Chapter 151 - Test The Waters (1)

Elena’s mind managed to recover as she made her way out of the training hall, but her racing heart wouldn’t calm.

Carlisle’s words still burned in her ears.

— I’ll teach you how to kiss and breathe.

Wasn’t it said that the first time trying something was difficult, and the second time was easier? She wanted to question why Carlisle was doing this all of a sudden, but she remembered she had allowed it to happen.

‘…I can’t act shy like this.’

They were not married long, but already intimacy was creeping into their relationship. Although they didn’t sleep together because of the contract, they had already had two passionate kisses like an ordinary couple. The heat of them still tingled on her lips. Elena shook her head to dispel her imagination.

‘I need to pull myself together.’

At this rate, she would be swept away by him, but she couldn’t allow herself to. She still had so much to do to make Carlisle emperor.

Elena rested a hand on her pounding heart.

‘…Calm down.’

It was not a bad way to keep people from trespassing Carlisle’s private training hall. However, no matter how much Elena repeated to herself “It was just a kiss,” her mind didn’t seem immune to this kind of touch.

Elena gave a defeated sigh. She walked towards the direction of her room, when the maid from earlier this morning hurried up to her and bowed.

“Your Highness, you have a visitor in the palace.”

“Visitor?”

Elena had invited many people from the reception to come by, and she wondered who among them it would be. The maid was quick to notice Elena’s thoughts.

“She says she’s Your Highness’ nanny…”

“What?”

Elena’s scarlet eyes widened at the unexpected guest.

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Ttogagttogag!

Elena’s footsteps raced as quickly as her mind.

‘The nanny is here!’

Elena had sent a letter to the nanny asking her whether she was well, but made no mention about the wedding or Carlisle. She didn’t expect the nanny to come in person, but her heart was glad. The nanny had filled the hole in the family after the Countess died, and raised the young Elena and Mirabelle since they were children.

Elena finally arrived at the parlor room.

Tak!

Just as she took hold of the doorknob, she suddenly remembered she had a breakfast appointment with Carlisle. She had run away because of the sudden kiss, and had probably left him waiting without a message. Elena turned back towards the maid who had been following her right behind.

“Please tell the Crown Prince I have a sudden visitor and I cannot join him for breakfast. We can dine together next time.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The maid hurried away to deliver the message. Elena braced herself, then opened the door to the parlor room.

Kkiiig—

In the lavishly decorated space was the nanny sitting primly in her chair. She still had the same white hair pulled back in a tight hairstyle, just like the nanny Elena had missed since her last life.

“Nanny!”

Elena abandoned her usual manners and rushed towards the nanny. Upon seeing her former charge, the nanny gave a warm smile and spoke in a kindly voice.

“Now a crown princess doesn’t run this way.”

But the nanny’s words passed through Elena’s ears. If one included the memories of the past life, it had been about twenty years since Elena looked at her nanny’s grave and laid white chrysanthemum flowers on them. The excitement of seeing her alive almost brought Elena to tears. She ran to her nanny and hugged her like she did as a child.

“I missed you.”

“Well, now you’re behaving more like a baby.”

Despite her light scolding, the nanny soothingly patted Elena’s slender shoulders. The small gesture seemed to melt away all of Elena’s suffering and hardship like a magic spell. She clung to her nanny for several long moments before looking up at her.

“But how did you get here? I was so worried about you that I didn’t even tell you I was getting married.”

“Do you know how much regret I feel now? I feel as if I missed my life’s pleasure in seeing you get married.”

Disappointment was evident in her wrinkled face.

“I was afraid that you might be in poor health. And you can see Mirabelle’s wedding instead of mine.”

“I will not be alive then…”

“Don’t say that. Live with me forever.”

The nanny gave a soft chuckle at her words.

“Yes, My Lady.”

The nanny held Elena’s shoulders back to study her.

“You truly are a mature woman. So beautiful. Your late mother would have been very happy to see you like this.”

“…Would she?”

“Of course.”

Elena’s lips lifted upward at her praise.

“But how did you marry the Crown Prince? Was this your choice or did the Count decide it?”

“Oh, that…”

Elena couldn’t tell her the full truth, so she narrated a false love story about Carlisle. They ventured on other topics as well, and time passed by quickly, as there was so much to talk about.

It was morning when the nanny arrived, and now lunchtime was already approaching.

Ttog ttogeu-

There was a knock on the parlor room door. Elena turned towards the sound and spoke in a calm voice.

“Come in.”

The nanny, who was looking at Elena, instantly changed her mood at the arrival of a new person. The door to the parlor room opened and a woman in a maid’s uniform entered. Elena had never seen her before, but there were so many people working in the palace that she didn’t know all their faces yet.

“Your Highness. The Empress has sent you a personal wedding gift.”

“Gift?”

Elena looked on in wonder. The Empress had already sufficiently congratulated them, of course, but she knew that Ophelia’s relationship with Carlisle was less than friendly.

“What did she send me?”

“A messenger from the Empress’ palace says it’s a rare plant that only grows in the Sibena kingdom in the far south. If it’s tended to well, it will grow pink flowers, which symbolizes harmony and fertility.”

Elena had no protest to the gift. Such a rare plant could be considered a gift of suitable sincerity, while not being too much of a burden. After thinking for a moment, Elena finally replied.

“Bring it here. Let me see it myself.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The maid bowed her head and soon returned to the parlor room with a burly-looking servant carrying a large flower pot. Although the plant had yet to bloom, its sweet scent filled the room. Elena did not particularly fancy sweet scents, but even this she found it pleasant. She studied the plant with her eyes, then nodded when she saw nothing outwardly wrong with it. She was with her nanny for now, and could check it again later.

“It smells divine. Then in my room…”

However, the nanny’s face had changed dramatically once she saw the plant. She had been watching without a word, but now she interrupted in a calm voice.

“My Lady, is there a need to leave right now? Let’s place it here for a while and enjoy the fragrance.”

It seemed a strange suggestion, but Elena decided to follow her nanny’s example. It was not difficult to move the plant at any time.

Chapter 152 - Test The Waters (2)

“Very well. Let’s keep the plant here for a while.”

“Ah…yes, Your Highness.”

The maid looked slightly taken aback, but she gave a look to the servant, who placed the large pot on the table. The luxurious atmosphere of the room seemed to lift with the placement of the single plant.

Before the maid left, she turned to Elena to speak.

“Please call me when you want to move the plant to your room.”

Elena nodded in reply, and the maid scuttled away with a friendly smile.

Kkiig, tak!

As soon as the maid gone, the nanny immediately stood up from her seat and began to throw open all the windows. Elena looked questioningly at the nanny’s urgent behavior.

“The weather has been getting warmer lately, but wouldn’t it still be cold if you open all the windows?”

“I won’t catch a chill, My Lady. But this plant’s fragrance…I have a feeling that keeping it around will be bad for you.”

“…What?”

The nanny returned to Elena’s side again and opened her mouth to explain.

“I’ve never seen it with my own eyes, but I’ve heard that some fragrant plants from Sibena have a detrimental effect on the body.”

“Detrimental? What do you mean?”

“If a woman inhales the fragrance over an extended period of time…she may find it difficult to get pregnant.”

“…!”

Elena was stunned. Pregnancy was not something that she thought relevant to herself at the moment, as she and Carlisle would not sleep together until he became emperor in the first place. However, that didn’t mean she wasn’t angry. The gift from the Empress was truly wicked.

“…Ha.”

