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THE VILLAINESS IS THE HEROINE'S BIGGEST FAN

| Chenobe

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WRITTEN BY CHENOBE



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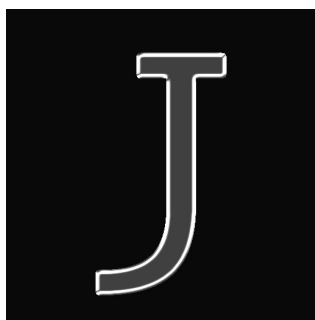
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CHAPTER ONE

All I wanted was a quiet and peaceful life—not the glamorous life of a heroine, or to be loved by everyone. I just wanted a happy, sheltered life as a nobleman’s daughter.

I didn’t want to get involved with the crown prince, either, if I could help it. *You should at least pretend to get to know the lady. It is the emperor’s will, after all.*

I wanted to break the engagement with the male secondary character who’d been my fiancé from birth as quietly as possible. After all, I knew that he would grow up and call off the engagement himself. *Break off our engagement? My lady, what on earth do you mean? This has nothing to do with my father. It’s between the two of us.*

I certainly didn’t want to talk to the other male secondary character, who I knew would fall for the heroine and come to hate me. *You’re much more interesting than the rumors led me to believe.*

And I definitely didn’t want to cross paths with the heroine. I wanted nothing to do with her for the rest of my life. *My lady, you said you’d be my friend. Did the time we spent together mean nothing to you?*

But with this body I found myself inhabiting—or rather, these lips that spoke for me—I feared that every humble wish of mine might be denied.



When I opened my eyes after the truck’s headlights flashed before me, I found myself lying on a bed. Maybe this was a hospital. Or heaven?

Raising my head slowly, I noticed that my hair was red. For a moment, I thought it was soaked with blood and that the pallor of my fair skin was the result of excessive bleeding. But that wasn’t the case.

“What’s happened?”

Several women dressed as maids came running through the door. They eyed me nervously. “My lady! You’re awake. Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

I tried to ask where I was, but strangely, my body refused to follow my will. Instead of calmly asking the question, I found myself yelling irritably. “What is going on here?”

“My lady, please forgive me.” A dark-haired maid dropped to the floor,

begging for forgiveness. Why was she acting this way when I was the one who'd yelled?

Disconcerted, I looked down at her without a word.

She continued her pleading. "My lady, I have a sick mother, a father unable to move for a month due to a back injury, and a brother who's only five years old, all that I need to provide for. Flog me if you wish but please don't fire me."

"What are you doing?" whispered another maid. "Don't you know she hates this kind of behavior?"

I froze in confusion before coming to my senses and trying to help her up. I wanted to tell her to stop, but again my lips did not move as I intended. "So what? Stand up this instant!"

"Yes, my lady," she sobbed.

Why was I saying such domineering things? It seemed like I was possessing this strange body, but something had gone wrong in the process. I didn't know what to do. I composed my face and thought frantically. It seemed I was able to convey my intentions through speech, albeit in a shockingly rude way.

I cleared my throat. "Enough. Go fetch me a mirror. Now!" It was an order, not a request.

Despite my shout, the first maid thanked me repeatedly before rushing out of the room. She came back struggling with a full-length mirror and placed it in front of me.

With a trembling heart, I stood in front of the mirror: red hair, red eyes, fair skin, and sharp, beautiful features like those of a cat. Judging by the groveling of the maids, I was a lady of high stature. Characters with such features in the novels I read were common; there were plenty of redheads. I had a feeling that I was not a nice one.

I pointed at one of the maids. "You there. Who am I?"

"You are Lady Mary Bell, the flower of Eton and the most beautiful lady in all the empire."

"What?"

"Apologies, my lady. You are the most beautiful lady in the entire world, not merely the empire. How shortsighted of me. Please forgive me this once, please, my lady!"

I wanted to ask why they were so scared of me, but now that I'd heard who I was, I understood. They were right to be scared.

Mary Bell. I knew that name all too well. She was one of the villains in the novel *Beneath a Beautiful Melody*, a typically expendable villainess. Pretty,

foul-tempered, and stupid—that was Mary Bell.

“I’m Mary Bell?”

“Yes, yes.” The maid with dark hair praised me again with a serious expression. “You are the most ...”

While the real Mary Bell may have liked this kind of adulation, I couldn’t stand it. It was suffocating. “Stop. That’s enough. Leave me now. I need some time to think.”

“Yes, my lady.” After a deep curtsy, she and the others left the room in a hurry, as though they’d been waiting for me to dismiss them.

Normally I would have been hurt by such a reaction, but Mary Bell had once thrown a hair ornament into a maid’s face because she didn’t like it. She had fired a maid for complimenting another lady in front of her. What a narcissist.

“So I’m Mary Bell—ha-ha!”

Okay, I got it, but did my laugh have to be so evil? It was strange. I was able to say what I wanted, but only in the way Mary Bell would have said it. The real me would never be so rude. I’d been shocked enough to speak that way in front of others, but apparently the pattern didn’t stop even when I was alone. Did this mean I would speak like this for the rest of my life?

“Being pretty means you can do anything, right? Who cares if you’re a bad person, as long as you’re pretty?” I tapped the mirror in frustration. I’d meant to say that being pretty doesn’t give you the right to act like a bad person, but my lips had twisted my words. What was happening to me?

As I cursed to myself in panic, my face in the mirror remained strangely calm, as though it weren’t my own. I was a regular high school student. I’d been on the way home when that truck ran a red light and hit me. I remember blinking, and when I opened my eyes, I’d found myself in this implausible situation.

I could not accept this with a calm demeanor.

How had Mary Bell ended up in the story? I tried to recall. She was a simple, one-dimensional villain, not smart enough to commit truly evil deeds. She said nasty things to provoke or belittle Aria, the heroine, and she demanded to know why the male characters didn’t love her. After persistently harassing Aria, she’d lost her reputation and honor, and in the process, she’d lost the trust of her friends, her fiancé, and her family. But she wasn’t a major villain capable of plotting to assassinate the heroine or pushing anyone over a cliff.

It was only when her parents cast her out due to her unruly behavior that she’d lost everything. Well, maybe she hadn’t had much to lose in that regard. In the end, she’d been forced to marry a country noble. I didn’t truly understand how

she'd had any reputation or honor to begin with.

Mary Bell was an arrogant character who cared only for herself. She didn't care about other people and did whatever she wanted. But I wasn't that kind of person. It was bad enough that I'd ended up in a different world overnight. I had no desire to live life as Mary Bell.

But this was my life now.

I considered my options. I had to decide what I should do. Since my lips didn't seem to obey me, I decided to speak as little as possible. And if I ever saw Aria, I would leave immediately. I was the daughter of a marquess. As long as I lay low, I should be able to lead a comfortable life in peace.

But first I had to find out which part of the story's timeline I'd been thrown into. What if Mary had already performed her terrible deeds?

I cleared my throat and called the maids. "Anyone outside, get in here."

"Yes, yes, my lady." As soon as I spoke, the maids scurried into the room with frightened looks.

I didn't want to raise too much suspicion, so I asked the most harmless question I could think of. "What is the most important upcoming party?"

Mary Bell was crazy about parties. She loved getting attention by flaunting her looks and charms, but she got herself into trouble at every party she attended. I would be able to find out what part of the novel I was in by asking which parties were next. I waited uneasily for one of them to answer.

Finally, the nervous dark-haired maid opened her mouth. "Well, isn't tomorrow His Imperial Majesty's forty-seventh birthday celebration?"

I had to stop my mouth from opening in surprise. The birthday celebration was tomorrow? What kind of absurd timing was this? Only a day to prepare.

"That is tomorrow?" I said.

The emperor's forty-seventh birthday celebration marked the beginning of the main plot. Aria the heroine, Prince Edville the hero, and all the other male characters would attend. Many of the characters would meet at this event.

"Of course, I remember now," I said through clenched teeth. "I should make all the necessary preparations for tomorrow."

The maid nodded. "Yes, I understand, my lady. With my life, my lady."

I was sure we had different things in mind, but I didn't care. It wasn't important. I opened my eyes wide with burning determination and hoped the sound of their frightened breathing next to me was only my imagination.

CHAPTER TWO

I kept trying to speak politely to the mirror all day, but my attempts were foiled every time by my disobedient lips. I woke up the next morning with nothing to show for my efforts, and I absolutely did not want to get out of bed. I sat up and let the time pass, sighing every so often in frustration.

After who knows how long had passed, someone knocked at the door. “My lady, it’s Lilian.”

I assumed she was one of the maids.

“What do you want?” Once again, my intention for a genteel reply was denied by my lips.

“It’s just that you should start preparing now if you wish to make it to the party on time.”

“Then get yourself in here!” I’d wanted to say *Come in!*

The door opened quietly, and a calm maid I’d never seen walked into the room, accompanied by the two maids from the previous day. “My lady, we brought the dress you picked out for the imperial birthday celebration.”

The imperial birthday celebration. Many of the main characters would make their first appearances and meet each other at this celebration—and one of those meetings in particular would be significant for me. The emperor’s forty-seventh birthday celebration was where I would meet Aria, the heroine.

I’d been rather hoping that I wouldn’t have to meet her at all.

I recalled a scene from the novel. Aria had been invited to the imperial palace, but she didn’t have many dresses. She came from an impoverished family with nothing left but a noble title. She agreed to go to the palace only because her father urged her to seek out a suitable spouse. Having to work hard to make a living, she’d never dreamed she would attend a social event at the palace, let alone buy a dress for it. After reviewing her small collection of clothing, she showed up wearing the cleanest dress she owned.

Her entrance at the imperial palace immediately caught the eyes of everyone at the party: flowing golden hair, fair white skin, and a serene white dress that suited her beauty perfectly. Given her role as the heroine, no one could resist the urge to stare.

But her debut soon took a wrong turn. Jealous that the daughter of a ruined noble was stealing attention that was rightfully hers, the villainess Mary Bell purposely spilled wine on Aria’s dress.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Mary purred. “Perhaps you should have watched where you were going?”

It was a ridiculous suggestion, but Aria couldn’t say a word in return, as the lady obviously came from a noble family. Instead, she ran out of the hall after hastily apologizing for her departure.

And as fate would have it, the imperial palace garden was where she would meet Prince Edville, the crown prince.

That was how the story went in the book.

“Whew,” I murmured. How could I avoid a predestined catastrophe with these disobedient lips?

Sighing, I looked disapprovingly at the dress that the maids had fetched. The green would go well with Mary Bell’s red hair and fair skin. But to me, it would only emphasize her extravagance and highlight her villainous side. “Isn’t there anything else?”

“My lady? You said this dress was perfect,” the maid replied, trembling.

I meant to ask if there truly wasn’t another dress, but what came out was “So you only prepared this one dress?”

“I’m sorry, I—if you’d just head to the dressing room...”

“Enough. Help me prepare.”

I wanted to change Mary Bell’s image by wearing a different dress but soon gave up after considering her taste in clothing, which I recalled only too well from the novel. All her dresses were green, red, purple, or black, her characteristic colors. I was sure that her other clothes would not be so different from this green dress, so I stopped fretting and let the maids tend to me.

They diligently tended to my preparations, treating me as though I were a sugar sculpture that would crumble at one wrong touch. Amidst this suffocating atmosphere, I could feel how on edge they were. The dark-haired maid, who seemed especially tense, was visibly trembling.

Something pricked my neck, and I heard hairpins falling to the floor.

“Ow!” I yelped.

The dark-haired maid was trembling. She cast away all the hairpins in her hands, knelt on the floor, and begged for forgiveness as though it were the end of the world. “My lady, please forgive me!”

“What are you doing?” I cried in surprise. “Get up this instant!”

It was a simple mistake; there was no need for kneeling. But the dark-haired maid remained on her knees, trembling as though she hadn’t heard me.

I decided to dismiss her for the time being. “Get out of here if you plan to keep

annoying me. How are you going to help me prepare if you can't even do my hair? This is frustrating. I'll wear my hair down. You—pick up these pins and get out of my face.”

“Thank you, my lady. I'm sorry again, my lady.” She thanked me in earnest with her head still down and began snatching up the pins. She must have been completely cowed, because she scurried out of the room the instant she was finished.

Her reaction troubled me. How awful must Mary Bell be for her maid to act this way?

“My lady, I shall help you put on your jewelry,” said the other maid, with the same calm expression she'd worn when she entered the room. Had she said her name was Lilian? I remembered she'd entered the room first. She must be a higher-ranking maid.

Lilian sat me down at the dressing table and put on my earrings, which were adorned with green gems to match the dress. The necklace she brought out was also embellished with emeralds—massive emeralds. I never thought I'd see such fancy jewelry, never mind put it on.

I let out an involuntarily exclamation. “Humph! So you finally managed to pick out something tolerable.” What came out was not a compliment, and I regretted saying it.

But Lilian replied with a faint smile. “Thank you, my lady.”

She continued to help me by applying my makeup and spraying me with perfume. The brunette maid also did her best to help, working in silence. After attaching decorations that looked like real gems to my polished green fingernails, they finally allowed me to get up from my seat.

“I look beautiful!” I marveled, admiring my image from different angles in the full-length mirror. Mary Bell's face was already pretty, but now it glowed with polished beauty.

I wanted my thanks for the maids' hard work to sound sincere, so I tried addressing them through the mirror: “For once, it seems you've earned your keep. Of course, it wouldn't have been possible without my natural beauty.”

Despite my condescending delivery, Lilian praised me without so much as a change in her expression. “You're right, my lady. You are beautiful even in your nightgown.”

I supposed she had to be tactful to serve Mary Bell. “Such an obvious thing to say. Now go and prepare the carriage.”

I gave her an internal thumbs-up and followed her into the corridor.

Someone was standing outside the door, and I knew who it was with only a glance. Red hair, red eyes, and he resembled Mary Bell, although his features were more like those of a dog than a cat: May Bell, her twin brother.

Instead of a friendly greeting between siblings, I spit aggressive words. “What are you staring at? You disgust me.”

May frowned at my remark—but then, he wasn’t close to Mary in the novel, either. Although he was her twin, all they had in common was appearance. “You think I wanted to come here?”

In contrast to Mary, who led an impulsive life, May was described as a diligent and polite young man. He was also the only member of the family who pointed out the flaws of her character, yet he always cleaned up after his troublesome twin and apologized in her stead. It’s no wonder he didn’t like her. Perhaps that was the reason they quarreled every time they were together. They only stuck together because Marchioness Bell, their mother, kept nagging them to get along.

May held out his hand to escort me. “Let’s go, dumb ass.”

Uncomfortable about having an escort, I avoided his hand. “Who are you calling dumb ass? Did you even wash your hands? Get them away from me.” I slipped past him and got into the carriage.

One hand left holding thin air, he glared before stepping up into the carriage. “Never mind. And please watch your tongue in front of His Imperial Majesty. I won’t forgive you if you say something stupid.”

“You think I’m an idiot?” I retorted. “Mind your own business.”

Don’t worry, May Bell, I’ll try my best to be careful. Even though I’m forced to speak like a harridan, I want to survive. My true intentions, which I wouldn’t have been able to voice even if I were able to speak properly, disappeared without leaving my mouth. I silently turned my head away from May. Staring out the window, I could feel his furious gaze on me.

Amidst the interminable and uncomfortable silence, the carriage finally arrived. Escorted out of the carriage by my disgruntled twin, I straightened my shoulders and swept into the imperial palace, exuding confidence.

The party had long since begun, and the hall was full of people.

“Introducing the son and daughter of The Most Honorable Marquess of Eton.”

We entered the party hall.

May irritably lowered the hand he was escorting me with and whispered in a low voice, “You’re on your own. If anything happens, don’t come to me, because I’ll pretend I don’t know you. We only have to be together when paying

our respects to His Imperial Majesty.”

“Who said you needed to stay?” I replied. “I know what you mean, so leave me alone. Go play with your stupid friends.” *Don't worry, I'll stay quiet.*

Everywhere I looked, guests with dazzling, colorful hair and gorgeous dresses were enjoying the party. Younger ladies chatting in small groups scattered as I approached, as though they'd seen something unspeakable. The men stole glances at me even as they pretended not to. Mary Bell would've soaked up the attention and roamed the center of the hall, but for me this was an uncomfortable setting.

I decided to look around and turned to stroll through the glittering hall in the most dignified manner I could muster.

CHAPTER THREE

“Boring,” I muttered after walking about halfway across the immense hall. For once, my lips did not twist my words—it *was* boring! What did Mary Bell do at parties in the novel? If I recalled correctly, she had several followers who always accompanied her at these events.

Just as that thought came to mind, a lady approached me in an exuberant fashion. “Lady Bell, it’s been so long!”

Who was she? I needed a name.

“Who are you supposed to be?” I asked cautiously (or rather, tried to).

It was a blunt question, but she replied as though she didn’t care. She seemed used to it. “My lady, surely you jest! It’s Ashley.”

I knew that name. In the novel, Lady Ashley Gardner was one of Mary’s followers who always joined in when Mary started criticizing Aria.

“My, just look at these earrings!” she purred. “Aren’t those the emeralds from Dowell? I heard they only made five sets of jewelry with those gems. I should’ve known you would have one. They look so elegant on you.”

“I suppose they’re all right,” I allowed. “I don’t wear just any jewelry.”

“Of course. They shine more beautifully on you. They must be happy to be worn by such a fine lady.”

If I’d thought Lilian was skilled at singing praises, she was nothing compared to this young lady. Ashley began praising every aspect of me possible. “Is that necklace a set with the earrings? My goodness, I’ve never seen such a large and beautiful emerald. I believe emeralds must have been created specifically for you. Who else could look so gorgeous wearing green? Compared to yours, my necklace looks like that of a commoner.” She touched her own necklace. Judging by her sullen expression, she was hoping I’d take pity and give her a new necklace.

Ashley Gardner was painfully self-conscious about her family’s lack of wealth. It’s why she followed Mary around, wearing jewelry and dresses that Mary discarded and serving as a faithful follower.

So I told her what I thought she wanted to hear. “Why are you wearing such an unfashionable necklace? It looks as though it must be at least a decade old. Throw that away right now. The necklace I wore last year is better than that. I’ll have it sent to you as soon as I get back. Wear it, if you like.”

It was dismaying to see such an undignified smile. “If it once adorned your

neck, it must be beautiful, no matter its age. Thank you, my lady.”

Then again, Ashley was only seventeen or eighteen, and girls that age are usually fascinated by such things.

“My lady, your dress looks lovely as well,” she continued. “I noticed that you decided to wear your hair down today?”

“I got bored wearing it up.” I recalled the maid who poked my neck with a pin and wondered if she was still trembling. I twirled my hair a little.

Ashley didn’t seem to tire. Now she told me how pretty my hair ornaments were, chattering away even though I said not one word. “By the way, Maia is late. It’s not like her to arrive late to an event like this.”

Maia—I remembered her. She and Ashley were Mary’s two most loyal sycophants. In Mary’s first scene in the novel, they had stood behind Mary and laughed along with her at Aria.

I shrugged it off. “She’ll show up.”

Ashley agreed, “I suppose so.” Then, she changed the subject, “Anyway, my lady, is it true that the crown prince is attending today’s party?”

This was to be Prince Edville’s first public appearance in two years. Having been absent from every public event in order to tend to the sick empress, he was the fairy tale prince—no, the crown prince—of every young lady’s dream across the empire. Aria didn’t know this and probably didn’t care, but more than half of the young ladies at this party were dying to catch his eye.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” I said.

“I can’t wait,” Ashley said. “I know His Imperial Majesty would prefer to lay eyes on someone as beautiful as you, rather than me, but I’m thrilled at the chance to see him myself. I wonder how handsome he is?”

The emperor’s deep love for his empress was well known, which is why he had excused the crown prince from public affairs for the last two years to tend to her. Today, for the first time in two years, all the members of the imperial household would be in attendance.

“Of course,” I said, “but what does it matter? I already have a fiancé.”

“It’s an engagement, not a marriage,” she replied. “Ah, what if the duke’s son and the crown prince decided to duel to win your love?”

My fiancé and the prince? Duel to win my love? It ridiculous to consider, even as flattery. Mary Bell had been engaged to the son of a duke since birth, but I didn’t want to get involved with him. Not only was he not interested in me at all, but he was a secondary character who would soon fall for Aria and ask to break off our engagement.

“A duel?” I snorted. “Ridiculous.”

But I stopped talking and let Ashley dream on. I was afraid I would speak harshly if I opened my mouth again.

Despite my efforts, Ashley didn’t take the hint. “It’s so romantic that marriage for love is the tradition of the imperial household. Didn’t His Imperial Majesty also marry the empress—she was the daughter of a viscount at the time, wasn’t she?—after a passionate courtship?”

It was a tradition I was sure had been put in place to make the romance between Aria and Prince Edville seem plausible: No member of the imperial household would marry for political reasons. This tradition explained how Prince Edville and Aria could begin courting, and it annoyed Mary Bell to no end. Even though she already had a fiancé, she believed with absolute confidence that the crown prince would fall for her. But a month and a half from now, she would witness Prince Edville and Aria together at the summer hunting tournament, which would fill her with a burning rage.

What didn’t I have that she, the daughter of a viscount with nothing but a name, did? Mary Bell was a one-dimensional villainess who belittled Aria at every turn out of jealousy and a cruel disposition. I remembered being amazed at how childish and stubborn she was when I was reading the novel I now found myself in. But since I was Mary Bell now, it wouldn’t play out that way.

Ashley seemed visibly anxious. Maybe she thought I was sighing because I was bored of her chatter. “By the way, my lady...”

The doors of the hall opened wide to grand music. “His Imperial Majesty is entering!”

Everyone in the hall bowed their heads in unison. The emperor entered to a chorus of voices: “Congratulations on your birthday, Your Imperial Majesty!” and “Congratulations, Your Imperial Majesty!”

The emperor gestured for everyone to raise their heads. “I thank all the distinguished guests who have graced this celebration with their presence. Her Imperial Majesty, my beloved Empress Tanzania, is here with me today, which makes me happier than words could ever express.” Even without a microphone, his booming voice echoed through the hall. He smiled and continued. “And with my son Edville ever steadfast at my side, I truly am an emperor blessed with everything he could ask for.”

At his words, the handsome man with dark hair and violet eyes beside the frail-looking empress bowed his head. Crown Prince Edville.

“Just look how handsome he is. It’s stunning.” Ashley’s eyes sparkled as she

stared up at Prince Edville. Little did she know that he was destined for someone else.

I shook my head quietly, and Ashley eyed me nervously once more. Perhaps she took my gesture to mean *How dare you?*

"Today is a joyous occasion," the emperor continued, "so everyone should enjoy themselves by feasting and drinking to their hearts' content. Now, let the celebration continue!"

To resounding applause, servants escorted the emperor to the high seat. He let out a hearty laugh as they filled his glass.

"Mary, Mary!" May, my twin brother, frantically gestured. It was time to pay our respects to the emperor.

Ashley greeted May as he approached. "Lord Bell, it's been a while."

"It has, Lady Gardner," he replied. "My apologies, but may I escort my sister to greet His Imperial Majesty?"

"Tsk." Seeing him so polite made me click my tongue. I didn't mean to let it show, but my body moved of its own accord.

May shot me a sharp glance but couldn't say anything snide in front of the others. Instead, he held out a hand. "If you would, Lady Bell?"

"Put it away." I brushed aside his hand. Mary's body was instinctively rejecting his touch, which told me how deeply these two detested each other.

I quietly followed May. As the daughter of a marquess, I couldn't avoid paying my respects to the emperor on his birthday.

"Oh?" the emperor said as we approached. "Well, if it isn't the twin son and daughter of Lord Bell."

"Your Imperial Majesty," May and I replied in unison. We saluted the emperor according to proper etiquette.

The emperor looked happy to see us and beckoned us to come closer. "Are you two already seventeen years of age?"

"Yes, my lord," May replied.

"I remember when you were little children, following the marchioness around. Now you've grown up and are attending court functions in their stead. Time flies."

"We can't thank you enough for remembering us," I said.

"Remind me, when are the marquess and his wife due to return?"

"They're due to return next week by sea." I'd worried I would be forced to speak rudely in front of the emperor, but I guess even Mary Bell wasn't that deranged. Now that I stood before the emperor, I displayed the perfect etiquette

of a noble's daughter.

The emperor glowed with pride, as though looking at his own children. "I see. It's good to see the next generation growing up to be so fine. Thank you for attending today's celebration. I hope you enjoy yourselves."

"We will, my lord," May said. "Congratulations on your forty-seventh birthday."

"Congratulations, Your Imperial Majesty."

Well, that had been easier than I thought. There was a long line of nobles and delegations who had come to pay their respects and offer gifts to the emperor, so we had little time to stand before the high seat.

May sighed with relief and turned to me. "I'm not cleaning up after you, so don't get in trouble. I'll be going now."

Oh, I wouldn't. "Go mind your own business." Please enjoy the party.

May disappeared into the crowd, and I turned my head in search of Ashley. She was with another girl, presumably Maia, and waved when she spotted me.

