn't surprised at what he was spouting casually. People with power like him don't talk without knowing the other person. Not to mention for a topic like this.

When I quietly looked up, Isador raised an eyebrow this time and made the expression that he made a mistake.

"You're not surprised either. I must wonder at the size of your guts. Yes, I know you. Likely better than you do. Shirley Hince. Fifteen years, on a rainy day, you were found wrapped in a cloth on a stone by a road. Then, you were raised at the orphanage in Kaina. Always good at academics, with sports slightly good? Thanks to that, there were many adoption offers but you didn't accept any. There was even one from the local noble, isn't refusing that being too above your station?"

"There's nothing I could give back for adopting a woman who will become a nun. It would have been everyone's loss if I was adopted."

"Amazing, your goal from the 'my dream' essay written when you were six had not changed at all, that really is amazing. Then, I wonder if you knew that the mayor of

Kaina wanted to marry you to his son. Since his son isn't too bright, he probably wanted a wise woman to grab his reins. That's why the orphanage director sent you here."

I frowned slightly. This time, Isador laughed merrily, refreshed.

So that's why the orphanage director got desperate. It wasn't just to stop me from becoming a nun. As soon as it was arranged for me to work here, I was driven away without time to listen to details, so I was wondering if I was making a face as if I would die if I can't become a nun.

The mayor's son..... Right, he was a rowdy boy with a aquiline nose. I remember him throwing balls of mud, flipping skirts or pulling hair. It felt like he had energy lying around. He fixed the roof of the orphanage, so I don't think he's a bad child, but since it was him who ruined the roof he's not a good child either.

".....Did investigating me did anything?"

"No? It was just weird to have nothing. But it wasn't just me who investigated you. Kaid investigated when he hired you. And now, not just Darich and Wyfar, even the king is probably looking into you."

I grabbed my index and middle finger. I put some strength into my back which was straight to begin with.

"Laius is big. So no one could touch it fifteen years ago. With the king, it couldn't be touched. It was a land descending from the union between a general and a princess. The root of the previous rulers were royalty. So other noble couldn't touch it. If a noble tried to do something it could mean that they are acting against the crown. The king meant to dismantle the fiefdom of Laius. So he did not reach out. The power of Laius was too much. Then Darich knew that it can be divided up after it's dismantled, so he even encouraged specific actions to the previous lord."

Yes, that was how our paradise was completed. With nothing threatening it, our paradise exploited from Laius and grew.

The princess of the past who fulfilled your love. Your blood mixed with your love had become the yoke upon this land. Your descendants, us, became obstacles.

“So Laius was near its end. The rulers of other lands didn’t move yet, letting the rulers of Laius be finished by the people of Laius, poised to swoop in once the only resistance would be the people. No one knew this noble house of Falua that was demoted away to a remote province a long time ago. Moreover, who would have thought that a fourteen-year-old boy whose family was wiped out from epidemic would bite off the neck of the lord. Even though his family was already dead, if he was found out his followers, their families and possibly even related villages and towns would have been burned, yet he did well despite the risks.”

“.....Yes.”

“I still remember it. He was only four years older than me, but he had the face of an adult. People’s lives, Laius, murder of royalty, shouldering all those on his thin shoulders, he became a lord. ....My father said that he was pitiful. To those hands that dirtied themselves to get back that which was taken away from the people Laius, nothing would come. Saying that, my father decided to support Kaid. To begin with, Gimii isn’t very big. Not much could be gained from Laius collapsing. We could see that there was too much on his hands and Laius falling would be troubling for us.”

My body grew cooler but a heat whirled in my head.

My sins were too heavy for me to go to hell. That’s why I am here.

.....Ah, I hope at the least that my parents are in hell. I’ll take all the unremovable sins, so please wash away your sins in hell. I hope they could pass away into the embrace of our ancestors.

In front of us, a child swinging from her parents hands smiled. Boys with arms around each other’s shoulders ran. A blushing pair of man and woman let their hands go but entwined their fingers again. They grew embarrassed from each other’s gaze, but their smiles were very dazzling.

“He doesn’t marry because of hereditary succession. Because hereditary succession was why the past Laius was born, he wants the next succession to be someone of good ability. ....With that as the excuse, he lived alone. He kept losing without having anything. Casually, in front of me who called him a friend. It really is a cruel story.”

Unlike Isador who stared up into the sky, I stared down at the ground.

“Laius takes from him without giving anything or paying back. But he will still live as a Lord. He’ll be the wise lord. Kaid is the obedient slave of Laius. Kaid know he won’t gain anything. He will rot away without hope. A lord worse than a person. If that’s the condition, it’s too harsh.”

I clenched my two fingers as if to snap them and bit my lips.

“.....Telling me that, what do you wish to tell me?”

A shadow fell over my feet as I hung my head down. Isador was looking at me. I knew that I have to lift my head, but my gaze did not leave the beautifully cobbled street.

“I’ll tell you why I investigated you thoroughly. It’s because you threw Kaid out of order. You made Kaid, who did not tremble a bit for the past fifteen years, waver. Going down to town with a maid, it’s the first time I heard of it.”

“.....There were many such occasions. Might your investigation be not adequate enough?”

“Before he would take a few servants and maids. It’s the first time seeing him go out alone with someone. I saw with these eyes and got surprised. If he got interested in chasing skirts, that would have been better, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Now then, who could you be? It’s a mystery to me. How did you make that Kaid waver? You couldn’t have had any opportunity to have prior contact. It’s the first time coming out of Kaina for you, and Kaid doesn’t have time to go out to such a place in the sticks. Then within this month? That’s too fast even for a fated meeting. Even love at first sight isn’t believable unless there’s more time. Falling for your charms, I’m sorry, but I don’t that is a possibility. And even if you were his type, he wouldn’t let you close more than necessary. Then, who could you be. What is it about you that made Kaid waver? Just a month is still a month. This can only apply for people other than that

stubborn man. For him, I won't be surprised if it takes a year."

Relying on the fingers that I clenched without minding if they broke, I lifted my head. Isador was closer than I expected. I could see his beauty spot. In the backlight, those curled lips were especially clear.

"Before I met you, I asked a servant I knew, but it doesn't really seem like anything special happened. Now that's strange. You were just doing the same thing as the other maids. Rather, you're increasing your distance from Kaid. But then what lured Kaid?"

He's searching. The gaze judging me was particularly sharp. He must truly be wanting to find the answer, yet it feels like he's teasing rather than interrogating. I wonder if I feel that way because I'm menial.

"Nothing like that happened, so it's difficult for me to answer."

"No, it's different. I wondered if these people didn't realise it..... Now that I met you, I'm certain. You look his way so many times yet you say that. You look at Kaid's back, while Kaid looks at your back, 'Nothing,' won't work here. I'm sorry, but please tell this to Kaid. Unless it's fixed before other lords come, it'll be quickly found out."

I realised only after it was pointed out. I wonder if I was looking at him that much. ....I, might, have.

I clamped down on my lip. It'd be nice if it tore away and bled, but my trembling mouth didn't have such power.

The way tied back his black hair swayed, the trembling gold colour softer than the sun, the back that grew quite large, the legs I once saw at the stream, the hands I once held.

I was watching those. The person I once loved, the first love. I was watching. Surely.

I was watching.

Always.

I was always watching.

Now, and in the past.

Because, I had loved you.

## CHAPTER 9

# YOUR FRIEND AND ME

---

“Who could you be, and what could you become to Kaid?”

“.....I, do not know.”

“Could you be someone that will liberate my friend?”

“I do not know.”

With a grin, Isador stretched out his long fingers and grabbed up my chin. My face distorted slightly from the pain as I looked up at the face that approached.

“I won’t blame you even if you can’t liberate him. Since it could still spark the hope of him living not as a lord but as Kaid. But I won’t forgive you if you hurt him. I won’t let him have more burdens. If it’s just longing, leave now. If you’re not ready to be there to the end, step back before you hurt him. If it’s him, he won’t think he is bruised..... What do you mean, ‘the Wolf’. You people call him that as a sign of strength, but wolves are creatures that live in packs. You are leaving such a thing alone with burdens. He’s cast outside the packs of people, yet the pests hang on.”

I could feel disgust in his voice.

“.....Isador-sama, do you dislike these people..... no, commoners?”

He is not just talking about Laius.

The sweet face that women like shifted in a blink. Not just the tone, but his expression too was flaring, like a blade.

“Do you think I like them? Just weakness isn’t bad. I don’t criticise people for their weaknesses outside their control. But why must they use that weakness as a spear to denounce my life? The weak aren’t sinners. But the strong are? Are the strong sinners unless they let themselves be deprived? Is it a sin to not use my strength for others? Is

it arrogance to use my own strength for myself? Do I have to feel pleased to see my friend sacrifice himself? Calling such things as noble's duty and using their lives as stepping stones, yet they call that sacrifice. I am not a kind person like Kaid. I'm not that magnanimous."

It was too grim an expression to be called a smile. It wasn't the first time I saw a commoner-hating noble like him. So I'm not scared. But it hurts.

He dislikes commoners. He does not scorn them. He dislikes.

It has been decided that he must stand on top of people from his birth. Even if he did well, only death might wait at the end. Even if he doesn't commit evils like my family and it's just the flow of the period, he is a sinner unless acknowledged by the people. Ignorance, incompetence, powerlessness, those are all sins for a noble.

It's on the bright side if it ends as a light crime. Expulsion is good. Even if it's banishment, there's still life.

There are people like us who were executed. We received just punishment, but there were kind people among the others. Just, normal, not exploiting the status, not extorting money nor land, not murdering to get women. There were normal, good people like that. But no achievements. No glory. Powerless. Not predicting the future. Not preventing famine. Unable to make rain. Unable to suppress the plague. Unable to capture rampaging bandits. Not bringing stability like in other places.

No devils, them.

Just, not skilled, either.

If born as a noble, one is born to stand on people. Yet, some find happiness in humble everyday life. There are people who just wish to protect their family. They would normally be considered as kind, but those people are considered incompetent as rulers.

Ill-fitting. That is unforgivable.

Couldn't do it. Didn't know it. Those are directly linked to death. For the people and for themselves.

Sacrificing themselves for the people that might one day kill them.

Those are rulers.

“People can choose their lords, but lords can't choose their people. It's a really unfair system.”

“That must not be all the world. I hear that there are places where the weak and the strong do not exploit each other...”

“Well, I don't know..... such an ideal world can only exist in wishes. Kaid too knows that. He knows, yet he'll keep being a lord. Since he resolved to do that, a friend's job is to support him. However, I cannot look over nuisances.”

The fingers pressing my chin grew more forceful, almost as if they would bury themselves in my bone.

“Which side are you on? A battle between the strong. I wouldn't mind that, but if you drag him down from your weakness, I'll have to remove you now.”

I stared at the eyes that came closer.

There were maelstroms of hatred there. Disliking commoners, that was too lukewarm. He hates. He detests the inequality.

But that's not all.

He worries. About his friend, about where his friend is going. For Kaid's happiness. From back then, unchangingly, he worries for Kaid.

I grabbed the hand gripping my chin.

“You’ve always been friendly with Kaid... Helt.”

His eyes distorted open wide from discomfort.

“I’m sorry, Isador-sama, but I have damaged your cherished friend beyond repair. As you say, I am his shackle.”

Strength left his hand and fell away. Not quickly as if swatted away, but suddenly losing strength.

“W-What?”

I grabbed his falling hand with both hands.

“I wonder if you can wait a little. ....I’m sure, Kaid also knows. He knows and we both are looking for it. The words..... and the way to end the second time.”

Once, long time ago, I had grabbed his hand like this. Before, he did not hate commoners and dreamed of becoming a splendid lord like his father, his eyes shining bright. I wonder when it changed. Fifteen years is long. It has been long for anyone.

And there was another person back then.

“.....You people, did something happen?”

Indeed, you were there.

With an expression of both surprise and exasperation, Kaid was standing there. The awkwardly positioned hand wandered confusedly and settled down in the end. The appearance of the tall man with his arms crossed can only look imposing to people passing by. Naturally, people avoided him. Sometimes, there were people who were looking at us pitifully.

I let go and Isador’s hand and turned around to Kaid. Then I deeply curtsied to him.

“Welcome back, master.”

“Ahh, I’m back.....”

“How did it turn out, sir?”

“.....Did Isador tell you? It didn’t increase as much as I had expected. Considering that it’s near the festival, there’s not a lot. Other than the related ones, I handed them over to the police and that’s all good... but, what were you doing?”

He gazed at Isador and me, but as Isador was looking at me, Kaid’s gaze was also fixed on me.

I grabbed my index finger and middle finger and thought a bit.

“I was listening to how magnificent master is.”

“Oi, Isador, what did you blow into her?”

Glared at sharply, Isador hemmed and hawed. The eyes that wandered between Kaid and me often ultimately turned towards me.

“W-Well.....”

“You should ignore this guy’s words. They’re a mixture of facts and fiction.”

“I don’t lie though.”

To Isador who said something while looking at me, Kaid made a strange expression. Then he looked towards me.

“I also don’t lie, sir.”

“Ahh, no, I don’t doubt that.”

Still not looking satisfied, Kaid looked back and forth between the two of us. I took a step in front him. While looking at the person who was showed a surprised expression to me, I smiled. I couldn’t feel any crooked twitching.

“I lied enough already.”

I wonder if I smiled properly this time.

“A long time ago, I told an awful lie.”

“.....Not had to tell, but told?”

Definitely, there’s nothing I can do for Laius.

However, there’s something I can do for this person that is protecting Laius.

He protected this land that was ruined because of us. For this person that lived for the sole purpose of cleaning up after us, there’s something I can do for him.

I can take back the burden I forced on him.

“I’m a liar.”

Bowing deeply mid-curtsy, I stopped any further conversation. I could feel that they wanted to say something, but I risked being rude and bowed further.

Please wait a little more.

I will, tell you your mistake. Then I must apologise for my lies to you. I will apologise.

I will definitely apologise. For that purpose, I’ll muster up my courage.

So please, just for a little more, give me a little more time.

# CHAPTER 10

## THE WAITING PERIOD OF YOU AND ME

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It was Kaid who broke the deep silence.

“.....First, we have to finish work.”

In response to the murmured words, I raised my head. Isador swung his hands that were meaninglessly floating in front of his chest. Rather than swing, it looked like he didn't have a place for them that he couldn't drop them.

“What, Isador.”

“N-No.....I'll, pass on it.”

“But you followed us here..... there aren't any plans for you to carry baggage, you know.”

“Eh? Ah, ahh, I don't want to carry stuff, yeah.”

With that, Isador stepped back.

“.....Kaid, I have something to say to you later.”

“What a coincidence, same here. You look terrible. What's wrong?”

“Later, let's talk later. For now, I'm returning to the mansion.

“My mansion.”

“Ahh, yeah, your mansion..... I'll return, there. Then, later, some talk.....”

“.....You, what really happened to you?”

Flustered, he looked back and forth between Kaid and me. Isador was so pale that even I felt worried. Today was a day for looking back and forth between people.

Raising his head then hanging it down, Isador ran home at full speed. After absentmindedly watching his back disappear in a blink of an eye, Kaid looked at me with truly indescribable eyes.

“.....Did you say something?”

“.....I’m sorry for returning a question with a question, but may I ask a question?”

“.....Yeah.”

Indeed, I haven’t been hiding it desperately, and rather, it was me who spoke about it first. Though I just reported it. Still, I’m curious if there’s something that made him sure.

“I..... Is there something special to me?”

Kaid blinked his eyes. He pressed his mouth as he was about to say something and groaned for something, finally letting out a sigh.

“.....Your eyes are reflecting you.”

With a murmur like a small sigh, the golden shade looked at me reproachfully. Indeed, the eyes did not change. But, I couldn’t change this on my own will, and in addition, I wonder they didn’t change even though I changed as a whole.

While I was tilting my head and thinking, he continued on as he sulked slightly.

“.....I was planning on waiting until you were ready, but seeing that you can mention it to Isador, it really set me thinking.”

“Your name..... that was all I said.”

“That guy reacted with just that. Hehh. Just that.”

When I looked at him, the golden shade slowly moved away. It felt as though I would be pursued if I turned around. I could understand why he is called ‘the Wolf’. Since it felt like I would be chased if I showed my back, I slowly backed away while facing him.

Even if I turn away, I would feel the gaze following me.

I know. I know. I know that Kaid knows.

Please wait a little more. I couldn't organise any of the thoughts.

I used the technique for working I learned when I entered the mansion. Bowing my head and hiding my face. It was taught so that I could hide that I was not smiling, but it's working greatly outside of that too.

To the technique of the skilled deputy head maid, Kaid sighed.

"Let's finish work."

"Understood, sir."

The farce that we kept up for a month abruptly changed the atmosphere that was between us.

Kaid seemed to think about the flow of people. He looked at the movements of the patrols and marked something down on the map. When I silently looked up at him, Kaid smiled bitterly after noticing my gaze.

"I'm not very bright, you see. Unless I see it for myself, I can't get a clear grasp. Otherwise, I'd feel sorry for the people actually working that receive absurd instructions."

The man who pulled together Laid that was about to fall apart said that without any self-deprecation. He probably really feels that way.

It's not that he's not bright.

It was that tough. It must have been desperate. In such a chaotic Laid, telling apart friend or foe must have been the hardest thing.

He does not the time of leisure I spend without knowing anything.

Butlers and maids work on shifts, but he does not have anyone to change with. The light does not go out at night and in the morning he has already changed his clothes and is working. After the basics are done and the head butler reports to him, he nods and heads to train with the sword.

Every day, without rest.

Even on days after he was poisoned.

He doesn't have to do everything on his own. He doesn't have to protect everything by himself, he doesn't have to sacrifice himself, he can be protected by someone and he can rely on someone. There certainly was the way a lord should be, as Isador said. The right standards for a lord does exist in this world.

However, that does not have to be synonymous with killing Kaid.

No one will blame him. Don't you think so?

If it's not hubris to say so, it may be my fault.

When I looked up while holding my index and middle fingers, the golden shade made a strange expression.

As I looked at that face, emotions soaked in. He told me that I am reflected in my eyes. Without realising what this thing welling up inside me, I bowed my head using the excuse that I am a maid.

I felt thankful to Kaid who made a bitter smile but did not pry further.

“Huh, isn't it my lord?”

Stretched with intervals, or carefree, or relaxed. It was really hard to describe it, but perhaps the best expression would be that the voice was peaceful.

It's a voice I know.

"Cecil."

Without turning around, Kaid wrote something on the map with a frown on his face. He's not displeased. His eyes are probably tired. He didn't get much sleep in this busy period, so he could have rested at least for today.

"Is it done?"

"It always has a satisfying result every year."

"I'm not worried about that. I'm talking about the picture for the stage."

"Ugu!"

"So it's you..... every morning, Carolina comes and says sorry....."

"Ugu....."

"The forehead of the person in charge of the stage decorations grows wider everyday, so please hurry up."

The person with smile lines near his eyes is Cecil Fox.

He's Caron's husband.

From the time he eloped with Caron, he was a painter that was being called to noble's mansions, but it seems that he is quite a famous painter now. However, though it may just be the trait of artists, he is very slow with his brush unless he feels like it.

I see, so the empty part at the stage may have been the place for his picture. ....It looked like there was a lot, I wonder if he'll be alright.

*I'm glad that he looks happy, but I hope he doesn't trouble Caron too much, I thought, then my skirt was lifted up from behind. From the skirt between my legs lifting up*

from an impossible wind, I ended up letting out a short yelp.

From my scream, Kaid snapped around. Then, right after he glared at my feet, he closed his eyes.

“Adele.”

“Hello, my lord! How are you! Who’s that?!”

“Ah, hello. I don’t feel bad, but since she’s surprised can you let that go for now.”

Grabbing my skirt in the mysterious way of flipping it up and pulling it down, there was a girl of ten or so. She had a lovely freckled face with her hair split into two braids. She wore a cute ribboned hat sideways.

The girl who resembles someone put up her index finger with a prim face.

“Because, pulling horizontally will take time, but pulling vertically will get it done straight away, right?”

“You can’t go around surprising people for just one second. I’m sorry..... er,”

“Ah, I’m my master’s maid, Shirley Hince. I’m in the care of the head maid.”

“I see. I’m Cecil Fox. This girl is my daughter Adele.”

I thought so. The girl introduced by Cecil, who looks like Caron, let go of my skirt and greeted me.

I met Caron much later, but thinking that Caron might have been like this when she was little, Adele was lovely.

“Lovely..... Cute.....”

When I unintentionally blurted that out, she brushed away the hand I stretched out for a handshake. She first blinked her eyes, then pouted her small lips and turned away.

“If you’re saying that because I’m like mummy, I’m tired of that. I’m cute on my own!”

“Well, you really are like your mum. Your face and your personality. I sincerely apologise for my daughter’s rudeness, Shirley-san.”

“No..... I should be saying sorry.”

After bowing in apology, I stared at my hand that was brushed away.

“.....I ended up getting disliked.”

“Ah—, er—m..... how about breakfast?”

Looking at me downhearted dropping my shoulders and staring at my hand, Kaid, not having found effective words of consolation, looked around the stores.

“I ate before we left, sir.”

It was Kaid who gave the order, for him to have possibly forgot.

When I narrowed my eyes at him, Kaid spoke nonchalantly.

“I thought that it should be just enough for this, but it does seem to be right. If you want to blame someone, blame yourself for not eating a lot usually.”

A voice like Cecil’s came out. I was told to have some meals after I change clothes. Everyone looked at me strangely for eating at the mansion when I’m going downtown. If this was going to happen, maybe I shouldn’t have had the bread.

Looking at me who was staring at him reproachfully, Kaid suddenly stared at somewhere far away. It’s noisy over there for some reason.

“I’ll go take a quick look. Cecil, I leave Shirley in your care.”

The moment he said that, Kaid fixed his sword low and left with quick steps.

Different, you’re different, Kaid. Seeing the back that quickly melted away into the crowd, I thought so. Here you should have sent your maid and stayed here.

It wasn't just me who thought that, as Cecil smiled bitterly as he scratched his head.

"He's ever the same. I could have went on my own."

"Hey hey, are you really just a maid? That necklace, did you get it from Kaid-sama?"

With the unique way of lifting it up and pulling it down, her fingers pointed to the blue flower I got from Jasmine.

I folded my feet in and crouched down.

"No, I received it from my roommate. She's a very nice person called Jasmine."

"Ah, I heard that name from Carolina. She made a bitter smile, saying that the girl is just like her when she was young."

"Like mummy?"

The small head and the big eyes staring at the necklace was so cute that my mouth naturally formed into a smile.

"This flower is cute. What's it called?"

"This is a hyacinth."

"My, isn't that nice."

Leaning in lightly and checking the colour, Cecil said that with a soft smile. He really is a painter. Looks like he knows a lot about flowers and the language since he uses them in his pictures. Adele who alone seemed to not know the meaning tugged Cecil's clothes. It looks like his trousers will fall off.

While clutching his trousers tightly with both hands, Cecil bent over and told the meaning. Then, Adele suddenly lost interest in the trousers she was pulling so strongly and let it go. Cecil was freed. Then he fell over magnificently.

Without giving even a glance to her father who was on the floor, Adele held her small hands together.

“It’s the same as the one I gave to Kaid-sama!”

I ended up opening my eyes wide.

Cecil kept speaking with the slow dispirited voice.

“Daddy doesn’t support that.”

Unlike her relaxed father, her eyes shot up. She’s quite the precocious and unyielding woman. Possibly more than her mother.

“Daddy, you eloped to marry mummy.”

“That’s why I’m saying. Not him.”

“.....Grandpa and Grandma are telling me to work hard, since something might happen if I don’t give up. Since, Kaid-sama hasn’t married yet.”

“M—n, they like power after all.”

“Why not? Because I’m a child? But I’ll grow soon. I’m the best in studying in my school too.”

“No. Because I love you.”

Adele gradually grew sullen from not getting the meaning. Her father brushed off the dust from his trousers and crouched down in front of Adele.

“That person has already decided to be alone. Let’s pretend that something happened and you somehow ended up marrying him. Still, he won’t treat you specially. He lost his lifetime’s worth of love.”

“Was he rejected?”

“Now..... daddy doesn’t know. Changing is not evil. Even breaking an oath is not necessarily evil. Forgetting or healing from time is something allowed only for living people. However, he doesn’t forgive that. He can’t forgive himself for changing. He can’t forgive even being forgiven. To save him, a miracle is needed..... Ahh, still the world is

flowing with unexplainable phenomenons. Then, if there's a miracle, rather than a beautiful miracle, I'd like a kind miracle."

Looking at her father narrow his eyes and stare far, the girl puffed her cheeks.

"I don't know."

"It's alright if you don't know."

"No! That's not an explanation if the other person doesn't understand. No points for that."

"Hahaha, Adele's strict."

"Daddy's too carefree. Your socks don't match again today!"

"There wasn't a matching pair."

"You're lying. I properly put them in the drawer yesterday."

"Adele, amazing, you're helping out."

"Daddy's just too bad. How can you make the soup that salty?"

"It's strange, right?"

At the street, a father and his young daughter are smiling. That is not a rare sight, but a natural one.

A gentle Laius came back..... no, it's different. He made a gentle world.

He's not in there. That sort of thing, it's strange.

Weaving through the crowd, a brown-haired head appeared. It's amazing how he can arrived without bumping into anyone in that crowd. Adele who suddenly dyed her cheeks is amazing too. Very cute.

"There were drunkards acting violently from daytime, so I punished them and handed

them over to the patrol. Sorry, Shirley. Looks like we stand out a bit, so let's change places. Then, Cecil, Adele."

"Please excuse us."

I quickly bowed and stuck close to the familiar brown hair.

"I don't think they're lovers. Because, they're not holding hands."

"Maybe we should keep talking about it until they get it."

Such voices came from behind us. Then, as if chased by the rowdiness, we left that spot.

Since I was too weak to walk around while eating at the same time, we ate while sitting at the fountain of a small square.

I wonder how people can eat without spilling anything as they walk. Seeing how little children could manage that too, I grew a little depressed. Kaid came to the simple conclusion that it's alright if I can't walk while eating without getting angry. Then he even told me that people usually eat while sitting down. As he ate the meat bun he bought from the stall while slowly strolling.

"What's the seasoning?"

"Ey, it's a southern spice called pepper."

"It's delicious."

"Right? You can count on our judgement. Though, women and children said that we should reduce it a bit."

"Indeed, it might be tough if there's too much. Still, I like this. Pepper. I'll remember it."

There was a food stall where we had an exchange like that. The stall owner told many things to the well-dressed people that look interest in the new spice and Kaid listened carefully. He's a good listener. The other person was easygoing and looked happy.