Elena gave a sharp laugh, but it was not one of joy. The palace was as terrifying as she expected.

‘I was too sure of my safety.’

Elena had been so reliant on her sword and her ability to defeat assassins that she thought it was not easy for someone to hurt her. However, imperial power was not necessarily wielded with physical force. The gift was a grim reminder of that.

“Thank you for warning me, nanny. The outcome would have been terrible if you didn’t know about it.”

“I’m not too confident, but I like to be careful. I have already said this to you, but ultimately it is a child that gives an imperial woman strength. The woman’s ambition must be focused on pregnancy. “

“…Yes.”

Although the nanny was thinking far into the future, the truth was that Elena had never pondered on it deeply before. When the goal was to make Carlisle emperor, it was useless to worry about anything after that.

But her nanny was never wrong. Once an emperor’s attention was naturally drawn to other women and he had many concubines, the only thing left for the empress was to provide a successor. For this reason, if Elena failed to get pregnant, she had no choice but to step down as she grew older. The final victory of imperial women was to give birth to the next emperor.

‘But…it shouldn’t matter to me.’

Elena and Carlisle were in a contract marriage. Ultimately, Elena wanted to protect her family, and Carlisle was the man she would walk with to make emperor. She didn’t know if their relationship would change, but even if the two of them were indeed bound together, Elena would take a step back in power. The thought of fighting with other concubines for Carlisle’s favor didn’t appeal to her.

‘If that happens someday…would Caril do the same thing with other women as he’s done with me?’

She remembered Carlisle’s sweetly smiling face in the bedroom last night, as well as the searing kiss they had shared this morning. The moment was so vivid that she could see it just behind her eyelids if she closed them.

It was strange to think that it would all be repeated with other women.

Uggsin.

Elena pressed her hand against her chest as her heart throbbed painfully.

‘Why do I feel uneasy?’

From the outset, she had suspected Carlisle was a playboy. She was grateful enough that he wasn’t meeting other women when she spent so much time thinking about protecting her precious family.

Elena stifled her pain and looked at her nanny in front of her. She had been thinking of making the nanny her lady-in-waiting since she sent the letter, but now when Elena saw the nanny in person, she knew that there was no one else better. Determined, Elena spoke.

“Nanny, there’s something I’d like to ask you…I’m telling you this in advance, but if what I ask you is too difficult, you can refuse it.”

“Do you want me to serve as your lady-in-waiting?”

Elena blinked in surprise at her astute observation.

“How did you know…?”

“It’s the privilege of being the one who raised you. I know what you’re thinking just by looking at your eyes.”

“Is that why you came all this way?”

“Yes. Although you didn’t put it in your letter, I knew you would need my help as soon as I heard about the wedding. I wondered what I could do best, and I came to the conclusion that I could serve as your lady-in-waiting. Now, what do you think, Your Highness?”

The nanny smiled knowingly, and Elena felt her heart beat faster as she was overwhelmed with gratitude. There were so many good people in her life, and she wanted to protect them from dying so they could remain by her side.

Elena cleared her throat and took the nanny’s hand, which bore the evidence of age.

“…Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I had already made my preparations, and I was not beyond staging a protest if you wouldn’t let me.”

Elena knew that her nanny often joked to lighten the mood. Elena choked back her emotions and forced herself to smile.

“Promise me one thing. You should never work yourself more than you can handle. Alright?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

They shared a warm feeling that only people who knew each other for a long time could share. As Elena gazed affectionately at her nanny, the rare plant from Empress Ophelia caught the corner of her vision. Later in the afternoon, she had to meet Emperor Sullivan and Empress Ophelia. She’d like to thank the Empress for the plant she just received.

‘First, let’s test the waters a little bit.’

Chapter 153 - What A Wicked Man

Elena had no intention of making a move at the moment, but now that the Empress had, she couldn’t allow things to remain the same. Elena slowly rose from her seat, her blood-colored eyes shining.

“The maid who brought the plant looks a little suspicious to me. What do you think of her?”

“I feel the same way.”

“Yes. There can be none of the Empress’ people here.”

I was sure that Carlisle already knew, but there was a mole hiding among us. From now on, many things would change. I was the mistress of this palace.

After a moment’s consideration, I opened the door to the parlor, and a maid who I recognized approached and quickly bowed to me.

“Is there anything you wish, Your Highness?”

“Get me Sir Zenard.”

“Ah! Yes, My Lady!”

As expected, the maid seemed to know who Zenard was. After several visits to the palace, he was the one Elena encountered the most among Carlisle’s subordinates save for Kuhn. Zenard was one of Carlisle’s closest aides and she was familiar with him, making him the right person to speak to once she had just entered the Imperial family.

As Zenard’s neat, white-haired appearance floated in her mind, she calculated her future moves in her head one by one.

‘Now, shall we move on?’

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Several minutes passed before Zenard arrived to the parlor room. As soon as he saw Elena’s face, he bowed politely.

“Hail to the Crown Princess. Eternal glory to the Ruford Empire.”

“We will meet many times in the future, so you can omit such formal greetings between us.”

“Oh no. I must follow standards.”

While his stubborn tone was similar to Kuhn’s, there was still a distinction in their personalities. Kuhn carried an air of indifference to him, while Zenard was steadfast to convention, and Elena knew not to ask him again to skip the formalities. She nodded knowingly and continued.

“I want to meet the people that work in the Crown Prince’s palace. I’d like to gather everyone together, and I can think only of you who could do this.”

“Ah, is that so?”

He lifted his head proudly. In the past he had looked at Len with eyes heavy with envy and burden, but his impression of Elena was quite admirable.

‘The difference in his reaction when I am Carlisle’s guard and his wife is enormous.’

Perhaps that was why there was a strange feeling of distance between them. When Elena was a knight, Morgan was the only one who treated her with a kind smile, contrary to his intimidating looks. She suddenly wondered if he was doing well, but she was pressed for other matters.

“I would like you to arrange a place where I can introduce everyone to my head lady-in-waiting.”

“Ah…”

Zenard looked at the nanny standing next to Elena with new eyes. The head lady-in-waiting and the head butler always played a large role on their master’s side.

The nanny, who had been keeping a quiet position next to Elena, politely introduced herself first.

“Hello. I’m the nanny who had looked after Her Highness when she was a child. I’m honored to be the head lady-in-waiting, so please take care of me.”

“I look forward to working with you. As you may have already heard, my name is Zenard. Please feel free to ask me for help anytime in the future.”

Satisfied with each other’s greetings, Elena continued.

“I’d like to take a look at everyone before I send my regards to the Emperor. Is that possible?”

“Yes. I’ll have as many people as possible attend.”

“Thank you.”

Zenard gave another bow in acknowledgment. The final task was to examine the plant Ophelia had sent. If it truly was poisonous to the body, they could feign ignorance and disguise it as a weakness. Elena would have assigned this to Kuhn, but he was still at Blaise mansion. She pointed to the plant on the table and spoke to Zenard.

“This was a gift from the Empress. Can you find out exactly what this plant is from the Sibena kingdom?”

“The Empress?”

Zenard’s eyes flashed. His suspicions also seemed to have been aroused.

“I’ll take it right away and find out.”

“No, I’ll leave this plant where I pass by often.”

“But if it’s dangerous—”

“All the more reason to.”

Zenard stare at her nonplussed, and Elena smiled and spoke quietly.

“With this, we will be able to find out who the Empress’ spies are in the Crown Prince’s palace. They will lower their guard if I appear to act careless.”