CHAPTER FOUR

As I headed toward Ashley, a man stepped in front of me, blushing all the way to his ears. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Bell.”

“Yes, my lord.” What came out of my mouth was cold and unenthusiastic.

Nevertheless, he didn’t give up. “You are truly as beautiful as they say. I—may I ask you for a dance?”

Ah, another poor young man drawn to Mary Bell’s glamorous looks. I was impressed by his bold request for a dance, but unfortunately, he wasn’t my type. I wanted to decline as politely as possible, but I knew my lips would twist my words. I apologized in advance in my mind.

“No.” As expected, I was forced to reply with a single, curt word. Turning on my heels, I lightly fluffed my hair, as though savoring my popularity.

“There’s no end to the young lords asking you for a dance, my lady,” Ashley said.

“It’s because the lady is so beautiful,” Maia chimed in. “But only a few are worthy to stand beside her.”

The two girls wouldn’t stop fawning over me and singing my praises. Afraid of the words that might come out of my mouth, I picked up a glass of wine without saying anything in return. Wasn’t it about time that Aria got here? The novel said she drew everyone’s attention upon her entrance, which I should have noticed. She must not have arrived yet. In the novel, Aria got lost in the imperial palace and took quite a while to get to the party—and wait, didn’t one of the secondary characters find her and bring her here? They should have met by now.

“Ah, I think the crown prince is about to leave,” Ashley said.

“A pity. I wanted to see more of him,” Maia lamented.

They sighed in disappointment. Looking up at the seats reserved for the imperial family, I could see that Prince Edville was indeed getting up to leave, escorting the empress, whose poor health gave her trouble in such crowded rooms.

In the novel, Prince Edville met Aria in the garden on his way back to the party, which meant that Aria would come through that door any minute now. I stared at the door.

“Why look, Lord Luce is here,” said Maia, pointing at a man entering by himself.

I knew him. He was Vante Luce, another secondary character. He was to bring

Aria, who'd lost her way while coming to the party.

"And the lady with him is—oh, my!" Ashley let out an exclamation.

Aria entered just after him, and she was stunningly beautiful.

"She looks like an angel," a lady nearby muttered, as though entranced.

It was true: straight-combed platinum hair and deep green eyes that sparkled more brightly than the emerald adorning my neck. Her lips glittered as though they'd been glossed with morning dew, and her cheeks were flushed with shy color. To top it off, she wore a pure-white dress with a graceful outline.

An angel.

Seeing my gaze fixed on Aria, Ashley weighed in. "Well, she does look somewhat pretty, but she cannot compare with Lady Bell."

"So mundane, without even any earrings or a necklace," Maia added.

"Maybe she's trying to get the attention of the men by looking pitiful."

"She looks well past the age of a debutante. Has anyone seen her before?"

"She must be from some ruined noble household."

They glanced to check if I was listening, but I didn't care. All I could think about was how beautiful Aria was. What use were earrings or necklaces when your face was so dazzling? A few ladies clicked their tongues in pity when they saw how my eyes were fixed on Aria.

"My lady, would you like another glass?" A servant offered me another. I'd drained mine while staring at Aria.

"Ah, yes." I took the wine and turned my gaze back toward Aria. She had already moved out of sight, but it wasn't hard to spot her again because of the people gathered around her.

"Men," Ashley said. "So typical."

"So fascinated with the newcomer," Maia added. "Even with the beautiful Lady Bell in the same room."

I couldn't care less what they were saying, but they were blocking my view of Aria. Having mistaken my desperate attempt to keep watching Aria for jealousy, Ashley and Maia attempted to make me feel better.

Please quiet down a little, ladies. "Be quiet. Get away from me."

"My lady...?" they murmured anxiously.

I wasn't jealous, and I didn't want to cause trouble. I wanted to keep looking at Aria's face. Gripping the glass tightly, I tried my best to get another glance. I stopped abruptly when the color of the wine reminded me of a certain part of the novel. In the novel, Mary spilled wine on Aria as if it were an innocent mistake, leaving Aria's white dress stained with a purplish-red blot that spread across the

bodice.

I freaked out at the thought. I shouldn't be holding wine; it was like a bomb.

"This imperial wine tastes very nice." I offered the glass to Ashley, who looked flustered. "Try a glass."

"Thank you, my lady."

As she sipped the wine with a bewildered expression, I clenched my fist. There. That was one dangerous scenario out of the way. Now I had to refuse any further drinks. I turned to look at Aria again with satisfaction.

May's voice came out of nowhere. "Who are you staring at? Your next target?"

He must have thought I'd make trouble.

"Why aren't you with your friends?" I replied. "I was under the impression that we don't care for each other."

To my horror, I noted a glass of wine in his hand. I had to get rid of such a dangerous object. "Put it away."

"What?"

"The wine. And it's enough that I have to see your face at home. Get away from me." I didn't want wine anywhere near me right now. *Please keep walking wherever you were headed.*

He handed the glass over to a servant. "Are you insane? This isn't the family mansion. Watch your mouth. You don't want to disgrace the family name."

"I spoke quietly, and I'd be fine with you gone. Mind your own business and go away." *Thank you for taking it away. But would you mind stepping away? I'm in the middle of something here.*

His face reddened with rage. Sighing deeply to suppress his anger, he continued in a low voice. "If you're going to behave like this, let's go home. Then I'll get out of your face."

That's a brilliant idea. Thank you! If we went home right now, there was no chance I'd bump into Aria. I seized the opportunity. "Then let's go. Stop annoying me with such small matters."

He sighed again, and I mentally thanked him. I was sure the pressure building behind my eyes was only my imagination.

I rose and was about to head out with him when an unexpected hand grabbed my wrist. "My laaady... Leaving already?"

"What is this?" I cried. "What are you doing?"

Ashley, drunk, had grabbed my sleeve and wouldn't let go. Next to her, a flustered Maia was trying to pull her away, but drunk people tend to not be

afraid of anything. Ashley clung to me despite the attention she was drawing to herself. To make things worse, she held a fresh glass of wine in her other hand.

“Lady Gardner, you’ve had too much to drink,” I said. “You should go now.”

“What? I’m perfectly fine. Lady Bell, don’t leave. *Hic!* The wine is good.”

“Let go of me,” I hissed. “Getting drunk at an imperial party? You’re embarrassing yourself. Let’s go home before you make a fool of yourself.”

Disconcerted, I tried with all my strength to make her let go of my sleeve. May, who had just suggested that I head home, simply stood there watching. I turned to him for help, but instead of getting her off me, he held back laughter with his hand over his mouth. I let go of Ashley’s hand and tried to calm her down.

She bumped into someone passing behind her and staggered.

“Ah, sorry.” I apologized without even looking.

“Huh?” She burped.

I looked up. The person behind her was Aria. What was she doing here already? Startled, I desperately pulled Ashley away from Aria’s arm.

Splash!

Wine sloshed across my dress. Everyone nearby, including May and Maia, gasped.

I raised my hands, which were dripping with wine, in bewilderment. My dress was ruined.

“I’m so sorry, how can I...” Aria bowed her head.

I stood there gazing at the wine-splattered dress, unable to do anything.

“La—*hic*—lady, your dress... *Urgh—*” Ashley vomited and sank to the floor. This would make her an object of ridicule among high society for years, but I wasn’t in a position to worry about anyone other than myself in that moment.

“You—are you all right?” May asked, aghast at my soaked dress. He clearly regretted not dragging me out sooner. He must’ve imagined I’d be the one to make trouble if we stayed, not get dragged into someone else’s.

“Do I look okay to you?” I snapped.

I was a little wet but glad no harm had come to Aria. I wiped my hands with the handkerchief Maia handed me and bent to Aria. With her eyes brimming with tears, she seemed delicate and beautiful.

She tried to wipe my left hand, which I had missed, with the sleeve of her dress.

“Stop!” I wanted to respectfully decline her help but was forced to brush it away sharply. *What are you doing to your white dress, Aria?* My heart already

ached at the few drops of wine that stained it.

More tears. "I'm sorry for ruining such a pretty dress. I'll reimburse you somehow."

"How are you going to do that? Do you even know how much this dress costs?" I had no idea how much this dress cost, but I was sure she wouldn't be able to afford it. Her apologies tore at my heart. Even though I was the one covered in wine, she made me feel as though I should be the one reimbursing her for the tiny spots on her dress.

"... that being pretty is all that matters?" I found myself saying.

"Pardon?" she asked, confused.

"You think being pretty is all that matters?" I snapped. "Did you think I'd forgive you if only you cried in such a pretty way?" What I'd wanted to say was *Don't cry, Aria. There are plenty of dresses at Mary Bell's mansion, so I'm okay. I'll go home and wash.*

But as expected, my mouth, which had been disobedient the whole day, had once again twisted my words into a remark so nasty and childish that I winced.

CHAPTER *FIVE*

May coughed, abruptly breaking the awkward silence. He had been frozen as though he'd forgotten to breathe.

"I'm sorry?" Aria asked.

My shocking remark had stemmed the flow of her tears. It was cute to see her tilt her head in disbelief while blinking those big eyes of hers, but I couldn't possibly smile. What had I been thinking, to ask such a question?

"That's enough," I said. "Why are you wearing such an unfashionable dress? It looks even worse with wine on it." I only wanted to express my regret for the ruined dress,.

Although I was filled with concern for Aria, I was in no position to worry about her. Anyone could see that I was in a far worse state. My green dress was ruined with dark red stains. It was also uncomfortably and visibly wet. So why couldn't I stop worrying about Aria's dress, which only had a few drops of wine on it?

"What's going on here?" At the sound of that voice, the crowd gathered around our spectacle parted to make a path.

The emperor approached.

Ashley, who seemed to have sobered through sheer terror, sat trembling on the ground with her head almost touching the floor.

"It's nothing, Your Imperial Majesty," I said.

"Nothing? Then why is her dress ruined? And why is she on the floor?"

"Your Imperial Majesty." May stepped in front of the emperor to explain the situation.

This was my responsibility—and I'd just thought of a good plan, too. I stepped forward, ignoring the gestures from May signaling me to stay put. "It's nothing. Lady Gardner was holding a glass of wine and bumped into the lady passing behind her, which made her spill wine on my dress. But I'm not offended—so you see, it really is nothing."

I didn't know whether it was to maintain my public image or to prevent an early death before the novel's story could play out, but I seemed to be able to speak in a normal manner in front of the emperor. I held my ground with purpose, saying everything that I wanted to say.

"Lady Gardner and this lady did bump into each other, but I, too, am at fault

here for not paying close enough attention to my companion, who was holding a glass. Hence, I was about to offer her a new dress in apology, especially since she is wearing a white dress.” I faced Aria to say, “I’m very sorry, my lady.”

“No, it was my mistake,” Aria said. “I can’t accept a dress from you. If anything, I—”

“Ha-ha-ha!” The emperor laughed when he saw Aria shake her hands in an attempt to refuse my offer. The resounding sound echoed throughout the hall.

Aria shrank back.

The emperor gestured at Ashley. “You—Lady Gardner, was it? This may be the imperial palace, but the floor is still cold. You shouldn’t be lying down there.”

“I—I’m sorry, Your Imperial Majesty,” she said.

“Enough.” He turned to Aria. “What is your name?”

She answered with her head bowed. “Aria Peridot, Your Majesty.”

He stared at her, then laughed again. “Ha-ha—Peridot, is it? All right, Lady Peridot. You should accept Lady Bell’s kindness.”

“Your Majesty?” she said. “But this is my fault.”

“You should not turn down such an act of kindness.”

At the emperor’s words, she finally nodded. “I shall accept, Your Majesty.”

“And Lady Bell?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

He looked rather satisfied. Considering his earlier speech about future generations, he must have been writing a novel of growth in his head right now. Young nobles who build a relationship created through mistakes, and the relationship that continues...and such.

“It looks as if you’re going need a new dress. Lord Chamberlain?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“As I recall, Rosiland’s stature was similar to Lady Bell. Give one of her dresses to the lady. Now.”

The jaws of those gathered dropped in surprise. The bestowing of clothing from the emperor was a major coup. Clothing represented status, and no matter how rich you were, it was impossible to get your hands on clothing of this quality, made from special fabrics only supplied to the imperial family. Yet the emperor had announced he would bestow a dress to the daughter of a marquess—a dress that had once belonged to Princess Rosiland, no less. It meant that the emperor regarded Mary Bell as nearly equal to his own daughter.

“Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty,” I replied humbly.

The Lord Chamberlain beckoned. "Follow me, my lady."

Leaving the doubly surprised May behind, along with Aria, who was staring at me with awe, I followed the Lord Chamberlain out of the hall.



"This way," the Lord Chamberlain said briskly. "Choose whichever dress you want. The maids over here will help you change."

Two maids had already joined us and were curtsying. The room we entered was filled with dresses. No one would think this was the room of someone who had left the imperial palace.

Scanning the silken gowns, a dress caught my eye. It was a white dress like Aria's.

"Would you like me to show you that dress?" asked a maid.

"No." It was beautiful, but people would compare me to Aria if I wore it. Nothing white.

I stepped deeper into the room to look at other dresses. What I next spotted was an orange, off-the-shoulder dress, not too fancy—but it still had its charms. I liked it, and I was ready to get out of this dress soaked with wine. "This one. I choose this one."

"I understand, my lady," the first maid said with a nod.

"This way," said the other. "We'll first help you undress."

I would finally get out of this wet mess. Afraid I might say something rude, I let the maids tend to me without a word. Maybe imperial maids were more skilled than others because they changed me quickly.

"You look beautiful," said the first.

"Thank you. I'll head back now."

I had planned to head back home, but the emperor's gift had ruined that plan. It would be an insult to the emperor if I left without returning to the party in the dress he had bestowed upon me. I had to go back to the party.

"Mary!"

The first person to greet me as I entered the hall was none other than May. Aria followed behind him with short steps.

May grabbed my arm. "What's with you? Was something wrong with the food? This magnanimity isn't like you at all. Are you ill? Do you have a fever?"

Too many questions at once. "Stop it, I'm fine. Everyone's staring at us. Who's the disgrace now?" I shrugged off his hand, and he muttered as though relieved by my brusqueness.

“Right—there’s the Mary Bell I know. Good, good.”

“My lady!” Behind him, Aria thanked me, still teary eyed. I could sense admiration, gratitude, fondness, and many other positive emotions from the way she gazed at me. She was adorable to the point of tears.

It was sad to think that she would come to despise me one day.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “And I’m sorry. It was my mistake, but you covered for me.”

“Stop,” I said. “I think you’re mistaking something.” Unlike my warm feelings for her, my voice remained stern.

She stopped her chattering and met my gaze.

“I didn’t want to raise a fuss,” I said. “I didn’t do it because I like you, so please don’t misunderstand.”

“But...” She gazed up at me with big eyes, clearly eager to befriend me.

Should she even be here now? According to the novel, she was supposed to run into Prince Edville while singing in the garden. I didn’t want to become the villainess described in the novel, but I also didn’t want to sabotage Aria’s role as the heroine.

“Get out of here.”

“But I—”

“No. *Let’s get out of here together.* Everyone’s staring at us here, and it’s annoying.”

I took Aria’s hand and pulled her with me out of the hall. I was still inside the imperial palace, so I hadn’t breached etiquette. Yet.

I felt May’s bewildered gaze behind us, but I ignored it and made my way out to the garden.

“Could you slow down a little?” Aria called. “I’m still getting used to these heels.”

I stopped at her request. We were far enough away from the hall to be free from the staring.

As she came to a halt behind me, she staggered a little, as though her feet hurt. “Thank you.”

“Not used to heels?” I smiled. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen. I’ve never been to a party like this.” So she was older than Mary. I hadn’t known this. The novel rarely mentioned the ages of the characters.

“This is my first time in a place like this,” she said. “I’m hopeless, bumping into someone and ruining your dress like that. I apologize again for what I did.”

“Enough apologies. I already got a new dress. You should be more worried

about your own dress. You have nothing to change into, right? And you can't go back home."

"I don't have anything to change into even if I were to go back. This is the only decent dress I have."

I already knew that. In the novel, Aria had only three dresses to choose from on the night before the party, including an out-of-style dress her mother had worn when she was young and a light-green dress with mold on it from being stored improperly. The only other dress was this white one her friend Abelina had thrown away, which Aria had mended. Only this one had been remotely fit to wear, so she hadn't had much of a choice.

"If that's the only clean dress you have, you need not tell me more," I said. "My companion made a mistake, and I'm serious about compensating you. As you've probably heard, my name is Mary Bell. Come find me. Ask for directions to Marquess Bell's mansion from anyone on the street."

I'd said all I wanted to say, albeit in a provocative tone. I hadn't meant for this to happen, but since it had, I wanted to give Aria a dress. I liked Aria, but my actions worked to my own benefit as well. In the novel, Mary Bell would be shamed by a secondary character for criticizing Aria's fashion sense because she was wearing her mother's dress. This could be seen as an investment for the future.

"How could I accept a gift like that?" Aria asked.

"Are you trying to get me to break my word?" I demanded. "The word I gave in front of so many people?"

"No, no! I wouldn't dream of it!" She waved her hands, blushing even more than before, and twiddled her fingers as she continued to speak. "Thank you so much. I was worried about going to the imperial palace, but I'm glad I met someone like you, my lady. It makes me so happy."

A phrase from the novel came to mind: *I was worried about going to the imperial palace, but I'm glad I met someone like you, my lord. It makes me so happy.* Should I be the one hearing this?

But my anxiety didn't last long.

CHAPTER SIX

Aria continued to fidget, so I looked around for a place to sit. Fortunately, there was a small bench not too far away. I walked to the bench without a word.

Aria followed, mincing in her stiff shoes. “Where are you going, my lady?”

I sat down. “Seeing you so restless almost makes my own feet hurt.”

“Oh, thank you, my lady.”

“You have nothing to thank me for. My feet hurt as well.”

Aria’s grateful smile was adorable. Even though I spoke in such a brusque tone, she seemed to have understood my intention. Sitting next to me, she gestured around us. “It’s so beautiful here. I never thought I’d get to see the imperial garden.”

“Why not? All nobles are invited to the emperor’s birthday celebration.”

“Even with an invitation, you still need to prepare proper attire. I never had enough time or a suitable dress.”

Aria continued, spilling out her history although I already knew much of it from the novel. She was practically the sole breadwinner of her family. Her father was a ruffian who’d used his noble status to cause problems everywhere he went, and Aria’s days were mostly spent cleaning up her father’s messes. At least he could no longer gamble; he had no money or reputation left to wager.

Growing up in a house like that, Aria had learned to make a living. On weekdays she took in sewing jobs, and on weekends she played the piano for local churches and gatherings. Fortunately, many of the neighbors took pity on her and offered a steady supply of work, but it was barely enough to keep food on the table even for just her father and herself. She had never dreamed of attending a party like this.

I remembered from the novel when, one day, her father had come home holding an invitation. He’d never taken interest in mail before, which had surprised her.

He had grabbed her shoulder. “Aria, the day has finally come to prove your usefulness. You have a pretty face, thanks to your mother,” he said. “Go and find a nice man. There’s no one in this filthy town who can afford your looks—but at the imperial palace, there might be.”

His intent was obvious. He wanted to marry her off to some rich family and leech off their fortune. But his transparent words had still enough to get Aria excited. She’d never believed she would get the chance to attend one of the

emperor's celebrations. She had given up an entire day of sewing to attend the event tonight.

Finally, Aria had told me enough.

"I always wanted to come to something like this," she finished, "but thought I didn't deserve it. My father pressured me into coming. I felt happy enough merely entering such a grand hall."

Only after hearing her story did I notice that her hands were covered with many small cuts. "Don't repeat that story to anyone else. A noble with no money or connections? How shameful."

"I know. But I still wanted to tell you." She took off her heels and stood barefoot, taking a long breath of the cool air before turning back to smile at me. "My lady, I've been thinking. Since there's nothing that I can give you in return —"

"You don't have to. What would I do with a gift from you?"

"There's nothing better than a song on a happy day like this."

A song? My ears pricked up at her offer. As her name and the title *Beneath a Beautiful Melody* implied, Aria had been born with a heavenly voice. Applause erupted from every corner of the room whenever she sang. Moved by her singing, her listeners bestowed all manner of praise to tempt her to sing once more. The male characters were captivated by her voice.

To think that I could hear Aria sing.

I opened my mouth, hoping that for once, my lips would allow me to speak with sincerity. "Do so if you want. I suppose I could do with a song." Fortunately, I wasn't forced by my lips to reject her. I waited for her to begin with my arms crossed.

She cleared her throat and began to sing.



"Was it all right?" she asked bashfully when she'd finished.

Aria's face should have been envious of her voice. She had the face of an angel, but her voice... It was more beautiful than any angel's. Nothing in the world could express my astonishment. Considering where we were, the song she'd chosen was fairly unexciting, yet she made it seem more captivating than any song ever sung before.

I answered without hesitating. "It's acceptable, I guess." *Aria, your voice is sweeter than the heavens themselves. It's not just acceptable! I want to hear it again!* Unable to voice my thoughts, my opinion remained my own.

Aria sat back down. She was still not wearing her heels; her feet must have still hurt too much. “It was a bit stronger when I was a child. I was still learning to play the piano and used to enjoy singing along. But now it seems I’ve become rusty.”

Rusty? If this was rusty, then I must already be dust. But Mary’s body would not allow me to compliment Aria in such an eloquent way. Instead, I was forced to answer curtly. “It didn’t offend my ears. I suppose you’re not too rusty.”

“Really? Thank you. It’s been so long since I sang for someone. I’m glad.”

Aria, I wish you could sing for me alone forevermore. But I’m afraid the plot of this novel won’t allow it. I was gazing at Aria and considering these strange ideas when I heard a rustling nearby.

A handsome man was staring in our direction. He must have been drawn by the sound of her singing. I could see who he was by his distinctive features: dark hair, violet eyes, a handsome face. He wore different clothes than he’d worn at the party, but it was definitely Crown Prince Edville.

I rose to greet him. “Your Royal—”

“Stop.”

It was unusual for an imperial household member to cut off a greeting, but I had an idea why.

“I followed the sound of your song,” he said to Aria.

“I didn’t know anyone else was listening. How embarrassing.” She covered her face with both hands.

I stood anxiously at the bench. This was obviously the historic first meeting of the two main characters in the novel. Should I be standing here between them? The third wheel should make herself scarce about now.

At the risk of appearing rude, I made my excuses. “Lady Aria, I’ll leave you to enjoy the party now. You can come find me whenever you like. Good evening.”

I curtsied deeply to Prince Edville, who obviously did not want Aria to know who he was, and hastened away.

Behind me, Aria called out. “Lady Bell, it was so nice to meet you. I’ll be sure to visit you. Take care!”

How kind and adorable—and exactly why I had to get out of her way, so she could end up with Prince Edville. It was the right thing to do. But...I didn’t want to say goodbye to her, and I hoped I truly would see her again.

As I walked back to the celebration, wilting inside, I could hear Prince Edville introducing himself to Aria—as Ed.



“Why are you back by yourself?” May was waiting for me with a typically acerbic greeting.

“Of course, I’m alone,” I snapped. “Should I be with somebody?”

“You left with Lady Aria. You didn’t bury her somewhere, did you?”

“Get away from me, if you’re going to keep spouting nonsense.”

He seemed genuinely worried about Aria. Maybe they had talked while I was changing my dress. How had he ended up in the novel, anyway?

“You’re acting strange today,” he said.

“You’re always acting strange.”

“Don’t play games with me. Look at me straight.” Maybe it was a twin thing, but May seemed to sense something different about me. A brother who thought it strange that his twin sister was more well-behaved than usual? It was obvious what kind of relationship these two had shared in the past.

I glared at him. “Satisfied?”

He ruffled his hair in frustration. “Now you seem like your usual self.” He grabbed my hand. “Is it because of your ruined dress? If you ask Father, he’ll buy you the exact same one—and ten more, if you like. Let’s go home.”

I was ready to leave right now. Still. “Are you insane? It’s only a dress. Why are you so concerned about me?”

“Why?” He spoke quickly, eyeing those around us. “This isn’t the first time you’ve pretended to behave, only to then make more trouble. You’re not angry, and you’re not cursing. What are you up to?”

I understood why he was acting this way. Mary had a reputation for consistently malevolent behavior. Once she pretended to overlook a maid’s mistake, only to later trick her into making another and then punishing her doubly. And when her parents once commanded her to stop obsessing over Aria and to stay in her room, she pretended to obey but then ripped down the curtains and escaped the room to go make more trouble. That’s who Mary Bell was. *But I don’t want to do anything of the sort.*

“I did as you wanted, and you’re still not satisfied? Enough. You’ve ruined my mood. Let’s go home.”

“Truly?”

Yes, I want to get home safely, too.

“You want me to yell?” I held out my hand to May, who was still eyeing me with suspicion.

He took my hand and escorted me away.

It wouldn’t have been polite to leave without a word to the emperor after all

that'd happened. After all, I had been able to spend time with Aria thanks to him.