When I said that I don't need anymore, we stood in line for fried snacks that could eaten in a bite. When I said that I'll have a bite, I ended up getting the whole thing. Then when I reached the moment my body would really grow worse from eating too much, he stopped. I wonder if this is the difference in insight or if he's just weird.

Kaid gathered the trash and put them in the bin. When I told him that it was my work, he averted his gaze.

"Now then. We finished checking things and there's enough time until we have to go. Do you have anywhere in particular you want to go?"

"I do."

Maybe my answer was unexpected, since the gold opened wide. It's alright. Up until I said it, it was strange for me too.

If someone saw us staring at each other absentmindedly, they would comment that it looks stupid.

What has been said can't be taken back. There's no need to, either.

It's just a little quicker than I planned. Anyway, there are many days till the festival, so I need to muster up my courage and tell him.

I have something I want to say. For those preparations, I want his help.

"Erm..... where?"

I ended up laughing a little at his changed tone of speech. His eyes grew wider, then quickly narrowed. His eyebrows dropped and he bit his lips.

The expression close to anger looked like that of a child about to cry.

“There are some things I want to buy, I don’t know much, so can you help me?”

“Thing you want?”

“Yes, first, purple embroidery thread. The best I can get within my budget. Then a hair ornament. Red, with the best I can get within my budget. Next is a cigar. Mm..... Heavy? Heavy-flavoured? The best I can get within my budget. Finally, alcohol of bitter taste, with the best I can get within my budget.”

He had a puzzled expression, but as I went on he probably understood. He covered his eyes and tilted his head downwards as if to bow.

“.....If you’ll allow me, may I have permission to get them? That way, I can get the same things. “

Squeezing out a strained voice, I stopped making the same face.

“It’s alright..... It’s the first time I earned money honestly. So buying..... is the best. For me and for them, it’s the most fitting.”

It’s the first time I’m getting payment after working. A quarter of a month’s wage, so it’s not much. However, in a sense, it’s the first present from me.

To me who said that, Kaid barely lifted his head. There he looked somewhat exhausted, with a face like a hungry child, like a child that fell over, like a lost child, an undependable face. Also, as though he’s looking for tomorrow, like a person looking for someone, like someone that picked up a lost good, he had such eyes.

“Then, at the least, please let me be with you on that day.”

“.....Yes. I also have something to say.”

“.....Something?”

“Yes, let’s talk. And let’s end. This time for sure, let us end properly.”

Helt.

When I called him that, he bowed deeper than even that expected of a servant and said, "Yes, my lady."

# CHAPTER 11

## THE FAREWELL, OF YOU AND ME — I

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As the festival draws close enough that the whole schedule could be written on one hand, most of the guests gather.

The rumoured lord of Darich is also one of them.

We heard the stories, but everyone was overwhelmed as he was too amazing. According to people who've been here for a long time, this happens every year.

First, even from far away, one could see that the carriage was slanted, then when it approached it felt even more out of place. The carriage was thrice as big as normal ones and the door was too wide. From that, a man whose face and neck could not be told apart appeared.

He always was a giant of a man, but not this much. I could now understand the weight of the words, *he gets bigger every year*.

“Amazing.”

“Indeed.”

“Truly.”

At dinner, everyone's opinions were as one. Since servants couldn't say something explicit about their master's guests, only honest impressions were said.

By the way, Joblyn tripped over the low door sill of the mansion. Since servants from Darich were not enough to help him up, not only did the servants of the mansion help but Kaid had to help too. It was a huge ordeal. Everyone's hearts were as one when we said that it's a relief nothing big happened.

*It's a relief that our master is light, we thought.*

I don't think Kaid is light at all, but the young man who raises cows back home even complained that helping a cow up was easier.

There was that great commotion today, but that was all so we could say that the day passed safely. Receiving many guests from other places, the mansion's staff had to abandon the lax familial mood and everyone had to run about so that there won't be any problems.

For the past few days, we could only collapse onto our beds. Kaid too was everywhere, receiving guests and preparing for the banquet, so much that I wondered when he's getting his sleep.

Then this day came in a flash.

After a normal dinner, I declined everyone's offers and set out. Jasmine, who was talking about something to Samua and Tim while having dessert, panicked and packed the leftover cake.

"Wait, Shirley. If it's bathing, let's go together?"

"A while later, I have business..... I have a meeting."

"A meeting?"

"Yes, it might get late, so please feel free to go to sleep ahead of me."

I bowed slightly to the three that looked puzzled and set out of the restaurant.

First, I returned to my room and changed my clothes from the working uniform to plain clothes. I untied my hair as I looked at the mirror. I wonder if I'm just imagining

it. Lately, I feel that the colour has been changing slightly. Before, it had a fodder like colour, but now..... it sometimes has a blonde tinge.

After thinking a bit, I took out the blue necklace. As I hung it around my neck, my hands shook terribly. While smiling bitterly, I tucked the necklace I took great effort to put on underneath my clothes and clutched it with the clothes over it.

I breathed deeply for some times and lifted my head.

In the mirror, I had a very pathetic face.

So that I won't be found by anyone, I went around to the back of the mansion and disappeared into the forest. The surface was almost flat, with the stream and the meadows gone.

However, there still were some trees left. Though the birch tree where I made the promise with him is no longer there.

Since there's a mountain behind the place as well as tall walls, it might not have been neglected because the scenery couldn't be good. It can be seen from outside, but still such a remote place like this isn't visited often.

With the indicated location as my goal, I walked through the dark forest. The baggage in my hand made hard knocking sounds. I don't need a map. I'm not that directionally challenged to get lost in this forest. Moreover, it's not the first time I came here. I wasn't let out often, but the place inside the grounds was my garden, literally.

As I silently walked on, I spotted a light up ahead.

It was Kaid with a lantern.

Amidst the black hair that seemed to slip into the darkness, the glistening golden shade looked like that of a wolf keeping an eye on its prey. However, because he had his head down, his fringe was blocking his eyes, making it impossible to tell what he

was looking at.

He likely noticed that I arrived. With no signs of surprise, Kaid silently kneeled. Rather than that of a servant's, it felt like that of a retainers. I stared down at the head that was bowing down with his neck exposed.

"Helt... no, should I call you Kaid?"

"My lady is free to call me by how she pleases."

".....Here, I prefer Helt after all."

"Yes."

The time period is that of when there still are people who haven't had dinner.

It's a miracle that he could spare some time in this period. ....No, it's not a miracle. He worked hard. It was he who decided on the time and place, but even so I feel a little sorry.

"Buried here?"

"No, please come this way."

Receiving the sentence that did not have a subject without any difficulty, Kaid silently got up. He headed further into the forest, with me following behind silently. The scent of the dirt wet with evening dew mixed with the trees and created a terribly apprehensive mood.

I don't think too much time passed until we arrived.

When we arrived at the destination, he silently got out of my field of vision. I couldn't follow up. In my vision that only had his waist, there were now five stones.

I could somehow tell. Maybe it's because it's me.

I breathed in. I never thought that such a place existed in this world.

At a glance, they're just stones. Nothing engraved in them, just stones of the same size placed at regular intervals. It looked unnatural and showed that someone placed them there, but that was all.

Still, I could tell.

These are our graves.

Next to the stone farthest to the right, there was a large package. Cleaning tools, perhaps.

Having noticed my gaze, Kaid opened that package. Then shone the lantern light onto its contents.

".....Me?"

There was a single picture.

The foolish, ignorant me of the old days was smiling happily.

"These are gifts from Carolina, Cecil, as well as dozens more."

Beneath the the picture, there were flowers, necklaces, gloves, handkerchiefs and much much more. There's only the light from the lantern, yet it felt like it was bright like day because the scene was too unexpected.

"They were those that had already left or were chased out of the mansion. However, after that, they all returned here from all over the place and asked me to let them work here. That they'll watch me."

".....Watch?"

"That if I become like the previous lord, that they'll never forgive me... after deceiving, betraying and killing my lady, if that death was meaningless, they will kill me. That's what everyone said. 'We can't forgive the previous lord. Thank you for saving Laius. However, even if we die, we can't forgive you for deceiving our lady,' they said."

“.....You’re different from my family.”

“I also agree with them. If I became like the previous rulers before I realised it, they would tell me. Then, I would move the location of this grave and kill myself there.”

I couldn’t say a thing. I didn’t know what to say. Then, he truly is alone.

Amidst the offerings, there was a letter. When I picked it up and looked at the back, there was Caron’s name.

I grabbed it with both hands and brought to my forehead as if in prayer. Ah, Caron Caron, no, Caron. A kind person like you can’t say that. You can’t do that.

To me who was not moving while clutching the letter in my hands, he softly spoke to me.

“.....It’s in the order of age from the left.”

“.....Thank you. I didn’t think that there would be graves.”

“.....Officially, you’ve been abandoned in the plains.”

“Yes. That’s what I heard.”

I unwrapped my baggage and placed a small bottle of alcohol on the grave at the left.

Apparently it’s bitter, strong and delicious. Within my budget, I could only get a bottle smaller than the size of my palm, but grandmother had always been saying that grandfather should consider the age and drink less, so this may be a good opportunity.

On the next grave, embroidery thread.

Since it’s pronounced and vivid, it may be too gaudy. However, the colour is so pretty, so I’m sure grandmother who like purple can use it well.

On the next grave, a cigar.

I'm sorry, father. I only know that it feels smoky and even after explanations I couldn't get what it meant by heavy or light. Still, the people at the store were kind and told me this one would be good for people who like heavy tastes and sold me one. So please forgive me with just one. If I bought two, I wouldn't have been able to buy mother's hair ornament.

On the next grave, a hair ornament.

It's a red hair ornament in the shape of a flower, as you liked red flowers, mother. Apparently the shape is that of a rare flower that blooms in a country to the east. I think it will go well with your beautiful blonde hair. It may be a 'tawdry accessory' that mother dislikes, but I'm sorry. If I spent more, I wouldn't have been able to buy a cigar for father.

I brought my hands together and closed my eyes.

They're people who committed unforgivable acts. Undoubtedly, even praying for their happiness in the next world would not be allowed. But, I wonder. I wonder if I will be allowed to pray as a daughter, as family.

"I'm sorry I came late. ....To be honest, I never planned on coming here. Kaina..... the place I grew up is called Kaina and there's a small monastery in a neighbouring village. I had been planning on living there and ending my life there..... However, now I am glad that I could visit these graves. Grandfather, grandmother, father, mother. Please, do not grow wrathful. Please, pass on without grudges, without placing curses, without resentment. If, if we cannot be forgiven in any way, please, curse me for living on alone. Please curse me. Please. Then one day, when I die, please take me with you to hell. Then let us end the nightmare of Laius."

The rustling of the leaves in the night wind felt as though it was almost screaming. I wonder how many people cried for our deaths. There were countless people who shed tears of joy at our deaths. There really might have been none. Maybe only the plants of this mansion weeped for us. Or maybe they too resent us for burning.

I don't know.

Yet again, all this time, I don't know.

The reason why I am here, how I should go on.

All this time, I don't know.

What I should do, what I should not do. In the first place, am I even allowed to think? There's no pardon for my life, but to still live on.

There were fun things.

But when there are thoughts of happiness or fortune, someone said that such happiness exists thanks to the lord. Someone said it's thanks to the cruel previous lord's death. That the death was a welcome thing, that it should have come quicker. That is was thanks to the lord.

Yes, that is correct. Laius suffered because of us. So what they say are all correct, not wrong at all. Yet it was painful. It was unforgivable, but it was painful and unbearable, that my heart wandered. Bewildered, it kept wandering for fifteen years. Even after fifteen years, I still don't know.

To live on by forgetting everything, I was too sinful.

To live on by cursing everything, my crimes were too heavy.

To live on by loving everything, the love was too harsh.

The heart that did not yet find its life could no longer hold it in after finally arriving at their graves.

I hid my face and hung my head. An unbearable trembling voice penetrated through the beautiful melody of the night wind. But I couldn't stop.

“I am sorry, I love them. Neither I nor they can be forgiven. But I still love them. I love my family. I will not change, I am sorry, I cannot change. I do know that they cannot be forgiven. Yet, I cannot bring myself to dislike them. I cannot hate them. ....They’re, my mother. My father, my grandfather, my grandmother. I am sorry, forgive me, I am sorry. I love them, I am sorry, I am sorry.....”

“.....There may be people who will criticise not loving your family, but there aren’t any who will denounce you for loving your family. You don’t have to beg forgiveness for that. They’re your family. You can love them. What sin is loving one’s family? You don’t have cry about that. What’s wrong with loving family, what is there to criticise? It’s alright, it’s alright, my lady.”

In the midst of not being able to cry for them, how can he forgive me?

I cannot feel sadness. There was no anger to begin with. To begin with, am I pardoned to feel? Not even to feel pleasure, but feel things that those that died by our hands can no longer have the opportunity to feel?

That’s what I think, yet it does not stop. As if something broke, the pouring tears overflowed out of the hands that hid my face.

“If it displeases you, please push me away..... please excuse me.”

Before I could understand that, the curtains of night that I thought had already fallen fell again.

It was a terribly warm night.

Holding my head and my waist, embracing me in his chest, he was too vulnerable. *What if I stabbed a knife into his chest*, there was no room to think that.

His body heat warmed me. A long time ago, I embraced his head before, but now even

if I use my whole body I can't embrace him. I couldn't place my hands on his wide back, so I leaned my forehead against him while hiding my face.

I wonder how long it has been since I was embraced by someone like this. I don't remember. I pushed away everyone in this life. The people who tried to hug me all looked dejected. I'm sorry, and that was all I could say. They're not bad at all, but I hurt them.

I don't know. I don't know. I still don't know.

How I should have lived. The correct way to live. The way to atone, how I should live, how I could live without hurting anyone from my life. What I should have done with this life. What I should have thrown away, what I should not get. All this time, without knowing, I could barely plan to stubbornly live on.

Certainly, no matter how many lives I have, I'll be foolish. Rather, something might have changed if I was born as a completely different person. But I was born as me. Foolish, unwise, wandering and hesitating for fifteen years, not knowing life, not growing up and still wandering, but ending up in his arms. Enveloped by the warmth, I desperately tried to suppress the emotions that welled up. I swallowed my sobs, hid my tears and clenched my teeth so that I would stop shaking.

No. This isn't what I'm here for. I'm not here to weep and be comforted.

When I lightly pressed his chest, he gently pulled away and kneeled as he hung his head. I too kneeled in front of him.

After sniffing and wiping away my tears, I could finally let out a decent sound.

"Helt, what you did was right. You did not do anything wrong as the next lord. Deceiving us and killing us all to cut it off."

"I-"

"However, you did one thing wrong."

He raised his head as if he snapped.

“You have only one fault. ....You did not trust me.”

Your fault killed me.

And your fault saved Laius.

So, certainly, that too is right.

When I saw the glistening golden shade, a tear fell again. However, this time, I didn't weep like a child. It wasn't a tear that shook the body with emotion. It was as though all the emotions in me was condensed into a single grain, falling down and bursting open on the ground.

“You had no need to lie. You did not need to it. Just one sentence, one sentence would have been enough. That was all. I was a savage who abandoned her family. ....Did you know too? I had a marriage arranged by my parents. I was to marry upon turning eighteen. Yet I said I want to go to your homeland..... I was a woman who said that I wanted to get out of the house with you. I am the daughter of the people who were called devils, so I am beast that abandons her parent, her family. I love them, but I cannot live for them. I am but a girl who only thinks of herself. So, with one phrase, I would have helped you kill my family. ....Since I am a devil.”

His mouth opened slightly and closed again. He is lost for words.

Today, for me who searched for the words for this day, they all came together.

“However, now you should know. If I had been left alive in any way, the embers would remain. No matter how much I struggled, our deaths would have been the only way

for Laius to revive. If I was alive, not only would I have dragged you down, but have inflicted a fatal wound on you. That's how hated we are. We were flawless evil. So that would have been useless. You did the right thing. Laius could not survive another period of chaos and turmoil. It was us that turned Laius into a place that cannot be rebuilt while risking fire. You saved Laius from ruin. It was my fault that we could only meet like that. If I were smarter and knew the world, if I tried..... surely, we could have met in a different way. Yet, once we met like that..... there was only that end waiting for me."

It must have been scary. It must have been terrifying.

He knew better than anyone that just a small change could lead to losing something. He didn't say anything to me. He couldn't. That was all my fault.

He was three years younger than me, fourteen years old. Yet for him who was risking his own life, burdening everything of Laius, could there have been someone to tell everything, much less me? There was no way he would ask for help from a girl that did not try to think about anything. Ah, that too is my fault.

"I also lied."

".....I don't know. I deceived you cruelly and betrayed everyone. But you did not-"

I lied.

A horrible lie. ....A cruel lie.

I kept the most important thing a lie.

"I am sorry, Helt, I lied. I told you that I wanted to go to your homeland, but I abandoned that path. I am a liar."

I overheard the wardens at the prison.

That Helt was planning on putting me into a monastery in his homeland. The wardens were uneasy about the new young lord. *Bewitched by 'the Treasure Flower'*, They chatted. The reaction of the wardens were the reaction of the people.

Distrustful of lords, they could not believe in anything. So much that they would even be skeptical of their saviours.

I would be lying if I say that I was not angry. If I say that I did not feel sad, depraved, mortified nor miserable, those are all lies.

I was angry at being betrayed. I felt sad, depraved, mortified and miserable. I never wanted to see his face again, nor did I want to hear his voice again.

Yet, when I met him, it made me feel nostalgic.

That was even more wretched. I felt so miserable and embarrassed that I wanted to die. So I relied on death to end me.

“It was me who created that end. Yet I made you bear that end. I am sorry, Helt, I did not mean to hurt you for fifteen years. I am not angry. I never blamed you. No one resents you. Of course, I too. So, Helt, you can be happy. No, you must be happy. Lais too must become a happy place. I am sorry. I ended up inflicting pain on you.”

I learned it after meeting him again.

Helt was not non-existent. Helt was there. Right inside Kaid.

I loved him. He was a little mean yet so warm. I really loved him.

“My lady, you have nothing to apologise about. I deceived you. I am a hideous criminal. You, the victim, does not need to apologise at all. Not having told you was my own weakness. I should have hung myself, yet I placed that on you. So-”

“Hey, Helt, tell me one thing.”

I cut him off.

“Did you like me?”

I could tell from how he drew his breath. And by how the golden shade did not dart about.

That was enough proof of the truth.

“.....I know that our positions were too different, but, you have my heartfelt love.”

My body trembled. From the deepest part of my heart, delight welled up.

“Same goes for me, Helt, I truly loved you. It was the first time I liked someone. Now, I am glad that it was you.”

Even though I told him so, his expression was still stony. I probably am making the same face.

“So..... let us say farewell properly.”

It was love that began with lies. At the least, I want it to end with truth.

He was about to say something, but he shut his mouth and hung his head.

“.....I understand, my lady.”

I made a bitter smile at the appearance. Kneeling and bowing when a couple is breaking, really.

“Helt, stand up. Let us talk on equal grounds. You may speak like Kaid.”

“I had been trying my best to speak to my lady like that, yet she says a cruel thing.”

“Helt.”

“If it’s Helt, then this is not problematic.”

Well, that’s true, but still.

When he stood up, he really was tall. Beyond his head, the golden shade, I could see the white moon.

For us that dated in secret, it was only during the daytime that we could be together. Most likely, the most romantic moment should be now. Since that is our farewell, I couldn’t help but smile bitterly.

“.....What will you be doing afterwards?”

“As planned, I will become a nun. Until now, I had been praying only for Laius’s future, but from now I will pray for your happiness too.”

“Shall I move the graves? I am sure that they will be happier that way. At least, better than my visits..... I only spray alcohol haphazardly.”

I blinked my eyes at the unexpected proposal.

I am thankful for that, but is that alright, I wonder.

“I was thinking of moving them when I step down from my office. ....However, I have one thing I would like you to forgive.”

“Yes?”

“Can you leave your grave to me?”

His gaze passed me and was looking at the stone at the farthest end.

“Just that?”

“.....You are not displeased? You will be split from your family.”

“That’s fine..... this is a very late question, but the body underneath, does it have a head?”

“Both parts were buried properly.”

Then as though he remembered something, he turned his head. When I snooped about below him, he silently stared up and confessed.

“.....I kept a tuft of your hair.”

“Eh, no way, I did not take a bath then, not to mention my hair was charred! Ah, wash it, wash it and then hold it!”

“Is that the problem?”

“Because.....”

I don’t know anyone that would be happy from someone that they like having their dirty hair. Moreover, that was right after I was beheaded, so it must be blood-soaked. ....Considering that, I wonder if he would have washed it. If he has them as they were, I really will cry a bit.

When our gazes met, it felt awkward and we smiled bitterly. Before, when our eyes met we smiled happily, but now there are only bitter smiles.

“Helt, for everything, thank you very much.”

I was going to say sorry, but if I say it once it will drag onto a battle. Also, I could see that there would no winner, so I swallowed that back in.

“Yes..... I too..... my lady, please have proper meals. No one will get angry even if you eat until you are full.”

“.....I will consider it.”

When I held out my hand, a large hand clasped it. Both were shaking, but we ignored it.

“.....My lady.”

“Yes?”

“If, if I also have another life, then once again..... no, for the first time, may I confess to you?””

I blinked my eyes, but it didn't seem like a joke.

The force grabbing my hand grew stronger.

“I cannot vouch if the answer then will be ‘yes,’ though?”

When I teased him a bit, he smiled slightly.

It was the first time I saw his soft smile in this life.

“I will give it my all to convince you.”

“Oh, please go easy on-”

“No.”

“At least let me say everything.”

We let each others' hands go. Our fingers touched until the end and I formed a bitter smile at how there still were lingering feelings. There was still some regret left. But it's not chagrin.

It'd be nice if we could part ways. How nice it would be able to brightly smile so. To call it a past, it is too close, and to call it fate, there's too much love.

We both were bothersome. We were too cowardly to have our ways by force, but too persistent to reluctantly accept it. He was my first love, so I did not know. It's nice that I learned before I became a phantom.

As our hands parted, our nails clacked one last time.

“Farewell, Helt.”

“Farewell, my lady.”

In our place, only the trees were crying.

## CHAPTER 12

# THE FAREWELL, OF YOU AND ME — II

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As we were about to go, the rustling sound of someone moving through the bush came into our ears. Kaid stood in front of me and laid a hand on his sword.

The flickering light from the lantern enlarged the shadow.

“Master!”

It was Caron who came. Panicking greatly, she did not care that there were leaves in her hair.

She was about to say something in her panic, but seeing me behind Kaid her eyes opened wide.

“Master, no matter how Shirley is similar to her, this is inexcusable.”

“I’ll hear it later. More importantly, what happened?”

Flashing her eyes, Caron looked shocked as she was urged to talk.

“It looks like there was poison in the servants’ meals, and Tim is,”

“What?”

Kaid’s voice quickly grew sharp.

How, did that. I was just having dinner with them.

“It seems like there was some in the confectionery Tim had.”

“His condition?”

“We made him spit it out and took him to the infirmary. It’s not serious, but..... there is an uproar that Samua might have put it in.”

We unintentionally exchanged glances.

“At first, we assumed that it was the cook, but then all the food was poisoned. Then, the person closest is.....”

Indeed, as Tim was being guided by Samua, Samua was with him the most. They were often together in meals too, but that doesn't mean he's the one.

While shouting, we exited the forest at a speed that was close to running. The commotion had spread already and people from other fiefdoms were seizing and interrogating the servants of the mansion.

Kaid started clicking his tongue.

“Sorry, I'll go ahead. Carolina, please take of Shirley.”

“All right, sir.”

Without even checking that we were being respectful, Kaid kept running. From here and there, there were voices calling for Kaid.

As I stared blankly, Caron gently patted my back.

“You should go to the infirmary. Jasmine collapsed from exhaustion.”

“Y-Yes.”

I started running as if to repel the ground. Behind me, Caron sounded surprised but I had no room to look back. However, before and now, I had no experience in sprinting like this so my speed fell quickly but I did not stop and kept running.

While nursing my sides, I went into the infirmary. Of the six beds, the one furthest inside and the one opposite that had curtains drawn shut over them.

I approached the doctor who was scrutinising the diagnosis.

“Doctor, Tim and Jasmine,”

“It’s alright, so no need to come running with such a serious expression. Don’t you collapse too and increase my work.”

The woman doctor who was in her mid-forties adjusted her thick glasses and stopped looking at the diagnosis.

“For Tim, Samua made him spit it out immediately and the poison was not lethal so his condition should improve quickly. Jasmine..... had tranquillisers, but oh would you look at that, she’s up again. Looks like medicine won’t work if she’s that worked up..... I wonder if she woke up from hearing us talk. You’re her roommate. Go soothe her please.”

There were moans from the other side of the curtain, so I hastily entered.

“Jasmine, it’s Shirley. I’m coming in.”

When I went in, there was a very haggard Jasmine, so haggard that I almost suspected that she is not the same person I had been talking to just some time ago. She tried to get up, but possibly because her body wasn’t moving well, my elbows she was holding onto trembled greatly.

As I offered my body to support her, my elbows were clenched tightly and almost painfully.

“Tim, Tim, blood, spat blood, blood, his palms, were red, and,”

“It’s alright, it’s alright. The doctor said that he should be fine since he was made to spit it out quickly. It’s fine.”

“Samua, it’s not him.”

“Yes, that’s what I think too.”

The eyes that always glittered were clouded with tears.

“He said it was the first time he had a junior, he was really happy. That he finally

became a proper butler, getting all excited even though he was quite fresh too. I'll teach him lots, he said."

"Yeah."

"When Tim spat blood, he moved faster than anyone."

"Yeah."

"Even after Tim got poisoned, even though he shouldn't have because of the toxin he didn't care and put his fingers in Tim's throat to make him vomit."

"Yeah."

"It's not Samua....."

"Yeah. I think so too. Since, Samua is a good person. He's very nice, so it's definitely not him."

"His tongue slips often....."

".....Yeah, that's true."

"But that's because I've been watching him properly, really, it's not Samua. It's not the head chef either. Because, he always, looks after everyone, saying that the food should be sweetened for this person, or saying that this person should have more vegetables since he only has meat."

"Yeah..... Not him. It's definitely not him. So Jasmine, you should sleep and rest a bit."

She forced herself up. Jasmine's eyes were blank. However, from those eyes, tears fell and desperately croaked out some words. She's not someone to cry like this.

Someone, someone made her cry. Someone used a terrible method to make her cry.

Rage grew in me. The feelings that were rusted started heating up slowly like boiling water.

“The perpetrator, I’ll definitely catch the person..... and I’ll make the person grovel in front of Samua and Tim and the head chef, so, so,”

“Yeah..... but if Samua returns and sees that you’re so worn, he’ll be very worried. So you should sleep a bit. Then when we can, let’s find the perpetrator together, okay?”