“…!”

He was stunned at her reply, then he spoke in admiration.

“You truly are a crown princess.”

Elena smiled sheepishly at his excessive praise.

Whether it was a favor or a grudge, one had to return whatever they had received. This time however, she planned to act differently.

‘I don’t have to expose my claws yet.’

Elena needed to conceal her true intent and watch the Empress’ reaction. And if the opportunity came, she would strike first.

“I will go quickly and gather the servants of the Crown Prince’s palace.”

“Yes.”

Zenard made to exit the room, but he suddenly stopped and turned toward Elena with a cautious look.

“Ah, Your Highness…”

“Speak.”

“I’ve threatened everyone to keep away from the Crown Prince’s private training hall, so you don’t have to worry about anyone interrupting you.”

“…What?”

Elena blinked for a moment, and then her cheeks flamed as she realized what he meant. She thought she glimpsed Zenard when Carlisle kissed her this morning. It had completely slipped her mind after she received the plant from Empress Ophelia.

‘I can’t believe it…’

Outwardly she was calm, but inwardly she wanted to crawl into a mouse hole and never leave. Other people might not give second thought to their love affair, but Elena was so embarrassed that she wanted to die. The nanny looked curiously at Elena.

“Training hall? What happened there?”

Thankfully, Zenard had the sense to shake his head.

“Nothing. I’ll take my leave now.”

Zenard left with a look of satisfaction on his face, blissfully oblivious of Elena’s feelings. Elena fanned her hot face with her palm, and the nanny ventured with her question again.

“What happened at the private training hall?”

“…Nothing, nanny.”

Elena avoided her gaze and stared out the window. She may have a place to train now, but she suspected that rumors of the two sharing a passionate love life would spread far. She suddenly remembered when Carlisle leaned down to whisper in her ear.

—…Last question. It doesn’t matter what the method is, right?

It seemed that Elena still needed a lot of mental preparation before she could practice sword fighting as much as she wanted. Her face glowed red as she remembered the hot pressure of Carlisle’s lips against hers.

‘…What a wicked man.’

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Zenard quickly gathered all the servants that worked in the Crown Prince’s palace. An assembly was expected with a new mistress in charge, but it happened much sooner than anyone anticipated, as it was only a day after Elena rose to the position as Crown Princess.

Ungseong ungseong—

There was a rumble of feet as the crowd gathered, and Zenard confirmed to Elena that everyone was present.

“We are ready, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

They were assembled at an open garden outside the Crown Prince’s palace, as it was difficult to accommodate them all in one place indoors. Elena slowly ascended the high platform Zenard prepared, taking in the view of a larger crowd than she expected. The servants all gathered their voices together in unison.

“Hail to the Crown Princess. Eternal glory to the Ruford Empire!”

The voices sounded quite distant as everyone spoke together. Elena turned her head to survey the group and spoke in a calm voice.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all. From this day on I will manage the palace, and I hope you will obey my will.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Then, I will introduce my chosen head lady-in-waiting. From now on, treat her as such.”

For the servants of the palace, the head lady-in-waiting was their immediate superior, who they would encounter more than the crown princess. Everyone’s attention turned to the aged woman as she rose to the platform. She had a gracious air about her, but there was a sense she was not to be trifled with either.

“Pleasure to meet you all. From today on, I will be the head lady-in-waiting. If you don’t break the rules, there will be no need for embarrassment, so please do your part well.”

Everyone bowed to the nanny’s calm charisma.

“Yes, head lady-in-waiting.”

Elena watched with a look of satisfaction, and she studied each of the servants’ faces gathered there. Some of them she had already met several times before. And…

She spotted the face of the maid who brought her the plant to the parlor room. Elena pointed towards the maid.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, I am Asabe, Your Highness.”

“Very well, Asabe. I would like you to serve as my personal maid starting today.”

Asabe’s eyes widened in surprise, then she quickly lowered her head.

“Thank you, Your Highness!”

Elena kept her face outwardly smooth, but she had already secretly exchanged glances with her nanny. Elena may be able to find out more about Asabe and if she was secretly associated with the Empress. If the maid was confirmed as a spy, it was not yet known whether Elena would remove her, but the important thing was that she could be useful one day.

‘Even though she may be a spy, it doesn’t mean I have to keep her away. I can bring her closer to me and leak false information.’

To do so, it was urgent she find out who were her friends and who were her enemies. It was likely that many of the servants here were not only spies for the Empress, but of other nobles and even of other kingdoms.

‘It’s impossible to not be watched at all…’

Elena quietly looked at all the servants gathered here.

‘…The more you figure out who your enemy is, the better you can make your move.’

First she would look into Asabe, the first to catch her suspicion. Elena had taken her first step in her life as part of the Imperial Family.

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In the Empress’ palace, Ophelia lounged in a high-backed chair with a pipe resting in her hand. A spiral of smoke drifted in the air, when someone approached her silently from behind.

“Your Majesty.”

Ophelia turned her head at the low voice. Cassana, her head lady-in-waiting, stood before her.

“The gift was delivered to the Crown Prince’s palace.”

“…Is that so?”

Ophelia’s reaction was muted, however, and Cassana spoke carefully.

“They didn’t notice at all, so I don’t believe they’re the smartest type.”

“We’ll see.”

“It’s a bit disappointing that she didn’t even notice a simple gift.”

At those words, the corner of Ophelia’s mouth tipped upward. She wanted to test Elena’s reaction, and so she baited her with the plant. The Empress could’ve tried something more elaborate, of course, but for now a little taste to celebrate the arrival of the Crown Princess would suffice. If Elena didn’t notice anything about the plant, that was fine. It wouldn’t be good for Ophelia if Elena were to get pregnant before Sullivan died. Ophelia wondered how they would have reacted if they noticed the scheme quickly.

She placed her pipe back on her lips and relaxed, like a fisherman waiting for a fish to take the bait.

“…I look forward to seeing what the new family member will be like.”

Chapter 154 - Mismatch (1)

After introducing herself to the servants of the palace, Elena met up with Carlisle to pay their respects to the Emperor and Empress. Carlisle wore his usual formal clothes, save for a cravat around his neck. She looked at him curiously, but then turned away as their eyes met. She still felt a bit embarrassed after their kiss at the training hall.

“Tie it for me.”

“…What?”

“I heard that other people’s wives do it every morning.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“My subordinates.”

“Please ask one of the maids to do it.”

Carlisle’s brow furrowed at Elena’s rejection.

“Why should I allow a maid to do it when my wife is perfectly capable?”

“I…”

Elena paused, and breathed a low sigh. Then slowly, she admitted her inability.

“… I don’t know how to tie it.”

Carlisle’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You’ve never done it before?”

“There was no one for me to do it for. My father and brother are knights, and they usually wear their uniforms.”

The knights’ uniforms had standing collars, so there was no reason to wear a cravat. Even when her father and brother did have to wear one, they would ask one of the maids to do it, not Elena.

Carlisle’s mouth gently lifted upwards.

“Then I can be your first.”

“…I really don’t know how.”

“It’s fine.”

“People might talk badly of me if they see an uneven cravat.”

“Then I’ll cut their throat.”

She was shocked by the casualness of his remarks. She couldn’t tell how much of it was true and how much was a joke.

“We have to go soon.”

“What does it matter?”

Carlisle’s response caught her off guard. She was about to refuse again, but she knew the futility of it and took the strip of cloth from Carlisle’s hand.