"Thank you for your kindness, Your Imperial Majesty," I said, "but we would like to take our leave."

"Ah, why not stay a bit longer?" the emperor said, raising his glass. He was happily drunk. I would have frowned if it had been red wine in his glass, but fortunately it was white.

"I was able to change my dress, thanks to Your Imperial Majesty's gracious gift, but the experience seems to have taken its toll."

He nodded at my pretense of exhaustion. It wasn't a total lie; I still felt somewhat soggy even after changing into a new dress.

"All right, then. Have a safe trip home."

"Your Imperial Majesty, through whom should I return the dress?" May asked. He seemed worried that I would get it dirty and was eager to return it as quickly as possible.

"That dress doesn't belong to anyone here now," the emperor said. "There's no need to return it. She may wear it, or keep it stored as a gift from me. Do as you wish."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," May said as he bowed his head with a bitter expression. "We'll be leaving now."

I, too, paid my respects for the last time that night, and finally we were able to return to the mansion.

CHAPTER SEVEN

May continued to question me on the carriage ride back to the mansion. “You’re really not up to anything?”

“Relax,” I told him. “I’m not planning anything.” I turned my gaze out the window.

“That dress,” he continued. “Don’t wear it just anywhere. Keep it in a safe place when we get back.”

“I’ll take care of it. Mind your own business.”

After I’d ignored his every inquiry and bit of advice, May finally closed his mouth with a stern jaw, clearly holding back his anger.

In the novel, Mary verbally attacked May every time he spoke to her. Whether out of concern for his family or a sense of determination to do the right thing, he never gave up and continued to give her advice.

“Lady Mary, Lord May, welcome back.” The old butler of the Bell family came out to greet us. After seeing my different dress, he carefully asked, “My lady, did anything untoward happen at the celebration?”

“Can’t you see—”

“There was a small accident at the party,” May said. “She had to change her dress. It was a gift from the emperor, so make sure to store it well.”

The real Mary would have started a fight for interrupting her midsentence, but not me. In fact, I was glad for May’s explanation. If possible, I would have preferred that he always interrupt me to speak on my behalf.

I gently pushed him aside and addressed the maids who had helped me before. “Let’s go inside. I’m tired. You, go draw a bath. I’m going to turn in early today, so no one is to disturb me. Leave me alone.” I followed the dark-haired maid as the others scuttled off. “And if a lady with platinum hair comes looking for me in a day or two, let me know.”

“Platinum hair,” May exclaimed. “So something did happen between you and Lady Peridot!”

“Did you forget the promise I made in front of His Imperial Majesty?” I mentioned the emperor to put him at ease, but he continued to glare suspiciously. Since there was no proof that I was up to something, he had no choice but to back down.

“All right, all right. I tried to stop you.”

“Who asked you to? Let’s go.”

Putting May's remark behind me, I strode to my chambers and eased into the steaming bathtub. I let out a small sigh. Finally alone. I recalled Aria's song—the cool breeze, Aria's heavenly voice echoing out into the empty garden, and her face swelling with emotion. Just thinking about it refreshed my soul.

I let out a faint laugh. If I wanted a comfortable life, I had to lie low and try my best not to get involved with Aria. But at the same time, I ached to hear her sing again. *You really shouldn't get involved*, I warned myself. Nothing like today could ever happen again. I wouldn't be near the emperor again, and without his presence to moderate my speech, I would only end up offending Aria.

I let out a quiet sigh. My own fair skin felt so alien to me. Why did it have to be Mary Bell?

"Mary Bell, Mary Bell, the kindest and most beautiful person in the world," I said in a singsong voice. Apparently, my lips disobeyed me not only around other people but even when I was alone.

My behavior wasn't as limited as my speech, I'd noticed, but strange things still happened on that account as well, such as being forced to shove someone with full force when all I intended was to gently nudge.

Let's live as quietly as possible. Quietly and peacefully. I tried to stay as positive as I could. I was a villainess, yes, but I was also the daughter of a wealthy marquess. I could live a comfortable life without ever worrying about money. And since I knew every part of the novel, I could avoid any dangers that came my way. I would become truly free once the storyline ended with Aria marrying Prince Edville.

I only had to lie low until then.



Betraying Mary's desire for freedom and peace, the news about the marquess's daughter and her dress from the emperor spread rapidly. It took less than two days for word of the events of that night to travel throughout the empire. Those with better connections got the news even before the moon set.

Duke Frangert rummaged through a pile of documents. "The emperor bestowed a dress upon the daughter of Marquess Bell?"

"Yes, Your Grace, he did," his secretary replied.

"It's been long since news of that lady hasn't infuriated me." In the duke's mind, Lady Mary Bell was a reckless person with no regard for the fact that she was to be engaged to the duke's son, the subject of so many social rumors. He

wasn't even sure that she was aware of the need to behave like a noble.

"When did Ethen last visit the marquess's estate?" he asked.

"About two weeks ago."

"Did he say anything unusual?"

"Nothing that I know of."

The duke tapped the desk with a quill and fell deep into thought. Lady Bell, whom he had never heard anything good about, had apparently behaved quite uncharacteristically at the emperor's celebration. "It would be nice if she would grow up and behave more maturely."

Considering their age, it's about time to decide whether to hold a public engagement ceremony or to break off their engagement—from that oral agreement before they were born. If that reckless girl had decided to clean up her act, it spells good news for everyone concerned.

"Tell Ethen to pay a visit to the marquess's estate as soon as possible. Have him meet Lady Mary. Also, tell him to keep an eye on her, for the time being."



"My lady, a letter has arrived from Duke Frangert's estate." The brunette maid, Annie, approached and handed me a letter. I had just managed to memorize the names of the maids.

As soon as I removed the wax seal with a knife, the envelope spat out the letter inside.

"It's from Lord Frangert," I muttered, surprised.

Ethen Frangert. He was a secondary character in the novel, Mary Bell's fiancé since before birth. I knew he didn't like Mary that much, so why had he sent this letter? I read the first sentence: "Lady Bell, please forgive me for failing to escort you to His Imperial Majesty's birthday celebration."

I had yet to meet him in person, but the Ethen Frangert in the novel wouldn't have sent a letter to Mary for such an insignificant reason as this. He wasn't interested in Mary at all and wouldn't ask how she was doing, let alone send a letter, without good reason. But his father, Duke Frangert, was another matter. The duke was interested in power, connections, and money, which meant that he was also very much interested in Mary Bell. After hearing about what happened last night, he must have ordered Ethen to contact me.

I continued reading. Ethen used elegant prose, but as someone who knew the entire storyline, I saw it as empty, soulless flattery: "Therefore, I wish to meet with and talk to you soon. If you could tell me when you'd be available, I'd be

happy to adjust my schedule.”

This was his true intent.

Mary Bell was brimming with vanity. Unlike Ethen, who wasn't interested in her, she liked him. The real Mary Bell would wear the dress given to her by the emperor on the day of Ethen's visit and tell him endless stories he hadn't asked to hear.

“Ha, it says the young lord wishes to meet me,” I said without a hint of embarrassment.

Annie and Anna came running and began to sing my praises.

“It's been almost two weeks since Lord Frangert visited the mansion,” Annie said. “I'm sure he misses you tremendously.”

“And not to mention, the story of your kindness toward that other lady at the celebration last night has already spread all over the capital,” Anna added.

“Imagine how proud he will be.”

“Surely he will arrive with his hands full of gifts for you.”

It was a little sad to watch them praise me endlessly for their own survival. I put the letter down on the table. “Bring me some letter parchment. I wish to write a reply.”

“Yes, my lady.” Annie rushed out of the room at my request.

Now alone with me, Anna gulped in fear. “L-last time, Lord Frangert brought a bouquet of roses that went so well with the color of your hair. I wonder, um, what gift he will bring you this time.”

It wouldn't be polite to ignore her effort. I decided to reply in kind. “Yes, Lord Frangert always brings a gift for me. I don't mind if he comes empty-handed, but how could I possibly refuse his affection for me? I have no choice but to accept.”

With that, I burst into laughter. The real Mary had never imagined, not for one second, that Ethen might despise her. But I already knew it was so. In fact, I was a bit worried about meeting him, but I couldn't let my feelings show. “I've been his fiancée since birth, yet he still treats me with such care. Can't you see how much he cherishes me?”

I couldn't tell her that I knew. I gave up trying to voice my thoughts and changed the subject. I was beginning to wonder whether Annie had gone to fetch the paper or to make some herself.

She finally returned after a long while. “I wanted to bring the finest paper, so it took a while to decide. I'm sorry, my lady, but they all looked the same to me.” *That's a lie. You just didn't want to come back.* It was transparent as glass, but I let it pass.

Yet the letter parchment she'd brought was—well, I didn't know if it was the finest, but it certainly caught the eye. It was a shade of green with roses in one corner, a design a young child might like.

"I brought the ones with roses on them, since I know you like roses."

Her remark tormented me. *Mary Bell, I criticized you for your childish behavior, but I had no idea that your taste was so childish as well.* But I couldn't bring myself to voice my disapproval to Annie, whose eyes shone with pride. I knew I'd end up saying something offensive, no matter how hard I tried to be gentle.

Hence, I kept my mouth shut and began to write a reply to Ethen.

"Dearest Lord Frangert," I began. My hand shook from writing that one sentence. I continued. "I received your letter. It has been too long since we last met, and I was beginning to miss you as well. Now that you have requested to meet me, I think it only right that I grant your wish. Since you miss me so much, is it not my obligation as your fiancée to make time for you? Hence, you may visit whenever you wish."

Just like my speech, my hand moved of its own accord, expressing my true thoughts in obnoxious terms. Well, I had nothing to lose in my relationship with Ethen, so what the hell.

I folded the letter, short as it was and filled with groundless confidence, and handed it to Annie. "There. Go and deliver this to Lord Frangert. I'm sure he is eagerly awaiting my reply."

She ran out of the room with the letter in hand.

I was looking forward to one thing: seeing Ethen's face in person. According to the novel, he was swooningly handsome. He must be better-looking than most celebrities from the real world.

Come to think of it, I'd also asked Aria to visit soon. What was the chance they might happen to visit on the same day? I took a sip of tea, holding back a sense of foreboding.

CHAPTER *EIGHT*

Despite having sent my reply only that morning, another letter arrived from the duke's estate that afternoon. Ethen would visit tomorrow around three o'clock. I had nothing to do until then.

Bored, I began to pace about the mansion.

"My lady, is anything bothering you?" Annie asked, her lips trembling.

Was it so strange to walk around my own house? "No."

"You haven't picked out a new dress since returning from the palace, and you said you'd host a party on the day of the Lord's return."

A party for such a trivial occasion? I supposed it was nothing strange for Mary Bell. She was crazy about parties and looked for any reason she could think of to throw one. "You know what? I don't even care. Whatever I wear, people are going to stare at my face. And why have a party at all? It's so annoying to plan one. I'm canceling it."

I thought I sounded like Mary, but Annie's face turned as white as if she'd been sentenced to death, and her hands trembled. She anxiously inspected me. "My lady, are you all right? Maybe you're still in shock from yesterday."

"What are you doing? Get away from me." What kind of person gets questioned about her health simply for canceling a party? It was unbelievable.

Still trembling, she circled me, looking worried. "But you already ordered a thousand roses for a surprise party when the lord returns. We can't cancel those."

The extravagance of these people was amazing. And Annie looked ready to run to the doctor if I didn't throw this party.

I had no choice but to say, "Well, my parents would be disappointed if I didn't greet them properly."

She nodded furiously. "Of course, my lady. The lord and lady love the parties that you throw for them. I'm sure they're looking forward to it."

I'd never planned even a birthday party in my entire life, but now I had no choice but to throw a homecoming event for my parents. If I was to live as Mary, I had to get used to parties whether I liked them or not.

I decided to think of this as a sort of training. Trying to be positive, I continued my walk around the mansion.



The next day, I began getting ready to meet Ethen five hours before he was due to arrive.

“My lady, I prepared the dress you received from Lord Frangert,” the maid named Lilian said.

The dark-blue dress she carried in looked expensive. With tiny jewels adorning various details, it would sparkle even from a distance. Mary Bell, who liked expensive, shiny things, may have liked this dress, but it wasn’t to my liking. But since I didn’t have another dress in mind and I’d been told this was a gift from Ethen, I decided to wear it without objection.

“How would you like your hair done?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

“Lord Frangert prefers a neat look. Perhaps you should wear your hair up to reveal your beautiful neckline.”

I admired Lilian’s ability to slip in a flattering comment with every sentence. I shrugged. “Well, I suppose that’s a good idea.”

“It just so happens that the hair ornament that the lord brought home from his last trip to the eastern continent is a similar color to this dress you’re wearing. It would also complement the color of your hair, my lady.” She pulled my hair up and fixed it in place with several pins, proficiently holding it up in a tidy bunch. My fair white neckline looked as fetching as Lilian said, and it made my dramatic features look a bit more elegant.

“Anna, get me the hair ornament,” Lilian said.

“Here it is.” Anna pulled out the hair ornament, which resembled a traditional ornamental hairpin.

Lilian lodged it into my hair, carefully applied makeup to my face, and led me to a mirror. “Lord Frangert is sure to be enamored.”

“It’s true. You look beautiful every day but especially so today, my lady.” Anna managed a clumsy compliment and nodded her head. Such a pity she was so timid.

I clicked my tongue at her and turned to examine myself in the mirror. Mary Bell was a mean, rude woman, but she sure was pretty.

Rap, rap.

A soft knock came at the door. Annie poked her head out and pulled back with a confused expression.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s a guest for you, my lady. A lady from a family I’ve never heard of.” Was it Aria? Why today, of all days? “What does she look like?”

“A beautiful—I mean, a lady with platinum hair and green eyes.” She’d almost unwittingly complimented the guest’s appearance, but she stopped herself and finished quickly.

It was Aria, plain and simple.

I checked the time. It was a little before two o’clock. I wasn’t planning to talk to her for long, so there was no risk she would run into Ethen. “She is indeed my guest. Show her into the drawing room.”

“But isn’t Lord Frangert—”

“I’ll take care of it. No buts.” *Don’t worry, I know he’s coming.*

I headed to the drawing room.

After a brief time, a maid brought Aria into the room. Aria entered awkwardly. Her modest clothing contrasted my shiny dress. “It’s been a while, Lady Bell.”

“A while? It’s only been two days.”

“I wanted to visit yesterday and make a real apology, but something came up and I had to come today.”

“What happened?” I said bluntly, the opposite of my true feelings. In truth, I had already picked out a dress that would look perfect on Aria. I didn’t let my excitement show and offered her some refreshments instead. “Let’s talk over some cookies. These were made by a famous chef, and I’m sure they’ll taste better than what you’re used to.”

“Oh, thank you.” She picked up a cookie and took a tiny bite. So cute.

I pushed down my affection. “So aren’t you going to tell me why you came today and not yesterday?”

“My father. He drank quite a lot while I was out. I had to take care of him the next day.”

In the novel, Aria’s father, together with Mary Bell, was one of the greatest obstacles in her life. He saw his daughter only as a potential source of a bride gift. He was a pathetic man who got drunk every day and picked fights wherever he went. If I could have done as I pleased, I’d have told him to stop being so pathetic and given him a nice kick, but that wasn’t going to happen while I was stuck in this body. “If he was merely sick from drinking too much, did he really need you to take care of him? You could have left him to rest on his own.”

“When I leave, he starts drinking again right away. Once, he got seriously ill from drinking, and ever since, I’ve made sure to keep an eye on him.”

How pathetic. I frowned at the surge of disgust that rose inside me. This was one hundred percent my feeling, not Mary Bell’s. It was perplexing how a pathetic father like that could sire a wonderful daughter like Aria. “Are you

planning to look after him forever?”

“He’s the only family I have, so I want to do everything that I can.”

Oh no, just no! I screamed inside, knowing how much harder her father, Edward, would make her life. I didn’t want to get involved in the storyline, but maybe I could help this once.

“Pathetic,” I said flatly.

“Pardon?” she said.

“After you do what you can for him, does he even thank you for it?”

“No, but he’s still my father.”

“That’s only true when he does his part as your father. Didn’t you tell me he was lying in bed, sick from drinking too much? That’s pathetic.” I gave it to her straight, without beating around the bush or being nice. I would have preferred to convince her in a more calming way, but this was the best I could do with a mouth that wouldn’t obey me. “If you continue like this, he may rub off on you, and you could end up like him.”

Wait, had I gone too far? I peered at Aria, worried about how she’d react.

Sure enough, her face, which had been gloomy before, hardened into anger.

“Lady Bell, he may be pathetic, but he’s still my father and he’s raised me until now. I’m a bit offended.”

I knew it had been a rude thing to say. I wanted to tell her that I didn’t mean to offend her, but my mouth clenched as though someone were holding it shut.

“Maybe you thought I was pathetic because I made a huge mistake when we first met,” she continued. “Or maybe caring for my father when I can barely care for myself seems pathetic to you. But I don’t think I’ve ever behaved in a way that I deserve to hear something like that from anyone.”

Rather than shutting up, my mouth spat out shameless words instead of an apology. “It wasn’t meant for you. I was talking about your father.” *Oh, no.* Sirens began to blare in my head. I had invited Aria here to befriend her, but now she would remember me as the rudest woman she’d ever met. Maybe this was how we would become estranged, putting me on the path to becoming a villainess.

“That’s not what you said,” she said. “And even if it was, does that make it all right? I am his daughter.”

“I may have spoken a bit harshly, but you and your father aren’t the same person.” *I want what’s best for you, for you to live without constantly worrying about your father* was what I wanted to say, but I’d gotten it wrong from the first word. Was I doomed to have a complete falling-out with Aria? I didn’t want

that. *Please, God, let me shut up.*

Bam!

Just as I was hoping to faint, the door burst open. Rendered mute by the crash of the door, Aria and I both turned our heads to see who had barged in.

CHAPTER NINE

An unwelcome guest burst into the room with enough force to break the door: my savior twin brother, May. He seemed surprised at how forcefully he had opened the door. He apologized awkwardly to Aria, then approached me. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean? Can’t you see we’re talking?”

“Why on earth are you talking about her family affairs like that?” he whispered. It seemed he had been eavesdropping on our conversation, worried that I’d make trouble again, and barged in to stop me when he heard me saying something rude.

I turned my gaze away with my mouth firmly shut, but I wanted to stroke his hair repeatedly in gratitude.

“I’m sorry, Lady Aria,” he added. “My sister can be so simple, sometimes.”

“Who are you calling simple?” I cried.

“Be quiet, you fool,” he growled, glaring into my eyes.

I turned my head without a word.

“I’m sorry for causing a disturbance,” he finished.

Clearly surprised by May’s entrance, Aria had been staring blankly at the two of us. She finally gathered her senses. “Not at all. Please don’t apologize.” She seemed ashamed of yelling so loudly. “I’m sorry to you as well, Lady Bell.”

“No need.”

I didn’t want her to be angry, and I also didn’t want her apologizing for no reason. My heart felt heavy as I accepted her apology. Barely calming myself, I decided to send Aria away. It didn’t seem we’d be able to talk in a friendly way with such a heavy mood.

I called Annie, who had been waiting outside the room. “Annie, are you outside?”

“Yes, yes, my lady.” She rushed inside. Sensing the heavy atmosphere, she lowered her head.

“Bring the dress that I picked out yesterday. Prepare a carriage as well. Our guest is about to depart.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Aria, whose anger had already left her, waved her hands in refusal. “Lady Bell, you don’t need to call a carriage for me.”

But I couldn’t let her walk home carrying a heavy dress. “I hope you

understand that it would hurt my reputation if I let a guest leave on foot while carrying luggage.”

May gave me a disdainful look.

“Oh, I see,” Aria replied.

It seemed she wasn’t going to decline whatever I was about to give her. At least I could send her back home in a comfortable manner. I internally sighed in relief.

I gave her a sideways glance. “Well, maybe we’ll meet again sometime. I’d be happy to see you in that dress.”

Aria gave me a shy smile despite my blunt tone. I was glad she didn’t think I was a bad person, but smiling at such an impolite remark? Maybe she had a problem judging people’s intentions.

“Will I see you again?” she asked.

“If you attend a party or gathering at court, then most likely yes.”

She bowed her head, one hand holding her skirt. Of course, she wouldn’t likely be wearing the dress I gave her at our next meeting. Before long, Prince Edville would be showering her with gifts. She might not even need this dress anymore, so when I said I’d be glad to see her in it, I wasn’t lying.

“I will,” she replied. I took that to mean she would attend any court function that she could, not that she’d wear the dress I’d given her. That would’ve been a big decision for someone who made a living off sewing. “I’m sorry for getting angry at you, my lady. Thank you so much for inviting me. I hope I will see you again.”

“...Farewell,” I managed. May went after her and offered to see her off.

“Really, I’m fine,” she said to him.

“I’m not,” he protested. “You are a guest. Please accept it as a gesture of kindness.”

It was obvious that he wanted to befriend her. After all, who wouldn’t want to befriend such a beautiful, kind, and bright person? I understood. I moved to the window to watch her leave.

Outside, a carriage rolled to a stop in front of the mansion.

It couldn’t be.

I raised my head and checked the time. It was fifteen to three. When had it grown so late? If I’d dragged on longer, the heroine and secondary character would have had an awkward meeting with the villainess inside her house.

“Ah, he’s out,” I murmured.

Ethen Frangert, my fiancé from the womb—the fiancé who could never end

up with me—got out of the carriage. I was too far away to make out more than his blue hair, but I could see that he had an amazing build.

He ran into Aria on her way to the gate, in the middle of the main drive. I watched as he exchanged greetings with May, then glanced at Aria before passing by—a rather bland reaction, considering that it was his first meeting with the heroine.

Anna approached me in the drawing room. “My lady, should I prepare fresh tea?”

I nodded curtly. It would be weird to greet Ethen with Aria’s cup of tea still on the table. “Take the cookies back as well.”

“I’ll bring something more to the young lord’s liking.” She put the teacups and cookies I’d shared with Aria on a tray and left with quick steps.

Soon after, I was facing Ethen Frangert, one of the secondary characters.

“It’s been a while, Lady Bell,” he said.

I unconsciously gulped and inspected his face. He had blue hair and blue eyes, in contrast with Mary’s trademark bright red, but his elegant face complemented Mary Bell’s glamorous features. His eyes, slanted neither upward or downward, and fair white skin were the only two similarities they shared.

“Lady Bell? Is there something on my face?”

Maybe he’d noticed my staring. In a moment of carelessness, I let an honest thought escape my mouth. “Um, handsomeness?”

Of all the things I could’ve said, this was probably the weirdest.

“Sorry?”

It would have been better if he’d pretended not to have heard. But instead, he’d asked me what I meant, a bewildered expression on his face. *Damn it!* “Oh, um, it’s a joke I once heard. Isn’t it funny?”

“Ah, I see. Yes, very funny.”

An open insult would have played better. It was embarrassing to watch him try and maintain a calm expression. *Please, shut up. Don’t act out.* I wished there were a hole that I could crawl into. I tried to change the subject. “Thank you for your letter, my lord. I had no idea that you wanted to see me so badly.”

“For personal reasons, I wasn’t able to attend the imperial birthday celebration,” he said. “It bothered me that I missed the chance to escort you to the party.”

A lie. I didn’t have to know the original story to figure that out. He was making no effort to conceal that this meeting with Mary wasn’t to his liking.

“If you’d let me know more often,” I said, “I wouldn’t have remained in the

dark as to how you felt.” Another sharp remark left my lips.

Ethen seemed to think it was another ordinary complaint and answered without much thought. “My awkwardness at expressing myself seems to have made you misunderstand. I’ll be more mindful in the future.”

“Truly?”

Despite Ethen’s dry reaction, the real Mary liked him very much. She thought he reacted this way because he was shy. *I know you don’t want to be here. I don’t want to spend a long time with someone who doesn’t like me, either.*

“Yes.” He sipped his tea.

After settling myself, I brought up the subject he had come to discuss. “All kinds of things happened at the imperial birthday ceremony, you know.”

“Ah, I heard His Imperial Majesty bestowed a dress upon you.”

“My own dress was ruined.” I chattered on with my chin leaning on the table. “Lady Gardner bumped into a lady and spilled wine all over my dress.”

“Lady Ashley Gardner?”

And I’d thought he already knew everything. I continued, “She was drunk, and she bumped into a lady behind her. Unfortunately, the wine glass she was holding splashed right on me. It completely ruined the dress I’d prepared especially for the celebration.” I ruefully recalled the ruined dress, dripping with crimson wine.

Ethen listened with a look of surprise.

“It caused quite a fuss,” I continued, “and the commotion reached the ears of His Imperial Majesty.”

“Who was this lady that you bumped into?” he asked.

“You just saw her leaving.”

His forehead furrowed at my answer, as though he didn’t understand what I was saying. Maybe he thought I was making a joke.

“Her dress was stained as well,” I said in a light, casual tone. “I couldn’t merely look the other way, so I invited her here and gave her one of my spare dresses.” Mary Bell was known as a fickle person. I thought if I said it lightly, he’d assume I’d acted on a whim.