After I rubbed her stiff body and gently laid her on the bed, her eyelids started closing, definitely from fatigue. From the eyes that blinked many times, tears fell.

Watching me laid a blanket over her, Jasmine smiled slightly.

“.....Fufu, somehow, it feels strange.”

“Eh?”

“Shirley’s talking a lot..... it feels like a dream..... and you’re like an older sister..... comforting, Shirley, you’re very wonderful.....”

With words that made me blush, Jasmine went off to sleep, making me feel relieved. I gently loosened the fingers that were clutching my sleeve and tucked them under the sheets.

I confirmed that she was asleep, but for some reason I sat down on the seat right there.

Currently, there are people coming from various places. So entering places is under stricter control. It’s the servant’s dining hall on top of that, so people other than staff members can’t enter. Since the place won’t cause much trouble it will inevitably end up there.

However, the people working at the mansion are hired after thorough investigation. As a matter of fact, it would be preposterous to think that anyone related to people executed fifteen years ago would be hired. Moreover, what would poisoning Tim achieve? Was it indiscriminate? Then that’s even more mysterious.

Maybe it’s just to tarnish Kaid’s reputation.

I don’t know.

I pressed my forehead and pondered.

I unconsciously rubbed the necklace I received from Jasmine. Blue hyacinth. Unchanging, “\_”. Cecil knew. Adele knew as well, and what if there’s a suicide attack on Kaid from tightly grasping the hyacinth.

Unchanging..... unchanging..... unchanging?

With a clang I stood up.

As I dashed out of the curtain, the doctor let out a yelp. I started running as I shouted an apology. People who saw me looked on curiously, but I had no time for them.

I ran in a straight line with Kaid as the destination.

However, Kaid was running about here and there so I couldn’t find him. In the end, I found Caron and asked her to deliver a message to him.

After I waited a while in the hallway, rushed footsteps were heard.

“Shirley.”

“Master, I’m sorry in this urgent time. I have something I must tell you.”

“Ahh, I got it. Carolina, tell others that I’m in the office.”

“Understood, sir. I’ll prepare tea and some snacks. As you had not had dinner yet, master.”

After lightly bowing to Caron who had a strange expression, Kaid and I went into the room with tea leaves for two people. Inside, there were documents strewn about all over the floor. There was no time to pick them up.

Kaid collapsed into the chair and scratched his head. After a long sigh, he started

making tea.

“My lady, what is it that you’d like to talk about?”

“I can only say that the change in stance is superb, but anyhow..... Kaid, I am your lady, yes?”

“.....Or so I believe with confidence.”

To Kaid who frowned as if to ask what I am talking about in this time, I handed him a cup of tea and got one for myself before sitting down in front of him.

“I cannot ascertain that there are not people who have memories of the past like me.”

“.....That, is..... Then, even after thinking through about the current causal relationships, it still is not certain. The person would be..... around fifteen?”

“I believe so.”

“My lady, is there anything special, evidence, about people with past memories?”

Evidence. I wonder if there was something like that.

As I pondered, Kaid stared at me with a serious expression. For sure, I need something. As nothing can be gained from looking at the current causal relationships, all the teenagers currently hired are all suspect.

“.....Come to think of it, I recall that the moles are on the same spot.”

“Moles?”

Yes, moles. *I had not checked my whole body so I cannot be sure though*, I added. Kaid observed me for a while and raised his voice in realisation, so I got a bit startled.

“On the back of your neck.”

“On my groin.”

Silence fell for a while.

“.....There’s one on the back of my neck?”

“.....There’s one on your groin?”

I felt a little shocked since he told me a place I could not see, but then it was me who told him a place he never saw.

Kaid lightly cleared his throat.

“If two places match, then that’s somewhat credible..... My lady, do you know the location of the moles of people you were related to?”

“.....Don’t ask for the impossible. To begin with, I rarely were related with anyone. Father did not seem to want me to greet guests. The only people who were related often enough to know the location of my moles were my family, you, Wil and his father.”

“.....Ah, Wilfred.”

Upon hearing the name of my previous fiancé, this time I cleared my throat.

“Wilfred, his moles..... there weren’t many that were in noticeable places.”

“Indeed. Let’s think about that later. Anyhow, we will know once we catch the person who poisoned Tim’s food.”

“.....Yes.”

It’s not Samua. Kaid too seemed to be sure of that, so I felt relieved.

From the silence that came after the conversation ended, I felt restless. I told him what I wanted, so I’ll return quickly after I finish the tea.

I want to visit Jasmine again and if he’s alright I want to see Tim and if possible I want to see Samua too.

Kaid too couldn't sit still. He twiddled his fingers and had some tea.

I'll drink it too. Then I'll go quickly.

When I thought that and brought the cup to my lips, Kaid's fist came swinging at me.

For a while, I didn't realise what was happening.

Before the pain, the heat and the numbness came. The hot numbness assaulted my cheek and my hand.

Flying to the other side of the room, the cup shattered with a great sound. The tea set that still had content was thrown to the floor and shattered.

Without thinking to nurse my hurting cheek and hand, I stared at Kaid.

Kaid, who hit me with an awkward stance, smiled gently like a child that woke up from a nightmare.

*Retch.*

A very dull and sticky sound came.

A red droplet from Kaid landed on my cheek.

From Kaid who quickly covered his mouth and turned his head great amounts of blood came pouring out from his mouth.

"Kai, Kai, d."

I couldn't move my limbs. I forced myself to crawl to approach Kaid, but Kaid too did the same to get away from me.

"Don't, come.....!"

But then, Kaid's movement halted for a moment. Then he stretched out his clean and diligently wiped away the drop of blood on my cheek.

After smiling faintly as if in relief, the red colour that came in streams burst out in a torrent this time.

"S-Somebody, somebody, the doctor, somebody!"

"Master, what is this noise—— Master!"

As I started running, people came running in at the same time. They all held their breath at the horrible scene.

"Master!"

"Someone, go to the infirmary! Quickly! Don't touch the blood if possibly!"

"Master, please hold on, master!"

"Vomit out everything, please, quickly!"

"Master, master!"

People gradually came flooding into the room. Every time, I had to retreat to the wall.

"What happened with the poison tasting!"

"It always done right before the food was served!"

"What about the dishes!?"

"They were cleaned before usage!"

One of the people who was often with Kaid approached me with a fierce countenance.

"You bastaaaaaaaaaard!"

"Wait! It's not certain that it's that girl yet!"

“Don’t, don’t get violent!”

By the man, whose eyes flashed like those of wolves, who shouted so loud that almost all his teeth were visible, I was seized by the collar and swung. Caron and other grabbed onto his arms and separated me from him.

Banged against the wall, I collapsed and crouched down. Through my dishevelled hair, between the people who were frantically shouting, I could see Kaid.

Maybe there was nothing more to vomit, as his body was lying still in the blood as if it would float away into the sky.

The world is red. Long time ago, I lost everything inside the red shade. That red colour is dyeing this land again. Even though it’s not that hot, even though it’s cold enough for the body lose its complexion.

That redness, again.

“No.....”

The hand I stretched out shook and there was no strength in my body.

Past the person that was trying to make him vomit without minding their hands getting dirty, a thin golden light saw me and slowly stretched his fingers towards me.

Those fingers too fell into the sea of blood.

“No.....”

“Get up, get up you bastard, what did you do to master..... oi,”

A confused voice came out from the man who approached again after tearing himself away from Caron and others.

“No.....”

The family I was chatting with about the tea and snacks for tomorrow.

The mansion that was like an ivory person.

The beautifully kept garden.

The person I truly loved.

Disappeared into the redness.

The redness, that redness.

It was taking him too.

I touched the place he wiped with a trembling hand. I clawed at myself with my nails, yet it did not hurt a bit. It did not hurt, yet it wasn't a dream. It's too much.

No, not the redness, not that redness.

It didn't hurt, yet,

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

The red shade hurts.

## CHAPTER 13

# THE FAREWELL, OF YOU AND ME — III

---

The man who had been grabbing me by the collar just a while ago was now confusedly holding me in his arms as I cried deliriously. Even as I was dragged outside the room, my screams did not stop. These weren't words. These were more primal than the cries of beasts. Just roars that projected motion onto the world.

"It really isn't that girl!?"

"Tell me! You should have the antidote!"

"Look for the perpetrator! There should be the antidote there!"

My dishevelled hair clung onto my skin, attached in a soggy state. I collapsed against the wall, crouching down as I was at my wits' end.

"Antidote....."

Amidst the thought that was flashing with red, that word resonated.

If there's the antidote, Kaid can live. Kaid won't disappear. Helt won't die. Helt won't be dragged into the red shade.

"Moles."

Moles. Remember. Even if I don't remember things in the past, I have to smash through my memories and dig it out.

Murmuring while I scratching at my face and hair, I'll look like a lunatic to anyone. I'm fine with being a madwoman. I have asserted many times that I'm insane. Even if that its baseless madness, I don't care. If that means Kaid won't die, anything is alright.

Father, on the right earlobe.

Helt smiles.

Mother, on the neck.

Helt smiles.

Grandfather, on the left cheek.

Helt teases me slightly.

Grandmother, by the mouth.

Helt smiles.

Every time I try to think of the past, Helt is smiling in my memories. Stop. Don't appear. Please, so that the you of now won't die.

However, I couldn't do anything. Since, most of my world had been given to me by father, I couldn't remember much. Amidst that, my first love occupied most of those memories.

"Moles..... moles....."

I don't know Wil's father. I don't remember much about Wil either. To begin with, I didn't meet him often.

He visited once a month, where we had tea and took a stroll in the garden.

"His lordship is calling for you."

Saying that, he came to fetch me as I didn't appear at the tea party.

"Come on, my princess. Please take my hand."

I reluctantly took the hand that was stretched out.

“Shirley, you should rest a bit. Okay? It’s alright, so please, rest a bit.”

I raised my head in response to Caron’s voice which was tearing up.

When I looked to my side, the man who brought me out of the room was bending down and reaching a hand out. On his chest, I saw a strap holding a knife.

The hand he held out was bare. In his pocket, there was a glove dyed red from blood.

Glove. Moles. Glove. Moles.

I saw moles in a gap from a glove.

On Wil, and on someone else. I saw them.

Well-mannered, has attractive smile, is loved by everyone, does not make a sour face at boring work, rather even volunteering to do them.

I saw them on the boy who was like Helt.

“.....Tim.”

“Eh?”

“Tim has it.”

I rammed into the man with all my strength, taking the knife and running out like that.

There were many voices calling me. However, my feet did not stop. Even my hearing seemed to be filled with red, as if my ears were submerged in red water. The sounds were covered and did not come into my head very well.

This isn’t that day. The mansion has burned down, my family whose heads were rolling are now asleep under the graves that he made. They’re asleep with me.

Yet everything is red. Eyes, sounds, thoughts, everything was scorched red.

On my way, I crossed paths with the doctors who were heading to Kaid. They were shouting something, but I couldn't tell what the sounds were.

Thoughts and limits, they were all bring painted red. I had never ran this long. I had never ran this fast. At the speed that I would definitely trip over after I return to my senses, I ran.

I ran back into the infirmary that I had just rushed out of. Maybe because they all went to Kaid's side, there were no doctors nor assistants. The curtains closest to the front were still drawn shut.

The difference was that the curtains inside were pulled open, with Tim who looked pale was standing in front of an open window with a thin smile.

"That was fast. Did he die?"

"Give me the antidote."

Seeing me take a step forth with the knife grasped tightly in my hand, Tim frowned displeasedly.

"The poison is for killing bears, so a person should die quickly."

"Give me the antidote."

"I would have thought it would kill wolves quickly too..... I had a lot of trouble trying to dilute the smell and taste."

"Wilfred Alcott!"

"Scary, don't get angry. I don't have anything like that."

Tim, no Wilfred put on an inhumane smile. The hand that he brought to his mouth was ungloved and the sleeves were unbuttoned, maybe done so to treat him. Wilfred

rubbed the moles on that, possibly subconsciously.

In that expression, there was no trace of Tim. There was not even the appearance of the Wilfred I know. However, I could tell from his speech.

How he breathes, how he takes intervals before the next words. Such small things that couldn't be faked, things so petty that it's just habitual.

"If it meant killing him, I didn't care if I would die as well. So I didn't bring anything like that from the beginning."

".....You're lying."

"It's true. It should have been instantaneous, but if I did have that and he lives, I'd hate that, you know? For importantly."

His eyes narrowed and he pointed a finger from his untanned hand at me.

"You're turning your blade against the wrong person. Even an ignorant princess should know who killed her."

"I am not incorrect in discerning who tried to kill Kaid right now."

"I'm disappointed in you. For the first, when I found someone like me for the first time, and that was you. Can you understand my joy then? My joy when I found the mole on your neck. I was delighted that you had the eyes that were similar to the past, yet different. Oh, you must have the same feeling as I. You must want to make that man suffer the same bitterness, I thought. Yet, look at you now. Are you just going to forgive him? Give him salvation? To the person who killed us? After getting robbed of everything from that minor noble? I have wonder if you're sane."

That's what I should say to you.

That was what I thought.

I don't care, I thought.

I don't care, so tell me where the antidote is.

Seeing my obvious reaction to the two bottles that were brought out from his pocket, he snickered.

“Even if you look at me so yearningly eyes, these aren't antidotes. It's another kind of poison. It will be hard to make it lethal, but it's convenient since it's volatile. Even if it's weak, there still are some after-effects. The other one isn't poison. Just sulphuric acid.”

“.....So you think I would hesitate from that.”

“It might have had some effect on you in the past, but it looks like it won't now. However, from here you will be on my side. You will curse his wrongdoings, sneer at the owner of this estate and throw away your proof of friendship.”

With the tip of the small closed bottle, he pointed at the necklace on my chest, a scowl on his face. I wonder if he learned hypnotism in these past fifteen years. Otherwise, I cannot understand how he can say something that can't possibly happen with such a cheerful look.

As I was about to shout that to him, a soft voice came from behind me.

“.....Shirley?”

Hearing the voice slightly clouded with drowsiness, I almost snapped around.

Jasmine, who had her clothes slightly unlaced, came teetering out from the curtains and opened her eyes wide.

In her eyes, there was a woman who was pointing a knife at her colleague who looked pale from poison. The woman had her hair and clothes unkempt, suspicious no matter what.

“H-Help, Jasmine-san! Shirley-san is strange!”

Seeing 'Tim' speak in a trembling voice and stagger and lean against the window as if he were dizzy, Jasmine screamed.

'Wilfred' who collapsed against the windowsill shook the glass bottle in his hand.

Which bottle was that? No, that didn't matter. Even if weak, there's no telling what will happen to Jasmine who is already very pale. The acid is out of question.

On that pale face made from drinking the poison himself, the white lips curled into a smile.

"To tell the truth, there's another bottle, but my partner has it. On my signal, it will be thrown into the well..... Jasmine-san, run away, Jasmine-san....."

After telling me things in a quiet voice, he told a barefaced lie in a weak voice. He was asking for help before, but now he was telling her to run away.

I wonder if he was this kind of person. I don't remember well. I never knew well.

Since he was my fiancé in that paradise which I knew was distorted and foul, he might have been this kind of person to begin with. Or maybe fifteen years turned him into this.

Either way, there was a ridiculous lack of possible actions for me.

I gripped the knife in reverse and grabbed the hair of the sickly 'Tim'. While getting goosebumps from his tiny yelp, I placed the knife against his exposed neck. Then, with eyes as though they coldly staring down at subjects from the gallows, I gazed at Jasmine.

"Don't come any closer."

My voice wasn't trembling.

There was the noise of many footsteps.

Isador, Caron, Samua, familiar faces all gasped at seeing me. The person who screamed, "Tim!" was the maid from the room next door. She is a kind girl who shares that she found a delicious confectionery shop.

"Shirley, what, why,"

Seeing the aways serious Samua who firmly set his hair back having his fringe down, I felt slightly relieved seeing such a figure. So he's been released. Then, that's nice.

Even though I think that from the bottom of my heart, what I am giving to all the exhausted people is not relief.

It's betrayal.

"I'm just sick of it all. Jasmine, you, Tim, annoying doesn't cut it. ....Also, that man."

Unable to hold back, I strongly pulled the hair of Wilfred who gave a thin smile. He groaned for real this time, but I didn't feel happy at all. How nice it would have been to slash at him with this knife.

Even though it was sticky, I desperate ran my tongue in my dry mouth.

"If he's giving me something, jewels would have been nice, but all he gives are sweets and cookies. I'm not the sort of person to sit smouldering here. I'll go higher, become better, become rich and I'll live the happy life everyone will envy."

I'm lying.

"I really hate that I didn't get anything out of being a servant to him. It's annoying."

I'm lying.

"If I couldn't get that man, I was thinking of getting the heir-apparent, yet that man interfered in that. Even more than that, he was going to fire me. So I killed him. If I poison Tim, Samua would have been taken care of as well. You would have quieted down after losing two friends, yes?"

After turning pale like when she was unwell, Jasmine's legs buckled. Reflexively supporting her, Samua still looked bewildered with disbelief even after seeing this much.

"Hey, head maid. I wonder if that man died already. The poison was for killing bears. He should have died. Well, it was for killing bears. Hey, Isador-sama. The man who was in our way is no longer there. Will you look at me now?"

Isador was about to say something, but he closed his mouth. Then he muttered something. I can't see from here, he must have told someone close to him what I said without any exaggerations.

I apologised in my head to Caron who looked confused. To be honest, before leaving here, I wanted to tell you at the least. I don't blame Kaid, that it's alright now. At the least, that there was no need to defend me and condemn Kaid.

I wanted to tell her that.

Before people could come around me, I dropped 'Tim' who was weakened from poison outside the window. This is the first floor so there's no problem and the window is low so that patients can be carried in.

As I followed out, the voice that always greeted me cheerfully for a month, despite there being nothing fun for her, called me.

"Shirley!"

I tightly bit my lips and leapt over the window, then turned around.

“Shut up. Stop yelping about. Can you never talk without shouting? That’s what I hate about you. You’re noisy. Just hearing you makes me feel thirsty. Won’t someone go to the well and draw some water for me. Ah, Jasmine, you can go do that. It’d be nice if you fell in right there and became quiet.”

Even though she turned pale and her teeth were chattering, there were no tears. Yeah, you can’t cry. For some reason, it’s not possible to cry if there’s too much sadness or pain.

I slowly moved my fingers to my necklace. The chain snapped easily. The eyes that were light quickly warped.

“I’ll be leaving this too. I’ll leave it here. Right, you can leave it to Kaid. A broken necklace. The flower fits him well.”

I made the flower lying on the frame fall away with a flick from my fingers. With the sound like shells reverberating as the end, I stepped back while having my knife drawn on ‘Tim’.

Right as I reached the last place where the light from the window could reach, I raised the corners of my lips.

“Goodbye.”

“Wait, Shirley, wait!”

“Tim! Stop! Give Tim back!”

Bitter shouts struck my back.

But Wilfred and I did not look back and disappeared into the darkness.

Anyway, the gates were shut. There were no places to run away too. I was hoping that there would be arrows if we delayed, but Wilfred shifted his expression from that which was like that of a scared dog into a smug smile.

“This way, come on.”

“.....Is there really, no, antidote?”

“Nope. Even if he somehow manages to live, just his bowels feeling like they’re being boiled alive won’t be all. Killing him once is not enough.”

As the knife was pressed against my back, I reluctantly ran. My sides hurt now. My throats hurt so much that I might even wonder if I’m breathing thorns.

I wonder where we’re going. Anyhow, we’re running away together. If someone had an arrow, I could signal them so that the two of us would be pierced together.

Since we’re outside, the volatile poison will flow away with the wind, and the even if the sulphuric acid is thrown only I’ll be harmed. Just one signal will be good.

In the shadow of my body I closed and opened my fist many times. It will be decided in a moment. Ah, how about whistling? I won’t be able to do anything if my arms get restrained.

Fortunately, our height is similar, so maybe a headbutt might work. If possible, I want to slug him with my fist, but it will have no point unless it works. I don’t care if my fingers break, so I wonder if it will work if I hit him with all my strength.

As I ran, my focus drifted to the shouts and lights that came from many places.

Kaid. Helt.

Ah, either is fine. Either is good. Whatever you want, please, either one, please stay alive.

No. We promised to meet in our next life, yet this is too fast. I didn’t want to say goodbye like this.

“Haha! A fitting end for a lord who came to power through revolution!”

Seeing him laugh in a manner too inhumane for a child, the image of red and the smell of rust came back. The way how he worried for the drop of blood on my cheek even as he vomited gushes of blood.

“.....Wilfred Alcott, if, if Kaid dies I will never forgive you.”

“That’s unfair. You forgave someone who killed you and your family. Well, let’s talk about that later. After we get out of here.”

“There’s no way we can get out. All the gates are shut.”

Maybe it’s alright under normal circumstances, but there’s no way the guards would let two servants past after such event happened. Even if there’s a hostage, it’s not possible.

Even so, he smiled.

“If we can’t pass, we can just get away with someone who can get past. Ignorant princess.”

After I tried to find out the true intent of those words as I frowned, I realised.

This was the place where the carriage guests brought were. Among them, he stopped in front the carriage that was slanted and ‘for some reason’ he laid a hand on the large door. The carriage that had its horses ‘for some reason’ easily opened its mouth. Then seeing the lump of meat inside the answer was revealed.

Today was a relatively calm day.

The only trouble before dinner was that Joblin, the lord of Darich fell over and that it was hard to raise him back up.

“Now, how did it go?”

“He did get it, but he didn’t die instantly even with poison for bears. What, is he a monster or something?”

“The beastly noble survives by feeding on trash, so his stomach is strangely strong. Good work. I shall allow you to ride the carriage.”

“Sir.”

The servant from Darich who was sitting in front of Joblin stood up and kicked the space beneath the seats. That opened up to reveal a tight space. The servant descended and took off the board inside.

“Ladies first?”

It was absurd seeing Wilfred making the elegant gesture of a man escorting a noble lady.

“.....Riding out after such a commotion is equal to saying that we are the culprits.”

“But, you can’t accuse the lord of another fief without clear proof. Come one, get in quickly. Or, I wonder if the princess can’t get in unless I embrace her.”

I silently glared in response to his bare insult. Wilfred was laughing from something, while Joblin’s meat wobbled as he seemed to move his head. He might have tilted his head, but his neck is hidden in the meat.

“Since thou expressed that she was necessary, I wondered what kind of girl she may be, but is she not just a plain girl. Sullen face and no meat. It surely shall feel disgusting to hold her.”

“.....Compared to you, everyone is not meaty enough.”

“Haha, what words.”

The The meat wobbled. The carriage rocked as well.

“She’s a girl without anything, but she is the only one for me in this world. No one can replace her. Like how everyone is different from me, only she can see the world I see.”

“Thou always say mysterious words. Well, ’tis fine. Get on.”

“Yes. Now, princess, come in.”

“.....No.”

To me who was glancing at the shut door, Wilfred shrugged and opened the shelf inside the carriage. Immediately after seeing cloth in the tightly shut bottle, I turned around to run away. However, as the entrance was blocked, even though it's a carriage wider than normal, it still was a carriage. I quickly bumped into the wall.

The manservant from Darich restrained me.

“Let me go!”

Like what I did to ‘Tim’, my hair grabbed and I was forcibly pulled up. Before I could say any more, my mouth and nose was covered with wet cloth.

“If I knew that you were this energetic, maybe I should have invited you for some horse riding? Though, I still would have hated visiting your father.”

I also hated that, yet from the cloth that reeked of medicine I quickly lost consciousness.

The word I muttered, Kaid, was also absorbed into the cloth, blocked from getting out to the world.

# CHAPTER 14

## THE FAREWELL, OF YOU AND ME — IV

---

The sound of rain was not stopping.

A severe rain was now falling for two days.

We can't stay in a fief where the lord was poisoned.

Insisting so, the people from Darich fled the mansion, but were being held up by an out-of-season rainfall that we could not get out of Laius yet.

Being held up in a countryside village without any large inns, Joblin was feeling irritated as he rocked his large body. It seems that he is also angry that he was forced to use a barn that had a large entrance since there were no rooms fitting his size. If he gets angry at such stuff, he should reduce his waist size. It seemed that he could not think of such a thing, since he was now grabbing snacks like an eagle, gulping them down like water.

I wonder if this was why mother disliked him, saying that the man was dirty.

Near the barn, there was a bell tower tolling every six hours to tell the time.

Since the bell tolled just a while ago it dawn must be breaking now. Leaning against the window shut tightly to keep out the rain, I listened to the sound of rain.

In the room, there was me, Joblin and three servants. It wasn't a place where everyone could fit in.

As for one servant, the person is staying in the bell tower. It must be painful to listen

to the bell that tolls all over the village four times a day up close. This is pretty close too, but it's not the same building so I don't get startled by the sound at least.

Wilfred always went out somewhere to gather information.

It's been four days since we left the mansion. He's been coming back dejected every day.

"He's not dead yet."

Those words were my only salvation.

After that, I never talked with him. From his conversation with Joblin, I could get that Joblin has not realised that he is Wilfred.

"If you will be a bit more lovely, I shall give these to you too."

I looked at Joblin who held out a box with leftover chocolate with a hand smeared with chocolate melted from his body temperature as if he were a filthy thing. Not only did he seem filthy, the way he licked his fingers was indeed dirty.

He just had breakfast, yet he seems to be hungry already. Since the sound of rain and wind was strong, he was up early after all. Though, he's been eating something all day so it might not be related.

"Please don't approach. It feels nauseating to just be in the same room. Unless you note your own squalidness, pigs in sties still have more elegance."

"Hoho, she talks well for a country girl. She runs her mouth like a finely brought up lady."

"It's you who can't talk like a fine lord. It troubles me if you blame your own incompetence on me."

The lump of meat shook its body as it laughed.

Then the expression suddenly turned neutral.

“What are you trying to by making me angry, girl?”

I wish he would charge like an enraged boar and destroy the window and entrance, but I know that to be impossible. If it's Joblin's body, he can muster up sufficient strength but he has trouble from just sitting down so he won't lift his body up to charge at me. I'm welcome if he comes charging at me any time but now he has no signs of moving at all. He rarely stands up, so there is little hope.

Unlike the man who erased his expression, I smiled further.

“Rather, I might ask what you are trying to do by waiting upon a country girl.”

It seems like I've been judged as a worthy conversation partner, good.

Despite his clumsy appearance, he is quite the meticulous and ambitious person. Otherwise, he couldn't have kept up this long as a lord while watching for the opportunity to claim other fiefs' lands. The man who concluded that the conversations with me in the past four days were not meaningless stopped leaning against the window and stretched his back.

Amidst the face buried with meat, his eyes that were oddly small narrowed, which was quite hard to tell it did.