“I warned you.”

“I know.”

Carlisle slightly lowered his upper body, and she concentrated on fastening the cravat around his shirt collar. When she looked up, she saw that his gaze was fixed intently on her.

“…What are you thinking of?”

“Beautiful.”

His response came out of nowhere, and Elena widened her eyes as she looked up at him. He spoke again, his voice like velvet.

“My wife is so beautiful.”

Elena’s fingertips felt shakier than before, and she suddenly became aware of his proximity to her. His breath tickled her forehead. She didn’t want him to notice her burning cheeks, so she hurriedly finished tying the cravat. It didn’t look as neat as a maid’s work, but it was acceptable enough.

“It’s ready.”

Carlisle carefully stroked the cravat with a look of satisfaction.

“I should have married you sooner.”

Elena alternated looking between Carlisle and the cravat, and spoke with a perplexed look on her face.

“Because I did your cravat?”

“Yes. Maybe I’ll ask you to do it every morning.”

Elena sometimes really wondered what was going on in Carlisle’s head. He extended his hand towards her as a warm smile played across his face.

“Let’s go then.”

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Elena and Carlisle arrived at the Emperor’s Palace in time for their meeting. The guard gave a deep bow and opened a massive door embellished with pure gold.

Kkiiieu—

Beyond the doors was a lavish interior, and sitting inside was Emperor Sullivan, looking more sickly than before, and Empress Ophelia, a picture of elegant beauty. Elena remembered the rare plant she received from the seemingly generous Empress. Ophelia was not someone to be underestimated.

“Kollog—welcome.”

Sullivan held back a coughing fit behind his hand as he greeted Carlisle and Elena. A frown crossed Carlisle’s face.

“You look worse than before.”

“As you age, each day is different. There is nothing to worry about.”

Sullivan carelessly waved his hand, but Elena thought he did look sicklier.

“How was your night at the Imperial Palace, my dear?”

Elena blinked and turned to look at Sullivan’s face.

“Thanks to the care of Father and Mother, there was nothing lacking.”

It was a routine answer, but it didn’t seem to be the one he was looking for.

“Yes, my daughter-in-law can say all kinds of lovely words. But is it true that Carlisle gave you an enormous return gift? The palace is buzzing about it.”

Elena nodded as she recalled the small fortune Carlisle had given her. She was still embarrassed about it.

“Yes. Carlisle cares about me very much.”

Sullivan smiled knowingly.

“Haha, it’s no use persuading my son otherwise, isn’t it?”

Hearing this, Ophelia answered with a honeyed smile.

“It’s a blessing when a couple gets along well.”

“Just like us?”

Ophelia’s eyes glimmered like a snake, but the look had disappeared in an instant and no one noticed.

“Truly…it is a great blessing.”

However, Elena sensed something was wrong. Sullivan and Ophelia looked amiable on the surface, but somehow it felt as if they were treading on thin ice beneath them. Elena couldn’t quite put it into words. She soon gave up trying to gauge their mysterious relationship, and instead intended to watch them for now.

“I received the flowers that you sent today, Your Majesty.”

Elena’s words caught Sullivan and Carlisle’s eyes, and she continued.

“I hear that it is a rare plant only found in the Sibena Kingdom. The blooming flowers symbolizes harmony and fertility.”

If the plant was truly harmful, she had to make Ophelia say she was the one who sent them herself, so she could not claim otherwise later. The Empress’ eyes shimmered, but then she smiled and casually answered.

“Yes. When I heard there was such a plant, I immediately thought of you.”

“I don’t know how I could express my gratitude for sending me such a gift. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Elena hid her true intentions, instead projecting the appearance of a simple-minded princess. Nothing would be better than taking her enemy off guard.

‘…It will be easier to make my move that way.’

Elena didn’t want the Empress to immediately be wary of her. Ophelia’s influence was greater in the Imperial Palace, and Elena had not yet established her own power.

An elegant smile graced Ophelia’s face.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you would like it so much. Would you like me to plant them all over the garden of the Crown Prince’s palace?”

“…!”

Chapter 155 - Mismatch (2)

Elena suspected this was a test to see if she knew the truth. If the plant was truly harmful, she couldn’t allow this to happen. The smile broadened on her face.

“There is no need, Your Majesty. No matter how precious something is, its value lessens when there’s many of it. I will cherish what you sent me.”

“Very well. I’ll plant more of them whenever you desire, so just say the word.”

Pointed daggers were hidden under their smiling faces. Carlisle watched the scene with a curious eye and spoke to Elena in a barely audible voice.

“I didn’t hear about the Empress sending a gift.”

Elena had asked Zenard to investigate the plant, but she hadn’t told Carlisle yet, thinking it wouldn’t be too late to talk about it after the results of the investigation. Still, she suspected that Zenard might’ve informed Carlisle at some point, but she had kept the knight busy gathering the servants around the palace.

Elena looked awkwardly at Carlisle and replied.

“I had so much to do that I must have forgotten. I received a gift from the Empress.”

“Whatever the news is, I hoped to hear about it first.”

Other people might not have noticed, but Elena detected a telltale glimmer in his eyes that indicated he was in a bad mood. However, Carlisle looked straight at Ophelia with no signs of displeasure.

“Anything that goes to my wife, even the smallest thing, goes through me from now on.”

“Oh, are you already trying to protect her?”

Ophelia covered her mouth and smiled, but in spite of her teasing gesture, Carlisle spoke unblinkingly.

“Of course. She’s my wife.”

It was true that Elena was his wife, but to lay his feelings so nakedly before them was a bold gesture. Ophelia looked stunned for a moment, then burst out laughing as if she had witnessed something amusing. At the same time, a strange mood lingered around Sullivan as he sat by and watched the situation, his face as pallid as ever.

“You two must be quite busy on your first day of marriage. We can finish here, then you can leave.”

“We are just getting acquainted with the Crown Prince and his wife, and you are already sending them away, Your Majesty?”

Ophelia’s face was plastered with a sad smile, but everyone gathered here knew it wasn’t genuine. Carlisle responded in a clipped tone.

“Our relationship is different from what I know.”

The mood in the Emperor’s palace quickly turned ugly. Carlisle was a man of characteristic arrogance and overwhelming spirit, even when he was simply standing still. Most would recoil at the hint of bloodthirstiness, but Ophelia’s spirit was also formidable. Although the Empress had never learned to wield a sword, the Anita family had produced many generals, and she met Carlisle’s cool eyes without so much as a blink. It was Sullivan’s cough that cut through the strained atmosphere.

“Kollog, kollog.“

His fit forced Ophelia and Carlisle to dampen their heated feelings. Their expressions were still hostile, but Sullivan interrupted them.

“I need to get some rest. You may leave now.”

Carlisle shot Ophelia a cold look and immediately gave Sullivan a bow. Elena, who had been watching the situation, hurriedly spoke.

“Rest well, father.”

“Alright, my dear. Until next time.”

It may have been a customary farewell, but Elena was sincerely looking forward to her next meeting with him. Before she was married, he promised to tell her the secret of the blue bead ring he gave to Carlisle when he was just a boy.

“Father, did you remember that you and I would have another dinner together after I became crown princess?”

Carlisle had dismissed the ring as just superstition, but Sullivan believed in it and even declined the dowry from Elena. The ring was the reason why the Emperor so easily accepted the marriage in the first place. Elena wondered if there truly was a secret behind it. Sullivan nodded with a faint smile on his face.