Instead, his expression grew serious. “You gave her a dress?”

Mary Bell, what kind of life did you lead? Why does no one think you’d display kindness without an ulterior motive? “I’d given my word in front of His Imperial Majesty. I had no choice.”

“Ah, I see. Then that dress...”

“My dress was much worse off than Lady Peridot’s. His Imperial Majesty

decided to bestow me one of the dresses that used to belong to the princess,” I said, shrugging my shoulders in pride.

“You must have been quite startled.”

“What’s done is done. I decided to let it go.” That concluded my account of what happened at the celebration.

Having gotten all the information he wanted, Ethen grew quiet, as though he couldn’t think of anything else to talk about. *Ticktock, ticktock*. Suffocating silence filled the room. If he was going to remain this silent, wouldn’t it better to simply depart?

He finally opened his mouth just as that thought crossed my mind. “You’re wearing the dress I gave you.”

“Ah, yes! So you do recognize it.” A fancy dress from a young lord who preferred a neat style for his fiancée. I rose from my seat and spun where I stood to let the dress unfurl. “How do I look?”

“It’s very nice on you. You are beautiful, as always.” Another mechanical reply. How dull.

I sat back down at the soulless compliment. And then silence, once more.

“It’s a nice day,” I finally said. “Shall we take a walk outside?”

“We shall.”

Good. I’d talk with him a bit longer and send him on. We headed out to the garden on a sunny afternoon stroll.

CHAPTER TEN

“I will escort you to the next celebration,” Ethen said. “We should start discussing the date of our engagement ceremony next year. It wouldn’t do to leave my fiancée alone because of work.”

I tried to put him off. “Why, I attend so many events. Could you escort me every time?”

I replied in a way that he couldn’t detect subtle sarcasm in my reply. He must have thought that *the* Mary Bell couldn’t use that kind of utterance, so he seemed to interpret my words directly.

“Maybe not every time, but I’ll be by your side as much as I can.”

I recalled the scenes of the novel with Mary Bell. Because she attended every party that she could, she and Aria mostly saw each other at various social events—and Ethen was almost never by her side. If he had been, he would never have let her act so recklessly.

“Really? I’m glad.” I smiled brightly.

Judging by the way things were going, receiving a gift from the emperor had caused some problems with the storyline. Ethen, who should have shown no interest in Mary, had now come to visit her right after the party and even vowed to fulfill his duties as her fiancé from now on. I could only assume the duke had something to do with this.

“My parents are coming home next week,” I said. “I’m planning a small soiree at the mansion to celebrate their return.”

“If you tell me the exact date, I’ll do my best to attend.”

He clearly didn’t want to come. I kept smiling straight at him, and he struggled to hide his troubled expression while returning my gaze, as though he didn’t quite understand what was going on. Every noble in the empire knew that Marquess Bell took frequent business trips, but throwing a party to celebrate his return must have seemed strange.

I widened my eyes and smiled as gently as possible. “Since you said you’d come, I’ll be waiting.”

I’d been engaged to this man since birth, but he would never be mine. Soon he would fall head over heels for Aria. That love would make him disobey his own father to be by her side. I had no intention of stopping the predetermined storyline, but I couldn’t break the engagement for no reason. I couldn’t risk something else going wrong. He was a man I shouldn’t covet, and I had no

desire to do so, but there was nothing wrong with enjoying the sight of him. So for however long I had left in this engagement, I was going to enjoy his handsome face.

He nodded slowly. “I understand. Oh, and—” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box, and handed it to me.

I looked up, puzzled.

“Open it.”

I carefully opened the lid. Inside the box was a ring adorned with a ruby as red as Mary Bell’s hair.

A ring? I looked back up with blank eyes.

This was obviously not the reaction he’d expected. He looked disconcerted. “You like rubies, do you not, Lady Bell?”

A smile spread across my face. Was this what the world of nobles was like? Gifts of jewelry for no reason at all? “So you’re suddenly giving me a ring?”

As I looked down at the ring, I realized my mistake. The real Mary Bell wouldn’t react this way to a gift of jewelry. “Ah, of course. I love rubies, red and sparkling. Don’t you think they resemble me? After all, they say red was a symbol of nobility from ancient times, ha-ha.”

“They look nice on you.”

Once the fuss over the ring was done, the cold atmosphere returned. Now it was not only cold, but it was also awkward. After a long stretch of quiet walking, it was Ethen who broke the silence. “I should head back now.”

Of course. The duke’s heir would naturally be busy. I desperately wanted to escape this suffocating silence, so I let his words lighten me up, and I nodded in agreement. “Then I’ll see you next week at the mansion.”

“I’ll see you then.”

I sent him off with a smile, then straightened my face as soon as the carriage was gone.

The maids misunderstood and assumed that my conversation with Ethen had not gone well. They began to eye me nervously.

Annie carefully suggested a refreshment to lift my mood. “My lady, ah, today’s refreshment is one of your favorites, a lemon sherbet.”

A lemon sherbet? Good. “With such fine weather, it will be nice to eat something sweet.”

My big smile hid nothing. What was there to feel bad about? I didn’t expect anything to happen with Ethen. My goal was to break the engagement off as quickly as possible by mutual consent. I wasn’t jealous, and I wasn’t going to

beg him to love me. If I managed to stay in the capital with the family fortune, then I'd consider my life here a success.

"Of course." Seeing that I was in a better mood than she'd thought, Annie rushed away to the kitchen in relief. "I'll prepare and bring it here quickly."

How did the original story play out from here? I walked around the garden one more time, thinking that I'd take my time to consider my next move over a nice sherbet.



Ethen arrived home musing that something had been different about his fiancée today. What could have made him feel so strange?

"You are always tired after a visit to the marquess's estate," observed Heint, the duke's secretary. "How are you today?"

"Mmmph."

It was this sound that made Ethen realize what had been different. Today's Mary Bell had been too quiet. It wasn't that she had seemed docile or that she'd only said a few words, like *Don't you think so, too?* or *and I went to the dress room yesterday but couldn't find anything that I liked* or even *These are my new earrings. Don't you think they go well with the dress you gave me?*

Mary Bell usually relished talking about herself. She went on and on about all sorts of things that he hadn't even asked about and gave him such a headache that he preferred working to visiting with her.

"She was a bit quiet today," he allowed.

They had spoken about various things, but she hadn't brought up any stories about herself. She'd even waited quietly until he asked her questions.

"This is the first time your fiancée has attracted attention for something positive, young lord," Heint said with a chuckle. "Maybe it's a good sign. Maybe she's finally growing up."

Maybe that was it. After all, as a debutante, Mary had attracted the attention of others many times, but never for anything positive. At her debutante ball, she ignored the order of the group dance and caught the eyes of many people by remaining in the center. This could have been considered an act of cute defiance from such a young lady, but the following year she was responsible for a terrible mess and to this day, she claimed she'd done nothing wrong.

Everyone knew that people whispered behind each other's back at parties. It was an unspoken rule of high society that those whispers were to be ignored and that everyone should act friendly in front of the other person. But Mary Bell did

not conform to such rules. If she heard that someone had said bad things about her behind her back, she immediately went to that person to make them pay.

An unknown lady with light pink hair had endured the humiliation of having a chunk of hair pulled out in the middle of a party hall, but Mary had claimed the lady should be the one apologizing for talking about her behind her back. The story of how she'd shaken off her twin's hand in anger had made its way to Ethen in less than a day. Even the marquess and his wife, who were known to dote on their daughter, had scolded her harshly for the incident. After that, she was careful not to make trouble of such magnitude, but she remained the topic of many rumors.

"Last year, she spilled trash on Lady Lorain's dress," Heint said. "And a few months ago, she made a fuss accusing Lady Rita of stealing her earrings. She said they were all supposedly mistakes, but who would believe her?"

Heint shook his head in disapproval. Even the duke, who was excited about the wealth the union would bring, was seriously thinking about breaking off the engagement.

And it was for these reasons that this news was so surprising. When he had first heard about what happened at the emperor's celebration, Ethen was sure he had misunderstood. He would've had no trouble believing she'd spilled wine on someone's dress. But not only had she overlooked being humiliated by someone else's mistake, she'd gone so far as to give the other victim a gift. For a moment, he considered the possibility that she may have applied poison to the dress she'd given Aria.

"Maybe she truly has turned over a new leaf this time," he mused.

"Maybe she has grown up."

The old Mary would have put the ring on her finger as soon as she got it and boasted how good it looked on her. Even when she was sulky, a gift was enough to get her excited. But not this time.

"At this rate, maybe you won't need to break off the engagement." Heint grinned at Ethen.

It was true. But Ethen did want to break the engagement. Even with his father's advice, he didn't think he could handle Mary. He'd wanted to break off the engagement countless times before it became public.

"Don't speak so lightly." It was a brisk answer, but if Mary truly had grown up, then he wouldn't need to worry about breaking the engagement. "The duke seemed ready to set a date."

Actually, Mary Bell was a fine woman, if you overlooked her...character. But

that's who she was. Still, she had looks, came from a nice family, and was extremely wealthy. If Duke Frangert had known beforehand that the marquess's daughter would grow up to be such a lout, he would never have agreed to the engagement. But now, although he had considered breaking the engagement due to Mary's personality and reputation, the duke seemed to have changed his mind, after hearing what had happened at the emperor's celebration. He'd decided Mary could be fixed.

Ethen didn't think on it longer. It was still too early to decide. "There's still one year left until official marriage discussion begins. There's no need to make a fuss this soon."

Marquess Bell and his wife were due to return in six days. If he was to visit the Bell estate that day, he first had to take care of all the paperwork piled up on his desk. "I'll know more once I've spent more time with her."

With a determined expression, he reached for a quill.

CHAPTER *ELEVEN*

“When does Ethen call off the marriage again?” I wondered, alone in my room. Since I’d met Ethen, I decided to go over the rest of the storyline for a moment. Mary would pick on Aria in earnest at the hunt, and Ethen’s relationship with Aria would begin with him consoling the poor lady who was being given such a hard time by his fiancé. “Hmm, that’s just a few months away...”

After that, I wouldn’t see his handsome face as much, which disappointed me ever so slightly. Even so, that was okay. The male protagonist was Edville, after all. Though I knew that Ethen would not end up with Aria, that didn’t mean I wanted to get closer to him or anything.

He would fall in love with another woman and call off our engagement, anyway. Once we did, there would be no going back. The best I could do for Ethen was to hope that he would meet a good woman who suited him—although she may not be as much of an angel as Aria.

“There’s only a week left. No, even less.”

I will probably see him again soon. I’d better not make any stupid jokes and stay quiet instead. I’ll likely have to work on the party preparations until then. I let out a deep sigh.



“Mary! May!”

A few days flew by, and the marquess and his wife returned to the mansion. The pleasant-looking couple, who I didn’t resemble in the least except for the color of my hair and eyes, ran toward us with arms outstretched.

“Mother! You shouldn’t run like that. You might get hurt!” said May, hurrying to meet her.

The marchioness jumped up and down excitedly as if to show May that things were perfectly fine. “I may be older now, but I can still run,” she said jokingly.

“You know I didn’t mean it that way,” May replied with a smile and took his mother’s luggage.

Unsure how I should act in front of Mary Bell’s parents, I simply stood there and stared.

Throwing his luggage onto the ground, the marquess ran toward me with a smile and said, “Mary, my beloved daughter!”

Wait. How had Mary been born with this malevolent, cat-like face from such gentle-looking parents? Before I knew it, I was wrapped in the father's embrace. "I missed you, dear. Didn't you miss us?"

"I missed you as well, Father," I said impulsively, hugging the marquess back.

From what I'd read, Mary had grown to be such a supercilious girl largely due to her parents. Marquess Bell himself had grown up with intimidating sisters, and when a beautiful daughter was born to him, he'd lavished all the attention he could on her.

"Right. Steward, hurry up and bring the gift boxes from the carriage. The ones with the red ribbons."

"Oh, honey, you said it was to be a surprise!"

"Haha, well, I can't wait another moment to see the happy look on my daughter's face."

Mary Bell's mother playfully scolded her husband for being so impatient to fill my arms with gifts. It was obvious that she had likely played a part in filling up many of said boxes.

"You really should stop buying things like this," May grumbled.

"Is that jealousy I detect in your voice? Don't worry, son. We've got gifts for you, too."

"That's not my point," May groused with a sigh. He wasn't being jealous; the look on his face said, *This is why she's so spoiled.*

The parents seemed oblivious—I wasn't sure if that was a good thing—as they looked at me with sparkling eyes, waiting for me to open my gifts. When the father saw that I was simply staring at the boxes, he said urged me to open them. What had they brought? Left with no choice, I approached the boxes, undid one of the huge ribbons, and checked the contents.

"That's a very popular sort of dress around the places we visited. I know you have several dresses, but trends come and go, don't they? These reminded us of you as soon as we saw them," the mother said proudly.

I lifted the dress from inside the box. It was an off-shoulder style with a hem completely ornamented in gold. It looked more expensive and fancier than any of the dresses I'd seen in Mary's wardrobe. The red lace flowers scattered across the fabric and the gems ornamenting the dress here and there suited Mary very well. The only problem was that the dress was a bit heavy. Despite not having the least bit of interest in dresses, even I was taken aback for a moment at how beautiful it was.

"What do you think? Do you not like it?" The marquess and his wife acted

exasperated at the unusually quiet reaction.

They knew Mary wasn't often the sort of girl who thanked or even said she loved them. Even so, she was a cute child with a face like a transparent window into her joyful emotions. The parents seemed puzzled by such a dull reaction.

I had been too taken with the dress. Only after I saw the glum looks on their faces had I realized that I'd disappointed them. I cleared my throat and prepared myself to fulfill their expectations.

"This is excellent. Who but me among the entire empire could manage to wear a dress like this and look good in it?" The words came out before I could even think. For a moment, I felt relieved that my tongue was out of my control.

"And if I wear this in public, the design will most certainly become popular among the empire," I added haughtily. The words were enough to make anyone else frown in disgust, but Mary's parents seemed pleased. "Yes, you're absolutely right."

"Thank you, Father, Mother."

The marquess and his wife nodded proudly. They continued to bring me boxes of all sizes and shapes, showering me with earrings, necklaces, and countless other gifts.

"Aren't you tired? You've been traveling by ship for days."

"It's all right. Looking at the two of you is enough to invigorate us."

"Still, you should go and get some rest. We can check the presents later," May finally said after watching the endless procession of gifts.

They waved him off, assuring him they were fine but, in the end, May succeeded in persuading them to head inside the mansion.

"You go inside, too. I'll call for you when dinner's ready."

I returned to my room, but only for a short while before Annie came in to tell me dinner was ready. It was a family dinner in the kitchen for the very first time.

"Ah, it's good to see familiar food again."

"You're right. We've been aching to eat something that isn't seafood."

Mary's parents marveled at the deliciously arranged steaks. I supposed it was to be expected that they didn't have access to meat where they were visiting. There were no refrigerators in the empire, after all.

"That's what I thought. That's why I had your favorite dishes prepared, Father."

"That's my son. Thank you," said the father and gave May a thumbs up before picking up his knife.

May looked gratified by the compliment.

“What I wouldn’t give to leave everything in the hands of an agent and spend all my time with my family...” the marquess murmured.

The marchioness heard him and replied, “You’re right. Traveling was fun at first, but now the mere thought of leaving home again makes me tired.”

“If it’s too hard for you, rest at home instead of coming along. You had trouble with the food for the first few days this time around, too.”

“I can’t let you travel so far alone just because the food’s not to my liking.”

The couple, obviously still very much in love, worried about each other. The conversation soon moved on to a different topic as they began to tell us of their journey. “The weather was so hot this time that I didn’t even get that hungry,” the marquess said.

“Tell me about it. I even thought the summers here paled in comparison to that.”

“Though I suppose it might have been because I was constantly filling my belly with water.”

The House of Bell operated the largest merchant group in the empire. This household had a peculiar tradition—the marquess, the head of the merchant group, did the legwork himself as he oversaw his business. He said that leaving the work to someone else might result in others taking over.

“And there was this one day when the waterway broke down. We had no water to drink,” the marchioness grumbled.

“The waterway broke down?” May asked in shock.

“Yes. It was quite troublesome.”

It was likely impossible for May to imagine not having access to water. Being the eldest son of a noble family, he never had to go without. As he would have to assume his father’s role one day, the story probably had more importance to him than it would otherwise.

“It’s a good thing we landed a good deal. After all we went through, it would have been devastating to come back empty handed.”

“It’s enough that you returned home safe.”

I still felt awkward and remained quiet at the table. *Hm, the meat is so tender and tasty, at least.* The marchioness spoke to me, “Mary, is everything all right? Or did you not like the gifts?”

“Yes?” How could I not like those gifts? I thought of the humongous pile of gifts and gulped before speaking again. “I liked them. I’m just a bit tired, is all.”

This was true, to an extent. I was tired from running around all day to prepare the parents’ homecoming party tomorrow. I’d never even so much as put

together a small party before today.

This was probably a much better excuse than to say that I wasn't actually their daughter.

"My goodness, you should have said so!"

"Steward, go call a doctor at once."

"I don't need a doctor. Just some rest," I said, shaking my head. Leaving this table would make me feel better. *Just let me go back to my room already.*

The mother cupped her chin with a worried look. "Mary, we can cancel the party tomorrow if you don't feel well."

"Yes, your health comes before anything else."

I tried to dismiss their worries and made to wrap up my meal. May didn't seem to like the fuss and changed the subject. "The weather has been quite warm. It's a good thing the food didn't spoil."

"Oh! The people there sprinkle some kind of powder on their food. Apparently, it keeps the food fresh a little longer and adds more flavor. But I didn't even try. It was too icky for my taste."

I perked my ears at this. Was she referring to spices?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“It wasn’t just your mother. No one from the empire could touch any food with the powder on it.”

“I don’t think I would have wanted to eat that sort of food, either,” said May

“I did bring back a few bottles of the powder, but I’m not sure they’ll be of any use.”

“I’d like to have that powder,” I said, not able to hold back my curiosity any longer.

I enjoyed spicy and salty foods. The foods here, though tasty, were mostly bland. If the powder they mentioned was a spice like black pepper or red chili powder, I’d likely be able to enjoy the food a bit more. “I’m curious about the flavor. Can I try it?”

The parents looked at me with surprise. Nonetheless, they gestured to the steward, who brought over the powder in question.

“Here you are,” said the steward.

My eyes shone with excitement. I couldn’t be sure without trying it, but it looked to be black pepper. I ignored the dumbfounded looks and sprinkled the pepper over my steak.

“Hmm.”

The marchioness tried to dissuade me, “Are you sure you’ll be okay with that? Sprinkling something onto food simply doesn’t seem...”

I had been eating bland food for a whole two weeks. Her worries didn’t seem the least relevant to me. It smelled good.

I opened my mouth and shoved the meat in. I chewed the soft meat under the rather uncomfortable gazes of the family and the servants.

This is what I’m talking about. I was getting sick of bland meat. Spicy soup would be perfect with this.

Pushing my thoughts aside, I gulped down the meat and said, “This is good.”

With hints of relief and curiosity in their eyes, those who had been staring at me nervously relaxed. Did they think I would throw my plate across the room or something if I didn’t like it? I frowned at the maid standing next to the tray who looked noticeably relieved.

“It makes no sense to sprinkle powder on food. It’s not even sauce,” May said mockingly.

Hmph, it’s obviously because you’ve never tasted MSG. Feeling rather

spiteful, I sprayed the pepper-like spice all over May's plate.

"What are you doing you idi—" *You idiot!* was probably what he'd meant to say.

May glanced over at the parents and shut his mouth. *Just calm down. You haven't even tried it yet.* I looked at him brazenly. "Are you still picky about your food?" I said cattily before casually continuing my meal.

The daughter-adoring parents smugly looked between us.

Seemingly irked by my words, May replied, "Picky with my food? What nonsense," and immediately picked up his fork, though he'd looked appalled a few moments ago. He put a piece of the meat into his mouth.

Trying his best to look unbothered, he chewed. He looked a bit surprised, perhaps finding the flavor better than he expected. "Well, this isn't too bad," he said, attempting to sound nonchalant. Despite his indifferent reaction, his was already reaching for another piece.

Seeing May's positive reaction, the parents cautiously sprinkled the spice over their food.

"Hmm."

"Fascinating. To think a simple powder could produce such a taste..."

All new things were bound to invoke repulsion at first. I had been a bit concerned that someone might dislike the taste, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"I think this could be quite popular among the people in the empire. It doesn't seem like a bad idea to import it before anyone else. Could be a market advantage," I said, feeling a bit proud of myself.

The marquess' eyes gleamed. After giving the matter some careful thought, he nodded and said, "That's a good idea. We are the only ones in the empire trading with them, and we could start a new trend if it pans out."

He looked at me, pride in his eyes, and said, "My little daughter is really all grown up. To think you'd come up with something like this!" I wanted to leave the table before my tongue could wag any further. However, it was too late.

"This is nothing, Father."

"Really, it seems like it was yesterday when she was barely able to say 'Mom' and 'Dad.'" Mary's mother was taking it even further, dwelling on past memories with tears in her eyes. *Mother, isn't that a bit too much? It's not that big of a deal.*

As I finished up with my peaceful dinner, I got up and dismissed myself. "I'll head back to my room now. I think I'll have to get up early to prepare for the

celebration tomorrow.”

“Oh, of course. Please go and rest.”

“We’ll be looking forward to the party.”

The garden party tomorrow was to celebrate their return. I found the reason silly, and even more curious that people would actually attend. But the plans were already in place, and it was too late to cancel.

“Ugh.” I sent the maids away and sighed alone in my room as I went over tomorrow’s to-do list.

I had to check the flower ornaments and prepare to greet the guests. Fortunately, I at least didn’t have to memorize the guests’ names thanks to Mary not being the type to pay much attention to others.

Let’s just deal with the things that have already been planned. After that, I’ll have to slow down on the parties and banquets. Having hardened my resolve, I pulled off my lavish head ornaments and threw myself onto the bed.



“My lady, it’s been a while.” Ashley was the first to show up.

She’d arrived earlier than Maia and looked quite pleased as she greeted me warmly. “My goodness, beautiful as usual. Is this a new dress that the marquess brought back from his trip? Oh, the fabric is so soft and unique.” It was the bluish dress I’d picked out among the many options. Ashley piled on the compliments.

I guess I must show some kind of response. I twirled slowly to give her a good look and replied, “Yes, this fabric hasn’t been officially imported yet. My father has given it to me as a gift.”

“I knew it. It looks amazing on you.” This girl would compliment me even if I dressed in rags.

I saw right through her, but scoffed and agreed. “Of course, it does. Once the imports start coming in, I plan on allowing a select few ladies to wear similar designs.”

“My goodness, I’m so excited!” Ashley exclaimed and clapped her hands together, seemingly convinced that she was in the chosen group.

“My lady!” Maia appeared.

She seemed to have come in a hurry. She frowned and slowed her pace when she noticed Ashley, but she recovered gracefully. “Oh my, that dress is gorgeous. It reminds me of the sea or perhaps the wind?” Maia laid on the compliments too. She looked around in attempt to find more things to flatter.

I realized having people like this around was what turned Mary into the conceited, arrogant girl she was. I changed the subject before Maia could speak. "I've made the preparations a bit less fancy this time since this party's about celebrating my parents' safe return. They will have had a hard time on their way back from the desert, so it's only right that I, as their daughter, help them unwind."

"You're absolutely right, my lady."

"The marquess and marchioness must be so happy to have such a thoughtful daughter..." Apparently, I hadn't succeeded in changing the subject. To my relief, more guests streamed in.

"We're blocking the entrance. Let's head inside."

"Oh dear, you're right."

And thus, the homecoming party began.



"Nice to meet you, Lady Mary."

"I've heard that the marquess and marchioness have become the first in the kingdom to begin trade relations with a desert kingdom."

"Congratulations."

"My goodness, this silk..."

Everyone was busy praising and flattering me and my parents. In fact, they probably wouldn't have come in the first place unless that was their intention.

"Oh my, isn't that...?"

No, strike that. There was one person who would come without any intention to flatter, but simply out of a sense of duty.

A gentle-looking young noble with blue hair and blue eyes walked across the garden.

"Lord Ethen."

"My lady, may the blessing of the sun be with you today," said Ethen as he bent down on one knee and kissed my hand.

Ladies nearby exclaimed that this was romantic and that they were envious, but I wasn't so sure. What was so romantic about an engaged couple who still addressed each other so formally?

"I'm so happy that you came."

"Of course, I came," Ethen said with a gentle smile, moving to stand by my side.

Most of the guests seemed to have arrived.

I looked around and noticed that my mother and father had joined the rest of the guests in the garden. May had also come down, but he looked cross.