“That shrewd Tim, you, the youngster of Laius, children these days are frightening. My guts feel queasy.”

“I am honoured for the praise, but I do not feel happy at all from getting praised by you.”

“No no, it truly is frightening. At first I thought you were just a dull country girl, but then such a crafty man like Tim would not give you up. It was the correct choice to bring you, thinking that it would be interesting.”

The eyes that could only be seen as circles depending on the angle looked down at me

silently.

“I hear you even tamed that wolf lord?”

“A wolf is a wolf because it does not follow people. Things that wag their tails to people are not wolves but dogs. Don’t you even know that?”

And things that get tamed by people without wagging their tails are not dogs.

Just humans. People liking others as people. Just that.

However, I have no plans to tell him that. Saying that he is just human, to those that can’t get such an obvious thing, there’s no use from telling them that.

When I gave him a high-pitched laugh, Joblin snorted and grabbed more chocolate with his hands. Without minding that it was melting from his body temperature, he tossed them into his mouth and licked up what was left on his hands.

“I wish I could have had a chance, even once. I could have chosen a suitable black-haired man to make a child and use the child as a pretender to take the place, it’s a regrettable thing.”

He talked of a filthy thing as if he were talking about chocolate. Willing to choose any method for his goals, this is the lord of Darich. Just as ugly as my father and even slier.

“Even without having to look for uncouth country girls, he has many people that will be with him. Why don’t you let me go if there is no use for me then? I could comply if you order me to.”

“Well, don’t rush to a conclusion like that. What, once the storm passes it could immediately be used for Darich. In that situation, thinking slowly is possible, is it not?”

“There is nothing to think about.”

The man who licked his fingers with his thick tongue shook his body in puzzlement.

“The venue, the dress, the food, the guests. There are many things to think about, no? Even if you are a country girl, you must have dreamed of getting married. What, rest

assured. Let me give you generous help.”

For a moment, I didn't realise what he was talking about. I wonder what kind of face I had been making. A dumbfounded face, or an expressionless one.

I couldn't tell, but it seemed like it was enough to make him laugh, as Joblin rocked his body in pleasure.

“.....Ha?”

“My own granddaughter too just came of age and fell in love with the him, so I wish to cheer her on wholeheartedly, but it's the feelings of the person in question that is the most important, you see. He insisted that he must have you and only you. I too wish to support the love of youngsters.”

After barely managing to squeeze out those words, the lump of meat laughed buoyantly. Just a while ago, he was saying that he wanted to use a suitable black-haired man to get a child, but now he was cheering love on.

Both Joblin and Wilfred taught me with all their actions what duplicity is. However, I'm not any different. I too lied nonchalantly. I lied about important things and lived as only as a contraction.

I've been thinking for the past four days. Even now, I am still thinking while listening to the sound of rain.

I remember the face of everyone when I left the mansion.

Sorrowful. Bitter. Pained. That wasn't all. In this life, many smiles were bitter ones. There were many good people. Kind people, warm people. Those people smiled bitterly at me.

I remember those faces.

It could be that I wasted these past fifteen years. I had thought that if I stubbornly clung on and did not feel happy that I will be atoned. Living like that, I have hurt others,

made people worry, put dark expressions on their faces. I was befuddling myself that this obstinance was alright. Pain, suffering, sadness, I had thought of them as because of the sins from my previous life, pushing them on myself. By saying that I shouldn't be happy, making my surroundings unhappy, I may have been running away.

If I really wanted to atone, if I really wanted to make up for it.

I shouldn't have made myself unhappy and hurt kind people but give happiness as much as I have sinned.

Like Kaid, I could have struggled to make people happy, but I headed the opposite direction and hurt the hearts of kind people. Instead of making such expressions, I could have smiled. Now I know.

I always make mistakes. I only learn of them after it's too late.

Thinking that I can't be happy, I isolated myself, not trying to know anything.

It's the same. I had not changed any bit from when I did not know anything.

Ah, I really am a stupid woman. I learned of that only now. I hurt those kind people beyond healing and left them.

Kaid, ah, Kaid.

Sorry, I'm really sorry. Isador, I'm not just a shackle. I'm a curse. Drunk in unhappiness, spraying unhappiness, I am a calamity.

"Hey, Tim."

"That's not very nice, Joblin-sama. The words of proposal I thought up carefully were just spoiled."

"Hoho, wasn't it a good lesson for you, learning that discerning the timing is the most

important?”

I don't know when he changed, but Wilfred threw his wet clothes, shrugged his shoulders and scratched his head.

“Then at least give me time to persuade her please.”

“Hoho, there's rain anyway. There's plenty of time.”

“I can't persuade her unless there's just the two of us. Since she's a sheltered princess.”

“The country girl talks unabashedly. I had thought that it was strange that you would be interested, but, hm, she indeed is an interesting girl. Grand, I shall lend you the carriage. You may talk with her as much as you please.”

“I am grateful and happy, though, it is very generous of you.”

“What, one needs to enjoy themselves even in a gloomy weather. Although, I will have the carriage back, so you shan't dirty it, is that clear?”

“Since it is a specially made one, I won't do such a bothersome thing. Then, let's be off, Shirley.”

I stood up without holding the hand that was held out.

Wilfred deftly raised an eyebrow.

“My, the princess can stand up on her own?”

“She stood up, hm.”

Over a long time, people who did not abandon me even as I kept making mistakes taught me. Not yet. I have not repaid anything yet. I have not yet apologised for anything. To everyone, to that person.

Kaid, I'm sorry, Kaid.

I got you twined in me and made you drown. You who is drowning in unhappiness, I

will pull you up this time. I will take you to a bright place. I will definitely do it.

So please, don't die. Please, make it. Don't say that it was too late, or that you couldn't make it.

No matter what happens, I will come back for you, so please don't die. Please, stay alive.

God, I plead you. I don't care if all my luck runs out. I will become happy even without luck. I will never hope for happiness, never again. I will not run away. No matter what, I will never give up in trying to be happy. I will give my everything to make it so that people who see me are not saddened.

So please, God.

Help him.

In the rain, we headed to the carriages. Tim sailed right past the carriage that was at least thrice as big as the other ones and opened the door of a small carriage and got on.

Since I only have bad memories of that carriage I didn't care, but I was looking at it anyway when I was pushed inside.

"There's probably someone inside that. I'm sure you don't want others to hear, yes?"

"True."

Even if it's small, it's big enough for four people to get on. There's space for that.

I wiped my hair that got wet from the rain which an umbrella had no meaning. We sat with our knees facing each other and I grabbed my index and middle finger.

“Let me go.”

“I have a question.”

He’s a man who doesn’t listen to people. Well, I suppose I’m the same since I asked for a request before listening to the other person.

Left with no choice, I shut my mouth. Currently, Wilfred has the lead.

To me who grew silent, Wilfred tapped his knee with his index finger. This is his habit. Since I never saw him doing it as Tim, he knows of the habit too.

“You, I heard you kept refusing marriage with me. I heard you kept asking your father to cancel it.”

“If I knew that you were this kind of person, I would have felt much more disgust, but so what.”

“At the mansion, I did see that you were stirred up a bit or had a weakness for him, but..... could it be that you were already lovers back then?”

There is, no reason to flinch, at the gaze that will not miss even a blink.

“What about it.”

The eyes, opened wide.

Even an ignorant and foolish girl knows that a noble’s daughter marries for the good of the family. Thus, I had thought that if my relationship with Helt is found out he would be fired and that we would not be able to meet again. Actually, he wouldn’t just have lost his job, but also his neck. Even if I didn’t think that far, the two of us met in secret so that no one would know. I didn’t know back then that Helt was good at concealing such things, but he did it very well. I was not very close with the maids to begin with and there were only a few people I was friendly with.

One of those few were Caron. I had told Caron. Whenever I went to meet Helt, she

helped.

However, because of that, when I refused the marriage for the family without any reason, father did not allow it.

“Ha, haha, ahahaha! Then, you weren’t just betrayed by your servant, but by your lover! This is a masterpiece!”

Wilfred laughed while holding his belly button, tears forming in his eyes. When I replied yes to him, he grabbed me by the collar.

“Are you an idiot. If that’s the case, what the hell are you doing.”

“Nothing, I didn’t do anything. I haven’t done anything for him to be happy.”

With the sound of skin hitting skin, my vision blurred. I was slapped or hit. Doesn’t matter.

I corrected my head’s angle which was turned by getting hit on my cheek.

“Pretending to be a saintess?”

“That’s nice. Rather, it’s the ominous kind.”

I wiped my lopsided lips and spat those out. He twisted his face a little in surprise. That face was delight that was like madness.

“You’re making a good face. Back then you were a boring woman who didn’t even know profanity. If you’re dissatisfied, you’re making that face at the wrong person.”

“.....Wilfred, why now. Now, I’m neither the only daughter of the lord of Laius, nor do I have royal blood, just a simple country girl. From a long time ago, I’m sure you didn’t really like me.”

“I liked your face and body very much though.”

Pervert.

When I stayed silent to the answer that was hard to reply to, he chuckled. He laid his elbows on his knees and rested his head on his clasped hands and looked at me.

“Well, you’ve been lonely, haven’t you?”

With a voice that one could misunderstand as kindness, he smiled.

“It is only humiliation to to keep reviving through recollections a place that will not return into our hands again. We should be holding the regret of being killed by him, raising that towards him. Hey, I think you should be like that too. Just how many times were we killed even in mere pillow talks? With the pretty voice of bards, in the picture shows of wandering jesters, in school classes, in children’s games, how many times did we die? How often did people rejoice over that sorry sight?”

“.....We were justly hated. We were persecuted justly so it’s a natural thing.”

“Everyone applauded and cheered at our deaths. Since we don’t even exist any more, crimes that we didn’t commit are added on. Children play with figures in my shape. They swing the head about, hit them with sticks, throw stones but their parents to not chastise that. Even though they don’t know the pain of thrown stones and getting hit with sticks, they coolly reproduce that seen.”

“Wilfred.”

“However we certainly are here. We are still here. Even if no one believes it nor recognises us, we are here. We’re here. It’s not over yet. To those who think so, I’ll make them realise it with no room for doubt.”

“Wil!”

Like how a beast bares its fangs past its lips, I shouted instinctively.

He looked surprised for a moment and then concealed his teeth.

“You’re the only one who calls me that now.”

Of course. Since we were born as different people.

Even if everything was like ourselves.

Wilfred rested his head on his clenched hands and looked down.

“If it was something from a long past, I would have put up with it. If it was just history, I would have lived as Tim. However, it’s not. The man that killed is leading a carefree life even now and the place is brimming with people that rejoice over our deaths. As if I can live like that! The people that won’t let me forget that I am Wilfred is them! .....I became Wilfred from their hands. They will take responsibility for that.”

“You and I were both relics of an already ruined miniature garden. We had tormented Laius enough. We were pests that harassed the land, the people. We stirred up Laius and made the land go desolate. So we were removed. That was all.”

“You’re saying that because the things you lost were given to you. I gained everything with my hands. Then I was robbed of them. So I am taking them back, that is all.”

That cannot be allowed.

I didn’t say that out loud, but as he lifted his head up and saw me he understood how I felt.

“I who was killed by him will kill him. Then maybe he will be reborn. Then I might die from his hands. Even if that repeats..... I won’t lose you. You’re a person on this side. Because that is so. You were our flower. You were the flower that bloomed at the summit of us.”

“It already withered away. Because I’m the fruitless flower of Laius. I disappeared without producing fruit.”

“No, you are here. You are still here with me.”

It sounded like he was telling that to himself.

“No..... I’m lonely. I’m lonely on my own. There’s no one that doesn’t know Wilfred the devil of Laius. However, the only person who knows that I am Wil, Wilfred, is only you now. And only I know you. Only one person in the world, I know the same thing as you. Just you and I are living in this same hell.”

The hand that reached out as he was looking downwards suddenly grabbed my elbow. With no time to even feel startled, I was pulled in and embraced. After I tried to push him away in confusion, my hand stopped as I tried to push his shoulder.

He was trembling. The arms on my waist, the head on my chest.

His trembling body temperature could be felt.

“.....Am I a lunatic? Am I just a lunatic who believes that he has a past life? .....That’s fine, that’s still fine, so please..... stay with me. Please, don’t, leave me alone.”

“.....Wil, please, let me go.”

“I won’t ask you to give me your heart. However, if you won’t be mine, please say that at the least you won’t become anyone’s.”

“No, not with you.”

“I won’t let you go! At the least, I won’t let you be his! No matter what happens, wherever you run away, even if we both die, I will find you!”

“Wil!”

We were both crying. Weeping while trying to tear the clothes off, crying and screaming as he chased me, we struggled violently, causing the carriage to rock heavily.

The hairband was pulled and ripped to shred. The buttons flew away. Since both our bodies had not finished developing, the physical difference was not as much as adults. So Wilfred and I both became beaten up.

When I groaned from getting bitten on my neck and loosened my strength a bit, he grew careless. I used all my strength to kick him away.

In that frame of time where he lost his breath from hitting back in the small carriage, I ran out.

The rain had stopped before I knew it.

It was a little late to see the sunrise, but the thick clouds quickly cleared up. The wind that was still slightly strong picked up my loose hair and batted it against my clothes.

I sensed Wilfred exit the carriage behind me. Yet, I couldn't move. Wilfred also didn't pounce on me. He absentmindedly stared at the world, then ran off as if he was repelled.

The bells echo.

The curtains of night fell on the small country village. I watched absentmindedly as the village was being dyed black. Because today is the Liberation Festival. It was the day when the decorations that were being suppressed from the rain would shine from light from the sky.

Yet, I wondered if night did come for a moment.

But the clouds rapidly washed away to reveal a refreshing blue sky.

The bells resound.

It hadn't been long since the six o'clock morning rang, yet the bells didn't stop.

I wonder what that black thing is.

The black shade was fluttering in the wind. The black wavered on rooftops and the

black colour dyed the windows. People hid their faces and were looking downwards as their black clothes were getting soaked. The people who should be wild with joy for the festival all had their heads down, the black flowing through the village.

Strength left my legs and I had my knees on the wet floor.

Ahead of me, Wilfred was coming back, panting. Though he had a terrible expression just a while ago, he smiled like normal children, like Tim.

A glittering, innocent smile.

“This morning, Kaid Falua died.”

He announced as if to tell that to the sky.

# CHAPTER 15

## YOU AND ME, OUR

---

A grey scenery was laid out. Rocks and stones were tumbled around on a mountain of a colour that one would suspect that there would be more pebbles than dirt. The nearby fields also had an overwhelming amount of dirt compared to grass, with only minuscule patches of grass.

The roads were uneven, causing the carriage to rock left and right. Joblin, who would usually be complaining, was actually enjoying the rhythm now.

However, the grey scenery changed drastically upon entering a village.

Like the previous villages, the veil of night had fallen on it.

A village of stone, silent as death. On sharp roofs, on windows, everywhere was covered with black cloth.

After looking outside through the carriage curtains, Wilfred whistled.

“Amazing, or should I say that it’s his hometown after all. It’s full of black.”

*Take a look*, he said and slowly raised my head up with his finger.

A village that fell silent even though it’s not midwinter nor midnight.

Located near the border between Laius and Darich, this is Kolkia, the furthest point north in Laius.

Kaid’s hometown.

“Let’s go sometime.”

The land that he promised, the promise which I broke.

Even after the storm subsided and we were able to depart, the effect of the heavy rain was enormous. There were many landslides on the roads. The frequently used roads were blocked and people could not travel.

It took a more than a day where it would normally take just half a day.

On top of that, it was tough enough with the disasters, but Laius didn't have a lord now. There is a person for such times, but no matter how much he tried he could not keep up with the amount of work Kaid had been doing alone. Moreover, people here and there who received the news of the assassination of the lord were demanding an explanation.

Joblin occupied one whole seat section of the wide carriage. It's fine since it's his carriage, yet it looked like it was tight even though he had the whole space to himself.

Sitting next to me, Wilfred rested his chin on his knee and looked at me.

"You're making a terrible face."

I was aware of it.

Without even thinking of fixing my hair, I looked at my dishevelled hair resting on my face. It looked much lighter than how I remembered it. I wonder if my hair will turn white at this rate. Then my face will age greatly too. I'm already making a depressing face, I wonder if I'll become a witch with white hair then.

Almost two days passed since then. However, I didn't sleep much. I couldn't sleep.

"I thought that you would break down in tears."

He noted interestedly to me who did not create a single drop of tear since the day the world was shrouded by the night.

You can't cry if there's too much sorrow. I knew that.

But there wasn't even that. I didn't even feel sad. I couldn't feel anything. My heart was frozen.

I wonder if that was the last.

What did I last talk about with him..... right, moles. The mood grew awkward after we mentioned moles and became fidgety. It felt somewhat embarrassing.

But then, Kaid was dyed in red and smiled after wiping away the red on me.

That was all?

Kaid is not here anymore?

He's not anywhere?

Kaid can't be found anywhere in this world?

Helt disappeared and Kaid appeared. Yet nothing appeared when Kaid disappeared. Why?

I loosened the hard lock on my hands and stared blankly.

I brewed it with these hands. I brewed his tea. My hands poisoned him. Ah, why did I not drink first? If I drank first he would not have had it. Why did I not call the doctor immediately? I shouldn't have panicked. Why was there no antidote? I really needed it.

Why did he have to die.

I didn't do anything yet, I didn't do anything for him.

Not, a thing.

Even though the land was vast, there was little space for people to live in. We passed through the village of small houses in the rocky field on a stony road that was barely in a fair condition.

The flowing waters of the river could be heard. The river that was overflowing from the rain that had falling until yesterday roared as it gushed. It was as though it was spiteful. A sound that was as though it maddened from losing a beloved child of the land came from the ground.

Enjoying Kolkia's rage, Joblin spoke in a high-pitched voice as though he was going to hum.

"My my, Tim. You shouldn't bully her too much."

"Don't you want to tease the girl you like?"

"A woman's resentment is frightening. It's vengeful and sticks even to unrelated things, reviving over and over again until it finally dies."

Feeling good, Joblin let out a laugh that was shorter and lower than that of an owl's.

"More importantly, discuss about the wedding. once we arrive, we'll start preparing immediately. I'm also busy. Laius will be embroiled in a storm. Well, actually, it is like a place the wolf created on his own. I hope the place is full of foes. I hope disease spreads. I hope the flow doesn't stop. I wish I could have done it again fifteen years ago."

Among the things that pop up, I wonder if there's even one thing this man will not try his hand on.

"He was a terribly unpleasant man. As he did it alone, it would have collapsed if he disappeared. However, it would not collapse unless he's erased. Something will maintain it as long as that one man is there. He was the bothersome beast."

Laius that escaped destruction fifteen years ago appeared. The place called Laius would be gone. The Laius he protected will be taken by the man in front of me.

When I looked straight ahead, a gleeful voice of “Hoh,” escaped the meat.

“.....You’re making nice eyes. It’s as though you’ll tear out my throat. Are you truly not the partner of that wolf? Tim, take care to not be murdered at the ceremony.”

When I looked at him, Wilfred distorted his face without holding it in. It wasn’t a face that couldn’t hold it in. It was an expression full of delight.

“Nice..... exciting. As you are now, I think you’ll look very good in a bright red dress.”

If I have to wear something like that, I’ll be clad in flames to dye myself red. Then I’ll be satisfied.

“Still, let’s do the ceremony in black. We’ll be wedded while wearing mourning clothes. Isn’t it perfect for us?”

Not faint, but a thick black something rioted in my heart. All the suppressed feelings were sucked into that and scorched the inside of my body.

Wilfred smiled innocently like a little child.

“Do you want to die?”

“I want to kill.”

At the words that came flowing out, Wilfred laughed out loud this time. I couldn’t feel sorrow, yet hatred was there as though it was alive and breathing.

He was holding his belly button in laughter, but I continued.

“Give me a trial in Laius.”

In a blink, his face lost all expression. I was hit on the cheek. Not caring about it, I grabbed him by the collar. The body I pulled in close with my weight fell. The face was so close that the lips almost touched.

“The crime of poisoning the lord of Laius as people of Laius should be judged in Laius. Whatever happens, it doesn’t change that we’re from Laius.”

I will never forgive you if Kaid dies.

There was no lie to that. Not forgiving. Forever, even after death. Even if we return again.

Go die.

I’ll kill you.

Words that were in some sense contradictory yet wishing for the same result were stuck in my head.

I hope your spine breaks that you vomit blood as though it’s the end of the world and feel the same, no, an even worse pain before you die.

Or so, I thought.

Even though I couldn’t mourn, hatred kept gushing forth. I can’t forgive him. No matter how I tried, that remained.

However, even if I killed him here it wouldn’t change anything. Killing won’t make me feel better, nor would it bring anything back.

Even if a miracle happened and I reunited with Kaid, his hands would leave me.

Kaid was a lord. For the people, for Laius, he worked as a lord to the end.

He protected the Laius that we destroyed. It was he who sacrificed himself, yet he protected even what I forced him to bear.

I wonder if I can live a life where Kaid can smile to me. When we meet again, I wonder if I won't have to feel shame, not feel disheartened, nor run away. I wonder if I can smile to you.

I wonder if I can finally smile out of happiness.

Then, I might have shed a tear for the first time.

At least, he won't be happy if I killed Wilfred. He will definitely make that lonesome smile and stare at me sadly. I can tell now.

I decided to not pursue unhappiness. I decided that I won't bear it nor chase it.

It's not the past that shouldn't be seen. People turn around and advance. I stopped without seeing the future. I couldn't see the hole and tripped, then I fell down as I couldn't see the hand that was stretched out.

I won't advance if I can't see ahead, if I can't see it in the future. Even if he's only in the past.

I decided to take myself away. From the dim place I fell down to, to a bright place.

You gave me that road. You had to abandon that road because of me, but you made that road in Laius.

You rebuilt everything from the crumbled cobblestones, you levelled the greed of those clawing up, you repaired the collapsed walls, and you calmed the anger of the sky.

You gave candies to starving children, dreams to waning families, tomorrows to babies.

You gave love to a foolish woman.

I burdened you with so many things, yet I only offered you one thing.

It was the ruined necklace the kind girl gave me.

A blue flower to you.

A blue hyacinth.

Love to you.

Love from a foolish woman.

Unchanging 'love'.

Wilfred grabbed me by the collar as well and he was stronger after all. He gripped me tightly and had me on my toes.

"Ah, I really like you now. You're in a different league from that boring woman who was only beautiful. If you want to rub me the wrong way, don't break. Don't break and I'll

let you continue invoking my wrath. I had killed everyone who did that until now, but I'll forgive you. Ahh, I'm glad you're my fiancée. I love you. I love you from the bottom of my heart. You are the only one for me. The only person who knows me is you. The only flower I need in my garden is just you."

I wonder if he just failed to cover it up with love, or if he really meant that from the beginning. The words spun a tale wearing an unfamiliar form that was like, or unlike, kindness. Wilfred kneeled on one knee like a knight and looked up at me from something that was like thick sludge.

"My toxic flower, please marry me."

"No. No one will be happy."

"At least I will be. I'll be careful about making you mine. If it's you now, I feel that you'd give birth to a birth."

".....No way."

After saying something that I didn't want to imagine in various meanings, Wilfred laughed joyfully.

"Now that's what I call a love twin!"

Even though he wouldn't know the actual meaning, Joblin laughed loudly after coming to a conclusion of his own. I didn't know what was so funny, but he laughed with a sound as though his lungs were collapsing, causing the carriage rock greatly.

It would be amazing even from outside.

At first, I thought it was because of this that a polite voice called for Joblin from outside.

"Master, master."

"Mm."

Not laughing anymore and showing a movement of meat that was hard to tell if it nodded or just shook, Joblin said something. Wilfred then approached the small window that was kept open so that we wouldn't suffocate.

There, the butler from Darich was on horseback. Since he had bits of white hair, I could tell that he was rather old. He had been doing it for a long time. With a practised movement, he spoke directly to Joblin without talking to Wilfred.

"There are people from Gimii behind us. They request to see master. What shall I do, sir?"

"Hm..... Who's the representative?"

"Isador-sama."

Joblin clicked his thick tongue.

"Did he flee because his friend died? I would have ignored them if it wasn't the man himself. No choice then. Stop the carriages. Tim, lend me a hand."

"Sir."

When lords meet, one cannot not get out their carriage. However, I couldn't help but think that Wilfred would be squashed flat when he lent his hand.

But I wasn't worried too much. I gave up on the small window and stared at where the window was past the thick curtains.

Isador..... I don't know what you're planning, but I hope you won't do anything strange. Even if you won't be able to do anything to him after he returns to Darich, here in Laius he is just a guest. The only people who can wield authority in Laius are those from Laius.

And the only person who can wield authority over lords from other fiefs is the lord of Laius.

The lord of Laius, the post which is absent now.

In contrast to the hoof sounds that steadily approached, the hoof sounds from here subsided. The rocking stopped too. Joblin exited the carriage while holding on the hands of any squirming servants. Having finished lending his hand, Wilfred changed his position and bugged me from behind. Somewhere that I couldn't see, a small bottle asserted its existence with clanking sounds.

"I think you already know, but unless you want an accident to happen to the next lord of Gimii stay still. That crybaby grew up. I want to keep him alive, don't you know? .....Stop glaring at me like that. You're making me excited."

I immediately stopped glaring at him and focused my attention to the outside.

Built to withstand that giant, the walls were thick. After the doors were closed, all sound from outside was cleanly shut out. After frowning a bit, Wilfred opened the window past the curtains slightly causing sound from outside to reach in for the first time.

"My, Isador-dono! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

I could clearly picture how he was feigning surprise.

"I'm sorry if you were busy. As I couldn't accompany you here, I was thinking of returning together, but I panicked after realising that you had already left."

"My, I'm very sorry. An acquaintance informed me that he's marrying. I thought that I had to run over to give a present, but then I received the news that he left this world..... I was considering that I shouldn't meet him with such a sorry face.

From the tone of voice that delivered his condolences, I couldn't even get goosebumps.

I started clawing. I tried to control myself but I couldn't feel pain, but instead I heard a groan. When I looked down I had been clawing at Wilfred's arm.

".....Sorry."

“.....So it wasn't on purpose.”

I regretted that I shouldn't have apologised. In the indescribable mood that came from my reflexive apology, he rubbed at where he was scratched. As the sleeves moved, I saw the moles on his wrist. I hadn't hurt him there, yet Wilfred's fingers were rubbing there before I realised it.

He didn't have to confirm it that much.

For some reason, I got a thought.

He was so much like me of the past. Clinging onto something, even without having to confirm that we are here. After we got away from the mansion I saw him do that often. I didn't see him do that much in the mansion, so maybe this too was something he was aware of.

“.....My friend too was worried until the very end. About not being able to see you off.”