“Of course. I will keep my word to my daughter-in-law. I will see you when I feel better.”

“I’ll be awaiting you, Father.”

“Leave safely now.”

Elena bowed respectfully to Sullivan and Ophelia, then walked out of the Emperor’s palace with Carlisle in a good mood.

Kwaang!

After Elena and Carlisle fully stepped out of the palace, the golden door closed again. Ophelia, however, was looking at the empty spot with a look of displeasure. An air of strained silence hung over her and Sullivan.

“Kollog, kollog.“

Sullivan covered his mouth as his body racked with coughs, while Ophelia held out a handkerchief to him.

“You are in bad health, so please don’t strain yourself, Your Majesty.”

Sullivan accepted the handkerchief Ophelia gave and spoke with a more serious tone than before.

“…Can you just follow my lead?”

He gave no explanation, but Ophelia understood it immediately. He meant that he couldn’t groom Carlisle to be the crown prince if she undercut him.

Ophelia smiled, casting her eyes away as if she knew nothing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Don’t say things like that, Your Majesty.”

Sullivan and Ophelia had known each other for decades, and Sullivan already knew that Ophelia was often a snake with her words. However, he didn’t understand what she meant. He shot her a questioning look, and she gave him his usual smile.

“Expressing your feelings when we have such a political relationship, it really isn’t like you You shouldn’t convey your thoughts when you have an upright image to maintain, Your Majesty. “

Sullivan’s expression darkened. In either case, the Emperor and Empress were the two pillars that supported the Empire. There was so much to lose if any of them backed away, and so for many years that fought to take another inch from each other. There was no difference…even until now. They only kept in proximity to each other to keep each other in check, and their affection was simply show to the Empire and to the other kingdoms. They were a couple who never had a physical relationship with each other in these long years.

As usual, Sullivan bore a gentle smile on his face.

“Yes. I feel weak because I feel like my last day is approaching. “

They looked at each other and smiled as if they were a loving couple. It was such an old move now. Ophelia spoke with a radiant smile on her face.

“Yes. A concession between the two of us, it really doesn’t fit.”

Chapter 156 - The Name Of The Emotion (1)

Silence hung over Carlisle and Elena after they left the palace. It was only when they reached a fork in the path did Elena shatter the quiet.

“I’ll go this way. “

She turned away, when—

Tak.

A hand captured Elena’s wrist. She looked questioningly back at Carlisle, who responded in a firmer voice than usual.

“I don’t know what she gave you, but whatever it is, dispose of it now.”

“If I dispose a gift from the Empress, there will be gossip. Don’t worry, I have a plan in mind.”

“…You make me worry about you.”

“You needn’t be concerned about me.”

Carlisle’s eyebrows lifted at Elena’s over-confident answer, but she refused to retreat. She knew Carlisle was worried, but he didn’t understand her position right now.

“I am not a little girl hovering at the water’s edge. Are you going to be angry simply because I hadn’t yet told you about the Empress’ gift?”

His jaw clenched, but he had nothing to say about it.

“Don’t forget our contract, Caril.”

It wasn’t as if she had made the decision so easily. After receiving the plant from the Empress, her first course was action was to come up with a solution, not to go running to Carlisle at the first sign of danger. She didn’t come to the Imperial Palace to depend on him, but to ultimately make him emperor and save her father, brother, and Mirabelle. She couldn’t bear to lose them again in this lifetime. As her heart became more desperate, so did the burden on Elena’s shoulders become heavier.

“…Are you telling me to leave you alone, no matter what you do?”

“I’m not saying that. I just want you to trust me.”

In less than a year, Paveluc would attempt to seize the throne. When Elena had returned to the past, it was as if her blood dried up when she realized that she had so little time left. She threw herself into doing everything she could for Carlisle—sword fighting, power games, living in the palace. Sometimes, however, Carlisle’s overprotectiveness threatened to obstruct her path.

“…You’re mistaken. It’s not that I don’t believe in your ability. In truth, I’ve admired everything you’ve done so far.”

Elena’s ruby eyes shimmered at the unexpected answer. She thought he didn’t believe in her decisions, as he always tried to stop her every time she tried to do something.

Carlisle continued, his voice soft.

“Trusting you and feeling worried about you are different. The Empress is known to be vicious and clever, both at home and abroad. I can’t leave you vulnerable to her.”

“But if you’re going to be emperor—”

“Why the hell are you so obsessed with me becoming emperor?”

“…!”

Elena was struck dumb. Carlisle may be ignorant, but it was because she couldn’t confess her motivations. She wasn’t sure how much he would believe in a situation that couldn’t be explained logically.

‘…I would be lucky if he didn’t see me as a madwoman.’

Elena didn’t answer, and Carlisle continued on in a suspicious tone.

“I thought you wanted to be empress because you desired wealth, but you have no care for it at all… I don’t understand why you want me to become emperor.”

To her amazement, Carlisle seemed to have gleaned Elena’s thoughts in all the time they were together. In fact, all of what he said was true. She wasn’t greedy for wealth or power. What she wanted was to protect what she had. No one knew how horrendous her past life was, how she shivered in the biting winters surviving for days on a piece of bread, with only one thought in her mind.

‘I want to see my family…’

She had spent those decades possessed with regret and anger. After experiencing a hellish life, she had a miraculous chance to turn her fortune. She decided she had to change her future at all costs, no matter the pain and sacrifice.

“When you become emperor…I hope that someday I will be able to explain it to you with a smile.”

Carlisle’s brow furrowed at the seriousness of her tone. So she couldn’t tell him right now.

“You leave me with a big question.”

“Forget about it for now. What’s important is that I will support you immensely in your path to emperor.”

Elena’s eyes and Carlisle’s complicated gaze met in midair.

Hwiiiingeu—

A warm spring breeze blew past them, and Elena raised her hand to catch the stray locks from flying in the wind. Carlisle lifted his hand and arranged her fine golden hair. It was a special gesture without physical contact…

A strange feeling welled up within Elena. It was something that she had never felt before in her life.

Chapter 157 - The Name Of The Emotion (2)

…What is this?’

Elena stared up questioningly at Carlisle’s finely sculpted face. His hand came slowly down as he arranged her hair, then his fingers traced her jawline. It was an action where she could barely feel his touch, but nevertheless, a small ripple pulsed through her mind.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ll lose my anxiety over you.”

“…!”

“I cannot stand it if the Empress tries to harm you in front of me.”

“…Caril.”

Despite Elena’s soft voice, Carlisle pushed forward stubbornly.

“I don’t understand what you’re thinking right now. But there is one thing you are overlooking.”

“…What is it?”

“Your safety.”

“I care about that—”

“No, every time I’ve seen you so far, you seem to have no regard for yourself. I won’t ask why you want to become empress anymore, but remember this one thing. “

There was a deep emotion in Carlisle’s eyes that she could not identity.=

“Without you…there is nothing.”

Kung kung kung.

The small ripple in Elena’s mind became a huge wave, and her red eyes widened. She never thought he would say such words to her. Elena was ready to jump into a fire holding a can of oil, but it was as if Carlisle was telling her to cherish herself first.

“…”

She found it difficult to conjure up something to say. After what she heard so far, should she be angry with him? Should she try to stop him from worrying unnecessarily? Or perhaps…

Should she say thank you?

Elena’s thoughts tangled in her head, and her expression hardened as if she had been doused in cold water. Carlisle seemed to have mistaken her expression, however, and he lowered his hand with a bitter smile.