I climbed a few stairs to have a better view of the guests for my opening speech. “As you all are aware, my parents returned from a desert kingdom yesterday. Now, it’s nothing new for my parents to be away on their endeavors, but this time, they were opening trade relations in completely uncharted territory. We had our share of concerns.” I laughed inside the whole time. This was comedy gold. I continued talking, “I gave a lot of thought to how I could express my gratitude for their efforts. I decided it would be best to hold a party and invite many guests.”

My words were hardly intellectual, but people clapped left and right. I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

“I’d like to thank you all for joining me, and I wish all of you here a wonderful day. Please enjoy your time.”

There was a round of applause. My parents beamed. I think I’d done enough. I would mix with the guests a little before sending them on their way. I let out an inward sigh as I stepped down from the stairs, one hand in Ethen’s.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“My lady, I must say your dress is—”

“I heard your parents struck a deal with the desert kingdom—”

Many people spoke to me after I gave my speech, but none of their words were worth listening to. They all complimented the dress or mentioned Mary’s parents’ business. The talk was boring, but there was an even bigger issue. I was getting more and more careless at the repeated questions.

“I know.”

“You should tell my parents about that directly.”

May gave me scornful looks. Ethen drifted away as he spoke to the other guests.

That meant there was no one around to dissuade me.

“My lady, do you feel tired?” Maia asked worriedly.

I suppose I did present an odd sight, tired as I was. Mary was usually very excited at parties and never liked to stay still. “No, I’m all right.” Trying to look less bored, I held myself up straight and gazed forward.

The party was full of faces I didn’t know. *Why do people enjoy things like this?*

I barely managed to look presentable and hold in my yawns. Then a familiar face caught my eye. “That’s—”

“Lord Vante is here! He’s famous for being private and never showing up to social events.”

The secondary male protagonist, Vante Luce, whom I’d had a glimpse of at the emperor’s birthday party, confidently prowled the garden of the mansion.

What in the world is he doing here?

I knew who Vante was. He’d always make it abundantly clear that Mary’s ignorance seemed to affect his own brain and picked a fight at every opportunity.

Perhaps I’d been staring at him too openly. Our eyes met. I quickly turned away, but Vante strode over to say hello.

“Ah, my lady. It has been a while.”

“Has it been a while?”

Technically, it was true. But I don’t think we had ever actually spoken to each other before. With a frown, I roughly accepted his greeting.

“I am glad you sent me an invitation to this party.” He looked quite dashing with his handsome smile but knowing that this man and Mary Bell definitely did

not get along, I found it impossible to smile back. He was basically Mary's personal bully.

If Mary could be described as having a catty tongue, this man had a terrifying one.

"I see. I'm also grateful that you would come to one of my parties, my lord," I said in a contrasting tone.

If I remembered correctly, Mary and Vante were supposed to have their conversation during the hunting competition that would take place in a month. Vante had come to know Aria after having guided her to the banquet hall on the day of the birthday celebration. He pitied Aria since she'd been subjected to disgrace as a debutante by Mary.

It was pity that attracted him to her, and he thus became natural enemies with Mary.

"That's a beautiful dress."

So, why is this man hanging around and flirting with me?



"Oh my, Lord Vante is speaking to Lady Mary..."

"Isn't he infamous for having no interest in ladies at all?"

"My goodness, to think that the first woman the high-and-mighty Lord Vante sets his sights on is Lady Mary..."

I could totally hear them. *Do they intend for me to hear them?* The people whispered amongst themselves and glanced in our direction. Maia and Ashley watched the situation unfold with glittering eyes.

"I know that you had some trouble at the emperor's birthday celebration," said Vante, smoothly continuing the conversation.

"Yes."

Unlike in the novel, what had happened that day wasn't my fault. It wasn't even a mistake on my part. Why is he mentioning this now?

"One of the ladies that wronged you that day had blond hair."

Sounds like it's about Aria, after all. As he appeared to be interested in Aria and not me, I lowered my guard and said, "Yes."

"When I saw how forgiving you were of that lady's mistake, I realized that I'd been wrong about you all this time."

"I-I'm sorry?"

What he said was enough to put me at a complete loss for words. And I wasn't the only one who reacted this way.

“To think he’d say such a thing to Lady Mary—” someone uttered in shock. I completely agreed. No one in the empire was ignorant of the fact that Mary was a nasty girl, though nobody mentioned it in her presence.

With the exception of the imperial family, she had the highest social rank in the empire and was the daughter of the empire’s richest household. Who would dare to criticize Mary Bell’s character?

Even if such words were said in secret, the consequences of getting caught would be unpleasant. The people around me were even more shocked at Vante’s unfaltering words. They all gaped in our direction.

“I have no idea what you mean.” The best thing to do was feign ignorance. Wouldn’t it be better to paint myself as slightly slow of intellect than to ask, *So what exactly did you think of me before?* and pick a fight?

I had trouble controlling my tongue, but somehow maintained a frosty tone for now.

“You’re more interesting than rumors seem to suggest,” said Vante. There was a look on his face I found impossible to comprehend.

This was Vante, of all people. Mary’s archenemy! Unsure of what I could possibly say, I considered the option of turning tail.

But there were too many eyes here for that to be a valid option. I did my best to sound nonchalant. “If you have something to say, my lord, let us speak in private. I don’t wish to have everyone hear my private conversations.”

Vante nodded at my suggestion. Thankfully, the garden was big enough and there were many spaces that afforded privacy.

“I heard that you really gifted a dress to the girl who spilled wine all over you that day.”

“Of course. I had to keep the promise I made in the emperor’s presence.”

In the conversation that followed, I couldn’t be sure if he wanted to talk about Aria or attempt to somehow upset me.

“It was that lady who made the unfortunate mistake, and yet you were the one to gift her a dress. It made me wonder as to the reason.”

“I simply pitied her. She was trembling all over, and it was obvious she’d never been to such an event before.”

“I’d wager that’s an indication of how upright your character is.”

Hey, hey, are you even listening to me? I furrowed my brow and stared at Vante. It was like he couldn’t hear a word I said.

“That made me want to get to know the real you, not the woman the rumors make you out to be.”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about. You keep talking about rumors. What are they about, exactly?” I snapped back, irritated that Vante talked in circles. I couldn’t figure out what he was getting at.

I hadn’t intended to sound irritated, but continuing my tactic of ignorance didn’t seem likely to end this conversation any time soon. “Or perhaps you are interested in the lady? Why don’t you go and ask her yourself, instead of coming to me? I must say, all of this is very irksome.”

I can’t tell you anything even if you ask me. I don’t know anything, either.

If I guessed right, Vante was interested in Aria, not me. There was no way a secondary male protagonist without any real link would show interest in the villainess.

“What makes you think that?” asked Vante. For the first time, it was not an ambiguous smile on his face. He looked like he was genuinely a little surprised. “Of course, that lady is also very attractive. I am, however, talking about you, Lady Mary.”

“Wh-what nonsense—” *What is this man saying?* My thoughts spewed out of my mouth.

Even if I hadn’t said anything, my immediate frown would have spoken for me, anyway.

“It looks like I was too indirect,” Vante said with a quiet laugh and bowed his head slightly.

Puzzled as to what was going on, I simply stared at his handsome face. He said, “I’d like to get to know you, my lady.”

Huh? Did I hear that right? I tilted my head. I must have misheard. Why would Vante Luce suddenly want to get to know me? “What did you say?”

“I’ve grown curious about the kind of person you are.” This was not a good sign at all.

These were not the words a secondary male protagonist would say to a villainess. I would have understood if there had been some kind of justifiable cause, but all we had done was come across each other a couple of times.

“Please don’t be,” I said, backing away in confusion. This was dangerous. It was not a good idea to begin any relationship with someone you couldn’t read. Even at the risk of seeming rather rude, I had to extricate myself immediately. “I don’t really want to get to know you, Lord Vante.”

“Why?”

“That’s the question I want to ask you.”

How many people would simply happily agree in this situation? I backed away

with a look of guardedness and said, “Why do I have to oblige when someone comes up to me and abruptly insists on getting to know each other?”

I didn’t mean to be so direct. But perhaps that was for the best. I had a feeling he wouldn’t relent unless I made my intentions very clear.

“My lady.”

“Please don’t speak to me.”

“No, that’s not it—”

I ignored Vante and backed away. I bumped into something behind me, nearly losing my balance. Whatever I had bumped into was too soft to be a tree and too solid to be a rose bush. Before I could turn in surprise, I heard a low voice from behind me.

“What are you doing?”

It was a familiar voice. I looked back, slightly perplexed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What are you doing?” The voice coming from above my head belonged to none other than Ethen.

We’d picked a rather secluded place. How did he find us? I blinked in shock.

“I asked you what you’re doing, Lord Vante Luce,” Ethen asked again in a low tone.

Did he think that we’d been whispering sweet nothings in each other’s ears? I’d really be upset if that was the case. I mean, it would be understandable if I’d really intended to be unfaithful or find myself a different man, but I had zero intention of getting involved with Vante.

“It’s nothing important. Please don’t pay it any mind,” I said, breaking the silence. I found the sudden cold mood rather uncomfortable. At least I could offer an explanation if Vante wouldn’t. “It can’t be helped. I’m too attractive, after all.” Strike that. I probably shouldn’t have spoken at all.

My tongue took on a life of its own, pouring out word after conceited word. “Lord Vante wants to get to know me. Sadly, I’m not very interested in him. I was just refusing his attentions.”

My answer couldn’t have been more ridiculous. I had a pompous look on my face, but inside, I wanted to find the nearest cubbyhole and disappear.

Despite the absurdity of my words, Ethen’s voice only grew colder. “Is this true?” he asked.

Vante didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. He nodded and said, “It was not a situation that should worry you.”

“It wasn’t, you say. Then how do you suggest I should take it when you forcefully approach a lady who refuses your advances?”

To my relief, Ethen didn’t seem to think I liked Vante. At least I wouldn’t feel wronged after this.

Ethen, who seemed to have a good grasp of the situation, looked at Vante coldly. “The lady says she does not appreciate your advances. I didn’t think you were so rude as to press your affections on an unwilling lady. Perhaps I have thought too highly of you, Lord Vante.”

He had every right to be angry in the apparent situation. He was Mary’s fiancé, so he would be offended by anyone trying to woo me, regardless of whether he actually liked me or not. I knew these things, and yet it seemed awkward that Ethen looked angry. He placed a hand on my shoulder. Ethen must

have noticed my discomfort. He lowered his hand and took a step toward Vante. “Apologize,” he demanded.

I didn’t move to stop or join him. I just stood there and watched.

“I’m sorry if there was a misunderstanding. It’s true, however, that I’d like to be her friend.”

“Lord Vante!” Ethan shouted at Vante. Ethen’s voice was low but easily heard. People murmured in the distance.

Wait, what’s gotten into this man? “It’s fine. Just ignore him.” Not wishing to be featured in some baseless rumor, I pulled Ethen’s wrist.

He seemed to think for a moment. Apparently deciding that my opinion mattered most, he nodded and turned to leave. “I hope that I won’t have cause to be any more disappointed in you than I already am,” he said to Vante before turning toward me.

I wanted to move elsewhere before people began crowding this place. I pulled Ethen after me. “That crazy bastard. I hope he isn’t following us...”

“My lady?”

I hadn’t known I’d spoken aloud. Ethen called my name with a look that told me he was doubting his ears.

Not good. I made an innocent face and asked with a puzzled look, “Yes?”

“Did you just say...”

“I said nothing, my lord. More importantly, your timing was excellent. I’m so grateful. I really was at a loss as to what to do.” My tongue had no trouble being coy, perhaps because the real Mary liked this man.

My ploy seemed to have worked. Ethen’s expression shifted to worry. “I heard from Lady Ashley that Lord Vante disappeared with you in tow, so I looked for you. If I’d known that he’d act thus—I’m sorry, I should have kept at your side,” Ethen said, bowing his head.

This wasn’t really anything that required an apology. I’d wished for a bit of help from Ethen or May, but I hadn’t really counted on it. “I was a bit taken aback, but I’m all right.”

“What did Lord Vante say?”

“He said he wanted to get to know me. Why would he say that when I have you?” I said unthinkingly, acting shy.

The engagement would be broken off soon, but being on good terms with him while it lasted wouldn’t hurt. All I needed to do was not to get jealous of Aria, right?

“I had been starting to feel a little distressed, so I was so happy you came.”

It was never a good idea to make enemies. Adjusting to the current situation bit by bit, I gave a smile. Ethen backed away with a slight blush. "Don't say that. It would never have happened in the first place if I'd stayed by your side."

"Even so, you have rescued me. I'd like to thank you for that."

He'd never been a ladies' man in the novel. Seeing him blush over such a simple compliment made me think that maybe I could find this temporary engagement quite enjoyable. I mean, how many opportunities would I have with such a handsome man?

"I don't have any right to receive your gratitude," Ethen said, refusing my thanks once more. His dark blue hair tickled his lowered face. "I'll try to do better next time...so that I'll be deserving of your appreciation."

"I like you as you are now, my lord. But, if you insist, all right." None of this would matter in a few months' time. I walked back with Ethen to the center of the garden. Ashley and Maia ran over promptly, looking worried.

"My lady, are you all right?"

"I'm okay."

"We heard that Lord Vante can be odd, but we didn't think he'd be so crass."

"There were rumors like that?"

He was a mysterious secondary male protagonist in the novel, but "odd" didn't exactly correlate with being mysterious. Did it? I tried to keep the surprise from showing. "Well, I suppose you might be right. He suddenly said he wanted to get to know me... I mean, even if he was a bit interested in me, you wouldn't expect normal people to act that way."

"What?" Maia stared at me round-eyed.

Wait, you're the one who called him odd, I thought. Isn't this what you meant?

"People call him odd because he has a way of being frighteningly direct, like he can read people's minds. I thought he'd said something rude to you, but to think that was what he said..."

Ah, yes, indeed.

Vante was a character who easily exposed the pith of every topic. Rather than reading what someone would think, he could rather easily identify the tendencies of an individual. He was quick to judge whether he wanted to be close to a person or not.

"Not that he wasn't rude, of course," Maia immediately said in remedy and waved her hand.

Maia probably expected that Vante had told me the bad rumors about Mary right to my face. Those rumors had been true until about two weeks ago.

“It can’t be helped. I’m just too attractive. It’s to be expected that the butterflies will go crazy at the sight of a pretty flower, isn’t it?”

“Of course. Lord Ethen was quite worried after hearing that you and Lord Vante had disappeared,” Ashley said from a few paces away, glancing at Ethen.

Ethen was a man of principle. He couldn’t help but come after his fiancé. “Of course, he did. He cares for me.”

“I guess we’ll be hearing of the engagement ceremony soon,” Ashley quietly mentioned.

I knew that there would be no such thing, but saying a few things about it would not change the result. I decided to play along.

“It’ll be the fanciest engagement ceremony in the empire. The sort that’ll go down in history, you know.”



“Ugh, I’m exhausted.” The party continued nearly until sunset. I flopped onto the bed as soon as I got to my bedroom, drained from meeting people and talking all day. The party had been held for a silly reason, but a lot had happened regardless. “Vante, Vante... What kind of man is he?” I simply couldn’t figure out why I’d run into him. It was a strange development.

Mary was supposed to meet him at the hunting competition for the first time, and even if that wasn’t considered, there was no reason for Vante to approach Mary. Was this some kind of butterfly effect resulting from what had happened at the birthday ceremony?

“Could he really be?” *Interested in me? Of course not.* I shook my head and laughed sourly. Even if he was interested—though it was highly unlikely—it wouldn’t be the good kind of interest.

About a month remained until the hunting competition, which was where the story would really take off. Once the novel’s story played out, I’d be able to do whatever I wanted. I’d meet a nice man—even if he wasn’t as handsome as Ethen, Edville, or Vante—and live a peaceful life.

“I want nothing to do with this story, darn it!” I’d have preferred to not have anything to do with it from the start, but with the way things were now, I’d best lie low and deter any more meetings with the characters. The best thing to do would be to avoid parties and banquets.

I should quietly spend my time at home, at least until the hunting competition. With the exception of Ethen, I was unlikely to run into the other characters unless I ventured out. Things would be all right. I nodded to myself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Miss, do you really not intend on going anywhere today?”

“Like I said, no.”

“But it’s the one day of the year when the House of Frederick opens its fountain to the public—”

“I said I’m not going!” I shouted.

Annie gasped in surprise and lowered her head. I could make neither head nor tail of the current situation.



“She didn’t attend any parties today, either.”

“What? But she stayed home yesterday, as well.”

“Maybe there’s something going on.”

It had been three days since I’d confined myself to the mansion under the pretense of exhaustion. Unfortunately, I was now the subject of people’s concern and suspicion.

Why can’t they just leave things be? Is it so unimaginable that a person might simply want to stay home? It’s not fair to immediately think there’s something wrong with me just because I haven’t gone out for a bit!

“Miss, may I come in?”

“Come in.”

In the end, the nervous Annie was replaced by Lilian, who was a bit calmer. Lilian brushed my wavy red hair and asked, “Do you not have any plans to go out for now, Miss?”

“That’s right. It’s all very bothersome,” I responded, waving my hand.

I’d never liked crowded places to start with. Now that I had a tongue that liked to wag at every inopportune moment, I felt even less like waltzing about.

“May I ask why, Miss?”

Why? I’d simply been saying I couldn’t be bothered, but it seemed I would need something more to convince people with.

“Boring.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s always the same people at the same old parties. I’m tired of that now. I need something new.” The best I could come up with was that I couldn’t be

bothered, and that I was tired.

“I see. Would you be willing to consider another hobby?” Lilian asked without losing her calm demeanor.

Another hobby? This didn’t sound like a bad idea. If I had something other than parties to be preoccupied with, people would bother me less and I’d be able to spend my time more efficiently. I lapsed into thought for a moment. “Hmm.”

“Please tell me at any time if something else strikes your fancy. I’m sure that your parents will support any new hobby you may take an interest in. Your enjoyment is their priority,” said Lilian. She brushed my hair and tidied my clothes. I just nodded at her without comment.

“Please rest well.” Lilian closed the door behind her.

A hobby... I considered what I’d done to pass the time in my world. I’d mostly been on my phone. In this world, there was no such thing as a phone, a computer, or the internet. So, that wasn’t an option.

“I wonder how the Phoenix comeback went?” Thinking about phones suddenly filled me with a desire to use one and check out my favorite idol group.

The day of the accident had only been three days away from the comeback of my favorite idol group, Phoenix. The theme for their comeback was nuts. I can’t believe I had to die before seeing it. I’d been so excited to see Rinto’s pink-haired performance.

How could this happen? I had even succeeded in getting an advanced recording slot, the first time in a long while. And I hadn’t even received the photo card that I was supposed to get for my contribution to Harang’s birthday support fund...

Now that I’d been transported to a completely different world, there was no point in missing them, of course. I sighed.

The situation was simply terrible. I had no phone, no idol groups to fangirl over, no fancams to watch, and as for songs—there were songs here, too, but they weren’t of a genre I liked. I grew more and more worried about how I would pass the time.

Though I was now the daughter of a rich household and spending boatloads of money was no longer a problem for me, it was all meaningless. There wasn’t anything to spend the money on.

“Even if there are no idol groups, maybe they have musicals or something.”

This was a world without TV, the internet or YouTube. No television shows either, of course. But then maybe they had plays or musicals. Those could be interesting. “Maybe I should look into that.”

Nothing else really caught my attention. I could have great food at home, and I had many dresses and gems, but none of that gave me excitement anymore.

I sorely missed the days when I'd deliberately miss class and go to music festivals, chanting and cheering in the audience seats. I'd been doing this only a few months ago.

While I was immersed in thoughts about Phoenix, someone knocked on my door. I looked up, startled. "Who is it?"

"Miss, your father is looking for you," said Anna outside the door.

He's looking for me? Was he intending to join the others in interrogating me for not wanting to go to parties? I sighed and headed out of my room.

"Oh! My beautiful daughter." The marquess was waiting in the refreshment room.

I sat at the table, which was covered in plates of sweet desserts and little cups of rosemary tea. I tried to get a word in edgewise before he could begin the nagging. "I'm thinking about attending Count Schuher's banquet. Staying at home for several days has me itching to be somewhere." I tested the atmosphere.

"Is that right? Well, go have fun and be safe."

I'd expected him to be glad to hear the news, exclaiming something like, *So, you're finally feeling better!* But he sounded completely unaffected. Huh. Maybe I'd gauged him wrong. I stiffened with my hand on my cup of tea. "Why did you want to see me?"

"Mary, my little bundle of blessings," said the father, his face immediately brightening with a smile.

I knew full well that the marquess doted on his daughter but, even so, his reaction was rather sudden. He reached out a hand toward me. I sat there, unable to hide my confusion.

"And you're so smart, as well! I think it'd be a good idea to have you participate in our business meetings from now on. I have thought of you as a mere girl for too long. It's obvious you are already very much an adult." He seemed moved to the point of tears. I was dazed.

You could at least tell me what this was about before making such a fuss, you know. I tried to pull my hand out of his. "What do you mean?"

"We've decided to make the spice project official. You know, the one you mentioned," the marquess said with a grin.

One I mentioned? When? I searched my memory frantically. *Wait, I think I might have said something similar... 'I think this could be quite popular among the people in the empire. It doesn't seem like a bad idea to import it before*

anyone else. Could be a market advantage.’ “This soon?”

“What do you mean, soon? Speed and execution are essential to any business. We may even be a bit late. We requested a formal deal with a desert trader. I’m told that people from the imperial palace bought some of the spice recently and seemed to like it quite a bit.” He provided.

I didn’t expect my comment to lead to something like this.

I watched the enthusiastic marquess. He said, “Others will learn of this spice before this week is out. It’s such a relief that we’ll be able to procure stock and set up a sales plan before that happens. I had no idea you had such business acumen, my daughter.”

My thoughts were rather complicated as I listed to Mary’s father lay on the compliments. First of all, I hadn’t done anything deserving of such lavish praise, and second...

“Haha, of course. That was just a passing comment, really,” I tried. What I’d wanted to say was I didn’t really mean anything by it, but my tongue refused to obey.

The father continued to smile. “I considered it too early to talk about business matters, but it seems you children always exceed my expectations. To think you’ve grown so much! I mean, I’d like nothing more than to live with my son and daughter forever... At times like this I can’t help but feel saddened by the possibility that you might leave us one day, all grown up...” A gratified smile and tears materialized on his face.

How was it that such soft-hearted and emotional parents had a daughter like Mary Bell? It was a question that I could never find an answer to.

“Please don’t be too sad, Father. Even if I do move out, I can come visit every day. Or you could visit. We’ll never be completely apart, so don’t be too upset.”

These words, though not very thoughtful, would likely be enough to show that I was a well-meaning daughter wishing to console her father. I smiled and patted his hand.

The father didn’t seem ready to stop crying, however. In fact, he wept louder and louder. “Oh, my daughter!”

“I knew it.” The marchioness came in with an unsurprised look.

She scolded the marquess. “You should be ashamed of yourself, crying in front of your daughter like that. Remember your age!”

“But—”

“Mary will feel uncomfortable if you act that way.” She came over and smiled. It appeared that she also wanted to compliment me, though probably not

as effusively.

“My daughter, how you have grown. I’m so proud of you.”

“It really is nothing.”

“If this deal goes well, it’s all thanks to you. I’d like to celebrate it somehow.

Hm, why don’t we name the product ‘Mary?’”

Well, that’s... If that happened, people would start saying things like, “Honey, pass me the Mary so I can sprinkle it on my meat” and “The Mary really adds to the flavor.”

I desperately shook my head. “There’s no need.”

“Is that right? We still need to celebrate this somehow. Mary, is there something you’d like to get? Something you’d like to try? You said you wanted to have a party on a ship last month. How about we get you a cruise ship? Then you could have ship parties anytime you want.”

A cruise ship? Isn’t that too much of a gift? I didn’t know about Mary, but I had never been on a boat in my life.

I immediately shook my head. “No, it’s all right. I’m not interested in ship parties anymore.”

“What, then?” The marchioness gazed at me, waiting for me to ask for something.

I really can’t think of anything, though...

“I don’t really want anything right now. I’ll tell you if I think of something.”

“Oh? All right, then. Tell us at any time. We’ll make sure you get it as long as it’s not too excessive.”

I didn’t know how much more excessive you could get than a cruise ship.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“My lady, it’s been a while since you’ve been out. Shouldn’t you at least wear something like this dress?”

“No, Annie. That’s too plain. I think this one would be better.”

The maids, who hadn’t so much as dared to breathe in my presence, now had a heated discussion over what dress I should wear. Like most other people, I preferred to have people feel comfortable around me. But this was going a bit far. I hadn’t wanted this much attention.

“My lady, which of these two would you—” Anna looked over the dresses and gasped when she saw the look on my face.

I must’ve looked bored to death, so I understood her reaction. “The one on the right,” I said.

“Yes, my lady.”

I’d resolved only a few days ago that I would not go to any more social events. I shouldn’t have tried to cut the marquess’s worried words off by offering to go to a banquet. I would never have done so if I’d known what he’d summoned me to talk about. I suppose I deserved it.