My attention snapped back to reality from Isador's croaking voice.

“Ohh..... I did such a sorry thing..... How nice it would be if I could tell him to not worry.....”

“Even if he's called the wolf lord, my friend is human. Let's think of him..... yes, my friend is human. I kept thinking so.....”

“Ah, ah, what a regretful thing! Let me sympathise with you.”

“Really.....”

The words seemed to stop from pain.

Isador, are you crying.....?

It's regretful that I couldn't see him. It's painful that I couldn't get out. If I could rush out, I could have held him in my arms and think of Kaid, our precious person.

I bit my lips then the smell and taste of iron spread in my mouth. It was the same smell I sensed on the last day I met with Kaid.

How painful it must have been. How hurtful it must have been.

I always couldn't be there beside him when he was going through them. I didn't hold those hands, embrace him and share the pain.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed the thing that reeked of iron.

This red colour, what about it. If I had time to be afraid of that red colour, I should have hugged him and comforted him.

Right after I swallowed that red, my eyes opened wide.

Because, from outside,

“No, there's no need for that, Joblin-dono. If I don't see off the guests I invited, Laius would be ridiculed as a boorish place. Even if a lord left preemptively, a frown is not all that we'd received. I panicked and came rushing.”

I could not believe what I heard.

# CHAPTER 16

## YOU AND ME AND

---

A choking sound, or rather the sound of someone losing the air in their lungs came from past the wall.

Then,

“.....I thought he was human.”

The exasperated voice of Isador was heard.

The voices that were hushed spurted up at once. The noisy murmurings could be heard even inside the carriage and the arm holding me down trembled.

“We have shown you great disrespect. To think we forgot to apologise and see you off. It seems like the recent fatigue had built up, that I completely slept in. I should start thinking about my age now.”

I could hear the voice from the front. As well as the numerous clacking sounds of hooves and steel.

“Moreover, I received a report stating that my servants are inconveniencing you, so I hurried over. Truly, I am very sorry. If I sent out something like that as gifts, that will be a disgraceful blot on Laius’s reputation. Joblin-dono, I would like to be allowed to repair your carriage. It seems that there are two little servants. They really can hide anywhere. Really, I believe they snuck into your carriage since it’s the biggest and the easiest to hide in.”

Maybe the voice sounded hoarser than I remembered because the poison burnt his throat.

No, it wouldn’t have just been the throat that the poison scorched. Because, that

amount of blood.

Because, night fell on the villages of Laius.

“.....That, can't, be, true.”

I couldn't tell if the trembling voice was Wilfred's or mine.

Because, if I'm wrong, I cannot be. And probably, for Wilfred, if I'm not wrong, he cannot be.

From the other direction of the sound of our trembling, more voices came.

“Hoh..... What might you be talking about? They are not rats, there cannot be such things. Ah, anyhow, really..... the news was that you had died.”

“It seems that only the original information was delivered, I am ashamed. Well, I can at least boast at how fast news travels.”

“My..... really.....”

“Tim, come out. I don't have time to go hunting in a land that I'm not familiar with. Sorry about not having any tricks, but at that rate you'll be a rede guest.”

When he interrupted..... rather, ignored the other lord's words and speaking to a person that couldn't be seen, it was not the person in question, Wilfred, who gave up.

“My! Truly, in my carriage!? To think I had been unwittingly helping a heinous villain! Argh, damn! To think that he was hiding in my precious carriage!”

Faster than one can flip their hand, Joblin forsook Wilfred and I could hear Joblin gargantuan body distance away from the carriage. There was no time for me to think him filthy for abandoning a partner that he had been working with until just a while ago.

Wilfred did not stop reaching out. On the contrary, he reached out for the doorknob and rushed out in a posture that was like a brawler. Even so, he did not let me go so we rolled out together.

From the world where light and sound were only leaking in, we were thrust into a world flooded with them.

The roar of the rushing river. The wailing wind that would not lose to such a river. The boisterous birdsongs and the slightly startled yet somewhat serene sigh of soldiers. The feigned fuss of the people from Darich.

“Hey, Tim. Thank you for the pretty exciting gift. It must have took a lot of time, sorry about that.”

And his rather raspy voice.

Jumping off his horse after saying so, his eyes shone. Stronger than the stars in the night sky, a softer gold than the sun.

On the left side of his face, there was a trace of something like burns from his ear to his neck, possibly from the poison’s effect. He was noticeably emaciated. He had bags under his eyes, his cheeks were hollow, his voice was hoarse and his complexion was as pale as that of a dead man. Maybe he didn’t have much strength, since he was not moving much, merely resting his shoulder against the horse.

However, his eyes didn’t change. The golden shade that held life.

Behind the carriage, there were the people from Gimii, led by Isador.

In front of us, in our way was Kaid and others. Behind the armed soldiers, I could see something like a fence. The road was blocked. Looking at at that, it might not have been just a while ago that they arrived.

Right. Otherwise, they could never have come.

“.....Why, how are you alive.”

Still holding me tightly, the moan crawled across the ground.

“Why are you here, Kaid Falua!?!”

Something like the primal roar of a beast strode past the rocks and echoed in the sky. An earsplitting cry. A yell containing so much rage that the human voice almost could not be heard. A rage barely forming words.

As the thundering voice vibrated air and steel, a soldier from Laius spoke up.

“Tim..... his lordship... you really did that...?”

Tim was at the estate longer than I have been and he got friendly with most people quite well. There were many people who were close to him. He was someone like that. I could see him laughing with snacks with the soldiers. Teasing, bantering, making fun of, poking fun at, comforting and consoling.

I saw him smile like that often.

“Why..... why, Tim!?”

Even as the soldiers from Laius seemed to lament, Kaid didn't change his expression and shrugged lightly.

“I died as you wished. I reunited with my father after a long time. However, my servants were strict. I was woken up by the head maid. Seriously, my heart was pounded. Carolina must have been doctor or something. The angel's fists are tough, or so I commented after coming back, then I went back to dying again from the second fist that came flying.”

When Kaid entered a coughing fit, the soldiers I remember seeing clanked their armour. Kaid stopped them and let out a long breath.

“Looking back, you who was said to not harm people nor animals gave me such a passionate gift and moved Shirley for me. I was so moved that I even came here to thank you in person. ....I don't know who you are, but aren't you getting too ahead of

yourself?”

“.....You’re the adulterer. I wonder if you can tell from that, you poor aristocrat from the hicks.”

From Wilfred’s body that was trembling with rage, I could hear small bottles clang. Even when I struggled to free myself from his grip, he did not budge, a mysterious strength coming from such thin arms. Even when I dug my nails into him like before, he did let out a single groan.

From Wilfred’s words, the corners of Kaid’s mouth curled up. His eye teeth rested on his lips like fangs. With an expression too grand to be called a smile, he laughed as if he was howling.

“I see. I suppose I’ll congratulate you for not running away with your tail between your legs, loser.”

“That’s what the mongrel who bit its owner said.”

“I’ll say this now, but I only regret not being able to apologise to that person. Actually, I regret having been too tame in getting you.”

“Shitty mongrel.”

“What, loser.”

At the front were the soldiers from Laius, led by Kaid, behind there were the soldiers from Gimii, led by Gimii and in a mediocre position were the people from Darich. They didn’t back away probably because Joblin was too slow, but I could also see another reason why from the exhausted eyes that were shaking from trying to keep up with every sentence.

Even I could tell, so the two must know. A vulgar duel of words without any clear hits continued.

Slowly, Kaid stood without leaning against the horse and swept his cloak to his back

as if it were a hindrance, revealing his sword belt.

“Let’s stop this here. Your strongest point, the disguise, is now off, and the person who was your last ray of hope abandoned you. ....It’s not much, but I can at least give you alcohol and listen to your complaints. So let’s stop. I can’t die for you.”

“Even if you can’t die for the princess?”

Kaid laughed softly.

“That’s a hopeless death.”

“Then die, mongrel.”

Kaid didn’t react to those words. He laughed very softly.

“However, I made her cry. I will come back however many times if I made my lady cry. For that reason, I don’t care if I’m not human anymore.”

I could hear his tongue click. So that he could escape the arrowheads, Tim grabbed me tightly every time I moved slightly. I grabbed the arm that was holding me. So that it won’t be shaken off, I gripped him tightly.

“.....Let’s stop this. This won’t achieve anything. Nothing will come back, nor can we return anywhere, you know that as well, don’t you?”

“It can’t be helped. Otherwise, there was no meaning for me to be born as me.”

“You can’t know such things.”

“You didn’t even have your feet on the ground, nor swam up but sank, yet you say that..... as if you can change that now. As long as we are us, as long as this place is Laius, as long as that guy is alive, as if anything can change! It’s the same for you!”

“Yes! It can’t change! As long as I feel like this, I can’t live like everyone else! Still, I want to be able to say that I’m glad to have been born! Since I was reborn after all that, I

want that! Here, in Laius, I want to be able to live and say that..... I wanted to become like that. In that mansion, was there nothing, nothing that you liked? Nothing that kept you there?"

He learned nothing after spending time with those bright and nice people. With those people who were nice enough to not ignore this ugly and depressing woman. Did he really rid himself of those memories?

Looking past me, Wilfred stared at the soldiers from Laius. He narrowed his eyes slightly. Then his lips loosened somewhat.

Then he smiled like a child having a sweet dream.

"Then, why don't you die with me, princess."

"Tim!"

"It's impossible to survive. I can only live as me. This grudge is my only reason for existing. This memory is the only thing that confirms that I am me. And, you are the only proof."

A strength belying his soft voice held me tightly. Rather than hold me, it was as though he was forcing me to be a part of him. Even though I tried hardest to get away, I couldn't even breathe from the force.

"I don't want to disappear alone."

The strength was tremendous, but the voice was more pitiful than that of a lost child.

No matter how much he prays, no matter how much he tries to take me, we can't be the same.

There can't be people who are the same, yet he murmured no in a crying voice.

"Please, let me go."

"No."

“You won’t be redeemed even if I die!”

“Yes. You’re also a pitiful girl. For me, for the wolf, for you, there aren’t good people around us. It would have been nice if there were people not like us, but better people..... like Samua.”

As he lowered his body, I was slowly dragged outside the road. The ground was barely even enough to be called a road so outside that the land turned into a place of rocks and pebbles and dust.

And from below, a rumbling noise could be heard.

“Don’t bother. Even if you jump from there, I’ll always catch you.”

There as still some distance to the cliff.

As Wilfred moved with me in tow, the circle surrounding him grew smaller and smaller. The soldiers from Laius and Gimii were on the road, readying lassos.

It was me who was in the way. I knew that, but I could hardly breath because Wilfred was too strong.

“It’s not yours.”

My neck was grabbed and I was pulled hard. Not only did the buttons go flying, I could even hear the fabric tear.

“She was mine from a long time ago.”

“.....What about it. I was promised, so I won’t fall for such taunts.”

My neck was gripped tightly once more. While stifling me, a small bottle shook in Wilfred’s hand. That, the only use for that is just for killing me, yet he was holding it dearly.

“I see. However, it doesn’t change that she’s mine!”

He swung his arm and threw the bottle towards everyone.

Everyone used their cloaks, shields, luggage, something to cover themselves.

However, that small bottle was aimed at nobody.

“Everyone, get away!”

Seeing that quicker than anyone, Kaid’s yell and the sharp scream of a horse overlapped. The small bottle shattered against a horse and burnt its skin.

The six strong horses that could pull Joblin’s carriage suddenly charged in pain and confusion, towards the soldiers from Laius. The horses and carriage that turned into a living weapon rampaged and stampeded the soldiers and other horses as if they were stepping on bugs.

“Let’s meet in the next word, wolf!”

Taking me with a swift movement, Wilfred threw me down the cliff and followed.

“My lady!”

Not noticing that his cheek was bleeding from the shards from a carriage, he did not stop his feet. Before I could imagine the worst, Kaid jumped too.

Screams and yells came from many places as the weapon frenzied about.

Without minding those, he stretched his hand out and I too stretched my hand out unconsciously.

“Ha, hahahahaha! So it’s you next! Enjoy the warped life, wolf!”

Wilfred held his belly in laughter as he fell alone.

Together now, the two of us disappeared into the currents as well.

# CHAPTER 17

## THE AFTERLIFE, OF YOU AND ME

---

“\_\_”

“\_\_”

I hear the voice of the wind calling me, turning me around abruptly.

In the middle of the flower garden where flowers in myriad of colors bloom profusely, I saw a big, white sunshade. Surrounding the round table underneath it, everyone was there.

I lift the fabric of my skirt that seems so long that it will entangle with my legs. I wonder why. I wear this kind of dress all the time, but somehow I find it a little annoying now. Tilting my neck, I arrive at the place where my family is.

“-- , you must be hungry, aren't you?”

“-- , look, it's your favorite pastry from the capital city.”

“-- , oh, you, come and sit here.”

“-- , it's cold over there, right? Sit under this sunshade. It's warm over here.”

Grandfather, Grandmother, Mother, and Father are all smiling.

There are five chairs around the round, white table. One of them is pulled out, slanting diagonally.

This is my chair.

On the table, there are beautiful sweets lining up, made from the diligent effort of the capital's chef. The pastries aren't even the slightest less pretty than the flowers in the

garden. Everyone is eating until their cheeks are full.

As I see them from the side, the sweets which are crumbling down again and again to the flower garden, look delicious.

On good weather days, almost everyday, I had tea with everyone just like this.

But today feels slightly different than usual.

Grandfather, shaking a small, transparent bottle of alcohol, looking through the glass against the light.

Grandmother, while humming a song, making dark blue embroidery using many kinds of purple threads.

Father, who usually puts his cigar out as soon as he started smoking it, now chewing the cigar in his mouth without lighting it up.

Mother, who, doesn't wear her usual shiny hair accessories, looking at the mirror with such a happy face, styling her hair by hand repeatedly.

Those are undoubtedly the usual scene, but my chest feels so suffocated that it hurts. Painful, so painful, the water starts overflowing.

“—, what's wrong?”

“—, where does it hurt?”

“—, you have it bad, hurry and sit down.”

“—, where does it hurt? Come, let your mother take a look at it.”

I turn around to look at everyone whose expression quickly changed into sadness.

“...kh!”

When I heard a voice different to that someone, my lips moved.

If I have to give a name to this thing inside my chest, it would be feeling so full of devastation that you can't breathe. Now matter how many times I inhale, inhale to fill that emptiness right there, it's already fully packed that the air is forced back out.

This is the usual scene.

The usual, the mundane.

A gentle illusion.

The words I want to let out are hindered by the water overflowing from my eyes.

Grandfather. Grandmother. Father. Mother.

I want to ask all of you about a lot of things.

For my family who is looking at me with worried expression, I form the words soundlessly.

Why did all of you raise and teach the just to me?

Oppressing people, trampling their dignity, neglecting their lives, taking only for your selfishness. Why did all of you, who did all of those things, tell me that those were wrong? Why did you teach me that those things that you did were neither natural nor forgivable, that they were certainly evil and not just?

I was the only daughter, thus if I married Wil at that time, I would enter his household, never getting out of there. And then, until the day I die, until Laius perishes, I would live in that miniature garden. I would only take what I see, I would only ask for those you show to me. That way, I certainly would have lived without even knowing that my family was evil.

That's why, I became warped without realizing it.

Grandfather. Grandmother. Father. Mother.

The reason why you never let me out, was it because you didn't want me to know that you were evil? Did you regret teaching me that the evils were evil?

Treat people kindly and gently. Do not ever use offensive words. Do not ever hate people. Do not ever beat someone. Do not do the things I wouldn't like to receive, to someone else. Even if I have no interest myself in something, there are others who will think of it as something precious, so I must never look down on them with contempt. Do not ever take away someone else's treasured possession. Do not ever do shady things. Let's believe in someone who doesn't have a shrewd mind. Do not ever doubt someone or suspect about their ill will, and let's always put on a smile. Let's experience things firsthand, instead of just listening to someone else's experiences. Let's think positively. Let's have fun with everyone. Let's believe in people's kindness.

You taught me all of those. Everyone has their set of values, so I must not deny them. Let's treat people kindly. Let's be kind. Let's be a good and kind child. So that people will like me, I have to be a good child.

Yes, you always said those things.

**"...kh!"**

I finally understand now, that warped thing.

Your mouth with which you taught me those things, that palm you used to rub my head, those feet you ran and rushed over with when I fell down. What you actually did with them.

And still, why didn't you think that you were just? Why didn't you ever say that oppressing people was allowed for those in our positions?

If only you did, if only I was raised that way, I would just be a soul who knew nothing but grudge. I wouldn't believe in kindness; I would resent, curse, envy those smiles, the warmth of those people; those things wouldn't be precious to me.

What exactly was I to all of you?

Were you unable to change? Even by looking at me, were you unable to?

My vision was blurry, I couldn't see my family. The water flooding from my chest, keeps spilling over from my eyes.

Can I believe that, the moment you preached those virtues to me, it wasn't like you feel nothing? Can I think that, all of you were human beings, even just in those times? The kindness you showed to me, why, to the others, why, at least, the reason you stopped being inhuman, why couldn't you do that, I couldn't stop thinking about them.

If there was anything I could have done.

I, at least, surely, could have done something. I could have wondered, then I could have noticed, I could have warned you against it. If only.

If I could, would all of you still exist in this world?

Or, was there nothing I could do to change the outcome?

I don't know. Now, no one knows.

My family, sleeping under the earth, without any concern to my sins.

His hands had set me free, in the land of Laius where flowers bloom once again.

"\_ \_"

"\_ \_?"

"\_ \_"

"\_ \_"

Worrying faces, gentle voices.

My family calls my name.

".....-dy!"

Ever since that time, you were the only ones who called me by that name. I did wonder why no one ever called me by name, but if someone did, they surely would not be forgiven. All of you wouldn't forgive it. You wouldn't forgive anyone besides our family to be around me. I only realized now that it wasn't only because I was going to marry Wilfred that I was raised alone as the only daughter.

“- -”

You were the only ones who called me by my name. All of you were gone now.

That's why, just take me away like that. Just kill me, like that.

I really loved how pretty, how beautiful the spell and sound of that name.

That's why, somehow, please don't let me come to life again, take me away.

The water is flooding until it is deep in my ears.

I don't know since when, the flower petals have scattered, my chair has disappeared. My family is the only one here, showing your concern. Your gentle hand, gentle voice, gentle words, gentle look. I really loved them.

In the place of the disappeared flower garden, a flower bloomed in solitude. A single flower.

The flower that sways in the water, as if bathed under the sunlight, singing a song to the wind, blooms happily.

Yet, no matter how, I can't see the color. The bloom opens, I can even count the number of valves in it, but the color is the only thing I can't grasp.

“.....Thank you.”

Thank you for giving birth to me.

Thank you for raising me.

As a grandfather, as a grandmother, as a father, as a mother, thank you for being by my

side.

I'm sorry I couldn't give anything in return. I'm sorry I couldn't do anything. I couldn't become anything, for anything, something that could have stopped your ruin, I'm really, really sorry.

And.

**".....ady!"**

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry, I don't have the capability to hate. I love him. I'm sorry.

Even though I've been wishing to come to your side that much in these fifteen years, even though I still cannot see the meaning of this life that much.

I want to live, I want to try to live, I'm, going to live.

I want to know about a lot of things.

I've never gone out, from the mansion, at that time, and now, from Kayna, but still, this time, I want to see a lot of things, hear a lot of things, this time I want to think about a lot of things by myself.

**"My lady!"**

".....I wish, you could forgive me."

Somehow, I wish you could forgive this selfish wish of mine, to live with him.

**"My lady!"**

The breath I inhaled is blocked by the water filling my chest, unable to reach the lungs.

My attention is drawn into the intense pain passing through my chest, my stomach vomits the water out with the same force. I flip my body to the side in reflex, violently coughing out water or air, I don't know which one anymore.

The arms which supports almost my entirely crouching, coughing body are making me tilt downwards so that I can breathe easier. After breathing out for a while, the burning pain in my throat and chest finally appears, I realize that I've been coughing out towards Kaid, who has been holding me.

"I-it's filthy."

"That kind of thing is not important, so please let it all out!"

"I've coughed... everything."

After vomiting everything, as my coughs turn dry with nothing but air, I feel the burning pain in my repeatedly abused throat. Inside my nose, below my ears, inside my head, they're all painful as if water runs through them.

The dull throb in my head tells me that there's a burning feeling in my body. Even breathing hurts.

Kaid, who supports by back even when I don't know if I'm coughing or breathing, finally lessens his strength after ensuring that I won't pass out.

His arms show relief to me, so I start calming down as well. When I look around, I realize that we're in a cavern area. It's a half-circle nook in a rock cliff. I try to go back to the previous place, but I can't draw strength from my legs due to the water, which entered me. Meanwhile, drift wood and grasses are washed over here, again and again. Beyond that, in the scenery of a gaping wide half-circle nook, no light or muddy water is passing through.

Usually, shouldn't this kind of place dry? I stare absentmindedly to the surprisingly growing moss at the surface of the ground. More than constantly dry, though, it's more like the water usually won't reach that spot.

"Where's, this?"

“In Kolkia. It’s a place called fortune pocket. There are many things that fall into the stream to get washed up here. There’s an old friend of mine among those who lead the search, they will definitely look up at this place before anywhere else.”

“.....And Wil?”

No matter how hard I look around, I can’t find that small figure of his. Kaid silently shakes his head.

“This place is as small as a pocket, but...”

Kaid hides his eyes slightly.

“Did he refuse to be saved....? .....That idiot.”

“.....This stream, where does it lead to?”

“Darich.”

“Oh.....”

“.....whether I save him or not, with that kind of willpower, he’ll come crawling back from the continent soon enough.”

Throwing a complicated look, Kaid scratched his sore nape.

Going so far as being Joblin’s accomplice, Wilfred was obsessed about Laius. If Joblin was honest, he was being pursued by Joblin’s daughter. In Darich, he could probably live like how he used to, but for him, it wasn’t good if it wasn’t Laius.

We led Laius to its ruin. But even so, this place is still our birthplace. Although we were punished by Laius’ citizen, repelled away from Laius..... no, it’s because we were repelled from Laius, that we can’t go back to anywhere but here.

If he continues now, if there’s a next time for him, he will still aim for this place. Even if he is born in Laius, living as Laius’ citizen, he will still aim for Laius. Even though he has no other, no other place he can go back to, he will live to aim for Laius, and Laius only.

I feel nothing towards him. No mourning nor sorrow, no anger nor compassion. He fits neither of them. I couldn't decide which kind of emotion should I feel towards him yet.

When my eyes are fixed upon a particularly violent splash of waves, I slowly get up. My eyes noticed the golden color.

“My lady?”

My hands are wet. I coughed out all of the water with my strength just now, there's mud all over me, I feel cold as the temperature goes down.

That's why, it's hopeless.

I know that, but my hands can't stop.

Without any strength, I grit my teeth and desperately lifts my palm, and Kaid doesn't move to avoid it. My palm arrives at his mud-smearred cheek. The cheek whose temperature feels burning to my freezing palm, I wonder if it feels hot because I'm cold?

His body warmth travels to my palm, my tears are welling up.

“You're alive.....”

“Yes, I'm alive.”

“You're Kaid.”

“Yes, it's me. Isidore was so annoying, telling me to relinquish the name of Wolf Lord, that I must be called Elephant Lord since I won against a bear-killer, but for the time being, I'm alive.”

“I, heard the news of your death.”

The town was covered in black, the lamentation overturned the sky.

Even now, I still couldn't believe it, but a large hand took the hand I used to touch him. With that hand grasping mine, it slowly takes my hand down.

"It's true that I died once. They confirmed my death, but..... it was Carolina."

"Caron?"

He clutches his chest, as if recalling something.

*"It's way too soon, if you die like this, my kind lady will probably mind it and won't be angry, so the lady who has just properly gotten her rest will curse and get mad and no longer at peace, so just try to die now.* While crying, she said those things and hit my chest so hard that I was resuscitated. Even though my breath had returned, she didn't realize it and gave me a harder blow for the second time..... Next time, I'll leave this resuscitation business to the doctor."

".....The good thing about Caron, is..... her full strength."

If I have to give it a name, "fierce" would be right, but why do I think that that one word still can't sum up it all?

Those golden eyes opens wide and gazes down at me, who doesn't know which kind of face can I show him.

".....My lady, please drink an antidote later."

".....Why?"

"Your heart stopped once."

"Ah..... No wonder I saw my family again. But..... did I get revived by poison?"

I've never heard about that kind of resuscitation, but there are many things in this world that I don't know yet. Rather, it's not too much to say that I am composed of the things that I don't know about.

Kaid awkwardly turns his face.

“.....I judged that waiting for rescue would be too late, so I did the resuscitation. Because there’s a chance that the poison hasn’t completely disappeared from me, please make sure to drink the antidote just in case.”

“.....Thank you.”

When the realization dawned on me, I stirred meaninglessly. I feel my cheeks are heating up. It’ll be bad if I blush, so I covered them with both hands. My cheeks are wet. Of course. I was drowning until just now, of course they’re wet.

No matter how long I wait, it doesn’t seem that my face will be dry, so I remove my hands from my face and grasp tightly my chest, which has been throbbing with pain for a while now. I happen to know multiple causes for that pain, but somehow, I begin to think that they’re not the whole reason.

“Kaid, my chest hurts.”

“Forgive me. I did it with the appropriate amount of power, for a while, but there was no response, so I increased the power. There’s a possibility that it was strong enough to create fissures in your rib bones..... The fissure would be my fault, but you’re also too thin, your bones are too weak from malnutrition. Please eat properly.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’m not saying that you have to eat a lot at once, but please increase the amount of food you eat, little by little. And meat. If you’re not good with meat, then fish is good too.”

“Yes.”

“The head chef, he thinks that a young woman will eat if the food is pretty, so he started to carve kittens from carrots, and created goblins instead. If possible, please eat them as they are. His flavor is first class, but his plating sense is nonexistent. He’s a genius, one who regularly challenges himself in food carving which can stun the customers, so please take it into consideration.”

“Yes.”

I can only nod at Kaid who suddenly starts to talk in length. I'm not surprised or bewildered. I really can't do anything besides nodding.

"Ah, that's right. I want to raise a request to change the name of Liberation Festival. From now on, I want it to call it the Resurrection Festival. I just think that Wolf Liberation Festival is too much, but that's just me. My lady, is there any kind of name that you wish for?"

I planned to simply nod and say yes.

But when I think that it's probably not a suitable response, I already can't speak.

".....Please don't cry."

I should have coughed out all the water, yet I can't stop this from overflowing. It doesn't run out no matter how much I spill it, it feels even more natural in this world than breathing.

I'm confining myself in Kaid's arms which has been touching me, filling me with unwavering strength. Like that, once the warmth of the embrace that holds me tight so that I won't be wounded spreads to me, it's already hopeless.