“I’ll see you at dinner later.”

It was part of their contract to eat a meal together every day. Carlisle parted first, with a promise of a next meeting.

Ttubeog ttubeogeu—

She stood frozen on the spot, staring at Carlisle’s back until he disappeared.

‘…Why did he sound like that? ‘

It was not the first time Carlisle worried about Elena. This time, however it felt different. He had said there was nothing without her, and to her ears it sounded like, ‘You are more important than anything.’

Perhaps that was too generous of an interpretation. But whatever it meant…it moved Elena’s heart.

Kung kung kung kung kung.

Her heart pounded in her ribcage. She didn’t know the name of the emotion when Carlisle touched her hair, but she knew now.

It was “thrill”.

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After Elena’s wedding, the Blaise mansion was a hive of activity. The one who found himself busiest of all was the butler Michael.

“Are you all set to enter the palace tomorrow?”

Mary answered with a vigorous nod.

“Yes.”

The wedding completed, some of the servants prepared to arrive at the Imperial Palace to attend to Elena. Oftentimes when a noble was married, they took familiar servants from their own families, and Elena, as Crown Princess, would need more people to comfortably take care of her.

‘The maids are almost ready…’

The list of maids going to the Imperial Palace had already been taken care of by Elena. A few other servants, however, were not well-acquainted with Elena, and she left it to Michael to choose those who could be trusted. Michael didn’t think much of it, and told the Blaise household they needed more assistance at the Imperial Palace…

Kuhn, who had been employed a while ago, volunteered. Michael remembered how Mirabelle’s face was like death when she found out, and he pressed his fingers against his temple.

“What the hell is going to happen…”

Mary, who was standing opposite of Michael, widened her eyes.

“Hm? What did you say?”

“N-nothing….”

Michael confirmed that Mary was fully packed, then moved to check another maid’s room.

“Rest well, Mary.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Michael finally left the small room.

Kkiig, tak!

The door shut with a loud click, and Mary turned to the luggage case she had packed, a complicated expression on her face. She didn’t have much, as she was given her daily necessities by the family she served.

“…Well.”

Mary heaved a sigh, and then pulled out the item she had secretly hidden in the luggage case. It was a letter from Tilda that had arrived unexpectedly last night. Tilda was Sophie’s friend, and was currently in the employ Lady Selby. She had also previously worked for the Blaise family for a long time.

“Why is she sending me a letter now?”

She hadn’t opened the envelope yet, and she wondered what was inside. When Sophie had received a sudden letter from Tilda, Sophie had torn Elena’s dress into pieces and fled.

A letter sat before Mary now. She was hesitant to read the contents, but discarding it felt like ignoring the camaraderie they had built. Mary considered telling Elena about it first, but she was worried it would be a mistake.

‘Alright. I’ll just take a look at it, and I’ll tell her if it’s anything strange.’

Fully resolved, Mary finally opened the sealed envelope.

Chapter 158 - It Was Enormous (1)

It came as a sudden shock to Mirabelle when she found out that Kuhn would leave for the palace. She had settled down her mind and decided to go on a picnic with Kuhn, but now she felt as if everything was falling apart.

“Kuhn, are you really going to leave for the palace?”

Kuhn replied immediately, despite the quiver in Mirabelle’s voice.

“Yes.”

Her clear, green eyes trembled even more at his answer.

“Why? Why would you go to the palace so suddenly?”

“It pays well…”

“Then I’ll pay you better than the Imperial Palace does.”

“…”

Kuhn stared at Mirabelle’s determined face before a thin sigh escaped from his mouth. He had failed to capture the rat hiding in Blaise mansion, and now that Elena was married, the rat would naturally follow her to the palace. Kuhn had to do the same. He had to complete his original mission, but now an unexpected obstacle lay before him.

‘What do I do here?’

Kuhn felt the stare of some maids as they walked past. Though the maids were some distance away, his sensitive ears managed to pick up on their conversation.

“Look, the Young Lady is with that servant again.”

“I know. I think it’s true that she’s in love with him.”

Mirabelle’s intense affection had put Kuhn in the center of attention in Blaise mansion. He couldn’t help but sigh again.

“…Haaa.”

Mirabelle looked at him questioningly.

“Kuhn? Oh!”

Mirabelle was about to open her mouth to speak when—

Tag, hwiig!

Kuhn grabbed her shoulders and quickly pushed her where no one else could see them. She was quickly driven into a dark storehouse, with a hard wall at her back and Kuhn’s face right in front of her. It was an awkward position. Mirabelle’s eyes widened even further in embarrassment.

“Th-this—”

“Shhh. Or other people will see.”

Kuhn’s low voice caused her cheeks to color, but she managed to steady herself.

“What does it matter if others see us?”

“They’ll gossip about a close relationship between master and servant.”

“The servants in my family don’t do that—”

“Everyone’s the same. Take my advice so you don’t get involved in a scandal.”

Mirabelle’s face scrunched up as she reflected on his words, but Kuhn only stared down at her with a smooth expression.

“….I’ll be more careful in the future.”

“Please keep it in mind. In any case, I’ll be leaving for the palace.”

“Why? Did I do something wrong?”

Mirabelle pouted at him like an abandoned puppy. Kuhn furrowed his brow at the sight and swallowed the words he couldn’t say.

‘You’re the problem.’

The lady of the house could do no wrong to a servant, and she couldn’t be criticized for any mistakes she made. Such was noble society, and such was the gulf between Mirabelle’s and Kuhn’s positions.

“This relationship with you is somewhat uncomfortable, Young Lady.”

In truth, Kuhn needed to return to the Imperial Palace to complete his mission for Carlisle. Mirabelle’s behavior towards him had nothing to do with him leaving, but it was a convenient excuse, even if it hurt her. After all, the relationship between the two was only a fantasy from the beginning.

Mirabelle’s face paled.

“My actions made you uncomfortable?”

“Yes. I don’t want people to stare and gossip about me, and I don’t feel comfortable with someone who knows my past. I’d like to make a fresh start in the palace, where no one knows me at all.”

That was the perfect, plausible reason. Kuhn thought it would be enough, but Mirabelle turned out to be surprisingly stubborn.

“…I don’t like it.”

“…?”

“Even if you’re uncomfortable…stay.”

Kuhn looked surprised as if someone knocked him over the head.

“I’ll be more careful now that I know what the issue is. You still have some time left on your employment contract, and…and I’ll give you a raise, as I said. Oh! I can also make other tasks easier if you want.”

Mirabelle started to ramble, but it was a hopeless distraction from Kuhn’s point of view.

“…Young Lady.”

Mirabelle’s face stiffened as she knew what his soft tone meant.

“You won’t be able to go anywhere unless I allow you. You are contracted with Blaise mansion for a year.”

Kuhn was speechless. She wasn’t wrong, however. He had signed exactly that on his contract.

“…So I will not send you. Don’t go.”

Mirabelle clutched at Kuhn’s collar in a childish gesture, a stark contrast to the sternness of her words just before. She gave orders like a noble and completely disregarded his thoughts, but she was gripped with desperation. Kuhn looked alternately between her thin hands and trembling green eyes.

He didn’t know what to do with this little bird-like girl.

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Batori was busy packing his things as he was selected to go to the Imperial Palace. Instead of volunteering and arousing suspicion, he had planned to arrange an “accident” for a servant so he could take their place. Fortunately, a vacancy opened up without him needing to do anything, and Batori was able to save himself the effort.