“Are you sure you don’t need to contact Lord Ethen?”

“Yes.” Ethen had told me recently that he’d be my escort whenever I needed it, but I didn’t bother to request his help or anything.

The engagement would be over soon enough. There was no point in growing attached. Besides, Ethen was a busy man. I didn’t want to call him over just to be my escort.

“Let’s go.” I hadn’t been to a banquet in a few days. The maids decked me out more beautifully than usual. I was laden with gems: necklace, earrings, and the edges of my gown.

“Hello, my lady.” And there, I encountered a very unexpected figure.



“Lady Aria Peridot?” I blinked in disbelief.

“Hello, Lady Mary.” Aria. *What was she doing here?*

I took a step back in confusion and studied her. It was definitely Aria. There couldn’t be more than one such angel in the world. Aria wore the dress I’d given her and looked a bit excited. Why would Aria be at such an occasion? “Are you

acquainted with the count's daughter?" This banquet required an invitation to enter. Did Aria know Count Schuhern's daughter in the novel?

"Oh, I was lucky enough to be invited through a new acquaintance," said Aria with a bright smile. A new acquaintance? I could guess who that was. Probably Edville. Come to think of it, Countess Schuhern was one of the empress's close confidants. I imagined Edville introducing Aria, who lacked high society experience, to other people.

"I see." It had been a few days since I'd seen her. She was still just as pretty and lovely.

I tried to keep my distance. Even though I liked Aria, I valued my peace more.

Hanging around Aria would likely result in getting pulled into the novel's storyline. It was better to content myself with watching her from afar. "If you'll excuse me..."

"Thankfully I had the dress you were kind enough to give me, so I was able to attend without much worry." Aria lifted the dress slightly. The pink fabric was light and airy with a flower corsage on it. It suited Aria perfectly.

"I was worried that this kind of dress might not look very good on me."

"It looks good on you. Very good." My tongue moved before my neurons could fire. Having complimented her without intending to, I gave an inward sigh. This tongue is going to be the death of me.

"Thank you, my lady."

"Since you're here on invitation, you should enjoy the banquet with the Count's daughter. I think I have company coming soon," Maia and Ashley had the uncanny ability to find me wherever I went, so my lie wouldn't be a lie for very long.

"I'll see you again next time." I quickly walked away. I needed to be somewhere where I couldn't see Aria. Seeing her pure beauty would likely excite my tongue again. I had to get away from her.

"My lady, it's been so long." As expected, Maia appeared and greeted me warmly.

I hurried over to her. "Maia."

Maia looked suspicious at my warm tone, but she gave a small laugh, and the look was gone. She fell into step beside me and chattered, "You weren't there even at Lady Peilian's daughter's tea party. I was worried for you."

"I wasn't feeling well." Saying that I'd grown sick of parties would only make her even more bothersome.

Maia didn't seem very interested in my excuse and babbled on about the

things that had happened over the past few days. “You see, I never expected her to say such a thing.”

I was nodding along when I noticed a girl staring at me with open hostility.

“Lady Mary Bell,” said the girl as she approached me with her arms crossed. She sounded like she wanted to pick a fight.

She had green hair and scarlet eyes. I frantically tried to remember who this was. “Who...are you again?” I replied calmly. I couldn’t remember at all, no matter how I tried. She probably wasn’t one of the significant characters in the novel.

“What are you—you know what? Lady Mary, this is preposterous. Are you going to pretend you don’t know me now? I’ll tell you who I am again, then. My name is Iris Mirbaseba.”

The name didn’t ring any bells.

I repeated her name once just to be polite. “Right. Lady Iris...Mirbaseba. Is there something you want to say to me?”

“Are you serious? My lady. You don’t seem apologetic toward me at all.”

Apologize for what? It’s not like I remember anything. You need to tell me what I did wrong if you want me to apologize.

“You poured wine over my head two weeks ago and laughed it off without a word of apology. You really don’t remember?”

“My goodness, Lady Iris!” The ladies who appeared to be Iris’s friends seemed shocked at her directness.

I was taken aback, as well. “I—did that?”

“My lady, calm yourself,” someone said.

Iris fumed as she glared at me. There was one thing that bothered me, though. I hadn’t yet been transported into Mary Bell’s body two weeks ago. So, it’s not a total shock that Mary had done such thing. But why was this girl lashing out at me now?

“But you gave a dress to the lady from a mere viscount’s house saying it was partly your fault for being careless.” *Wait, that’s why you’re upset?* Even though I had intentionally poured wine over her without giving an apology, she was angry with the fact that I had given a dress to Aria. “Do you hold me in contempt?” Iris spat her out words despite the people around her trying to dissuade her.

Shocked gasps were heard all around. People must have thought I was about to do something reckless. A servant backed away, eying me carefully.

“You’ve treated me horribly, don’t you think?”

This was not good. I had to get things in order first. I'd have to apologize to this furious lady, but not knowing the full situation, I wasn't sure how. "My lady —" I found to my dismay that the crowd included someone I'd have preferred to avoid. Aria looked even more troubled than I did. "Why couldn't you have talked about that in private? Is it really necessary to do it at a place like this?" I didn't like how sarcastically my words came out. I really didn't mean it that way.

"Are you embarrassed, perhaps, to hear such things said about yourself in public?" Iris said mockingly. She probably wouldn't back away without getting her pound of flesh.

What should I do? I looked around me with a troubled expression. Aria had moved closer to me.

"Ha!" Iris scoffed, seeing that my gaze was directed elsewhere. She grabbed Aria by the arm.

"Ouch!"

"What makes this lady so special for you? I'm dying to know," said Iris, dragging Aria out of the crowd. Aria's confusion was palpable now that she was suddenly at the center of everyone's attention.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, grabbing Iris. I could understand that she was angry at me, but this was between me and her. Why drag Aria into it? We were now awkwardly linked, Iris holding Aria's arm and me grabbing onto Iris's.

Iris spoke first. "See? You're acting the same way again. You barely paid attention when I spoke earlier, but now that I've brought this lady into our conversation you're finally listening."

I had been listening, though. Taken aback, I thought hard. Though I didn't really know what was going on, I decided it would be best to apologize first. I had to calm her down if we were to have a civil conversation. "Let go of her arm. How are we supposed to talk if you resort to grabbing people before we've even spoken?" Darn it. Inflammatory words slipped out every time I tried to speak.

"What? Haha. Quite incredible. I wonder how Lady Aria won your favor so easily. In fact, I have half a mind to ask her for advice."

I sighed deeply. I should apologize first and think later. That would be best. I'm sorry. Just two words.

"I'm—"

"She's a nobody. She's got nothing to show for herself. I guess that's what

makes her stand out.” Iris said, openly mocking Aria.

That wasn’t something you said about a noble’s daughter. Iris was probably speaking thus because she knew that Aria’s house was only noble in name. Being all worked up and angry, she didn’t realize how uncivil she was being.

I had to apologize to calm her down. Trying to calm my racing heart, I opened my mouth again. “I’m-I’m-So-I-Are you out of your mind?” I half expected it; my tongue had a mind of its own. This time, though, I didn’t feel all that resentful about it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Iris and the banquet hall immediately fell silent. Aria lifted her hand to her mouth in surprise. *Oh, well. What's done is done. I might as well just finish.*

"I understand that you're angry at me. You should be telling me that I'm boorish and prejudiced. What do you think you're doing right now?" My words were sharper than intended, but right at this moment, I kind of liked the way my dagger tongue worked. "You obviously can't stand being discriminated against, but you want to treat others as such?"

Iris, taken aback, took a moment to organize her thoughts before stammering, "Th-that's... I'm sure I shouldn't have dragged Lady Aria into this, but—"

"Apologize then."

"You should be the one to apologize first. I'm not yet—" she said, tightening her grip on Aria's arm. Seeing Aria wince with confusion and pain made me lose my self-control.

"Enlighten me. I can't tell if you want an apology for my pouring wine over you or for giving a dress to Lady Aria here. No, wait, it seems it's the latter. Maybe I should give you something, too, to quell your indignation?" I removed my earrings. The jewelry was obviously much more expensive. "I can't take this dress off for you right now, so will these do?"

Iris's face turned a bright red. Having been unexpectedly put on the spot, she attempted to stammer something in response but came up empty. She threw Aria's arm aside. "Forget it. I don't think we need talk of this any longer." Fuming, she into the crowd.

She still hadn't apologized. I considered for a moment whether to stop her, but some ladies came over with worried looks.

"My goodness. I knew Lady Iris could be ill mannered, but I never imagined she'd act like *that*."

"Lady Mary, are you all right?"

In any case, it was probably true that Mary had poured wine on Iris's head. That meant that Iris was the victim, but people seemed more worried about me than her.

That made me feel bad for her, a little, but it was still her fault for trying to take out her anger on an innocent girl before I could even apologize. "I'm all right. Don't mind me."

"It's obvious why she's acting that way. She's pretended before that she was

your best friend. Being slighted made her angry enough to burst.”

The ladies offered explanations I hadn’t asked for, but I managed to piece together the following: Iris was apparently on pretty good terms with Mary originally. Though not as much as Maia and Ashley, she would occasionally fawn on Mary and receive gifts in return and they went to parties together.

The problem was the difference in the amount they liked each other.

To Mary, Iris wasn’t more than a casual acquaintance she’d greet every now and then. But Iris regarded Mary as her best friend. Iris would tell people that she was on the closest possible terms with Mary, and that became an issue.

Whoopsie, my bad. The wine is the perfect temperature to cool your head off, though. You’ll be fine. Mary had apparently poured wine over Iris’s head as if by accident, not having liked the way Iris talked about her. But Iris hadn’t been as angry at that point as much as she was now.

One of the ladies glanced over at Aria and said, “She was afraid that Lady Aria would take her place next to you, Lady Mary.”

Nobody seemed concerned for Aria, who’d been subjected to such aggression. I knew I had to keep my distance from Aria, but this was... Deciding whether to speak to her or not, I grudgingly averted my gaze.

“What’s going on here?” Count Schuher’s daughter asked. She was the host of the banquet and the person who’d sent an invitation to Aria. Seeing that Aria and I stood in the middle of a group, she immediately apologized without even finding out the details.

“Lady Mary, Lady Aria might have made mistake as she’s not used to being at events like this, but I’m sure she didn’t do so intentionally. Please do overlook whatever mistake she made.”

“My lady, that’s not what—”

“Lady Aria, we can talk more later. I think you should apologize first.” Without even bothering to listen, she demanded that Aria apologize, even though it was Aria who had encountered a mishap.

I frowned at her attitude of immediately assuming that Aria was in the wrong.

She nudged Aria on the back as if pressing her to apologize. Unable to stand it any longer, I pulled Aria close toward me. Both the count’s daughter and Aria looked taken aback at this.

“You haven’t even bothered to find out what’s going on.” I couldn’t take it. I ended up speaking up for Aria even though I’d resolved not to get involved.

“Lady Aria did nothing wrong. If you’re going to be a bootlicker, you should know the facts first. It is extremely rude to just come and demand an apology

like that!”

“Th-that was not my intention, my lady—”

I huffed and pulled Aria after me through the crowd. Aria quietly allowed me to lead her along.

“Phew.” I breathed a sigh of relief after entering a terrace at one end of the hall and closed the curtains.

Mary Bell, you really have been an obnoxious one, causing this much trouble.

“Lady Mary,” said Aria, who hadn’t spoken as I pulled her along.

Oh. I gazed at Aria. Her expression was unreadable.

“I’m sorry I got you involved in this. Why’d you come here, anyway?” My tongue was as sharp as usual. I teared up inside. It was surprising that Aria had come here, of course. I’d expected her to stay away from social events and banquets until Edville revealed his identity and provided her proper support, even if it was for her livelihood’s sake.

“I thought...I might be able to see you if I came here.”

What? What’s with this romance movie cliché of a line?

I stared at Aria in disbelief. She continued, “It’s quite fulfilling to do my work and care for my father. And I like to play the piano for the children on the weekends, too, but...” She bit her lip thoughtfully.

I found this situation extremely uncomfortable. *Can’t you say things like that to Edville instead of me? Or even Ethen or Vante...*

“But meeting you that day, singing in the garden at the imperial palace, and feeling many things besides—that made me want to have that dream-like experience again.”

I didn’t want to ruin things like last time by opening my naughty mouth. So, I clamped my mouth shut. *Let’s just zip it.*

“So I came here in hopes of seeing you again. And magically enough, I have,” said Aria, smiling the most beautiful smile imaginable.

How could I say anything bad to a person who looked this way?

“Thanks for today, as well. I’ve been introduced to her, and I’m sure Count Schuher’s daughter is a good person. It can’t be expected that she’ll see me as equals with her other friends, though. It’s all right. I was grateful that I was invited at all.” Aria’s platinum blond hair shone like an angel’s, and she smiled again. Then, her expression turned lonely as she peered through a gap in the curtains at the people chatting outside.

Aria seemed to know better than anyone that she didn’t belong in the world that lay beyond the curtain.

“I was a bit flustered, but I’m sure I’ll look back on this fondly later. That’s why I chose to come.”

Aria expressed neither anger nor confusion at my curt words. Perhaps it would have been better for us to have started off on the wrong foot, though thinking such things now was probably pointless.

There was no way I could ignore her after seeing that look. “People treat you that way precisely because you think you *deserve* to be treated that way. It’s far from true. It’s better to be angry and *show* others that you’re angry.”

She was too good a person for her own good, smiling even after being treated like dirt. How would she manage to survive in this tough world? I really was left with no choice. I told her, “If you need someone to lash out instead of you, well, I can be that person.”

It sounded corny and childish. Why was it so hard to simply say I wanted to be friends? Overcome with an unreasonable sense of embarrassment, I looked away.

“You don’t have to lash out for me. You really don’t have to do anything for me,” Aria replied, smiling with her beautiful eyes. Her hair fluttered in the breeze—like a scene from a novel. “As long as you’re staying with me, I would appreciate no matter what you do because I like you, my lady.”

I was left with no choice but to let this angelic female protagonist push against my walls, villainess though I was.



“How could she do such a thing? She was so cold to me! That viscount’s daughter is as lowly as they come!” Iris had practically fled the banquet hall. She cried profusely in the carriage on her way home.

Though Lady Mary had embarrassed Iris in public, Iris thought it would be okay to approach her carefully again. She was willing to stomach a little embarrassment if it meant being on good terms with Mary Bell, the lady with the highest rank in high society. But it drove her crazy that Mary, who’d acted so rudely toward her for no fault of her own, had cared for Aria.

“I’ve been so nice to her. Why does she think so little of me?” She wiped her tears and sniffled. “Just wait and see. I’m not going to just sit by and let you two get along.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“So, I’m thinking of going to the opera.”

I casually mentioned my plan for tomorrow at the family dinner. They seemed to worry whenever I didn’t go out, so I figured it would be better to tell them what I was doing tomorrow.

“Will you be all right? Last year, you came home in the middle of one because you found it boring.”

“In hindsight, I think it may have been better than I thought.”

Music and pastimes existed in this world, as well. There were no idol groups but, still, it was something. Having heard about the upcoming performance, Aria and I decided to go see it.

“Please don’t complain in public that it was no fun,” May said with a sigh.

From the sound of things, Mary had openly complained that the performance was boring. “Mind your own business and eat,” I retorted. *There was nothing to worry about. I’ll never do anything so rude. Don’t worry and continue with your meal, May.*

“Will you really be all right by yourself?”

“I have someone going with me. Don’t worry.”

The marquess and his wife had been kept extremely busy the past few days since the spice project was progressing quickly. They worked night and day, saying that taking the lead by fast execution was one of the most important things in business. I admired their determination.

Since I was going with Aria, not by myself, there would be no issues.

“All right. Go have fun, daughter.”

“Once things slow down a bit, let’s all go together.”

In my previous world, I’d been too busy going to idol performances to watch classical music concerts. Having been thrown into this current world without the internet or TV, I’d begun to crave some sort of entertainment, regardless of the kind.

“I’ve passed by one of the performance halls, but... Are you sure it’s all right for me to go with you?” Aria had asked.

I hadn’t known exactly how many people would make light of Aria. In the novel, Aria made a proper debut in high society further along in the plot. Mary was the villainess who belittled her.

I’d thought that no one would try to pick on Aria as long as I stayed away. But

I had been wrong. It was only right that I take responsibility. If I kept Aria around, people would not slight or make light of her. I'd only keep this up until she and Edville became a couple. Only until then.

Besides, there's nothing too wrong with being nice to the female protagonist. The original story had already been ruined, anyway. Wouldn't hurt to have a bit of insurance should the worst come to pass.

"I wonder if it'll be fun."

I'll just think about spending a fun day with Aria tomorrow. It isn't the end of the world if Mary doesn't throw or go to parties. People are going to stop nagging at me, at least.



I met early with Aria to get her ready. If I made sure she was covered in expensive clothing and jewelry, people would not look down on her or badmouth her for being poor.

"The performance won't start for a good while. Why did we—"

"Come with me," I said, cutting Aria's question short. I took her to a street filled with clothes shops.

"Welcome, my lady. You could have just had us come to your mansion," said the shopkeeper. She'd recognized me and quickly ran out to greet me.

She guided Aria and me to a private room and returned with a catalog and multiple clothes hangers.

"Today I'd like some gowns for this lady here," I said.

"Though the fabrics won't be as good as the new textiles the marquess brought back, we do have some trending clothes," said the owner, immediately pointing out various offerings.

Aria, who didn't seem to be used to this sort of thing, said anxiously, "My lady, this sort of thing, it's—"

"Do you not like it?"

"That's not it. The clothes are all very pretty and I like them, but I think they're all too much for a person like me."

The cheapest dress in the shop would likely cost more than Aria's monthly living expenses. Even though Aria knew nothing about dresses, she seemed to know how expensive they could be. She looked quite troubled.

"Don't say that. Anyone who spends time with me deserves such gifts. So, do you like it or not?" *Aria, you are going to have so many more expensive clothes when you become the Crown Princess. You need to get used to it.*

“My lady, don’t you think this dress will go very well with your eye color?”

Aria seemed momentarily dazed by the simultaneous endorsement of the shop owner and myself. She nodded, then shook her head, and suddenly jerked upright. “They’re all very pretty, and I’m very grateful for your offer, my lady. I don’t even have a proper wardrobe to put such dresses in, and even fewer occasions to wear them to.”

“Then all you need is a closet and events to attend,” I said, lightly ignoring Aria’s refusal. I turned the pages of the catalog and checked the clothes that might suit Aria. I found some that would look beautiful on her. *This is nice. Oh, this will look really cute on her. Oh gosh, I need to see her in this outfit!*

“I’ll take all the dresses from here to here. I’ll pay for them all, so please send the bill to my father.”

“My lady!” Aria protested.

“All right, my lady. You have impeccable taste, as expected.”

Aria looked at me, torn, but I had no intention of going back on what I said. “I’ll store the dresses in my house. You can come by to change, and then we can leave together afterward.” *Now that I’ve gotten myself into this, I might as well just invite her every day and keep her away from that dratted father.*

“No, my lady. I’d really like to refuse this time. There is no reason for me to be given such gifts, and this wasn’t why I wanted to see you again,” said Aria firmly, rejecting my gifts.

I wasn’t so easily dissuaded, however. As long as Aria was the female protagonist of this novel, any number of people could grow jealous of her and make her life hell. And I wanted to prevent that from happening. What was so wrong with that? I was also doing this partly for my own sake. Perhaps I could avoid being a villainess if I became good friends with the female protagonist.

“I’m going to store these in the guest room regardless of what you say, Lady Aria.” I turned away and acted as if I hadn’t heard her refusal.

Aria breathed a quiet sigh.

“I’ll have one prepared just for her size,” said the owner, a grin plastered across her face. “This way, my lady. Let me take your measurements.”

“Oh, I don’t—”

“Oh, don’t be shy now.”

I watched Aria being half dragged, and I sipped my tea, wondering whether to visit the jeweler’s or the shoemaker’s next.



“You’re so beautiful, my lady,” declared the shop owner.

I’d had one dress quickly prepared for Aria to wear to the opera. I gazed at her, satisfied. *See? I knew the light green would look great on her. The dress she was wearing on the book cover was something like this, too.*

“That’s better. I won’t have to be embarrassed with having you by my side any longer.” *You look gorgeous, Aria.* Having given her my own way of a compliment, I admired her new dress. The fabric that covered her thin white arms fluttered like the wings of an angel.

“Dress is taken care of, and now—”

“Is there more?”

“Of course, my lady. You can’t wear worn-down shoes with this dress.”

“Thank you for your patronage, my ladies,” the owner said.

I pulled Aria with me out the door.



“Welcome. Please come this way,” said a nervous employee, guiding us to a balcony seat.

After taking our seats in a spot separated from the crowd, I stoked my expectations for the upcoming performance.

“I’m so excited. I never thought I’d be able to watch something like this.” Aria’s eyes beamed with expectation.

She seemed quite uncomfortable with all of the gifts earlier, but now she looked thrilled.

“Ah.”

The lights all went out. We held our breath and looked at the stage. A pin light shone on the female protagonist, who stood in the middle. The actor wore a dress much fancier than that of anyone in the audience. There were no microphones or fancy lighting—only her voice and a light—but the actor’s presence filled the hall, and I was pulled into the performance.

“Ah—” said the actress.

Soon the play, which had begun with a song by the female protagonist and a single pin light, was reaching its climax. An innocent rural noble’s daughter had come to the capital with her lover. The play showed how she changed as she experienced her lover’s desertion and people’s disdain. It was an extremely well-crafted and immersive play that mesmerized everyone in the audience.

“I am back here, at last.” The fancy lights all vanished, leaving only the single pin light once more. The actress again appeared onstage.

She looked lonely, unlike at the beginning of the play. It felt as though I'd witnessed somebody's entire life unfold.

"To this dear place, I have longed to be—"

The single pin light went out, and silence fell over the stage. Unable to believe that the play was over, I stared dully at the dark stage for a good while. I even forgot to clap.

The lights came back on, and the actors all came up to the stage for the curtain call. I clapped enthusiastically every time an actor bowed.

"It's so beautiful...!" Aria exclaimed. She had been riveted throughout the performance, sometimes even crying. She stared dreamily at the stage. "It was an outstanding performance."

"I wonder what it feels like to be an actor and perform on a stage like this." Aria gazed enviously at the actors as they continued to bow.

Unlike me, who'd focused on the performance itself, Aria seemed taken with the stage. "It must feel like a dream..."

A thought occurred to me as I watched her eyes shine.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“You’re also quite a good singer, aren’t you?”

“I’m nowhere near a professional singer like her. And to sing in front of the crowd, you have to be born for it,” said Aria, waving my idea off.

No way. I heard Aria sing in the imperial garden, and I know she is every bit as good as those actors. She had been so good that I felt sorry for listening by myself. Too much modesty could be a sin.

“I’m not good enough to sing in front of people. And they wouldn’t be interested even if I did.”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong,” I said firmly.

Of course, people who hadn’t heard her sing wouldn’t be interested, at first, but I knew that anyone who did hear her sing would give anything to do so again. Aria, a girl with a heavenly voice and great appreciation for the stage. A sudden idea crossed my mind.

“Say, you like to sing, don’t you?”

“I do, but...” Aria said hesitantly, still admiring the stage.

That must mean she was interested. It would be a criminal oversight as a fan of this genius not to help her. I grabbed Aria’s hand as the curtain call came to an end. “If you’re interested, I’ll help you out.”

Aria looked at me, puzzled. It wasn’t the same look of flat refusal she’d given me in the clothes shop earlier. Her eyes shone with a bit of curiosity and expectation. “How do you mean? I’ve never sung in front of an audience, and all I know how to do is sew and play a bit of piano.”

Before I was transported into this world, I had been an idol fangirl. At the end of the day, the idol industry was essentially part of a larger performing arts industry. I had put in a vast amount of effort into figuring out how to best let others know who my favorite was and get people’s attention directed toward them.

‘What in the world is the entertainment company doing? It’s no use that the song is good if they mess up the marketing like this.’

‘Wait, this is the follow-up song they’re going with?’

‘Why are they always slacking on trends?’

‘They should let me work at the company. I’d pour my heart and soul into the work.’

Having been a huge fan of a subpar—but not exactly a flop—idol group for

several years, I had become well acquainted with the way things worked in the industry. In this world, I knew better than anyone what drove people to “geek out” over something.

Now, I have almost endless money and time on my hands. The possibilities! I gripped Aria’s hand tighter and formulated plans to let the world know about her singing. “It is disrespectful to your talent as a musical genius to do anything other than what you were born to do!”

“A-a genius? You think I’m a genius?” Aria’s eyes began to lose focus.

Most people would suspect that something fishy was going on and walk away immediately, *Aria... How are you going to survive in this daunting jungle world when you’re so easily swayed? You’re lucky I am the one making the offer.*

“Trust my judgment, my lady,” I said and nodded with confidence. “I’ll make you the greatest prima donna in the empire. I can do it.”

I beamed at her, feeling brighter than ever since I’d entered this world. I’d found something interesting to entertain me that didn’t involve parties or banquets, some...purpose.