That's right, I'm crying. I can't figure out when it started, but I can no longer stop even if I want to.

"I-I thought you were dead."

"Please forgive me. I don't have time to wash a lot of things away, so the first news wasn't corrected. I made my move only with my closest aides. It's my bad to decide from my inexperience..... My lady, my lady, my lady!"

I desperately lift my arm, clinging to him. It's warm. He's alive. This warmth, the heartbeat I can tell from touching him, they show me the signs of life, and I can't stop my tears all the more.

I'm gripping his wet clothes and holding him tight by ignoring the pain in my body, but Kaid softly removes himself.

“.....My lady, I..... I know that don't have the qualification to argue with you, nor do I have the rights to pursue you. But, but, my lady..... Can I treat this as the afterlife? Can I have my life now as my next? Will you forgive me if I start it here? Right now, the promise you bestowed to me, can I hang onto it? Kh...”

His posture now, isn't even that of a knight nor a retainer.

With his dripping wet, worn out body, he's down on both knees, both of his large hands are trembling, grasping my weak hand..... my fingertips, barely. He's grasping just a tiny part of my body, a part as large as barely covering one toe, gluing his forehead, his neck drooping low, looming in silence.

“.....I love you. I'm in love with you.”

Right now, which light is carried by that golden color?

“I, love you.”

No matter what, I want to see it.

Both of his hands, which have been grasping mine, are slowly remo... ..staying there, actually. I wonder if I'm too weak to put the strength to my hand, but no matter how hard I try, it doesn't move an inch, as if our joints are melding together. It's not as if I'm that weak, but it seems that I can't put enough strength to shrug them off, no matter what I do. I'm amazed, it seems that my ribs are really broken.

I give up from trying to retrieve my palm, then sigh.

“.....I'm troubled.”

Startled, his large figure is shaking. With the other hand that he's not holding, somehow I'm already touching his freezing cheek that he jumps in startle.

“I already planned to seduce you.”

Then the time passes for a full five seconds.

The body that completely stopped moving finally stirs to move again. So that I can reach the completely still figure for a long time, I'm smiling at the head that slowly lifts up.

Disturbed or disturbing, Kaid is finally opening up, I can see the base of his neck and his collarbone. I look at the blue flower swaying on his chest, which naturally makes me smile so wide that I even surprise myself.

"I could see your face at last. Fufu..... You've become even more like Helt now, Kaid."

"My lady.....?"

His expression has become more masculine, the childish roundness is all gone, and his countenance is more haggard now. And yet, it looks like Helt is here. That foolishly mouth gaping look on his face looks impossibly adorable, and to think like that, I'm certainly already hopeless.

Without warning him about his loose spontaneous expression, I touch the swaying flower on his chest.

"My words to Jasmine were really cruel, but..... she delivered it to you."

"..... Had you said you were throwing it away, she wouldn't be able to pick it up. Yet, you said that you were going to leave it. That you were leaving it here. That's why, she said, she picked it up and delivered it to me..... The flower's meaning makes me unwilling to return it to you, but this is the connection between you and Jasmine, so I'm returning it."

I'm astonished when he reluctantly removes the new chain. He has fixed it for me.

"Kaid, did you know about flower language?"

".....In the past, my lady asked me to attach the blooming flower in the garden to something..... so I studied it. Although, afterwards, I had no interest further than studying about whether it was poisonous or not, whether it would bear fruit later on or not, and if it would taste bad."

"I-it's not like I meant the meaning of all flowers."

“I knew that, but a man is someone who will cling to what he receives from his first love, pondering if the flower has any meaning to it or not.”

I thought that a woman was not that different, but I’m cornered all of a sudden.

Kaid looks up at my startled face with strange expression.

“My lady?”

“.....First love?”

“That’s right, though?”

“.....I didn’t know that.”

“I see. Even I, too, didn’t know that my lady was thinking to seduce me. ....Am I allowed? Right now, truly, treating this as my afterlife.”

It’s agonizing, each of his words, spoken cautiously. It’s so full of longing, so much that it hurts.

“Even if it’s not the afterlife, it’s alright, it’s fine now. I’m sorry, I’m fine with it, it’s alright, Kaid.”

I draw his face with both hands as his golden eyes widely open.

“I love you.”

I yearn for you.

You are my precious.

“I want to live, with you.”

I lost my home, parting with my family, losing sight of myself.

Even so, this love is the only thing I won’t let disappear.

“I want to know about a lot of things. About other towns, other villages, about the town where you can gather that delicious tea. This time, I’m going to see a lot of things, know a lot of things, I want to live. I want to know about everyone..... and about you, too.”

A drop of tear stains his cheek. The tear that falls from his wide-opened golden eyes traces over his cheek, then drops from his jaw. And then, following the same path, my tears also overflow, bouncing off the ground.

I open my mouth, thinking to say something, but I close the trembling lips again.

It’s the first time I ever see a grown-up man crying. Moreover, this is the first time I see someone with overflowing tears without even noticing it.

“Don’t cry, Kaid.”

“.....You’re crying too, my lady.”

“That’s true, we’re a match.”

Bumping our foreheads, we chuckle together.

“.....My lady, I will, become 30 soon, do you mind it?”

“An older man is good.”

“.....Does that mean a younger man isn’t good?”

“.....You, have quite the troublesome personality, don’t you?”

I burst in laughter at Kaid’s childish pout. Since I think of this soon-to-be 30 years old man as someone irresistibly cute, love is truly a troublesome thing. And, as I expected, it’s a wonderful thing.

Kaid, whose face grows constrained from being laughed at, is so charming, so lovely, that I want to do something that I couldn’t do in the past due to embarrassment.

His face that overlooks me is already wonderfully close, looking confused, so I'm moving to take his lips.

"Y-you can't, my lady. There's poison,"

"What are you saying now, when you've already given me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?"

".....That's, well, true, but..... You said it while blushing,"

"That's because you stopped me..... and aren't you blushing too? Aren't you, like, what, thirty?"

"Almost, but not yet..... Please, stop. A man's complicated first love isn't something to be teased."

"But I'm a woman who also experienced a complicated first love, so we're a match."

Kaid casts his eyes downward, one hand on my lips and his other hand covering his own face. From the gaps of his fingers, I can see him making a—is it a moan or groan—no, I can't even tell if it's a voice or sound in the first place.

".....So that's it, that's the way."

After sighing so deep that it seems his lungs become empty from it, Kaid lifts his head up.

"I'm going to say this because you don't seem to have any self-awareness, but under the basis of a sheltered girl's purity, innocence, and immaturity, along with an aristocratic magnanimity, natural disposition of sincerity, and gentleness being generously displayed, radiating them to your servants without any discrimination, the servants felt complicated. I was unable to say this, but for the sake of making the end as the end, the servants who was intimate with you, my lady, were all feeling complicated. Just please, know that none of this was any of their faults only."

I don't understand the point of what Kaid wants to say, but for the time being, I do understand when he called me a sheltered girl. For now, I think it's better to wait until he says everything he wants to say to the end. Obediently waiting him to continue,

Kaid wraps my cheeks with both of his hands. He's doing the same thing I did to him just now.

"It was always on my mind, but, if strength was added to those, you would have become an unbelievable witch. Looking at you now, your family was doing the right thing to shelter you."

"What do you mean.....? Is it about me being called as the Witch of Laius? Not as Fruitless-Bearing Flower?"

"Please stop radiating to that scale. Please, show them only to me."

".....Just to Kaid..... Did you just tell me to become the Wolf's Witch? To be the demon?"

I wonder if it was because how presumptuous of me to be compared to a flower. As much as I don't think that I was being so hated to the extent of condemning me a new nickname posthumously, I meant to understand Kaid's feelings, but as I thought, I don't get what he's trying to say, at all.

I told him the gist of it, and Kaid groans again.

".....I'm saying that even if you live in the street, my lady is indeed my lady."

".....And that means?"

That golden color is getting closer.

"That means, I wonder if I'll be feeling complicated throughout my whole life."

The contact only lasted for a split second, but to be able to make me feel this euphoric, love is really troublesome.

And even that troublesome-ness is precious. Even more than that, *he's* precious. This feeling that's neither yearning or love, emptiness or misery, sorrow or joy gushes forth from my chest, and yet it's also all of them mixed together. It becomes tears that fall from our eyes, that we see in each other, that neither of us notices in ourselves.

# CHAPTER 18

## YOU, ME, AND THE WORLD'S RULE

---

“Is anyone here—-!?”

Maybe it's so that they won't lose out to the muddy waters, or maybe it's the volume of his feelings. Their feelings.

As the barks and the reverberating loud voices come to my ears, I push Kaid away, not expecting to hear signs of people so sudden. Kaid looks at me who openly runs away, with a face that won't say anything.

Have I hurt him? Have I shown him that I want to treat everything until now as nothing, that I hated him after all?

I don't think like that at all. It's just, a little, a bit, startling, there's no way I could hate him.

Then, I properly receive the punishment for recklessly hurting Kaid, who has only been thinking about my interest: My chest hurts from moving so sudden. My heart hurts, but my chest also hurts. It hurts so much that I can't breathe in or out.

Kaid panics and supports me, who's crouching and groaning. I've hurt him, but he's so kind. Groaning, I clutch to Kaid's clothes.

“I r-really love you.”

“.....What are you saying in this situation?”

“Because, I pushed you away just now.....”

“.....I'm going to act conceited, I didn't feel hated so much that I was despaired from *that*. If anything, what you said just now is more shocking.”

“Ah?”

Kaid, supporting me with one hand and covers his face with another hand, groans.

“Hello! Is there anyone here—!?”

The voice that roars for the second time echoes with a tinge of sobs. Kaid makes a deep, deep sigh, then lifts his face up in a flash.

“There are two here! But, Tim was washed away! Keep looking with haste!”

“My lord!? My lord! .....Aah, you’re alive!!”

The voice of a youth goes through a whole range of emotions. Shock, doubt, delight, delight, delight. Then, his voice is raised to another direction from us, faint as if being damped by the muddy stream in front of me.

“The lord is alive and well—!”

The cheer I’m hearing now sounds wet with tears, so much that the youth’s voice can’t begin to compare.

Their triumphant voice rises up, with gross sobbing that doesn’t lose to the muddy waters.

The cheers also don’t lose out to the down pouring sobs from the sky, until Kaid raises his voice.

“I get it, so keep looking for Tim! It’s a race until the border of Darich’s territory, go!”

That’s right. Wilfred can only be searched within Laius’ territory. Beyond them, it’s no longer under Laius’ authority. It becomes the issue of Darich, of Joblin. How vexing.

Kaid’s authority exceeds another fief’s lord’s in Laius. In Darich, Joblin has the higher authority. It has to be that way. If there’s a lord of that fief, flaunting his authority as the lord of another fief is heavily inexcusable. It’s so extreme that the territory might suffer a military occupation, were it to happen.

Kaid can only search within Laius’ domains. After that, once it’s out of his jurisdiction, he can’t proceed to lay his hands or have his way with it.

Hopefully, Wilfred can be found. At least, I hope he's alright.

I have no idea whether surviving this will become his salvation or not, but I think so. Even if it's more cruel for him that way..... I still think so.

"Hah-! Should we dump it together, then?!"

"Yeaaah!"

"I'll do it too!"

Why are they saying "then", I wonder with my head slightly tilted, and a stone, fastened into a rope, was thrown before me. Kaid, who receives the rope that's securely attached to something on the other end, strongly tugged the rope several times to test it.

"What is that rope for?"

"This is a hollow area when the water volume is low. When the water level is high, no one can enter this area from above. That's why, we fasten our bodies with this and get pulled up from above."

"U....."

"I will lessen my lady's burden as much as possible. ....Before that, I apologize as of late, but, would you please come here?"

Holding my chest as if it will creak just from breathing, I imagine myself being fastened to the rope while being pulled out. Just imagining it feels painful, truly. It seems that the pain shows up on my face, as Kaid's face turns apologetic.

I need to be pulled up anyway, so it's not my place to complain, and he has told me that he'll make it as less painful as possible. The moment I start to calm down, I tilt my head at the wrinkled garment that was given to me.

It's wet, naturally, but still drier than the clothes we both wear. It can be seen from the

wrinkles, actually. Perhaps I feel too numb, but that coat isn't *that* cold. We're already drenched, so it won't be anything different, I think. Or, will I be wrapped in thick clothes until the rope doesn't dig painfully to me? Then I finally understand.

Concluding by myself, I receive the coat that can't be said to be light at all. The water has been squeezed out as much as possible, but it's still really heavy. My father's coat was also heavy, and my grandfather's coat was probably the same. A nobleman's coat is *heavy*. I don't know about Wilfred's coat.

Privately, I think I like the coat of the majority of the commoners who live in the street, donning light coats. However, the texture of this one is definitely better. I guess I really am a selfish person.

Kaid looks at me, who spreads the coat that I received, with a complicated look in his eyes.

"Kaid?"

"Ha..... No, nothing..... Does your neck hurt?"

"Neck?"

That's right, Wilfred did something to it, I believe. My eyes look down upon the tattered clothes that he violated until it exposed my neck and chest. It hung low on my chest, while the neck part is already hopeless, of course.

When I look at Kaid, demanding for explanation, he made a stubborn look that won't say anything, nothing at all. It's not the face that "won't say anything" because he doesn't know how to explain it. It's an expression that holds a lot more anger and sorrow than chaotic thoughts. However, it seems to be directed beyond me, because I will feel even more chaotic for sure. It's that kind of his "won't say anything" face.

"The teeth mark,"

".....The teeth mark. Aah, the teeth mark..... That's right!"

I instantly tilt my neck, recalling the source. Now that I recall it, I was bitten by Wilfred. It's not strange that he left a mark; it was really painful. Afterwards, things happened

one after another, so I completely forgot about it.

I'm pressing closer to Kaid with vigor. Kaid looks taken aback, a little. In introspect, it feels indeed improper, so I kill the momentum and go back to my previous spot, but as I thought, I have been a little more enthusiastic.

Because it was my first, you know? After I could properly feel my emotions, I do feel excited for my first time.

"Listen to me, Kaid!"

"Yes?"

"You know, I did it for the first time, I brawled in a scuffle for the first time!"

".....yes?"

"Now, and back then, I never did it, ever, but I properly got into a brawl, you see. Compared to my first time in a fight, Wil was stronger, but I properly scratched him and let my kicks fly."

Before, without any siblings, nor peers close to my age.

This time around, as an orphan, there were peers, but with whom I didn't build a connection.

I've messed around before, of course, but I never got into a fight. My first fight, a big fight where I scuffled and grappled. I think my first experience was a huge success. Isn't it something that I could boast about?

"Wil was soon beaten in the face. That's why, I think I properly returned the things he did to me. If I work hard, even I can fight. I admired a warrior in the book I read a long time ago, so much that I played pretend with a broom, you know? I was berated for acting improperly, it was quickly confiscated from me, but I really admired them back then."

Both my hands balled into fists, I laugh as if saying, how's that.

I thought Kaid would be surprised for me, but he doesn't move an inch, covering his face with one hand. By what I could see from the gaps, his eyebrows turned into a deep wrathful frown.

"That bastard....."

With the word that seems to spit out his annoyance, he unwraps my fists one by one. He grasps both of my hands once again, his shoulders falling down to the sides.

".....So I was hopeless, after all."

"No, my lady, you are admirable. It's just, that man is,"

"Wil is?"

"Under any kinds of circumstances, don't forget that he harassed you if you gave him the opportunity to. The fact that you showed the willpower to rebel against him is really worth admiring, so I was thinking what I could give to you as a reward. If I meet him again, I'll hit him until there's no trace of his original form. I'll hit him a hundredfold of how he hit you, my lady."

".....Six hundred times, is a little too-"

".....So he hit you six times? I understand. I'll kick him instead."

"That's also a bit..... I wonder what should I do."

I tried to imagine Wilfred being kicked six hundred times, but it was difficult. I could only imagine both sides being out of breath.

"I'll return the hitting part to him by myself, so, if it's alright, I'll be happy if you teach me how to throw a punch."

"I'll prepare Wilfred until there's no trace of his original form first."

".....I think there's something wrong with that."

Kaid sinks into silence taciturnly, starting to tie the rope to me silently instead. After

tying the bottom and the legs, he's leaving the rest of me and says "Pardon me" as the only warning before holding me in his arms. Because my position is changed, my chest is back in pain and my breath stops, but I'm enduring it.

"My lady, how painful is your chest? If I lift both of your arms, will it be all right?"

"Wait, a bit..... It hurts, but I'm fine. What should I do?"

"Please wrap your arms around my neck, and fix your body in place. I'm sure it will lessen your pain."

"I understand..... P-pardon me."

".....My lady. I beg you, so please forgive me at least for now, if I'm loosening up or putting my strength in strange places."

"Which one is it?"

"Either one. We're going. The shock will arrive soon, so please don't ever let go."

While holding me up in his arms, he enters the water while choosing the spot along the wall. In comparison, the water stream feels calmer.

Kaid tugs on the rope and inhales several times. I know it because my chest is pressed against him. It's very embarrassing, somehow.

"Pull!"

"Yes! He—y, pull over—!"

I only remember up to that point. To be accurate, I can only keep my consciousness up to that point.

The rope, as a tool being constructed for the sake of speed to pull us out, was pulled by horse and soldiers. After we climb out, there's only one word that I remember in dazzling clarity.

That it's definitely not just "a little shocking".

After we got pulled up, a lot of people were rushing over excitedly. The great joy conveyed by their eyes, voices, arms, was also directed towards me.

I'm glad, I'm really glad to be alive, I'm really glad to be okay.

Let alone being unable to do anything, I've even spread the calamity to their precious lord, telling those things to those kind people. Even among them, there are people who wouldn't accept those words. We, were there.

I shake off the glimpse of thought.

Wrong. This isn't that kind of place to think like that. Let's focus on showing them honestly about how happy I am. I want to be able to think that it's okay to be happy. Let's receive honestly those feelings in me. Because I've decided to stop thinking that I must go and take the gloomy path.

"Kaid! My lad....."

"My lad?"

Isidore who parts the crowded people to arrive here quickly presses his mouth close. One of the soldiers repeats him in confusion. Isidore, who becomes the center of attention, flaps his mouth open and close more than once, then finally decides to open his mouth as if he wants to say something.

"M-my lamb....."

"Your lamb!?"

He must be unable to withstand it, to raise his voice to the Gimmi army.

".....Do I look like it?"

"Look, like it?"

"Ah no, Isidore-sama even slipped, so I must look like one."

“Ah, maybe, you do. I didn’t know he ever has any lamb, though.”

“I didn’t either. Oh, right.”

I’m comparing myself and the imaginary lamb. Well, in the past, I was also someone who knew nothing but books, so I couldn’t blame his excuse.

Isidore clears his throat once, rising his eyebrow, as I remove my hand from Kaid’s shoulder, whose arms had been wrapped around me.

“You’re always reckless.”

“If I stick to the impossible, it probably will turn out right.”

“As if, you idiot! .....You too, my lady, at least you’re safe, above all.”

When I hear those words that he whispered, I respond with a smile.

However, soon I must retract it. Splitting, for the sake of passing through Isidore, the crowd has been dispersed without being noticed, parted once more. I realized who could have come to part the crowd wider than before, even if I didn’t want to.

I whisper to Kaid’s ear.

“Let me down.”

“It’s impossible without cutting the rope, and I’ll refuse anyway.”

Between those mutual whispers, I secure my nail to the knot. However, the weight of two people has strained the rope and made the knot way too secure. If I untie this, the knot will be worn out, probably. I can only give up on the idea of removing myself.

While doing so, exactly as expected, the other party shows up, without a happy face at all.

It’s like waving a completely thick lump of meat all over, without putting it down.

“Oh no, no..... Do not do the impossible. But, all I could say is as one would expect

from the strength of your fortune, that you can neatly come back to life. Or should I say, as one would expect from Laius' lord, huh?"

"To receive such words from Darich's lord, what an honor. However, are you all right? Our acquaintance is to be married, if I'm not mistaken. I wish to extend my congratulations as well."

"Ho, ho, ho..... To receive Laius' lord's congratulatory address, it is the greatest delight. Now, then, for the sake of passing it to them, I need to excuse myself from here. As long as Laius' Wolf is going strong, even Darich will not be touched. Everyone, you must rejoice. Isidore-sama, I wish for your well being as well."

"You as well, Joblin-sama."

The two lords and one lord's representative lightly bow their respects to their surrounding soldiers, who receive the deeper bows from the servants and retainers.

Laius' soldiers, Gimmi's soldiers, no one touch a single hair of Darich' hands.

This is Laius' territory, but it still doesn't matter. If there's no clear evidence against another lord, he can't be put into trial. If one wants to punish the lord of another fief, one must ask for an audience with the king, taking all of the sound proofs available. Then, one must abide by the rules. At most, a lord is the ruler of a fief. The ruler of a kingdom is the king. Without the king's approval, another lord will not be able to be put on trial. If he does, it will nurture the rebellious spirit towards the king. Anyone who bypasses the process will be deemed as breaking the king's authority.

Within that short moment, it was unthinkable to gather the proofs and present it to the king.

That's why, there's no option but to let Joblin go back home from this place. There's no reason to stop a homesick lord. Even though everyone in this place knew what that man actually did.

The eye that is smashed by the meat is looking at me. Is he thinking of how to make use of me? Is he planning to use me for his own gains?

While being held by Kaid, my feet aren't even on the ground, I understand that I don't even look appropriate, but I pull my chin and cast my eyes downwards.

"It's regretful that I cannot attend the wedding."

There's no one here who'd criticize the rudeness of a single maid, speaking to the lord of another fief without any prior permission. Not even Joblin himself.

"Ho, ho..... What, it's just about styling your black hair, though."

Joblin, who declares in nonchalant tone, can't act nonchalant when the meat is dangling before him no matter how it looks like, squinting his eyes as he looks at Kaid.

"Your choice, the next generation of 'Treasured Flower of Laius' will be scrutinized by the whole kingdom. Plucking a woman whose origin is unknown to anyone, it is in your best interest to protect it carefully."

"I am greatly obliged to heed your warning. I'll let the soldiers escort you until the fief's border. I wish you'll extort caution, were an unforeseen accident happens."

Only the muddy stream is visible, swirling into a vortex in menace, raging right to our ears.

In that kind of circumstance, only the hidden meaning of the words will swirl into a vortex of a human, stowing away the rage inside the body.

This, is a farce.

Anyone knows this, a farce that anyone wants to end, but no one is willing to step down before the other, from the stage.

This kind of stage will end only when someone destroys something. And then, the culprit who destroys this stage, will be hailed throughout the history as the victor.

That thing, from a long time ago, is something that exists from the first time human came into being.

# CHAPTER 19

## THE RETURN OF YOU AND ME

---

We stopped once at Kolkia town, bathing in hot water, washing the dirt, and adjusting our outfits.

The town that was cleared away from the black, mourning clothes, adjusted itself for the festival's preparation. Each house was adorned with many flowers, the decoration chiming from the wind that I couldn't tell whether they were made of colored glass or gems, both adults and children were in high spirit.

I wouldn't have expected that the black clothes were hanging to cover these decorations. The ash-colored town is completely buried in many colors instead, just like a flower field in spring.

However, as much as I regret it, I can't see Kolkia town properly.

The reason was Kaid; as soon as the news that he was well started to spread, he must return to the mansion as fast as possible. Moreover, I am also to return with him.

If that was the only reason, there wouldn't be any problem to gaze outwards from the window, but an incident occurred. After the hot bath, I broke into fever, had my wounds treated, and had a medicine to reduce the fever. At that point, it was still good, there was no problem at all. However, the antidote that I got at the end, was the problem.

I tasted something sweet at first. Thinking that the antidote was unexpectedly easy to drink, a misunderstanding, I'm sure it was for protecting me.

I even became unable to tell if it was bitter, spicy, hot, or cold. Moreover, I literally felt separated from my senses. You see, the sweets that Kaid carried all the time, for some reasons, could it be that they weren't for feeding hungry kids, but to cleanse his palate from the antidote's taste? It was a huge shock when he poured the antidote into my mouth. I couldn't even tell the taste. It was a shock of that scale.

The doctor spoke that consuming it raw might be too harsh with its taste. Also, he had tried to improve the taste for a long time now, but somehow, after all these years, the taste had become even more potent.

Turning his face away, he must have recalled the moment he said that. That was not an exaggeration, joke, or anything as such; that was the reality I couldn't escape from.

“Sobs.....”

I feel that the shocking taste still remains in my mouth, so I spit out the discomfort while groaning. Every time my consciousness returns, I drink some tea and get some sweets, but the discomfort is so stubborn that it's scary.

Inside the carriage, I'm lying flat on my right side, where my chest doesn't hurt. There's a light, warm blanket draped over me.

While the carriage was hurrying, out of concern for the impacts, the view from the slightly open window was too rushed, but it was quiet when we started dozing off.

Yes, we.

In my one-sided field of vision, I saw Kaid sitting across me. With his arms crossed, he even snored a little, and I stare at him absentmindedly. Different from me who dozed off all the time, when we passed the town, Kaid rode a horse, displaying their lord's well-being to the townspeople, easing their anxiety. Starting from the place he passed through, the mourning ended. Right now, all across Laius, the news of the lord's safety must have spread.

The lifted curtain didn't say “Liberation Festival”, it was “Wolf Resurrection Festival” instead. Kaid, who worried about whether it would be established as such from now on, was really cute, but that's a secret.

Though he must have been way more exhausted than I am, his posture never revealed that exhaustion, not even a word of it. As a lord, he's done splendidly. However, as a

human being, I wonder if it's alright.

If Isidore is here, he would have said something, but even though we set together to the mansion, he's not in the carriage with us. He was riding a horse instead with the other soldiers. I know that since we marched in hurry, the number of carriages was kept to a minimum. Still, even though it would be better if we were in the same carriage, he said "absolutely no way" without any hesitation. Tilting my head and looking at Kaid, who responded by saying that "if I were in Isidore's shoes, I would have declined too". I wanted to cry to their straight faces, had I been snoring too loud!? They both strongly denied it, but I was too anxious to sleep on my back from then on.

While listening to the clattering wheels as they spun, I'm still staring at Kaid absentmindedly. His eyelashes are unexpectedly long, though unlike a girl. It's just mysterious. Mysterious, interesting, strange, so much that I want to get closer to look at it, until I can tell every lash apart, until he feels ticklish or itchy. It's a luxurious problem for me, whose relationship with him is close enough to be forgiven for it, something embarrassing and to be proud of, making me feel as ticklish as I thought.

When I put a blanket on him until it covers his mouth, his golden eyes fluttered upon without saying anything. He blinks twice, three times, searching until he finds my eyes, then smiles tenderly. It drew the blanket up until it covers his nose.