“Hmm, hmm~”

Batori was humming a happy little tune to himself when—

Kkiiigeu.

The door opened and Kuhn entered into their shared room. The dark-haired man looked rather gloomy today, but Batori greeted him with his usual bright look.

“Hey~ Are you there?”

“…”

Kuhn sat down on his bed without a reply. Kuhn often ignored Batori’s attempt to talk to him, and so Batori was used to it.

‘I strangely like that he’s cautious with his words.’

Batori could charm anyone, and was easily able to infiltrate as a jewelry store clerk. It quite suited his aptitude. Artificial smile, artificial actions, artificial conversations. Batori displayed considerable skill in it, but he was strangely attracted to this man of few words. It almost felt as if he had been searching for someone of his own kind. Batori smiled at the thought.

‘If he infiltrated into Blaise’s mansion like me…it’s too obvious.’

Chapter 159 - It Was Enormous (2)

In many ways, Kuhn who received Mirabelle’s love in abundance was not someone worth suspecting. Excellent assassins would conceal themselves, so acting while laying everything bare like this was impossible.

Batori continued to speak Kuhn even though the other man didn’t bother looking his way.

“I’ll be leaving for the palace tomorrow. It’s a little sad since we’ve gotten along so brilliantly, right? “

Kuhn’s expressionless gray eyes blinked at the word “palace.”

“You’re the one going to the palace instead of me?”

“Was it your position that I replaced? The butler said there was a vacancy in the palace and he asked me if I had any thoughts. I agreed because of the higher salary.”

Batori once again deemed that Kuhn was not dangerous to him. If it was for his personal purposes, there was no way he would’ve missed an opportunity to infiltrate the palace.

‘It’s a useless thought. Him as the same kind is ridiculous…’

There was a murderous glint flashed in Batori’s eyes, but Kuhn did not notice. Batori smiled back and continued in a cheery voice.

“Take care of yourself when we part and—”

Kuhn ignored Batori’s farewell commiseration. In truth, Kuhn didn’t suspect Batori as a dangerous person either. Kuhn believed that if he had left for the palace as planned, Batori would not have taken his place and would have remained at Blaise mansion. The rat that Kuhn was looking for wouldn’t rely on chance, and instead would have used an accident to disguise his entry.

…But Mirabelle’s sudden interruption had put a spanner in the works.

‘Do I have to ask for help from the General?’

If he couldn’t leave Blaise mansion on his own volition, the last resort was to seek assistance from Carlisle. He couldn’t remain stuck here forever. Kuhn may be able to make a direct request to Elena, but he couldn’t tell her that he was tracking an intruder and had made a false promise to protect Mirabelle. The reason for Mirabelle’s obsession mystified him, but it was clear that she wouldn’t let go.

Kuhn pressed his fingers against his throbbing head.

‘…My heart was weakened.’

He should be going to palace, even if it meant speaking more hurtful words to Mirabelle. But he couldn’t bring himself to. He scolded himself internally for failing to make a sober judgment because of a momentary feeling.

Batori’s words interrupted him from his thoughts.

“Oh, and I left my shampoo in the bathroom. You can use it if you need it—”

Kuhn fell back on his bed with a thump. Batori kept talking as he watched the other man prepare to sleep.

“Hey, are you listening to me?”

Kuhn silently turned his head away and buried himself under a blanket. Ever since he came here, it had only been trouble.

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The work in the Imperial Palace was making steady progress as Elena planned. The nanny exceeded her expectations as head lady-in-waiting, and had organized the servants in a heartbeat.

Elena kept secret watch on Asabe, whom Elena suspected was in the employ of the Empress. The flower’s aroma was potentially harmful, and so Elena had the plant placed in a drafty area and took extra care not to be expose herself to it.

‘Do I wait?’

If Asabe was revealed to be Empress’s spy, or if the plant was identified, Elena could make her move as soon as possible. Anything could be used to attack the empress.

As Elena briefly considered her plans, she suddenly looked up at Carlisle eating his meal across from her. He was was overwhelmingly handsome. He had an air of intimidation about him, but when his deep blue eyes turned at her, she couldn’t help but swallow hard. His straight nose, sharp jawline, and muscled neck all looked as if they were laboriously sculpted by a craftsman. Even when Elena first met Carlisle, she knew he was incomparable to anyone else.

‘Is that why—?’

Her heart was beating at the sight of a handsome man. Carlisle had affected her from the start, and she tentatively concluded that he was familiar around women. He had been quite good to her, but…

‘I can’t have been the only one.’

Although she had never seen Carlisle with another woman, he had quickly gotten along with Mirabelle. And if Carlisle treated another woman like he did Elena, it would be inevitable that she would fall for him. He had even managed to turn the head of someone whose eyes were fixed only on revenge.

‘At a time when I should be thinking about my family…instead I’m feeling excited about my contract husband…’

On the one hand, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of shame. She didn’t think she had any room left in her mind for frivolity, but Carlisle had stolen her attention…

Elena was in turmoil over these confusing and new feelings.

“If you stare with such a passionate look, even I might get nervous.”

“…!”

Elena’s red eyes widened. She had been staring at Carlisle’s face without even realizing it.

“I—”

Elena tried to formulate an excuse, but Carlisle simply smiled and looked at her as if she was the only beautiful thing in the scenery.

“That doesn’t mean you should stop looking.”

Carlisle interlocked his fingers and rested his chin on them.

“I don’t care how you look at me because I’m yours, but I’d like you to eat as well.”

They she looked at him wasn’t near the same intensity as Carlisle’s gaze now. As she stared into his penetrating blue eyes, Elena felt her heart beat faster again.

Dugeun, gugeun.

To have this feeling…

It was enormous.

Chapter 160 - Stop Right There

Elena had been too preoccupied with the turmoil in her mind to eat much, and Carlisle kept shooting her concerned glances. After finishing dinner, they both returned to their shared bedroom.

‘…Why was he looking at me so affectionately?’

She remembered how her brother would leave her a cup of sweet cocoa after her father became upset with him. It would never fail to lift her spirits whenever she drank it, but the feeling she had from Carlisle’s gaze contained a deeper sweetness than the cocoa.

The problem was that nothing about Carlisle had changed; nothing in his gaze, tone, and behavior.

What had changed what her acceptance of him.

‘Keep your head straight, Elena. Don’t you remember what you have to do?’

The lives of her family members were on her shoulders. She had no time to look elsewhere. However…she couldn’t help but feel an attraction towards Carlisle. She didn’t know when it started. At some point, the emotion had embedded itself deep in her mind and sprouted roots. If she looked back at him, she knew that her heart would beat wildly.

‘I’m beginning to be aware of the opposite sex…’

Elena briskly shook her head. She had to sort this out before it tightened its grip on her. She needed to keep her distance from Carlisle…

“Ah!”

Elena let out an involuntary gasp. When she looked up in the mirror, she saw Carlisle staring right at her.

“W-what are you doing here, Caril?”

“You didn’t respond to me no matter how many times I called you.”

“Ah….”

She must have been too lost in thought to realize he had been calling her. Carlisle, however, did not leave. He simply leaned against the door frame of the powder room with his arms crossed as he stared at her. Elena broke eye contact from him and opened her mouth to speak.

“Well, you’ve checked in on me, so you may leave now.”

“What were you thinking about?”

Just a moment ago, Elena shook her head to shove away the thoughts in her mind. Anyone would be curious.

“…It’s nothing.”