While Mary sat with Aria in the balcony seat of an opera hall and strengthened her resolve to make Aria a world-renowned prima donna, Mary’s father, the marquess, was at the imperial palace. He was having an audience with the most powerful man in the empire.

I wonder if the opera’s finished by now. I hope she gets home without causing an uproar. Last time, she complained to the manager that the performance was boring. Hmm...

The marquess worried that the fuss Mary had made a few months ago would be repeated, but the emperor spoke to him before he could finish his thought.

“So, Marquess, will you really not tell me how you thought of moving so quickly to venture into the spices market before anyone else?”

Sprinkling something directly on food was completely out of the ordinary in the empire’s culinary culture. But there could be no progress without acceptance of change. The emperor had considered this quite the discovery.

The spice slowed the food from spoiling and provided an easy way to control the flavor. It was novel, something other nobles had likely never thought of before. When the emperor first heard of this spice, he had recognized it as an opportunity. He had planned to use the palace budget to start dealing in spice, but his plans hit an unexpected hitch. Surprisingly enough, the emperor learned

that a mere few days before he himself could get started with his project, the marquess had quickly established deals with all the spice trade routes.

Of course, everyone knew that the House of Bell had operated the largest merchant group in the empire for generations, but they usually dealt in fabrics and commodities. They'd never ventured into the culinary market before.

The marquess was one to drink only water whenever he visited a foreign country, unable to stomach the unfamiliar food. How had he come up with such idea, the emperor must have been wondering.

"It was difficult at first to make up my mind, but once I'd tried it, I realized it was worth looking into," the marquess said with a smile.

He'd pressed on faster than usual after hearing that the imperial house had also heard about the spice, so he'd expected to be summoned by the emperor at least once.

"You're famous for being a picky eater. I'm curious as to what drove you to try it." The emperor wouldn't be dissuaded from the question. The marquess realized that the conversation wasn't likely to end unless he gave the emperor an answer.

Well, it's not something to hide, either, he thought and replied while laughing lightly. "I feel like I'm bragging about my child, so I find myself embarrassed to say, Your Majesty."

"Interesting. Was it your son's idea?" the emperor asked.

Of course the emperor would think it was May. May, who had matured faster than most his age, having to handle the various mishaps his wayward older sister was always getting into.

The emperor opened his mouth to continue, but the marquess waved his hand and corrected the him. "No, not at all, Your Majesty. It was my daughter, in fact."

"Your daughter?" The emperor looked quite surprised.

The emperor must have been thinking that she seemed a little more mature the last time he had seen her, but had she matured enough and turned her behavior around in the space of a few weeks to give her father business advice?

"I thought of her as nothing more than a child, but to see her giving me advice for my business like this made me realize that she has indeed grown up. It was actually on her advice that I decided to get this business underway. All I did was pay attention to her suggestions."

The two nodded at each other. The emperor smiled proudly. Growth in the future generations of the empire was never a bad thing. "Your teachings must

have been valuable, Marquess.”

“I’ve always known that I can’t keep her with me forever, but even so...” The marquess thought of Mary when she was a child.

The emperor had a child of his own, Edville. The marquess knew that the emperor wished his son to become a leader of the next generation, the greatest person among them. Edville hadn’t been able to venture out much into high society because he spent most of his time taking care of his ill mother, the empress. But one couldn’t become a good ruler without an understanding of people.

“It would be quite nice to have your daughter be on good terms with my son,” said the emperor as he fiddled with his chin.

The marquess, still lost in thought, failed to notice the emperor’s plotting eyes as tears came to his own when he thought of the growing children.

“So, Marquess Bell.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.” The marquess finally pulled himself together and turned to face the emperor properly.

He had completely missed what the emperor said, but he couldn’t let on that this was the case. The marquess pretended to be perfectly calm.

The emperor had the look of a predator about to pounce. “I’d like to invite your daughter to the palace. What do you think?”

“Mary, Your Majesty?” the marquess asked in surprise. Without knowing what the emperor was planning, he continued, “But she can still be quite clumsy at times. I’m worried that she might do something unrefined.”

“That’s hardly anything to worry about. Everyone makes mistakes. I’m not so small-minded that I can’t tolerate a few mistakes.” The emperor burst into laughter.

Quarreling is how youngsters got to know one another sometimes, the men knew. The emperor gently smiled.

The desire to brag about his daughter had momentarily clouded the marquess’s judgment. He smiled back warmly before a new worry hit him. Even though the marquess was very fond of Mary, he was aware of her temperament and the rumors about her. That was why he normally would have politely refused the emperor’s suggestion. However, she seemed to be acting much more mature these days. *Perhaps I could trust her to behave well just this once?* If people began to think that she was trusted by the emperor, her current wayward image might grow less prominent.

After briefly calculating the ups and downs, the marquess laughed and

accepted the emperor's suggestion. "If you'll let me know the time, Your Majesty, I'll speak to my daughter about this."

"Haha. I love that you decide on things so fast."

The emperor knew, of course, that Mary had a fiancé, having a few conversations wouldn't lead to anything. The emperor wasn't irresponsible enough to wish otherwise, the marquess knew. And so, without Mary's knowledge, a meeting between her and the person she most wanted to stay away from was arranged.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“You’ve got a dressing room. Why’d you bring the dresses into the guest room?” May grumbled.

He has a room of his own, too. What of me using the guest room would concern him in any way?

“It’s none of your business.”

“None of the clothes were really your type, either.”

I got the impression that he was more of my personal prison guard than my brother. May gave me a suspicious look. I stared back at him. “That’s for me to decide. Lay off.” *I’ve got my plans for those dresses, so stop meddling.*

“Ugh, what is Father thinking, sending a girl like you alone to the imperial palace?” May lamented, shaking his head.

Wait...What? “Me? Going to the imperial palace?”

“Didn’t you hear? It seems the emperor will be inviting you soon.”

Why would I be wanted at the imperial palace? I thought hard. I hadn’t really gotten into any trouble recently. Besides, who gets called to the palace for a few mishaps?

“Why me?”

“I don’t know. I just overheard Father mention it, is all,” said May with a shrug.

What in the world is going on? Taken aback, I immediately ran to my father’s room and threw open the door. “Father!”

“Oh! My dear, Mary.” The marquess opened his arms wide for a hug instead of scolding Mary for noisily throwing open the bedroom door. “How was the opera? I came back late yesterday and didn’t have the chance to ask you.”

“Was I invited to the palace?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I heard it from May just now.”

“Oh dear,” the father said, looking a little put out. “The emperor said he wanted to invite you to the palace after hearing about you.”

“Hearing about me?” What could the emperor possibly have heard about me? I couldn’t think of anything at all.

“I wanted this to be a surprise, but it seems May has ruined it,” my father said jokingly.

But what did the emperor hear about me? I wondered, waiting impatiently and

staring at my father.

“When the emperor heard how you’d offered input for the current project we have going on, he seemed to be pleased.”

The answer only raised more questions in my head. *When did I offer business advice? The only business I know anything about is the idol business...* “When did I do that? What advice did I give you?” I was utterly serious, but the marquess seemed to think that I was being modest.

“The emperor said he was interested in the spices business as well. He asked me how I’d gotten the idea to expand into spice trading, so I told him it was your idea.”

Precisely speaking, I hadn’t offered *any* business advice. It had been nothing more than a passing comment. Apparently, the situation had taken on a completely different aspect in his head.

The way he said it, people would think that I’d made a serious business suggestion. “Haha, well, I suppose that *did* happen.” *Something like that, I guess.* I’d only been excited to taste something more flavorful after such a long time with bland food. That was all. I couldn’t understand how it turned into this.

“Anyhow, from the way the emperor also seems to be taking an interest, I guess this business is really going to pan out.”

The way he spoke, there seemed to be an undue emphasis on the fact that it had been *my* suggestion.

“I also wanted to show the emperor how amazing a lady you’ve become,” the father said with a gratified look in his eyes.

If I had really intended anything by my comment, I would have congratulated myself and felt a bit proud. But, it had just been in passing, and it weighed on me now.

“I was going to tell you tomorrow and surprise you with the news,” said my father as he walked over to his desk. He rummaged through the documents and pulled out an envelope. “In fact, I’ve already got an official invitation from His Majesty.” He smiled proudly and held it out.

Damn it. Why would you arrange a meeting like this without my knowledge? My hand trembled as I took the envelope. I hadn’t been this nervous even when reading Ethen’s letter. I read:

That is why I’d like to invite you, Mary Bell, for afternoon tea two days from now.

“When did this letter arrive?” I asked, my voice a quiver.

My father beamed. “Around this afternoon.”

Wait, so he been intending on telling me such important news the day before the occasion?



“Please don’t cause any trouble. In fact, I think it’d be best if you didn’t talk,” said May.

Two days had already passed. If the emperor’s invitation hadn’t thrown a wrench in my plans, I’d have invited Aria right away to tell her about my perfect plan and have a veritable fashion show with all the dresses I’d bought for her.

“You seem to like telling people to shut up. Why don’t you shut yourself up?” I said, pressing my forehead with my palm. *I need time to think, so please give me a moment’s peace, will you, May?*

“Do you have plans to suddenly fall ill or something?” It appeared that May really didn’t want me to go. *It’s not like I want to, either.*

“Why don’t you just go ahead and hold a ritual to outright lay a curse on me while you’re at it?” I had considered saying I was ill, but then the emperor could simply change the date. It was always better to get unpleasant things over with quickly. I’d go, play the docile lady for a while, and come right home instead of trying to think up an excuse.

“What is Father thinking?” May said, screwing his eyes shut and shaking his head.

Why didn’t you try and beg him to call it off or something? Though it’s too late to be thinking such things... “Please, stop nagging. You’re getting on my nerves.” My head was jumbled enough as it was without him scaring me like this.

At the entrance to the mansion, I saw a carriage from the imperial palace waiting for me. “I’m leaving.” I’d dressed to look as docile as possible, an attempt to negate the effects of my rather ferocious-looking eyes and face. I’d neatly tied my hair up in a bun and wore a light pink dress that looked extremely odd on a person like me, forming a striking disharmony.

“Whatever. What’s the point in talking to you, anyway?” May sighed.

I knew he’d worry regardless. I smiled and passed by him.

“Is that a smirk? I’m not kidding.” He seemed to have misunderstood, but it didn’t matter.

“Let’s go,” I said as I got into the carriage.

“Yes, my lady,” said the driver.

I was nervous, but in front of the emperor, my unruly tongue tended to behave

just a little. Things might actually be better than in most other situations. *Let's go. You can do this, Mary.*

"You just go about your own business," I said to May just before the carriage began to rumble forward. What I'd meant to say was, *Don't worry too much and have a nice day, May.*



The carriage arrived at the palace before long. As soon as I'd set one foot on the cobblestone, a high-ranking lady-in-waiting and bowed toward me. "My lady, it's my honor to serve you. Please come this way." The woman kept her head politely bowed as she took the lead.

It wasn't my first time in the imperial palace, but I tensed a little walking through somewhere that wasn't the banquet hall.

"Is His Majesty waiting?"

"His Majesty...is seeing to affairs of the state," she said after a hesitant pause. *Did that mean I had to wait?* "Okay, so where should I go, then?"

"My lady, may I ask you a question, just to be certain?" the woman asked, looking a little confused.

Huh? I was told we'd have afternoon tea. Isn't it three in the afternoon? My carriage arrived on time. "What is it?"

"Who were you told you'd be meeting today?"

I blinked stupidly at the question. *The emperor, of course.* "I received an invitation from the emperor. Has been there some kind of mistake?"

"It was the emperor who invited you, yes, but you won't be meeting the emperor today. There must have been a misunderstanding. The person you're meeting with is—"

"What?" I cut her off, disbelieving my ears. "I'm not meeting the emperor today?"

"No, my lady." I noticed sweat running down the nervous woman's forehead. I was pretty confused myself.

"So, who am I here to meet?"

"To my knowledge, you are to meet the crown prince today."

The crown prince? My head went blank. *The crown prince of this empire? That was the male protagonist of Beneath a Beautiful Melody. That meant it had to be...*

"There's only one crown prince, right?"

"Pardon?" the lady-in-waiting asked in confusion. Of course, there was only

one. Multiple crown princes would be a sure sign of the demise of the empire.

“Wait, so—I’m here today to meet the crown prince?”

“Yes, that’s what I was told.”

Who decided that? I stood stock-still. *On the letter...* “It didn’t say...”

“My lady?”

The letter hadn’t said who I would be meeting with. It was an invitation for an afternoon tea at the palace but hadn’t explained whom I’d be having the tea with. I’d naturally assumed that it would be the emperor. *It’s a trick.*

“Does His Royal Highness know of this, as well?”

“Yes, of course. He is waiting for you in the garden.”

Since Ethen was set to be my fiancé in the novel, I’d supposed a meeting was unavoidable. The same went for running into Vante. But I never expected I’d even need to meet Edville.

“Must I go?”

“Pardon?” The lady-in-waiting quivered at the remarks. I realized that I might make her cry at this rate. I sighed and tried to smile. Relieved, she said, “Ah, please come this way.”

I had no idea why I had to meet Edville all of a sudden, but I couldn’t simply refuse to meet the crown prince after coming so far. Looking like a lamb being led to the slaughter, I followed the lady-in-waiting, whose face was visibly covered in sweat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Please come this way.”

How had things come to this? This is why you’re supposed to read the fine print! I noticed the familiar silhouette of a man with black hair across the garden. This was probably my second time seeing him up close. I recalled the brief meeting with Edville on the day of the birthday celebration.

“Lady Mary has arrived.”

“I greet the future Sun of the Empire,” I said. *Right, he was handsome.* He had the hallmark of the imperial family—the purple eyes that shone like gems.

“You may raise your head,” Edville said lazily. He didn’t seem entirely happy to be here, either, though I suppose I should have expected it.

“It is an honor to meet you. I am Mary Bell, the eldest daughter of Marquess Bell.”

“Let us sit.”

God, I just want to go home.



“My father, His Majesty, seems to wish for me to get along with you.”

The unexpected words nearly made me do the unspeakable—spit out my tea into Edville’s face. Instead, the tea simply dribbled down from my lips—though whether this was lucky or otherwise, I couldn’t be certain—and I hurriedly wiped it off. “You and me, my lord?”

“Yes. He’s quite hard to please, but it seems you’ve won him over.”

But I haven’t even seen him since the celebration! Confused, I tried to gather my thoughts. Then I recalled why I’d been called here in the first place. *In any case, from the way the emperor also seems to be taking an interest, I guess your suggestion might really take off,* my father had said. *Wait, did he mean that the emperor was interested in me, not the business?*

“He even told me plainly to have a deep conversation with you.”

What in the world was the emperor thinking? I couldn’t even begin to imagine. The emperor wasn’t mentioned very often in the novel, and he certainly did not try and matchmake like this.

“I’m curious as to how you won his favor so easily.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been wondering about the same thing.” I was dying to know

why the emperor had arranged such a strange meeting.

“Pardon, what did you say?”

“Hm?” I’d been fiddling with my cup while spacing out. It was Edville’s confused expression that brought me back. *Wait, did I just say that out loud?* “Haha!” I attempted to change the subject with an awkward laugh. “I’m truly curious which of my many charms he liked so much.” I wasn’t sure this could be called changing the subject, though...

“Come to think of it, we’ve met before, haven’t we?” said Edville.

It was surprising, as I’d expected him to have zero interest in me as he appeared to be entirely occupied with Aria at the party before. I said, “Yes, we have. Briefly. I’m honored that you remember.”

“Do you and Lady Aria know each other?” He wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that he’d been in contact with Aria.

I gave a slight smirk. “I’m not quite sure why you would ask me, my lord.” *If I really was the villainess Mary Bell, what you just said would have triggered my jealousy like nothing else. Do you even care about Aria at all?*

“I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that we don’t have much common ground just yet. I’m just trying to make conversation, so please don’t misunderstand.” It seemed that a male protagonist blinded by love wasn’t all that romantic. From the reader’s perspective, of course, he was a man who loved the female protagonist, but to other people... “I have no ulterior motives. Do not get me wrong.”

I realized that this male protagonist was no different from shallow men whose motives were as clear as day. I told him, “We talk every now and then. We got to know each other a little better because of what happened at the banquet.” *And we will soon be business partners.*

“I see,” Edville said. He seemed to have a tiny bit of tact, at least. He didn’t give out any unnecessary information about how he was also close to Aria or the like. I watched him quietly as I drank my tea, and the minutes dragged on.

The mood was heavier than expected. This tea session was going quite oddly indeed. What were a villainess and a male protagonist supposed to talk about to have a cheerful conversation?

“I’ve heard that you’ve started to take part in your family’s business,” Edville said finally.

“I just gave my father some advice.” It wasn’t quite *advice*, and I had no intention of involving myself in the business in the future, but this wagging tongue of mine had other ideas, as always.

“His Majesty appreciates youth with talent. He probably wishes for us to work together and achieve something great.”

“His Majesty surely has very high expectations for me.”

Though Edville had gone to the effort of speaking first, the conversation lagged once more, cold and reticent. *Stupid mouth. Can you not just stay shut?* I bit the merciless lip that didn’t allow me to lower my guard even for a moment.

“I suppose I’ll have to put in a lot of effort to meet the emperor’s expectations.” I’d forced myself to speak words that I didn’t really mean to cover for my foolish tongue. I forced a smile. “However, I do think meetings like this should be best avoided in the future. Whatever the situation might be, I am engaged. It would not be good for either of us if news got out that I am coming to the palace to see you, my lord.”

I’d never expected my engagement to Ethen would be useful like this. By smoothly mentioning my fiancé, I expressed my desire to have nothing to do with Edville.

“Well, I’m not so sure. His Majesty seems to think that the engagement has little bearing on the present situation.”

What do you mean by that? I’d read the novel and knew better than anyone that the engagement wouldn’t last much longer, but the emperor or crown prince could hardly be justified in saying something like that. “That doesn’t make any sense...”

“Yes, I know. It puts me in quite a pickle as well,” Edville said, putting down his tea and looking at me.

I have a bad feeling about this. People generally don’t have good news to share when they look all grave like that...

“His Majesty told me he’d like me to learn many things from you and get to know you better.”

“I—”

“So, there’s no helping it.” Edville’s purple eyes fixed on me.

What was he trying to say?

“It’s his order. I’ll at least have to make it seem like I’m *trying* to get to know you.”

“...No.” *That’s not necessary at all. You are interested in Aria, aren’t you? I know you’ve been progressing the story with Aria from behind the scenes, so why are you saying these things to me?* “My lord, I think the distance that we currently have between us is perfectly fine,” I said with a stiff look. I reclined further and sat at the far end of the table, just out of arm’s reach. This was the

perfect distance between me and Edville. I wouldn't have minded a bit more distance, actually.

"I wish to be a good fiancé and keep propriety. As strictly as possible. I am honored to have met you today, but if that were the intention, I would like to refuse any further meetings." Neither my father nor May would blame me for extricating myself for this reason. Getting up hurriedly, I said a parting greeting to the confused Edville. "I'm sure that you'll appropriately inform His Majesty about my intentions as well. Good day, my lord." I rushed out of the palace and didn't look back.

The bewildered lady-in-waiting called my name earnestly, but I ignored her and walked back the way I'd come. That whole situation had gone down in the worst way imaginable.

How much worse are things going to get? I'd simply kept from spilling wine on Aria and mistreating her, but the end result was that I was now somehow being brought into contact with all of the male protagonists. I'm already engaged to Ethen, but what reason was there for Vante or Edville to want anything to do with me?

The story was already ruined, it seemed. Although, the inevitable encounter of myself and Aria at the banquet and the gradual progression romance between her and Edville did seem to show that the story was at least trying to go as written.

"I can't predict a thing anymore." The problem wasn't simply that the story wasn't going as it should—it was that *I* was at the center of the changes. *What good could come of attracting attention from the male protagonists in this body?* One thing was for sure, I needed to stay away from the imperial palace.

The emperor seemed to think that I was some kind of budding genius that had only recently begun behaving maturely. If I could show him that it wasn't true at all, he would give up on trying to get Edville to meet me. I'd be busy trying to turn Aria into the empire's greatest singer, anyway. When he saw me busy with this endeavor instead of my father's business, he would likely realize his mistake.

"Let's just get home..." I walked toward the carriage. At home, I could maybe find some peace. I'd do nothing until my meeting with Aria tomorrow.



"What? Why are you back so early?"

"I wouldn't have gone if I'd known it was a blind date. I realized too late, so I came back as soon as I could."

“What?” May pestered me with questions, asking if something had gone wrong. I briefly summarized what had happened at the palace and walked right past him. He demanded more information, but I kicked him out and threw myself onto the bed.

“It’s his order. I’ll at least have to make it seem like I’m trying to get to know you.” Since when was he such an obedient son? He had to have some relationship with Aria at this point. That meant he should have outright refused!

“This is just ridiculous.”

How dare you say something so laced with meaning, as if meeting another woman in the middle of your budding relationship with Aria isn’t enough? You have no right to be a protagonist! I would’ve replaced him if I could. The more I thought about it, the more it bothered me. If he was destined to become the lover of my angelic Aria, his eyes must be fixed on her at all times. He didn’t know the value of what he had.

Bang! Bang!

“Hey, what do you mean, a blind date? Tell me more, damn it!” May pounded on my door. I’d wanted some rest, but he’d only pester me more if I didn’t tell him. My father would ask me the same questions, anyway. I’d tell the story and get it over. I opened my door.

“Don’t be so noisy. Come in.” *I’m only telling you once, so you’ll be my messenger to everyone else, May.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Did His Majesty really...?” May turned ashen. “Why would His Majesty be interested in you at all...?”

“Exactly. It can’t be helped that he sees me in a favorable light, but I already have a fiancé.” *I really have no clue, either, May.*

Usually, May would have scoffed and shot back some acerbic comment, but he seemed quietly lost in thought. “I don’t think our father knew. He told me you were going to meet the emperor.”

This was probably true and why I went completely unprepared. The emperor had deliberately fooled us. How could we have possibly known?

“But what worries me is... People already know that you were invited to the palace.”

“How would other people know?”

“Father’s been bragging about it left and right...” May replied, pressing his hand to his forehead.

Was this what the emperor had been counting on? Had he intended to spread rumors that the crown prince and I had met privately, sabotaging my engagement in the hope of linking me up with his son instead?

“I have no idea what His Majesty is thinking. Besides the fact that you already have a fiancé, why would he be interested in the likes of you?”

The likes of me? That was harsh. “Father’s been telling people that the spice project was my idea. His Majesty must be thinking I have an amazing talent for business.”

“Our father is the core of the issue. He probably praised you in front of the emperor, too. The emperor, not knowing who you are, took Father’s word for it,” May said, nodding his head as if the situation was clear to him.

He did have a point. The emperor really wasn’t likely to hear about me otherwise. My father was clearly involved. “Father probably didn’t know that things would come to this. I wonder what the duke’s family will think when they hear of this?” As my visit to the palace wasn’t a secret, it wouldn’t take long for people to figure out that I’d met with Edville. The duke, being interested in the affairs and rumors of high society, would soon hear of it, too. And so would Ethen. I sighed and said to myself, “What a burden this popularity is.” I didn’t need this. I gazed out the window with a tired look. Perhaps the duke would hear of this by the time the sun set.

“I’ll have to tell Father about this. If anyone asks about it, tell them you don’t know anything. Strange rumors might go around if you try and say more. Just say that you didn’t talk about much, all right?” May said.

“Don’t worry, May. I don’t have much to say, anyway.”

“All right,” May started for the door. “I’ll go tell Father. You just stay quiet.”



As Mary had expected, the duke heard of the meeting with Edville even before the sun set.

“I have no idea why the emperor arranged a private meeting between the crown prince and that girl,” the duke commented sourly. The secretary flinched slightly at the remark and did not offer any comment, just listening quietly.

“He surely knows the engagement between the marquess’s daughter and my son,” the duke said, grinding his teeth. He’d only recently begun to less regret promising marriage between the marquess’s daughter and his own son, but here was the emperor trying to snatch it away. “What do you think of this?” he asked Ethen.

Ethen was just as taken aback at the news. Mary used to make it so obvious that she liked him. None of her various outlandish actions that reached his ears failed to make him sigh. But funnily enough, she pretended to be docile around him—even if it was just her showing less of her unruly self. She still couldn’t manage to hide all of her faulty personality, and the vanity and pride made her look a fool. She’d changed completely, however, around the time of the birthday celebration.

“I will be sure to escort you to your next party. We should discuss the date of our engagement ceremony next year. It just wouldn’t do if I left my fiancé alone because of work,” he’d said.

“But I attend so many parties. Are you sure you can escort me every time?”

In the past, she’d complained that he wouldn’t escort her, but she suddenly started going to fewer parties, almost as if to mock him. She hadn’t even asked for an escort to the first banquet she’d attended after a while. It was obvious her interest in him had cooled.