"My lady? Do you need to drink?"

I wryly smile unconsciously.

"That is what I said when you were awake just now. Great job, Kaid."

"I can sleep along the way, so it's not that much."

Does Kaid say something like that in this harsh trip, because it's his thoughtful act, or because he's too used to his rigorous training? I thought it was both, maybe, let's catch up with him this time.

"Where are we, now?"

“Please wait a bit.”

Taking his head out from the window, Kaid confirmed by looking at the immediate surrounding. He took out the map from his chest, then spread it in front of me. If it’s raised, we’ll stop instead, so, there’s no other option but to open it while laying down. Making it easy for me to see, folding both of his knees on the floor, Kaid’s face is close. I look at him more than the map that he explains by pointing his finger, so I turn downwards, feeling flustered.

The place he pointed to me was further along the way than I thought. At this rate, we’ll be arriving at the mansion when the night falls today.

“That’s surprisingly fast.”

“If we go in a straight line, it’s to be expected.”

Perhaps he’s right. Since we don’t need to pass through the road of “landslide blockade”, “washed away bridge”, or “sunken village”. Thoroughly, it looks like a detour. Still, Joblin has a fit body. He must have chosen to cross the path that was completely safe from the beginning. The narrow paths and those with unsafe bridges were used, so it wasn’t hard to estimate the path he took.

I’m staring at his black hair swaying as he turns the map upside down in order to figure it out. He’s all grown up, that kind of thought, suddenly came to me.

“Hey, Kaid.”

“Yes?”

“As I thought, I keep correcting my words, don’t I? No matter how I think about it, this treatment to you, the fief’s lord, is definitely rude.”

As I told him the thing I had in mind all the time, Kaid looked utterly displeased.

“Please spare me. If I receive a humbled down gesture from you, my lady, I want to die.”

“I-it probably won’t become that far. ....Hold on, don’t tell me, you weren’t even planning to return to the mansion?”

“Eh?”

“.....Eh?”

Silence falls.

From the slightly open window, I can see the cloudless sky, feel the wind that is just as refreshing, but inside the carriage, we are wrapped in speechless atmosphere.

Would this be the reason why Isidore didn’t want to get into the carriage with us? I can sympathize with him, somehow.

Inside the carriage, a sudden meeting had begun. A meeting of two, but somehow, there’s not a glimpse of a festive mood in it.

The agenda is about us, from now on.

We both find our knees very interesting. Kaid stretches his body with a snap, but before, I tried to do so with great difficulties. But still, we stretched as much as we could.

“Kaid,”

“Yes, my lady.”

“.....Uhm, you know, my name is Shirley Hince.”

“I have known about it.”

I wonder how I should say it, so I just speak while squeezing my brain. At any rate, there’s the way to engage in a discussion without touching, but I think that will result in mutual discomfort. I don’t want to fight him either..... We never fought before. Never in brawls, of course, but not even a verbal argument. Not only with Kaid, with

anyone.

I never had anyone who was close to my age, being raised among adults. Hence the lack of fight I ever had. It was difficult to meet someone else in the first place, let alone having someone who treated me as an equal, not that anyone was ever allowed to.

As that thought passed my mind, it sounds as if I want to have an argument, but to say that I want it to happen right now is a no.

Holding the forefinger and the middle finger, I lick my lips that's already dry without being noticed.

"Hey, Kaid. My current self doesn't have the blood of a royalty. I'm not even the daughter of an aristocrat."

"Even so, it doesn't change the fact that you are still my lady."

"You are the fief's lord, and I am a maid. With my current place, I have to call you Master. Actually, that's the reason why I shouldn't speak to you this way. Even *I* knew that."

In that sense, I knew that I couldn't do it with my position. Originally, I must wait until Kaid starts the talk, as my master, but Kaid seems to be intent on waiting for my turn instead. Thus our talk never really started.

Even now, I'm making a face that sincerely shows my thoughts, without treating it as a joke or sarcasm.

"A more exalted figure than you are, who else could it be but the royal family who lives in the royal palace?"

"Kaid."

Kaid turns his head towards me, which now looks as troubled as I am. No, it looks like he's in more agony, more despair than me. But even so, those golden eyes were so dazzling that they looked like they were almost burnt out, even now, even when they looked like they would melt into tears.

“.....I beg you to forgive me, my lady. For me, my lady is my lady. I didn’t believe that my lady could have truly come to love the likes of me. You were, truly, an unattainable flower. Your figure, your voice, your words, your feelings, everything that you gave to the world, every single thing was beautiful, and I thought, all the time, if only I could serve you. How joyous it would be, were you to live at the end..... From the beginning, I am a man who lives to serve under someone. I even wished, of having you as my only master, living only for your sake, protecting the Laius where you would reign over, how good could it be. I wished to that extent.”

My eyes are wide open at his confession.

I had no clue that he felt that way. People like him truly wished for a stupid thing. I don’t have the slightest ability to govern this land. I didn’t see a thing, didn’t hear a thing, a woman who had willingly submerged herself in the only happiness that was given to her.

No, it was a fact that he already understood. That’s why, he didn’t choose that road. Maybe it’s more accurate to say it must have been a road that he *couldn’t* choose.

If he chose that road for Laius at that time, it would be the same as choosing Laius’ collapse. More than collapse, a crueler rebellion, or even war, could have happened.

If he left a single person from the lord’s family, the main cause, alive, and even placing her in the position of the lord, what could have happened? There was no way that someone as clever as him couldn’t figure it out. Even someone as foolish as me could notice.

The principal offender was our aristocrat family, to the bitter end. But even so, only giving a severe punishment and placing me in that kind of position couldn’t have been something good. Laius would be enveloped in disputes, in war. If things were handled awkwardly, even he could have been punished.

That’s why, from the depth of my heart, I’m glad that his reasoning won.

I’m a completely cruel woman, to feel this relieved at his unfulfilled wish, but this is

the only thing I feel relieved about.

Looking at my appearance, with his own face in a bitter smile—or is it suffering there?—Kaid continued.

“But even so, I fell in love with you. And, you, too, came to like me. How could it happen, to the likes of me, I’m still thinking about that. ....However, I’m truly sorry. I cannot give it up anymore.”

Kaid covers his face with both hands, looking downwards. He’s all grown up now, no longer in his youthful stage, and yet, I could see his irritation, just like a little child.

“.....I’m truly sorry, my lady. Perhaps, this part of me, isn’t a pretty or noble thing such as fondness or love. No, a long time ago, it truly was. It’s probably just my wishful thinking, but at least, it was something different than what I feel now..... However, now, it has melded with obsession, with greed, turning into something brutal and self-centered. Therefore, now, I could no longer let go of your hand. I’m sure that I am..... not a single bit different than *him*. Forgive me, forgive me, my lady. I couldn’t bestow upon you kindness and warmth, I still touch you even as unsightly as I am. I beg you, please, forgive me.”

That voice which begs for forgiveness gradually turns hoarse, then finally diminishes. His crossed fingers make a creaking noise, as if his muscle and bones is going to break out of his skin.

Have we entered a flat road? Compared to before, the shaking has increased. Even so, along with the small shakes from the rattling carriage, I’m looking at the top of his downcast head. Even in this kind of circumstance, I couldn’t help but to absentmindedly notice that his hair still whorls clockwise, same as before, that long time ago. While thinking that I had been looking at this head too, back then, I exhale a deep, narrow, long breath. I figured out that whenever I exhale my breath, the strength will further break my bones, but still it grows stronger.

“.....In that case, I have to think of a way to explain to everyone, so that there won’t be a problem from now on.”

As I said it, his head that stubbornly cast downwards, twitches.

“Thinking about something like that isn’t exactly my forte, but..... that’s right..... I will be my lord’s wife. That’s why, what should I do, if you stay afraid, using honorifics at me? I might touch upon the lord’s dignity..... but, as the lord’s wife, I’m sure I could do it, leave it to me. A long time ago, I studied by reading Mother’s and Grandmother’s ladylike correspondences, as well as Father’s and Grandfather’s gentlemanly correspondences. In the ladylike correspondences, there was a column for “A Skillful Way to Make Rounds in the House”, while in the gentlemanly correspondences, there was a column for “Today’s Submission to Her”, so I knew about a lot of stories.”

It used to feel like the talk from a faraway land, somehow, some talk that would never have anything to do with me. They had no sense of reality, I read them just like I read novels.

I figured that the day would come when that knowledge would be necessary, if it’s my current life. But Kaid somehow only stares speechlessly. Since it’s the face that finally looked up, it’ll be good if he’s laughing happily instead, in my opinion.

“.....Excuse me, my lady?”

“What is it~?”

“.....Am I allowed, to marry you?”

“E.”

It was my turn to turn pale. That was an assault that made me so embarrassed that my blood felt like being drained, I unconsciously cover my mouth with both hands.

“Th, that’s right. I’m, now, no longer a noble’s daughter, I don’t have any good background anymore, it’s hopeless to become a fief’s lord’s wife. No, I, suddenly, acting like this, I’m sorry. That’s right, we’re lovers. It’s fine with me. I will definitely support your wife. I’ll never butt in, or threat the wife, or..... Can we at least reach the town first?”

Thinking about shameless things spontaneously, my head is hanging from being too embarrassed that my chest hurts. I was being haughty. We promised to live together, but his social status and mine this time around are too far apart, so how could I

spontaneously think like that?

My downward vision was obstructed by his hand. I lifted my flustered face, Kaid was there, before my lap. There was his face, looking paler than mine, fading to blue, even.

“I, I’m sorry. A friend. A friend, isn’t it? Yes, a friend..... is probably hopeless, though..... A contact..... An acquaintance.....”

“Please stop getting even further away. Why are you only using your aristocratic sensibility for that part? It is fine to register you as someone’s adopted daughter if you’re worried about social status, moreover, I think it won’t be a problem at all. If my lady could find it to forgive me..... the master of that mansion is you, my lady.”

No sooner than saying all those things, Kaid grasped my hand with both hands and bumped our foreheads. It wasn’t just the fingertips like he did in the cavern, he’s holding my whole hands this time.

“.....Am I allowed for that, my lady? I’m this kind of man, I didn’t prepare a ring, or anything.”

Peeking on his golden eyes, my shoulders lose their stiffness. I’m so glad that it’s not a misunderstanding on my part. Being together with him in this life within our hearts is all right, but if possible, I want to live a life where I can be forgiven for being close enough to touch him with my position.

With my hands in his grasp, his lips drop to my forehead.

“Then give me your oath. Give me an oath that from now on..... this time around, we’ll be happy, and we’ll be happy together.”

His fluttering open eyes is such an adorable sight. At first, that’s the only thing in my mind, then that love is overflowing.

It’s good that Kaid doesn’t move this time, since for the second time, my kiss drops above his eyelid.

“As the fief’s lord, it’s no good to address me like this, but..... if that’s Kaid’s wish, it’s okay. I’m going to work hard to fulfill Kaid’s wishes. Even if I can’t give it directly to

you, it's okay, it's okay, Kaid. Tell me all your selfish desires. I want to listen to your selfishness. If you're too cruel, I'm going to scold you, be mad at you, pout at you. That's why, calm down and tell me. I want to know your selfishness. I want to know your wishes. Hey, Kaid. I wonder if you'd tell me the wish you desire so much to kill for. Little by little, I don't mind no matter how small it is."

This time, I kiss the hands that grasp mine.

My vow.

"I'm in love with you, Kaid. Obsession or greed, if it's yours, I'm happy. Love is this kind of thing, isn't it? I'm sure I'm the same, too. Because we're lovers, you see. It's not a strange thing at all."

Don't bow your head. This is the road that you paved, so don't bow in front of me. Don't drown yourself in reasons. Don't throw away the road where you live as Kaid.

"Speak selfishly. I'll do the same. This time around, I won't lie. It's okay to have a small secret, but let's talk a lot. Teach me a lot of things. The things about you that I don't know about. Then, I wish you'll listen to the things about me that you don't know either. We both have troublesome characters, so if we don't talk often, I'm sure there are things that we can't convey. Hey, Kaid? I'm not seeking to mend things with you. We've already separated once. That's why, this time around, I want to start with you. Let's think. The way to do things as ourselves. Let's shape it on our own."

I did the same thing. I could find excuses everywhere, but saddling myself with those things will only make me depressed.

"I want to be your happiness."

No matter how deep I'm sinking or drowning, the hell has no bottom. Struggling in agony, dragging other people to the same place. When I look at the people I've hurt, it is an infinite quicksand.

"I want to be happy."

But, please.

If you hold me, do it for me.

“I want to be happy, with you.”

More than you can reason for, hold me tight.

Because I'll do the same for you. Because this time, I'll live it through.

Kaid gazed downwards, and I could hear a long, long sigh from his smiling face. While holding my hands, he rubs his cheeks to my stomach. He's not heavy, but the stubble on his face is ticklish. My hands are full, so I close my eyes while rubbing my cheeks on his black hair. Did he laugh? I could tell that his body slightly shook.

“.....You're too bold, my lady. I'm 30 now, but I feel pitiable.”

“I've lived for fifteen years, it feels like I could finally breathe now.. .....Uhm, too enthusiastic..... I did as I please, is what it is, I suppose. Uhm, forgive me for acting as I please?”

“.....My lady, is there anything you want selfishly ask?”

His muffled murmur doesn't press me, so I think a little.

“You're right..... I, want you to release my hand.”

With the hands that he released in an instant, I hold Kaid's head.

“Then..... that, uhm..... let's return to the original topic.”

“Yes?”

I pushed his head down with all my strength despite him wanting to lift it up, he gradually settled into my arms obediently. That way, I hide my happy, blushing face in his hair.

“.....It's true that I thought you were strange as the lord. I didn't lie either when I said

that if it was your wish, I wouldn't change my attitude and speech. But..... I-if we're lovers, your..... That, uhm..... I want to, uhm, see, your relaxed, less formal self..... and, that, uhm..... if you can call me, by my name, Shirley, I'd be truly happy, so....."

It's not like I want him to rock me back and forth in his lap like Father did, though that'd be cute too; I just think that it'll be good if he put his defense down with me.

But, this is truly just my selfishness. I understand that I've become so embarrassed that my ears and neck are too feverish. His head, which has been obediently staying still, has started moving again, so I panic and press it down again.

"My lady."

"No way."

"I want to see your face."

"You can't."

"My lady."

"It's my privacy."

"Shirley, I want to see."

My breath stops. That, just now, is just, too much.

"You said you'd let me see your expressions."

".....No."

"Show me."

".....You're too much."

This is too much.

My mouth curls in displeasure, I mess around with his defenseless hair. And yet, the

face that he slowly turns to look up is looking terribly mischievous. I wonder where the man with child-like tear-stained face has gone to.

Matching him, I'm sure I'm blushing so hard that it's improper. My ears, my cheeks, my nape, they must have been breaking out in fever even though they're not touched. Staring hard in point blank at this face, Kaid hums in a sing-sang voice.

"So cute. Shirley, you're so cute."

".....You're bullying me."

"Haven't you figured it out already?"

His canine tooth peek out from his parting lips.

I'm sure that was a smile, but his feral look told me I was the prey.

"I'm actually really evil."

From our overlapping lips, I could taste the sweet candy and the antidote.

The town where the mansions resided was filled with unprecedented loud shouts of joy. The whole town was decorated three times as much as preparation for the festival, all of them was devoted to the joyous return of Kaid. This was surely as merry as being in the festival itself.

Their greatest joy was represented by such a big volume that I couldn't even hear what I was saying.

Kaid pushed out the window, facing the people outside, waving his hand with a smile, and I looked at him. Until the very end, Isidore refused to accompany us in the carriage.

His "I was kicked by a horse" reason was something that no one told me. When we took a break and climbed down the carriage before, I realized that I was seen by everyone in the flesh like a hot potato. It made me blush hard.

Kaid threw a glimpse at me, then his lowered hand made a signal. I leaned my head and sat beside him. When I did, he hugged my shoulder in the unseen angle from the outside. I wondered if he noticed and wryly smiled.

The carriage stopped. The reason was neither for break, falling into mud, nor a broken wheel.

We've finally arrived at the mansion.

My tightly grasped forefinger and middle finger are as freezing as the midwinter, but they are damp with sweat.

I said the cruelest things. I vomited the words that would cruelly hurt the kind people by choice.

That was caused by Wilfred, but our relationship was the root of it.

I don't know what kind of eyes await for me beyond this door. I knew about Kaid's explanation for them while dashing with his fastest horse, that I was taken as a hostage. I'm sure they were concerned about my condition. They are that kind of people. I knew that. They are not people who would blame or rebuke me for shouting those thoughtless remarks while being held hostage. I knew that.

I know that, but my limbs are shaking. There's a clattering sound from my teeth.

Because, you see, this place was where I was convicted.

There were many cheers, rejoicing, wishing for my death. The excited voice of those who were happy overlapped with the excited voices of those who were set free; they were a little, just a bit, too intense.

As my head hung low, the door was open, blowing wind onto me. If I look up, I'm going to hold onto Kaid's hand, who has climbed down before me. Without hurrying, I reach out his smiling and waiting figure. I lean one of my arms until my chest won't be in pain, stepping out of the carriage while slightly bending down my body.

It's all right. It's not burning hot. That red color was in the past. There's no longer redness in the sound, in the smell, nor in anyone's eyes.

I keep telling them to myself. My heart is more sluggish than the clock tower's bell, but it beats with all its strength.

This time, my arms won't be twisted, I won't be forced to prostrate on the ground. There's a hand that will support me, so I'm not afraid. It's scary, but I'm not afraid. I'm all right.

I stop chewing my lip, and slowly lift my head up.

As if it had been waited for, the voice were in unison.

"Master."

"M'lady."

"Welcome home."

A row of people lining up, bowing at the same angle, made the trembling I've been having to disappear. Only bewilderment remained.

I understand if it's Kaid. This place is Kaid's territory, Kaid is the lord of this fief, the head of the mansion. The master. The righteous. That's the way it is.

Welcome home. I get it too. You see, because this is Kaid's mansion.

But.

".....My lady?"

Pondering dumbfoundedly, I look up to Kaid.

It's too much of a surprise. Kaid wryly smile and push my back forward, a little.

The one leading the bowing people whom I've become familiar with, Kaid's aide and direct subordinate, the head butler and the head maid, and then, people who are somehow too scattered in the lines. Just like Caron, these people are always here.

"What's wrong, you guys? I've brought Shirley back as I promised, you know? Carolina, you're frozen, Jasmine too, aren't you nailed to the ground? The people behind you are restless and stuck, you know?"

Hearing Kaid's words, Caron slowly lifts her head up. Just like her, the people around there are looking up. And then, with a crumple.

With a crumple, their faces distort.

Among them, the oldest man is well past his middle age, but everyone is equally on the verge of tears, and I look back at Kaid, who pushes me forward. Kaid, making a mischievous expression, leans his body and whispers to my ear.

"I only told Carolina."

".....Only?"

"I left it to her to choose whom to tell..... Most likely, all of your former staff already knows? If their looks are any indication."

*M'lady*, I look at them again in sudden realization, at the quivering voices.

Caron and the others walk forward, one staggering step at a time, and collapsed right before my feet. In their folded position, none of them moves an inch, so that they don't break into tears. I'm unable to move too.

"We have been waiting for you."

"Caron."

Caron starts sobbing.

“To have you, return, all well, from the depth of my heart, the same as everyone, from our deepest hearts, we have been waiting.”

The voices, in unison.

“M'lady.....!”

“Shirleeeey!”

Only one person burst differently.

Jasmine jumped out from the neat row. Together with Jasmine, with her messy tears and snots, the others were jumping in. Even Samua started running.

After that, each one of them raced against one another, until the row completely disappeared, no one knows since when.

Whether she stumbled to it, or if that was her plan from the start, looking at Jasmine who jumped and ran forth already made my chest throb in ache before she even arrived.

“Hey, hold it, Jasmine! I told you, Shirley is injured!”

“Jhaarliiiiiiy!”

With Samua's arms restraining her from the back, Jasmine cries in a mess, stretching her hands out. When I grasp that hand, her face wrinkles again around her eyes. Without wiping away her dripping, overflowing tears, Jasmine is sobbing.

“Sorry, I'm so sorry, I've hurt you, I'm sorry, it must've been scary, it must've hurt, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Shirley.”

“Me too..... I'm sorry I said those cruel things to you. I chose the exact words that would've inflicted pain for you.”

“The fact that I was close enough to you for you to know the words painful to me, I'm so happyyy.....!”

Jasmine raised her voice in tears just like a child; as soon as she held to her arms was released, she jumped straight like an arrow, then hugged me like I was fragile. Her light, soft, warm body wasn't as painful as I thought, so I wrapped my arms around her trembling, flustered back.

"Boohoooooooooooo, Jharliiii!"

"There's no Jharly here! .....Welcome back, Shirley. I'm glad that you're all right."

"Th, thank you. ....Uhm, what's that about calling me m'lady?"

I thought to ask to the only person who wasn't crying, but when I looked up, his eyes were red too.

"What, you ask, that should have been our line, we knew nothing, none at all. Why, how, since when, I don't even know, but Shirley is going to marry Master, right? Therefore, since as our Mistress, as the wife, Shirley is still too young, isn't married yet, to call you Mistress out of nowhere would make you bewildered, so everyone was mulling over how to call you. It would be good to call you Shirley-sama, but Carolina and the others preferred m'lady, and we thought it sounded nice too..... Should we change it?"

"N, no, that's, unnecessary, really. All of you, are good, just as you are. That's what I want."

"I see. I'll address you properly in front of the guests, but otherwise, I agree with you."

As Samua laughs in relief, I feel relieved too.

Now, the biggest reason to strain my surroundings in vain respect is gone, I'm no longer a person to be humbled upon. That was one of the reasons, but the treasures I got from this mansion were too many; I felt lonely. That's why, I want to stay this way.

Right now, I'm going to look for the shape of things as they ought to be, right here, from now on.

"Samua, you know, Tim,"

“.....yeah, he–”

“He loved you a lot.”

“E?”

The eyes he was hiding in pain widens to circle shapes.

“He really loved you, so he targeted you. He really loved you, so he didn’t let you drink the poison, choosing to drink it himself instead.”

For him, there must be a lot of chances. He could have put it in the food, even mixing it in the ingredients. There really wasn’t any meaning to drink it himself, nor was there any meaning to drinking it alone.

He’s warped. Defiant. It would’ve been better if he was only those, but he couldn’t even be like that, so he was drowning. His past pushed him down, twisted him around from the depth of hell, kept him in the middle of falling forth.

Kaid said that he was just like him, but I was the same. He, was my other self.

“When I see him again, I must sink my fist to that guy. Because I’m his senior, you see.”

Swallowing whatever he wanted to say before, Samua grinned wide. That smiling face was truly dazzling.

Stupid Tim. Stupid Wilfred.

You and I are both foolish.

Even though we had a future here. Even though Laius is, now, facing a different future. Even though the days when only ruin awaited was long gone already, replaced by a future that spins the tale of budding smiles.

Why are we nothing but a prisoner of our past?

Even though the life that wasn’t born at that time, the smiles in their faces that wouldn’t appear if not for that day, are this precious already.

“My lady.”

Kaid holds my shoulders.

I can't stop the tears. My chest is in pain from sobbing this heavily, but more than that, it's painful even deeper in. It's painful, and warm, and agonizing.

I have nothing but regrets. I've only been making mistakes, hurting those around me, running away, but why is it so, so warm in this place? The building is different, the garden is gone. Even my family, none of them is around except me, but why does it feel that, even with all of those, nothing has changed?

“M'lady.”

“Shirley.”

People who know my past self, people who only know my current self, they call me all the same. While crying, while laughing, they have been waiting for me.

Clasping both of my hands, I bow deeply.

“I'm home at last.”

Let's live in this place. Let's live with them. Let's live as myself.

No matter what happens, let's return back here.

Because, you see, this was once my final abode.

This is my living birthplace, even now.

## CHAPTER 20

### THUS IT BEGINS, YOU AND ME

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“My lady.”

I turn around towards the voice that called me. The hair that’s carefully combed cascades to my cheek.

“Isidore-sama.”

The person who showed up from the hallway’s direction was Isidore. I then thought about that time when we waited for him following us.

“I’m fine with ‘my lamb’ too, though?”

“Ugh..... Please, spare me.”

His flinch made me giggle.

At last, both him and Kaid called me ‘my lady’ like they used to.

*“A long time ago, I’m in your debt,”* was the only thing that Kaid offered as explanation. Thinking about his age, that long time ago was the time when he was barely a child, but he slipperily dodged. Everyone came asking about it, but he weathered all questions and only said, *“It was a very, very long time ago.”*

I’m no longer wearing a working uniform now. It wasn’t a long, lacy-laden dresses like a long time ago either, but I’m wearing a one-piece-like dress. It’s light blue.

I’m not permitted to go back to be a maid. *When outsiders aren’t looking, we’ll continue acting as usual, so please at least please spare us from returning as a maid,* was what Caron and her co-workers petitioned for.

At first, I thought being resented was a given, since a newcomer like me stole their precious lord, but I was bewildered when they were so amiable. It was such an

anticlimax.

Like Jasmine, who said, “It’s a great help if the master knows the hardships of being a maid!”, or Samua, who said, “The head butler has been crying happily, being in a high spirit everyday, so the job has been easy,” or Caron who said, “A Mistress who has the servants on her side is strong, you know, so defeat Master in one swoop.”

I’m really glad that people are so amiable, but, Caron, I’m not really here to wage war with Kaid, though?

The festival was over, the mansion sent off the honored guests, and finally returned to its peaceful atmosphere. I did say “return”, but the time is pressing for another event now.

Kaid decided to return here to sleep normally. Until now, he stayed at a building that looked like a fort near his office, but from now on, it seems that he’ll properly use the lord’s mansion.

That’s related to what he wants to do from now on.

Kaid has been thinking about many things about this time around, he has started to allocate the tasks he has been doing on his own to those around him, gradually.

Joblin said that as long as he was here, it would suffice. In other words, if he alone was gone, everything would collapse. Kaid said that it had no difference to dictatorship.

Now, little by little, Kaid assigns his tasks to the others.

“Is Kaid available?”

“No, he was just summoned somewhere else. He would return in a while, I’m sure, should I tell him that you are here?”

“Ah, no..... It’s fine to tell you instead. Can we talk for a moment?”

His voice frowns slightly. I nod and turn to look behind me.

When I turn around, looking at Jasmine behind me, she could guess what's in my mind. With a grin, she bows her head.

"I'm sorry, Jasmine."

"Don't be~ Well then, Isidore-sama, please excuse me."

Isidore waited until Jasmine's figure was gone from his sight, then started to speak.

"I'm returning home tomorrow."

"Yes, I was told so. I will send you off as well."