Carlisle looked at her doubtfully, but fortunately he didn’t press her further. He continued to study Elena’s face for a moment, then turned and strode away with his long legs.

“Whatever it is, it’s time to go to bed.”

Elena remembered they were married. It was impossible to stay away from Carlisle while she tried to find her peace of mind. Under the terms of the contract marriage, they had to face each other at every meal, and then they would see each other again each time when they went to bed.

‘…Please god.’

Elena dropped her forehead onto her hand.

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After she finished in the powder room, she took a few cautious steps into the bedroom, and saw Carlisle was seated languidly on the couch waiting up for her. His ordinary appearance felt different from usual, even though he was unchanged.

Elena kept her voice casual as she spoke.

“You don’t have to wait up for me. If you’re tired, you can go to bed first.”

“It’s fine. I won’t extinguish the lamps until you come in anyway.”

“Don’t worry. I can see well in the dark and find my way to bed.”

“…I see.”

Carlisle didn’t object, and Elena was satisfied that he accepted her request. They would be able to sort out how to stay in this room.

Carlisle made to stand up from the couch, when Elena quickly raised her hand to stop him.

“Why are you getting up?”

“The lights…”

“Oh! I’ll extinguish them, so please lie back down.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Please let me do it.”

Carlisle looked at her questioningly, but he finally relented and sat back down on the coach.

Elena didn’t want Carlisle to come too close to her. In order to extinguish the lamps, he would have to come near the bed where Elena was lying down, and her feelings might excite her again. Out of sight, out of mind. While some contact was inevitable as a married couple, she wanted as much distance as possible so she could regain her composure.

“I’ll turn them off.”

She hurriedly extinguished all the lights in the bedroom. She would normally leave a bedside lamp on, but she wanted the darkness and the illusion of sleeping alone. Sharing a bedroom with someone she was starting to see as a man made her feel awkward in many ways.

The bedroom darkened. Elena walked to the bed, avoiding Carlisle and the couch as much as possible.

‘Don’t waste time thinking about him, and work on how you’re going to live in the palace—Ow!’

Kudantang!

She was so preoccupied with avoiding Carlisle that her foot crashed into an ornament.

She would never had made this mistake under ordinary circumstances. Her vision and senses were keenly honed on the battlefield by the threat of a sword or arrow.

‘…I must look foolish.’

She couldn’t believe she had done such a stupid thing, and she leaned down to hold her painful ankle. At the same time, her frustration welled up in her.

‘What the hell am I doing…’

In her last life, she didn’t have the luxury of individual sleeping quarters in battle, and had slept among men she didn’t know in the barracks. It suddenly seemed ironic that she was trying so hard to avoid Carlisle.

” …Haaa.”

Elena dragged her palm down her cheek in despondency.

Ttubeog ttubeog.

She heard the sounds of footsteps in the dark. When she looked up, she saw a dark silhouette, with blue eyes shining dimly through the dark. For a moment Carlisle looked like a wild animal, a jaguar looking for its prey.

“Are you hurt?”

Just by his tone, she knew that he didn’t like her being injured. Elena quickly hid her bruised ankle and replied in a nonchalant voice.

“I’m fine. You don’t need to worry.”

“I don’t believe you’re fine.”

As he spoke, he walked closer to Elena. She hurriedly held out her hand.

“Stop right there.”

Carlisle froze on the spot. Elena hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that. She didn’t want to be so conscious of Carlisle anymore. In this situation where her family’s life was on the line, she had no time to indulge in this new feeling.

“I’m fine, really. Don’t come any closer.”

Although it was obscured in the dark, Elena could almost sense a smirk on Carlisle’s mouth.

“No.”

Carlisle’s footsteps resumed again. And then came his voice, lower and huskier than before.

“I told you, if there’s ever a moment when you’re too conscious of me, you have to hide it…”

Before she knew it, she realized that Carlisle’s long legs had brought him close to her.

“…because I can’t stand it.”

“Caril!”

Before Elena could say anything, Carlisle’s arms came under her waist and knees and abruptly lifted her into the air. No matter how slim she was, an adult woman was a heavy load. Carlisle seemed unburdened however, and Elena looked up at him with a wide-eyed stare.

“How many times are you going to say that, when you’ve already broken two things at once?”

Carlisle walked towards the bed, carrying Elena in his arms. In the short distance, Elena felt an oddly tickling, peculiar sensation…

She was carefully deposited onto the mattress. But it didn’t end there.

Seueugeu.

Carlisle took Elena’s slender ankle from underneath her nightgown.

“Tell me if you’re hurt. I’ll call the doctor right away.”

She was startled by the heat of his skin on hers. Carlisle’s body temperature was higher than she expected.

“You don’t have to call a doctor at this late hour. I’m fine.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Looking at Carlisle’s sharp eyes, she couldn’t help but feel once more he was a man who crossed lines freely. The more she tried to avoid him, the more entangled she became. Elena pushed away her confusion before speaking.

“I’m fine, truly. I don’t want to be crowded when people come and go. If I wake up tomorrow and it still hurts, then we can call the doctor.”

Carlisle frown disapprovingly, but he relented.

“Be sure to.”

Carlisle hesitated for a moment, then pulled the blanket up to Elena’s neck. She looked at him in surprise when he brushed his hand against her forehead.

“It’s late, so sleep now.”

Finally, Carlisle turned away.

As Elena watched his dark shape walk away and then recline onto the couch, she felt her thoughts became even more confused than before.

This was a long night.

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Zenard had been very busy lately.

He had gathered all the servants working at the Crown Prince’s palace at Elena’s order, then was later scolded for not reporting the plant to Carlisle.

‘By the time I looked for him, the prince had already gone to the Imperial Palace to visit the Emperor and Empress.’

Zenard though his treatment was unfair, but it couldn’t be helped. For now, he focused on gathering information on the plant even into this late hour. There was no deadline, but wanted to complete it as soon as possible in respect to Elena.

‘She is a good match for the prince.’

When Zenard had first met her, he was stunned by her dazzling beauty, and later, he came to admire her meticulous character and intelligence. Elena may not realize it, but Carlisle had changed immensely since he met her. Knowing how Carlisle was like at the borders of the Ruford Empire, Zenard could safely say that the prince had become more human than before.

‘If the prince is to be as gentle as he is now, he will need as much help from the princess as much as possible.’

The only thing that could put an angry beast to rest was beauty. An uncharacteristic smile spread on Zenard’s face as he thought of the crown princess.

Ttog, ttog.

There was a knock on Zenard’s door.

“Come in.”

One of Zenard’s men charged with gathering information entered the room.

“We found what you were looking for. Please look over this report.”

Zenard immediately began looking at the material the man had brought.

[Manera plant.

A rare plant that grows only in the kingdom of Sibena in the south.

If raised well, it will bloom pink flowers and is very aromatic.

Women, however, will become infertile if exposed to the fragrance over a long period of time.]

Zenard was shocked at the passage he just read. He had an ominous premonition knowing that Empress Ophelia had sent it, but he didn’t realize it would be to this extent. Elena had not mentioned a single word about this.

‘Does the Crown Princess know about this?’

Elena already knew that the plant only grew in the Sibena kingdom, so chances were that she was not ignorant. Nevertheless, she kept the plant… She was truly dauntless, and Zenard felt another wave of admiration. However, another sentence caught his eyes.

[There is another plant called the Vanera, which is the Manera’s twin.

It is said…]

A serious light glimmered in Zenard’s eyes as he read the information.