The honored guests and others were already gone while I was bedridden with fever. That was actually longer than expected, though. Despite that kind of uproar, the original agenda of the festival which was supposed to have passed were still around, so I must be thankful.

"Have you known about what Kaid is doing right now?"

"Yes."

He's gradually allocating his tasks to others. The job he has been doing on his own until now is impossibly excessive.

".....The succession won't be what it used to be, huh?"

".....Yes."

I knew what he was trying to say.

Because this topic can't be spoken in the hallway, I open the nearest door and lead us in. It's only a small guest room, but it's messy with various packages.

"Is he trying to get rid of the feudal lord system?"

“I think, he feels that it will be a good thing. ....I think so, too.”

It's not going to happen in an instant. It's about sometime far in the future.

However, someday, there will come a day when a lord is no longer necessary. Whether it's a land where a single lord can make or break it, or a land where a single lord fattens up himself, they are both warped.

“.....Did you understand what that means? Other fief's lords, even the king, will surround you as enemies.”

“.....That's true.”

A land that can hold itself without a lord. Developing a similar system to a parliament, where a single person's absence won't affect the whole system. That's what I want to build. Kaid said that if we could make it so that a single person wouldn't have to be burdened, or be able to burden themselves alone, that'll be good.

That, however, means that even a lord's presence is unnecessary. It will shake the very core of the current system. The change of Laius won't remain in Laius only.

It's not about changing the lord. If it comes to the point where the lord becomes unnecessary, the lord from other fiefs will surely oppose it. If the summit of that system is deemed unnecessary, and the idea is spread in that land, there's even a possibility where it will shake even the existence of the king.

Kaid didn't say that it wasn't necessary. A person who holds the position of responsibility is absolutely necessary. However, people turn anxiety into malice. To change that unintentional malice, the titles have to change. It meant that the lords and the king are unnecessary. The idea will possibly spread.

“.....No matter what we do, we have a lot of time. Laius itself is vast on its own. In ten years, or twenty years, even beyond that, we want to try to change a lot of things, that's what we decided.”

“Even if you'll accomplish that far, it will probably revert to what it was. The populace

is going to look for a man to bear the burnt. Just the slightest violation from the parliament, the inability to bring the expected result, will make them hold grudge to you two who change the system, or demand to revert to the old feudal system. Then, when the lord makes the slightest violation, they'll demand to revert again to the parliament system."

"That might be the case. The path chosen by someone else is the easiest to take. However, it's suffocating to live without the ability to choose. Isn't it sad to live without knowing the freedom to choose?"

I'm still learning, too. Right now, I'm learning about a lot of things from Kaid. About Laius, about feudal lord, Kaid taught me without holding back. My head even heated up from all the complicated matters. He taught me about the helpless, fruitless, piercing decisions to make.

No matter how many years it takes, I must learn. Not just the knowledge, but how to properly use the wisdom.

".....The two of you must selflessly sacrifice a lot more things, even your peaceful lives."

"That's true. I'll tell those things to Kaid."

"I'm telling this to you, too."

"Oh, my. But I am terribly selfish."

After I said that, Isidore made a face that looked like he refrained from telling me that I was still young. I'm sure that the next lord couldn't be too readable from facial expressions. However, we aren't in a public space. Isidore and I aren't in a relationship where we would spy out each other's internal affairs either.

Having this kind of person by my side, I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart. Living without lying is, surely, a very blessed life.

"For me, no matter what happens, I'll be together with Kaid until the very end. This time around, I'll bear in mind to do anything I can to stay married with him throughout

this life. To be liked by the people, to keep Laius from its nightmare, I want to learn, to know, and to choose..... However, in the worst case, if the world becomes his enemy, at that time, I will betray the world and become the demon with him. It'll be different to becoming the demon back in the past where I saw, heard, and knew nothing. This time I will properly turn into the demon with full awareness.”

“Kaid will definitely never allow that thing to happen, though.”

“That’s why, so that he won’t be able to let me go in the middle of it, I need to gain more wisdom. ....Moreover, I’ll be working hard from now on so that it won’t have to come to that. I’ll be working hard with everyone. There are cruel people. There are people who can’t see beyond the instant profit they could gain. There are also foolish people like me. However, there are also kind, wise, and strong people. There are many kinds of people even just in a single fief. At the very least, Laius already knew the fear of being under someone’s domination, the dread of being ruled under a powerful individual. Laius knew, more than anyone else in this kingdom, the horror of undiminished power.”

“That’s certainly true. In your previous life, it was a necessary reformation, but is it necessary for the two of you now as well?”

“Once this era has passed, people are bound to forget, aren’t they? The pain, the sorrow, as long as the same incident doesn’t happen before their eyes, the masses who live their busy ordinary lives are bound to forget. No one is willing to live only by seeing the sorrow. However, Isidore. We aren’t exactly planning to suffer, you see? Me, Kaid, and even Laius, we are different to what we were fifteen years ago. We can’t become heroes, nor we plan to. We’re just trying to throw a small stone amidst this ever flowing era.”

“.....Honestly, the two of you.”

Isidore wryly smiles while shrugging.

“Have you told your story to the maid just now, or the male butler that you’re close with?”

“Once they pass twenty years old and decide to keep working here, I will.”

It was something I decided with Kaid, Caron, and the others.

It's not that we can't trust the two of them. It's simply that, the moment they know, they cannot escape anymore. They're still too young to be bound. I think if they want to escape, it's better if they do. Dragging them out of their will is cruel.

We still have the time to wait, I'm sure. Because, you see, we haven't even started anything yet.

Outside the window, men are passing through while carrying the goods. One of them notices me and waves his hand. I wave back at him while smiling. It seems that Isidore at my side doesn't realize what's going on. Ducking his head, he runs as if rushing over. I hope he doesn't fall over. As I think so, I hear the sound of something huge being toppled over.

I shut my eyes in reflex. Then, I peek on the swaying window towards the outside. The angle doesn't seem accurate, though, since I cannot see his figure anymore.

What kind of place, I wonder, will this place turn out to be? At least, it won't be a place where the servants are always nervous and pale.

"My symbol of happiness in Laius is the two of you. Do you remember? I was lost in the garden, looking for our rendezvous point."

"Rendezvous..... Yes, I remember."

I gloss it over with a light cough.

"You made a flower crown, then put it on top of Kaid's..... of Helt's head. Helt sulked in embarrassment. You laughed. In my childish mind, I already thought that it was beautiful. I don't know any sight as beautiful as that. I thought, that was happiness, that was peace, a lord existed to protect that sight. But when I opened the lid, I saw people precious to me crying, only the lord's family was singing happily. Kaid clenched his teeth, grind them, moved on only by saying that it was as expected from the fief's

lord. They thought that whatever happened could be pushed to your family. That somehow things would be just fine if things were left to your family. Because, you see, it always worked that way.”

*“I will become an admirable lord. Then I will save my lady and her family!”*

The boy laughed while saying that. Leaving a trace of that time, growing up splendidly.

Even though things won't stay the same. But, still.

“Therefore, I fully supported the cause to erase all of you, the fief's lord.”

I'm sure, just as the same, everything has changed.

He was a serious child. Serious and kind. His sadness must have been really deep. And he was scared too, I'm sure. How much pain did his tender heart bear alone, I wonder?

“Personally, though. I agree to the abolition of the lord system. There's a limit to what someone can bear alone. It's great if someone capable could succeed, but people are born different. Moreover, there's the inability to give birth to the same person, which makes the impracticality of using the same system inevitable. A hero can be born. But the same hero can't be born again. It's not like heroes can be born in succession either. In which case, it's a given that the omnipresent system is impossible. I'm not saying that the masses cannot become a hero. Rather, it's about the lord being demanded to be a hero. Before making someone into a hero, if we rack the wisdom of a hundred ordinary people, a good idea should be born, even if it's a little, right? In that case, it'll be better if the whole population can be involved. It may need a longer time, but that's everyone's responsibility. It's good if everyone can share the responsibility. If a lord has to be troubled, decided, and taken responsibility by himself, the population would only be a burden. By relying on everyone, we will have the resolution to face any result together. If no one wants to take the responsibility of the decision and outcome in the fief's matters, then it's better to be demolished.”

“Kaid does make bold decisions, but you also say outrageous things without hesitation, don't you?”

“I’m just huge on nepotism. Anyone would prioritize his own happiness than a complete stranger’s, you know? Moreover, we’re supposed to kill our hearts for the sake of the fief’s population, but they take that as a given. No one will ever kill their heart for our sake, nor move into action for that. That’s why, at least, I decide to think, kill my heart, and act for myself.”

Isidore holds his chest with one hand, bowing down.

“I can’t give you the promise of the lord of Gimmi, but as an individual, I vow to be the ally of the two of you until my last breath. Please, my lady, take care of Kaid. I saw his selfishness in that cliff for the very first time. He threw everything away to run to your side, made a move for his own sake for the first time since he became the lord..... Please, this time around, live a happy and peaceful life.”

“And you as well, Isidore. You can’t become unhappy either, you know?”

After saying that, Isidore lifted his head up and winked at me. That joking face looks so messy that it looks cute.

“My family is well, my friends are well, the person I admired has returned. I’m happy, you know?”

“Oh my, how wonderful! I wonder who it is. Is it someone I knew of?”

“Kaaaid, I can’t saaay .”

Cheerfully clasping the hands together, Isidore bursts into laughter and turns around in exaggerated sigh. When I look at his back, moving out of my reach, I realize that Kaid is already here since who knows when. He leans on the open door and chuckles.

“Can he bear to tell that easily? He hasn’t even told me yet.”

When I saw Kaid laughing gleefully, I became happy. I already held out my hand, and he picked it up all at once, swiftly pressing a kiss to the fingertips. Our matching rings reflect the light. It’s not the sight I’m used to, so I feel the tingles, somehow.

“I’m home, my lady.”

“Welcome back, Kaid.”

He’s bending down, so I can reach his forehead to return the kiss, while Isidore visibly shrugged.

“Now, now, this bug is going to disappear. Kaid couldn’t stop pestering me to go home sooner either.”

“You’re only free from Gimmi for one month anyway. I received an urging from there, you know.”

“That’s because Father is desperate to be succeeded by me.”

“.....You jerk, did you come here because you ran away from that?”

“That’s just because Mother said that she wanted to retire by traveling around the world. Wouldn’t you be upset if you’re in my shoes? I’m here for my active duty, too.”

While shaking his hand, Isidore went out of the room.

Kaid let out a deep sigh. However, in his face, he expresses a wry smile as if saying that the guy is a handful. Somehow, Kaid really spoils Isidore. He really had a good friend. I’m really glad that in these fifteen years, there’s Isidore in Kaid’s side, always.

I don’t know since when, but Kaid’s room has become filled with nothing but books.

Since Kaid never really uses this room until now, there’s barely nothing, except for the basic furniture. However, now he comes back with a massive amount of materials. Rather than saying that Kaid moves back his bedroom here, it’s more like he moves his office here. I finally understand what Caron told me before.

The mansion is undergoing various repairs as well. This place should be surrounded like a fort too.

But, with this, whenever there’s something I don’t understand from my night studies, it’s easier to borrow a book. It feels like I’m stealthily obtaining a bargain.

“Hey, Kaid. When Kaid isn’t around, what should I do if I want to borrow some books from this room? Is there any place that I must not touch?”

“If it’s for you, my lady, even the access to the vault room is open.”

“So you have something like a vault room?”

Even if I look around inside the room, I can’t find the carpet. Kaid, who said ‘yeah’ to my tilting head, makes a small beckoning gesture. I scoot closer to him and he points at the spot below the painting leaning on the wall.

Then, he suddenly kicked that spot. With a heavy and lumping sound, the wall caves in. I thought it was smashed broken, but when he hooks his finger and pulls something there, the wall at our side is moving. Beyond the wall, a large iron door calmly awaits.

“It’ll open with a password and a key. This is the only key, but next time, I’ll get my lady’s copy ready.”

“No, that’s unnecessary! I can’t possess something that important!”

“If somehow this mansion is under siege, this is the safest place, so please escape here. It can cram up to three people.”

“So it’s a shelter.....”

“For the time being, it was built to be the vault room, though. Next time, I’ll think about how to open up a ventilation from the inside.”

He enters the password that I repeat again and again in my head so that I won’t forget. There’s no way I can write it down, so I have to remember it. Looking at me, Kaid makes a smile. I know he’s not a person who’ll laugh at my bad memorization, but I feel uncomfortable.

“Now then, it’s already open, so.”

The condition to open a heavy looking iron door makes me frown. Kaid notices that and leans down.

“My lady?”

“I wonder if I can open this door. Perhaps I can if I train like Kaid?”

“.....My lady is adorable no matter how you look like, but if you look like me, I’ll probably cry a little. Besides, my lady, your hair color has changed, hasn’t it?”

“It seems so. It looks more like the past, somehow.”

Reaching out his hand to touch my hair, his eyes narrowed as if it was on the verge on breaking.

The fodder-like brown color has become lighter as if it starts turning to blonde. I was told that my face looked changing too. I think, that’s because I’m eating properly, making my face look rounder.

The head chef, noticing that I make the effort to increase my meal little by little, also put on a lot of effort. The decoration that looks cute-ish keeps adding up. When I see that the stew looks like a poisonous soup with skulls stirred in grudge, I can’t forget that those are carrots, carved to look like cute small birds. I wonder what kind of small bird it was made to look like. Gathering up the courage to ask, I got the answer that it was supposed to be a small, pink bird. How they turned into skulls was a mystery to everyone.

I want to be able to do things, little by little. In my study and meals, also, if I can be honest, in sword practicing. If I can become more careful, Caron and Jasmine promised to take me to go shopping with them in the town. A festival is coming soon for the girls to give chocolates to her crush, I want to choose it with them. I want to try the things I haven’t done yet. I want to do things together with the person I love. I want to play with my friends, talk with them. I want to run, I want to enjoy sweets. I want to braid my hair, pick colorful clothes, and do make ups too.

Also, just a little bit, I want to try getting into a fight with him. I’ve had enough of a fist fight, but I want to try reconciling with him. But, I truthfully don’t want to feel sad or make him feel sad, so I don’t want to do it as much as possible.

Inside the vault room that he led me to, there are shelves attached to thick iron walls, mainly to store important documents and keys. Rather than things that could make money, they look more like things that are essential to manage a fief.

Let's treat this well too. While nervously looking around, I saw one distinguishable spot. It's a small and cute looking glass box. With flower decorations, it's put on top of a piece of clothing, unlike others which are littering around.

"This is?"

"Ah."

I don't know if I can touch it or not, so I ask by gesturing with my palm. Kaid, following the line of my sight, jumped in a startle. Seeing that, I also jumped.

"Wh, what? Is it something I couldn't ask? If it is, I'll forget about it right away."

"Ah, no, that's."

Looking at Kaid becoming incoherent and drenched in cold sweat. I feel flustered too. If it's something *that* important, so much that he doesn't want me know, I'm really sorry to carelessly ask about that.

"It's fine, I already forgot about it! I already forgot what I ate for dinner yesterday, and even the cute dog you drew on top of the pancake to erase the morning resentment is way forgotten!"

"Even if you don't become forgetful from being that flustered..... That thing in the morning, if you forget it, that's great. No wonder everyone said that they had no appetite back then."

Kaid pressed his forehead, but immediately shook his head. Then, slowly, as if holding a really fragile article, he took the glass box with both hands.

It looks like he's going to put it right in front of my eyes, so I shyly fix my gaze upon it.

“Please open it.”

“.....May I?”

“Yes. But please don’t laugh?”

Kaid holds up with both hands a tiny, cute-looking box, softly caressing it. The box that was kept inside the cool vault room was as cold as ice.

So that he wouldn’t scar it in one per ten thousands chance, he uncovers the lid very carefully. Just what did he put inside? While my heart thumping hard, I peered inside, and felt let down instantly.

A small paper, ribbon, light yellow paper, and handkerchief.

If the handkerchief isn’t there, I would’ve thought that they are trashes, but why are they kept so securely, as if they’re treasures? I tilt my head, but I can’t look away. It interests me, somehow. I think I have seen them somewhere before.....

I lift my head in an instant. Kaid doesn’t say anything. Yet he gave me a slight nod, which confirms my thoughts.

My eyes and nose are burning up. I couldn’t resist the heat from travelling up to my eyes.

“I’m more skillful now.”

“You’ve been skillful since that time, though.”

“That’s a lie. The flower was slanted and the cookies were slightly burnt.”

“I no longer lie to you, my lady. I’m looking at it everyday, but I can’t tell where the slanted part is, and I hid the cookies from everyone so I would be the only one who ate them back then.”

I control my trembling lips, desperately trying to reply. I was really against showing him this kind of pathetic face that I preferred being overturned, but, no matter what, I want to see it.

The letter I wrote in a rush for our rendezvous. The ribbon I used to wrap the cookies that I was too troubled with, so much that I barely made it to our rendezvous. The handkerchief that I was mulling over, because I had no spare if that one ended in failure.

I gave those to you. A very, very long time ago, fifteen years ago that felt just like yesterday, I gave them to you.

Even though you should've just thrown them away.

They were being a burden, right? It was really painful, right?

It was better not to hold the things in your arms when you couldn't go back to them again. You should've just thrown them away, lessened your burden, and moved on.

I think of these things, but at the same time, I feel happy too. Really, I'm such a selfish woman.

While thinking that he was such an idiot, I wiped the tears and suddenly realized. I wiped my tears once again, and looked closely into the box to confirm it. However, no matter how many times I look at it, I can't find *it*. I even opened the handkerchief, but there was nothing but a slanted flower, swaying as if it could be blown away by the slightest wind.

Kaid keeps gazing at me who is looking for something.

"Hey, Kaid."

"Yes?"

"My hair?"

"....."

I'm sure I heard that he took a bunch of my hair, but there's nothing resembling hair inside this box. Since I have this opportunity, I want to wash that hair at least.

And yet, Kaid somehow avoids my eyes, putting up a futile iron wall.

“.....Kaid?”

“.....Yes.”

“I won’t be mad, so tell me?”

“Uh..... Yes.”

“My hair, what did you use it for?”

“Huh!?”

My eyes are looking at him, soothing and conveying that it’s okay, I understand.

“Hold on, my lady?”

“I didn’t read in details, but in the book I read a long time ago, there seemed to be a lot of recordings about using hairs in good luck charms. You used it for that, didn’t you?”

“You’re mistaken! In the first place, using hairs for good luck charms is considered black magic, isn’t it?”

“Uhm.....”

It’s about a long time ago in the past, and I didn’t exactly plan on getting executed, so I don’t remember that clearly. I only read carefully about love charms. Like, using the hairs of one’s crush to create a paper doll and let it bathe under the full moon’s light, or like, braiding them into a *misanga*, braided bracelet, putting it against your skin without being noticed by anyone else for a month, or other things.

However, I didn’t remember anything other than the charms would make one’s feelings returned by one’s crush.

“Making a straw doll and inserting the hairs to it.”

“I understand the gist of it from that, but that is done to send a curse.”

“Sticking the hairs into a paper doll and burning it without being seen by anyone.”

“That’s also to put a curse.”

“In the novel I read a long time ago, the main character, a mysterious thief, can turn into a person by eating their hair, or.....”

“Eating someone else’s hair needs a considerably strong will power, indeed..... My lady?”

“.....I heard this from Jasmine before, but her mom read it in the popular novel when she was a child.”

“.....Well, it might be.”

I wonder if I radiated grief, because Kaid pat my back in return.

“So, then, what kind of charm did you use the hair for?”

“Just the usual kind, a plain protecting charm that I can carry everywhere.”

Inside the pendant that he took from his chest’s pocket, there were three small strands of golden hair. I stared at them without blinking, confirming for once that there were no noticeable dirt on them.

“Kaid.”

“.....It’s repulsive to you, after all?”

“I think my hair has no protective effect, actually.”

“I wasn’t looking for the effect.”

I think it’s unfair that Kaid is the only one who has it, so I told him that I wanted his

hair too and obtained them from him.

Somewhat limping, Kaid led me out of his vault room. He said that this place could be an evacuation shelter if something bad happened, but I wonder if the tightly shut door can be opened in times of emergency, especially with the door being that heavy, so it will only increase my anxiety. First of all, the way that the very first wall has to be kicked from the side already leaves much doubt. Next time, I'll definitely ask him to give me a kicking training.

A nice wind blows in from the opened window, caressing my hair as my eyes flutter close. I remember the feeling of looking at a far, faraway town.

"I want to go back to Kayna."

I heard a loud rattle from Kaid, who was examining the walls' condition. As I turn around in surprise, I wonder if he's trying to fix the bent wall, because he smashes the painting frame in his hand.

Kaid wasn't looking at the pitifully broken frame before dropping the painting.

"Did I, perhaps, do something?"

"A, ah, yes. You just smashed that frame."

"That frame is nothing of importance."

"It looks extremely valuable, though....."

Declaring a quite dire condition of the wooden chips as nothing of importance, he quickly paces himself over here. His hands reached out to my shoulders before he realized that there were wooden chips in his hand, which he threw to the back.

"So, uhm....."

"Yes."

I'm conflicted over continuing or not, but since Kaid has made a waiting stance, I continued. I look at Kaid's straight-laced back as he stands still, frowning, then I look to the neglected painting on the floor. Somehow it makes me feel a little restless. It's in a maid's nature. I want to tidy it up.

"I sent a letter, but as I thought, I want to directly express my gratitude. The orphanage manager is someone who raised and loved me, this kind of an eerily uncute girl who never smiled. Not only was I unpleasant, I was always worrisome. So I thought that I must show my face at least once to express my gratitude."

"Is that so? In that case, please let me give you company. I also wish to express my gratitude to the person who raised my lady."

"You're so busy though, is it okay?"

"The head butler said that I was never free enough to take several days off, even for the honeymoon, so I quickly assign the tasks. I think it's okay."

".....So you've been busy for that kind of reason?"

"Well, half of it."

"It takes half, even."

I didn't even know that that kind of motive could occupy half of his reasons.

Oh, well, under the pretext of a medical care, he should decrease the frequency of showing up at work, so even if he allocates the tasks, it shouldn't be strange.

With a somewhat extremely relieved expression, Kaid tilts his neck. I'm worried if he feels anxious, so I grab Kaid's hand, but what I got in return was a wry smile.

"I thought you wanted to return home."

"Home? Ah, that's right. That place has become my home. Fufu, saying it that way makes me feel the tingles."

She was truly kind. After all these years, she has grown much older, her body might no

longer listen to her anymore, disturbingly. Yet, against all those mischievous children, she never even shown any unpleasant behavior. She was genuinely worried about the child who wished for an unhappiness on her own, without feeling uncomfortable. Even I, who shook away people around me, could notice that.

The wise, kind, and gentle woman.

I think Isidore will like her too.

If there are selfish people, there are people who aren't. If there are terrible people, the kind ones are also there. There are people who will loudly scream their complaints, but there are also people who will endure and keep believing. There are people who won't work for themselves, but there are also people who will reach out to support the others.

I can't say that it'll become reality unconditionally. Maybe in one generation or two, not something right before us.

I think it'll be good if Isidore also has his wonderful destined meeting. I truly think so. If he comes into the conclusion of not wishing to succeed his fief, not at the price of sacrificing his whole life, I think that'll be good too.

If he can choose the path that he won't regret, that'll be the best.

I'll do anything so that there will be a choice for that sake. Not for Isidore the next lord, but for the sake of our precious friend, Isidore.

When I think about Isidore, my forehead gets bumped against and I close my eyes without thinking twice. My hand, which was grasped, somehow had its fingers being intertwined now.

"I'll be very happy if you can think of this place as your home as well."

"You're right. This place is my home, that place is my home too. I have to introduce myself to the orphanage manager. Telling her that my lord-master (*dannasama*) has become my lord-husband (*dannasama*)."

"That's,"

“Then, my master (*goshujinsama*)?”

“That’s a little too much too.”

“.....The-lord-turned-husband (*otto*)?”

“Just use the usual, please.”

“The one who becomes my lord husband?”

“That’s weird, I feel extremely uncomfortable.”

“The one who *became* my lord husband?”

“I feel that it strays even further from the usual.”

“What should I call you, then?”

“What should you call me, indeed?”

The corner of eyebrows lowering to the center, Kaid was even more troubled than me. If he has a tail, it’ll probably be lowered while feeling dejected. As I think so, somehow, I burst out laughing.

“Pfft..... Oh, Kaid, it’s funny..... Pff- ahahaha!”

“.....Go ahead, you may laugh at me..... Your laughter, it hasn’t changed.”

“P-perhaps so..... Pft.....”

“Unexpectedly, your low funny barrier hasn’t changed either.”

He uses a pouting voice, but the golden eyes gazing down on me look unexpectedly gentle, so much that it makes me blush.

I wonder if he has realized that I lost my ability to laugh, because now Kaid’s lips turn up to a smile. They said yawning is contagious, but laughter seems to have the same effect.

That hard staring makes me tingle, but I don't want to be separated from him either. Embracing me with an 'up you go', his large figure envelops me without leaving gaps. He's large, warm, and calming me down more than anything, but my heart beats fast at the same time.

".....This time, I will definitely make you happy."

When the reflective words came, it made me frown. I push his chest away, he let me go without resisting, though his face looks puzzled.

"That's not good, Kaid. Fix it."

"Yes?"

I pull both of his grasping hands, tiptoeing to reach his looming face.

Our lips crash together, *my lady*, he said under his breath.

"Let's be happy. The two of us. I'll tell you this, but I cannot be happy by myself. I won't be. I'm a troublesome woman. Please be prepared."

".....Pardon me for that. Let's become happy, my lady. Together, with me, please be happy."

"Yes, with my pleasure!"

Gleefully hugging his nape, the arms that encircle my body stays there, embracing me. My toes are dangling in the air, swaying. Albeit twirling in that position, I don't feel anxious at all. I have no fear of being dropped, and if I stay this way, I feel happier.

"My lady, I wish to correct one thing."

"What is it~?"

Without realizing it, Kaid was already holding the back of my knee, turning me into a sitting-like position in his arms.

Putting my hands on his shoulders, I'm looming over him in puzzlement. Those golden

eyes are too dazzling, but I'm still looking at them, narrowing my eyes in spellbound.

"That is, not with you as the troublesome woman, but as an adorable lady, you know?"

"You're the only one who thinks that, Kaid."

"If not, I'll be more troubled. Also, I'll tell you this: I'm a truly troublesome man, so prepare yourself."

".....Somehow, when you're the one who said that, I feel a little afraid."

"Yes, please be more afraid of me."

Kaid grins.

However, it's not the gentle smile he showed just before, it's a disturbing smiling face with his canine tooth peeking from his lips.

"Anyhow, all men are wolves."

Saying that, the wolf lord laughs towards his most precious person in the world.



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