“I don’t know what’s going on between the crown prince and Lady Mary, but she has been acting different lately.” Mary’s attentions being directed away from him was a good thing. So why did he feel this way?

Ethen bowed his head and continued, “She has been showing so little interest in me that I wouldn’t be surprised if someone else has caught her eye.”

“What did you do to displease that reckless girl, anyhow?” the duke said with a click of his tongue and gave Ethen a look that said, *You’re pathetic*. This was not how things were supposed to go. Even if she was acting a bit more mature lately, this was still the same Mary Bell he had known since youth.

The house of a duke was eminently marriageable, but it couldn’t be compared to the seat of the crown princess. The marquess’s daughter was well-known for her vanity. If the emperor and the crown prince set their eyes on her, not even a prenatal engagement would have any meaning. There was no way she would refuse such an opportunity.

There had been no formal engagement ceremony and no signing of papers between her and Ethen. The engagement had been a wholly verbal affair between the heads of the two households. Even if there had been a ceremony, nothing could stop Mary from breaking off the engagement.

“I can’t figure out what His Majesty is thinking.” The duke had the urge to go see the emperor right away, but knew that wasn’t possible. The engagement didn’t give the duke’s family the right to control every one of her private meetings, and if the emperor insisted that it had been about the business opportunity that Mary had advised her father upon, the duke would have nothing to say in return.

The emperor couldn’t have possibly anticipated that unpleasant rumors would circulate as a result of arranging a meeting with an engaged woman and his own unmarried son. However, if the emperor maintained that such hadn’t been his intention, who could dare say otherwise?

“So, what did those two talk about in the palace?”

“Not much is known about their conversation, but they apparently both acted very confused and spoke only briefly before parting.” That was a relief, at the very least. It wouldn’t do to be relieved that she wasn’t immediately interested in the crown prince, however.

The duke asked Ethen, “When was the last time you saw her?”

“The day after the marquess and marchioness returned from their business trip.”

More than a week ago. The duke furrowed his brow. “And what were you doing during all that time? Why haven’t you met her once again?”

“I’m sorry.” It had been a mistake not to request a meeting, but Ethen thought that Mary would ask him for an escort, anyway. Perhaps Ethen had been arrogant. He put on a bitter smile.

“The marquess isn’t the sort of man to ignore his daughter’s wishes for the

sake of power. It will be her decision that will matter in the end,” the duke said with a grave expression. The marquess’s daughter was finally starting to behave, and now the emperor had his sights on her. “Do whatever you can to keep Mary from taking an interest in the crown prince.”

“Yes, Father.”

It wasn’t clear what the emperor was thinking in trying to pair her and the crown prince, but they couldn’t simply sit by and watch. The marquess’s house had massive wealth, and the joining of the houses would result in great power. He couldn’t let those be taken from him.

“She has adored you since childhood, so she won’t easily fall for the crown prince. But nothing’s as sweet as power and social status. There’s no guarantee that she won’t fall for him in time. The crown prince is also good-looking, after all.”

“Yes,” Ethen nodded.

“You may leave. Make her your top priority for now.” Having been sent away, Ethen left the duke’s room and began to think, *The marquess’s daughter and the crown prince... Hmm.*

He recalled what Mary used to say as a child, “*I’m going to marry Ethen when I grow up.*”

“*Oh my, Mary, aren’t you a bit too young to talk about marriage?*” Her mother would say.

Her eyes used to sparkle every time she saw him. Her feelings seemed much too frivolous to be called love, but she’d never been indifferent toward him.

Ethen was puzzled. He realized that she’d been different from usual when they’d met at the marquess’s mansion two days after the celebration. She wasn’t the sort of person to show so little reaction to a gift. *Had she already lost all interest in me?*

“What did the duke say?” Heint asked, running right over as soon as Ethen returned to his room.

Ethen sighed and took a seat. “He says I should focus on Mary for now.”

“You never know with people, but who knew Lady Mary would change the way she did?” Heint chattered rather tactlessly. “She came by so often it was almost bothersome until only recently, but now she doesn’t even ask for you anymore. How could she?”

“Enough. That’s not for you to worry about.”

Heint finally shut up after the reprimand, looking slightly woeful. “Should I send a message to the marquess’s house?”

“Yes. It’s probably best to hear about what happened from her in person,” said Ethen, reaching for a pile of documents and acting like nothing was wrong.

Heint continued to chatter even after being told off. “An ordinary gift won’t do to bring her back. You said she didn’t seem to like the ruby ring you gave her last time, so you’ll have to take something more expensive and luxurious so she’ll at least give you a passing—”

“Heint.”

Heint clammed up at the frosty voice. He looked at Ethen cautiously. “I-I’ll go bring some letter paper.”

Ethen was left alone. He put both hands to his head, thinking. *Is she really tired of me?* Heint wasn’t entirely wrong. She’d always been exorbitant in her attentions toward him, so why was she hurting him like—*Wait... Hurting me? What am I thinking?*

Ethen dropped his pen onto the desk in shock. “Well, we’re engaged, so I suppose it’s to be expected that I’ll feel this way,” Ethen told himself with a nod. That was all there was to it. It would be strange if he expected less from her as his fiancé. He certainly didn’t feel sad or anything at this change in her. Ethen had been quietly repeating the assurances in his head several times by the time Heint arrived.

Heint extended a sheet of paper, “If you’ll write the letter, I’ll have it taken to the marquess’s mansion right away, my lord.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Damn it.” *Why haven’t I thought of this?* With my hands wrapped around my head, I glared at the letter on the table.

It read: *Will you grant me the honor of seeing you, as well?*

I felt a hint of anger in the sentence. I’d known that Ethen would hear of the meeting with the crown prince, but I hadn’t known that he’d react so quickly.

“My lady?” asked Aria with a puzzled look from across the table.

Recalling that I wasn’t alone, I cleared my throat and called Annie over. “I’ll write a reply after Lady Aria leaves, so please keep it for now.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“It looked like something important...” said Aria, looking worried.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing urgent. By the way, I changed the date rather suddenly, yet you managed to come.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. It’s fine.”

I’d been planning to meet Aria and explain my plan immediately after seeing the performance, but my schedule had gone awry because of the sudden invitation to the palace. “As I said last time, I sense great talent in you. I also realized something: it was divine intervention that I of all people saw that in you.”

“Divine intervention?”

“As I have the resources, it must mean that I’m to let the entire world know about you.” My lips moved effortlessly.

Aria blinked in confusion, but she didn’t remove her hand from mine as she listened carefully. “Even so... I did do some research after getting home. Becoming a singer who performs onstage requires that you receive training from very early on in childhood. There are also multiple preliminary steps you’re required to perform in the troupe. I’m a bit old for that, and I don’t have much time to spare for something other than making a living.”

You’re only nineteen. A bit old? Hardly. Before I could respond, however, Aria added, “I’m grateful that you think so highly of me, but... I have neither the talent nor the time. I came today to tell you that.” Contrary to the words she said, I could see a mix of regret and sadness on her face.

That’s a lie. I know you want to. After seeing that look, who in the world could possibly accept that answer and walk away? “Are you telling me there’s something wrong with my hearing?” I asked. Of course, this was definitely not

the right way to persuade her. *I meant to say to trust my ears. Damn it.*

"I didn't mean it like that," Aria said, waving her hand in denial. "It's just... I'm lacking in a lot of ways. I think it's too late for me to start something. My father might be right, maybe I should just get married and—"

"Rubbish!" *First thing I have to do is to separate Aria from that poor excuse of a father. All he did was gnaw away at Aria's self-esteem. What has he been telling his daughter?* "My lady, listen closely to what I'm about to say," I said, gazing at Aria with a grave expression. I went over the words I'd prepared to say to her over the past few days, took a breath, and spoke. "I told you last time that it's criminal for a genius to do something other than what she is gifted at."

"But I'm no geni—"

"Shh." I continued, "In that case, won't it also be hateful for me to do nothing after discovering such talent and having the resources to make something happen?" My words were quite baseless. Still, Aria was listening with a serious look on her face.

She was lucky it was me who was telling her these things. If she'd been born in the twenty-first century and met a modern-day swindler... I didn't even want to think about what might happen. "The dress I gave you last time wasn't free."

Her eyes widened and she gave me a look of confusion.

"It's an investment in a singer I'm going to make successful." And so my ruse began, my well-oiled tongue assisting me in the process.

"An investment?"

"Yes. I've recently taken an interest in business." I hadn't known that the unfounded spice rumor would help in this way, but I'd take it. The rumor would circulate no matter what I did, so why not capitalize on it?

"By business, do you mean..."

"I'm going to run a business that trains entertainers."

"Enter—what?"

Whoops. I'd accidentally used a twenty-first-century term. Feeling sheepish, I cleared my throat. "I'm going to train singers. Not ordinary singers, mind you, but those who will become the greatest stars of this empire."

"I didn't know such a thing existed."

"It will, once I start one," I said shamelessly. "Nothing looks simple when you're just starting out. Failing to make the first attempt out of fear of being mocked will get you nowhere."

"I see."

"Not that anyone would dare mock me," I added unnecessarily. When trying

to persuade someone, you couldn't show any trace of anxiety. I gave her a confident stare. "So, please don't feel indebted to me for any goodwill I show you. I'm not stupid enough to waste money on my investments." *That was perfect.* I could give Aria a reason to receive my gifts without feeling uncomfortable, and I could also enjoy my hobby.

"I-I've never heard of such things before."

"Of course, you haven't. This is an original idea that I've come up with." It wasn't original, but I decided to stick with the lie. I shrugged arrogantly. "No one else will do. I can't go scout people that already belong to a troupe, now can I?"

"But for me to become... Do you really think I can be a singer? I don't feel so confident." Aria's hesitation was palpable. She wanted in, but I was sure that it was practical problems that concerned her, problems regarding money and time. She was also probably worried about her father, who would be left alone at home.

"Don't worry too much. I'm the one who's offering this, so I'll be the one to take responsibility if things don't work out." I had more money than I knew what to do with, and Aria was still young. As for her father... I'd just leave him to take care of himself.

"I'm not going to make you work for nothing. I plan on pouring a lot of my money into this project, and nothing matters more than people when it comes to this entertainment business." People were the most important asset for entertainment companies, so I wasn't really lying. The only thing I omitted was that this enterprise was to be a hobby for me, meant solely for Aria's benefit. "So, please don't feel overwhelmed by the gifts that I give you from now on." Having finished rendering my speech, I crossed my arms and acted as casual as possible as I gazed at Aria.

"Do you really think I can do it?" Aria said with a mesmerized look. My enthusiastic pitch was working.

"Of course. Trust me," I said with complete confidence. I wasn't just trying to look more assertive in order to persuade Aria, I was truly confident. She had a proven "heavenly voice" that I'd read about in the novel, and she had great charms as the female protagonist. Then there was my money and knowledge as an idol fan. There was no way she could fail to be loved by the populace. "There's no way we can fail. But even if we do, don't be afraid. I'll take all the responsibility. There's only one thing that matters right now."

She looked at me hesitantly.

“It’s whether you are willing. That’s all that matters.” Various emotions flitted across Aria’s face. Worry, conflict, fear, and...

“I’ll try not to disappoint you.” There was also excitement and enthusiasm for a new challenge. “If you believe in me that much, I’ll give it a shot.”

I’d been right about Aria. Aria herself couldn’t have seen the look in her own eyes, but I’d seen hunger in them as she gazed at the stage that day. “Good,” I smiled. She was beautiful, talented, intelligent, and determined. “I’ll make you the greatest star in the empire. You won’t regret it.”



“I’ll send a carriage.”

“There’s no need—”

“Just do as I suggest,” I insisted.

After immediately agreeing to Aria’s request for a week to tie up loose ends—she did have work of her own, after all—I suggested that she join me at the mansion as soon as she was finished.

Aria smiled when I told her that I could also get her a separate house if she didn’t like the thought and answered, “It’s all right. My father’s never really interested in me as long as there’s food on the table.”

She’d likely been trying to say that staying at home was fine, but I gave an obvious frown. I didn’t like the sound of it. “See you then.”

After seeing Aria off, I let out a sigh, remembering something I’d forgotten: I had to reply to Ethen’s letter. I found myself even more troubled as I could guess why he’d sent it. Even if there was no love or trust in the relationship, I supposed no fiancé would be happy to know that their partner had met another man in private. I couldn’t just tell him that he would soon fall in love with someone else. Now I was the only one in a pickle.

“Annie, bring me some paper. I need to write a reply to Lord Ethen.” What could I write to make this situation less embarrassing for both of us? That I’d been tricked into going? That I wasn’t interested in the Crown Prince, and that he shouldn’t worry?

I sighed. All this was the damned emperor’s fault. Knowing my tongue would behave in front of the emperor, I’d expected things to be all right. How wrong I’d been! I couldn’t have refused his summons even if I had known that Edville would be there, but at the very least, I would have known what was coming. I could have prepared for my meeting with him a little.

I didn’t like the way Edville had talked, that he should at least pretend to

follow his father's command even though he had no interest in me at all. "Aria would be wasted on him," I said, shaking my head and going into my room to write up my reply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I thought for a long time, pen in hand, but eventually failed to come up with a proper response. What could I say to extricate myself from this situation?

“Why couldn’t he have just let things between us stay the way it used to be...” Though I was relieved that I seemed to have somewhat avoided the villainess route, I didn’t want to get involved with the male protagonists. I might have enjoyed it a little if my tongue hadn’t been so unruly but, in my current state, the ending would be far from happy. I didn’t want that at all.

Aria was the female protagonist, and just as she and I had somehow become acquainted at the celebration, they also would fall in love with her in the end. She would find her place eventually. If that were to happen anyway, I wanted to turn her into the kind of person people couldn’t ignore. It was obvious she’d be ignored by people if left alone, and I didn’t want that to happen. And if I had to admit it, my liking for her also played a part in all this.

[Dear Lord Ethen,]

That was the kind of peaceful life I sought to live, so why was something like this happening? I glared at the single written line on the paper and sighed.

Whatever, let’s just get this over with. I adjusted my grip on the pen and began to write.



“Lord Ethen has arrived at the main gate.”

Ethen came to the mansion a bit past lunchtime on the next day. May gazed out with a look of distaste. “Is this really necessary? He really came, despite being told that nothing happened?” He looked displeased. May was probably this way because we’d have to talk about the subject again even though Father had already explained things to the duke.

“He must like me that much.” I reckoned Ethen’s life wasn’t so easy, either, considering that he had to run over like this and check on things even though he had no interest in me.

“Are you really going to talk to him alone?”

“Of course. Lord Ethen isn’t *your* fiancé.” *This is my engagement, so I’ll take care of it.* Having steeled myself, I took a deep breath and walked forward. “It’s been a while, Lord Ethen.”

“Yes, it has, my lady.”

Formalities were exchanged in the lobby. Where could I begin? “As you’ll have heard from my father, my meeting with the prince was completely unexpected.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

If you know, why did you come? Briefly at a loss, I blinked at him.

“That’s not what I’m here to talk about.”

But what else was there to talk about? I couldn’t even begin to guess.

“I heard that you haven’t been to a single social event since the Schuhern banquet.”

“That’s right. My interests have moved elsewhere.”

Ethen studied my face, hesitated for a moment then replied, “I heard that a rude lady insulted you at the banquet. Is that somehow connected to this?” He was referring to something that happened a week ago. To think he was asking about this now! I felt like I could see into his every motive.

“There’s no way I’d be bothered over something like that.” *You don’t have to pretend like you care all of a sudden, so don’t go and bully the poor girl using me as an excuse.* “I’m just tired of parties, that’s all. I’ve found something more fun. I’ve had more than my share of fun at the parties, so it’s time I tried other things,” I said, being chatty on purpose. I looked at Ethen again.

Contrary to my expectations, he didn’t look relieved, nor did he ask again whether the incident really wasn’t the cause. A complicated look crossed his face. “They’re boring for you now?”

“Yes. In hindsight, I’m not certain why I liked such an unproductive pastime so much. I plan to enjoy myself doing other things from now on,” I said, wanting him to understand that I didn’t intend to find enjoyment in parties any longer. Ethen’s expression stiffened even more. *What in the world? What is wrong with him?*

“In that case, you won’t need an escort anymore.” His words finally reminded me of something he’d said in the past: *Maybe not every time, but I’ll be by your side as much as I can.*

“I suppose not,” I replied. But that was a good thing for Ethen, wasn’t it? Escorting Mary couldn’t have been anything but a waste of time for him. “Please don’t mind me. I’m sure you have much to do, and you probably have no time to think about such things.”

“What do you mean? I am your fiancé. It is my duty to take care of you,” Ethen corrected me, his brow furrowing in his sincerity.

I know you're busy. You really don't need to. "I didn't want to bother you. You're a busy man. I didn't think it necessary to tell you about such petty affairs." *I'm fine, so please pay me no mind.* With a smile, I strove to give the impression that I was completely fine. He still looked concerned.

"But we can tell each other about petty affairs no matter how trivial. Aren't we close enough to do that?"

Are we? I blinked in puzzlement. In the novel, when he said we were engaged or I his fiancée, those were only empty words, as he'd paid no attention to Mary.

"If it's what you want, I'll share with you from now on. But what happened at the party was nothing worth mentioning. Please don't be concerned about that."

"No, I am also at fault for not asking first. I'll try and be more attentive."

But you don't have to. I laughed in an attempt to end the conversation.

"When can I see you again, my lady?" Ethen asked. He looked a little taken aback and disappointed, resembling a puppy with a drooping tail.

"We can meet like this, can't we?"

"Pardon?" Ethen asked, his eyes widened.

"If you wish to see me, you can contact me and come and see me, or we can always fix a date." There was no way Ethen had actually wanted to see me. He wasn't the one who would be concerned over the meeting with the crown prince. Ethen had to have something to tell his nasty father at home, so I'll be kind and help him out a little. "Would you prefer to only see me at parties, perhaps?"

"Of course not!" I'd been joking, but Ethen looked almost offended.

"I didn't really think so. Who wouldn't want to meet me? Haha." The joke just further soured the mood. I cleared my throat. In any case, it should serve as reassurance that I wouldn't throw him to the curb.

"You suddenly refused to show up for social events, and I was worried that something might have happened to you," Ethen said, gazing right into my eyes. It was a pretty nice cover for his real motives.

My stomach twisted in discomfort with his handsome face directed right at me. I backed away a little. "Of course. You must be worried, having such a charming fiancé." Giving a nonchalant laugh, I nodded and said, "But there's no need to worry. There's something I'm working on. That's all the reason there is."

"Will you officially be taking a part in your family's business?"

"No. This is a private project." *A project to turn a woman you'll fall in love with into a star.*

The biggest reason I wasn't breaking off the engagement myself was that the

event was what caused Ethen to properly be aware of his own feelings. That had been the scene where Ethen, who'd lived all his life as a successor of the duke and an obedient son, had thrown off everything that bound him and chose to be honest for the very first time. I couldn't ruin that scene, even if I'd ruined others.

"You'll also stand to benefit if it goes well, haha," I said.

"Is that right? I'll be looking forward to it then."

Well, that you should. I'm going to create a perfect female protagonist who everyone will fall for, especially you.



"I'll be taking my leave. I'll be in touch," Ethan said on his way out.

"Have a safe trip back, Lord Ethen." Mary saw Ethen off from the mansion. Though he'd said his goodbye politely enough, there was quite a jumble of emotions inside him.

"I'm just bored of the parties, that's all. I've found something more fun," she'd said. But had she really been talking about only parties? Hindsight seemed to give him more clarity. Mary didn't seem all that interested in him right now.

"Perhaps I was too complacent." Frankly, Ethen had had his reservations about this engagement up until now. Sometimes he'd even wished that Lady Mary, who'd always given him too much attention, would despise him.

He recalled her puzzled look when he asked her whether they didn't have a relationship in which they could tell each other about their petty daily affairs. It had brought home the fact that this relationship had never been one of trust or intimacy. When Mary had started to act slightly differently, he'd simply been a little relieved. His engagement to her wouldn't be canceled, anyway. He was getting peace without any effort. What more could he want? The thought had been nothing but a misunderstanding.

"Please don't mind me. I'm sure you have much to do, and you probably have no time to think about such things," she'd told him.

He had failed to play his part as a fiancé, neglecting her. He should have known that Mary's feelings could change. He'd been too complacent. Once, she'd stared at him to the point where he'd been uncomfortable, but now she was the one avoiding the eye contact. She even backed away when all he'd done was look at her face.

He sighed. It felt oddly wrong. Of course, he didn't hold any special feelings toward Mary, but he did feel guilty at failing to fulfill his duties as a fiancé.

"As things are, I have no right to call myself her fiancé." One had to fulfill his

duty as a fiancé if he expected the same from his fiancé. Even without the duke's command, he couldn't simply continue to ignore her as he'd done until now. The emperor's unpredictable ways aside, Lord Vante had also shown an interest in her, and very openly at that. He couldn't ask that she understand his desire to keep this engagement intact without being as expressive.

The bitterness he felt was simply guilt for his own mistake. He thought about Mary's dispassionate look and sighed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“You’re going to support singers?”

“It’s not supporting, it’s *investing*.”

“Do you wish to own a troupe, Mary?”

I’d begun to explain my grand plans to my family at dinner after Ethen had left. Investing in singers seemed to be an unfamiliar concept in this world. My parents seemed to have difficulty understanding my thoughtful explanations.

“Would you like us to introduce you to Lady Priscilla? No, we could just invite the entire Leberika Troupe—”

“I don’t need a troupe, Father.” He seemed to think that I’d grown interested in singers after watching the opera performance last week. “I’m trying to start a business.”

“A business?” My father paused, serious. Perhaps we could finally have a proper conversation. “This doesn’t seem like a conversation fit for the dinner table. You can come to my room after dinner.”

He truly was the head of the largest merchant group in the empire. I marveled inwardly at my father’s earnest attitude, which contrasted with his usual playful one. I lifted my fork again and ate my meal.



“Please continue where you left off and give me some details.”

“All right. As I mentioned earlier, the business I’m thinking about isn’t one that supports singers but instead discovers and promotes them.”

“But troupes are already doing that, aren’t they?”

“The public grows infatuated with people who attain fame through unusual means,” I explained with a serious look. “I’m not making troupe singers, but singers to excite the general public.”

“Do you think that’s possible? The nobles like the singers because they perform exclusively for the nobles. The song would lose value if anyone could hear it,” replied my father somberly. This meant he didn’t think I was going about on a whim, at the very least.

“That’s precisely the kind of thinking I wish to refute.” As my father had said, culture and entertainment at present were a privilege granted to nobles. All the commoners got to enjoy were mere puppet shows in street stalls during festivals.

Songs and operas were a luxury that commoners couldn't even dream of.

"But most people in the empire are commoners, aren't they?" If the commoners got a chance to see a singer in person—something that was perceived to be reserved for nobility—they couldn't help but be interested.

"Both commoners and nobles have ears. And nobles are sensitive to trends. At first, they might dismiss a singer for commoners, but if that singer has enough skill and grows popular enough, they, too, will become more interested." My voice was full of confidence. "And I already have someone who will allow me to execute my plan perfectly."

"Hmm." My father seemed lost in thought for a moment. Though I knew for certain people would take an interest, this was probably an extremely unfamiliar topic to him. "Mary, as you know, your mother and I have tried to make sure that you got everything you ever wanted. I don't consider any sum of money wasted if I can let you have what you want—be it clothing or gems." He paused again. It was with a grave look that he continued to speak. "But running a business is extremely difficult and, knowing this, I find it hard to simply tell you to go ahead. Your perfect plan might not play out as you expect, and I'd like to spare you from the despair that could follow, if I can."

I'd thought he'd been listening earnestly, but he seemed to think that this was simply one of his unruly daughter's whims.

"If you've thought up that idea because you like singers, I'll buy you a troupe and a theater. Then you'll be able to see all the singers you want."

"It's not a troupe I want! Why won't you listen!" My tongue spat irritably. What I'd meant to say was, *That's not what I mean.*

Despite my rudeness, my father seemed uneasy and tried his best to calm me down. "But Mary—"

"You said you'd grant me a wish, remember?" I was left with no choice, so I pulled out my trump card. "I remember you telling me that since the spice project is probably going to succeed, you'd grant me whenever I wanted." This made me look pigheaded. I hadn't wanted to resort to this method, but persuasion was probably not going to work.

"D-did I say that?"

"I don't need a cruise ship. I'll use my wish now." Beads of sweat formed on his brow. "You're not going to deny promising me a wish, are you?"

"Are you sure about this? You should use it on something that will please you more than—"

"I know better than anyone what pleases me," I said, cutting him off and

puffing out my chest a bit with confidence.

A few seconds passed as I maintained eye contact. My father, frowning with persistent confusion, finally relented. “All right. All right. I suppose it can’t be helped.”

“So, is that a yes?”

“If you want it that badly, do as you wish. But Mary, you can quit at any time you like. I don’t want you to experience any hardships,” said my father, rubbing his chin with worry.

“Don’t worry, Father.” *Capital and time have now been secured. All I need to do is to act.* “Have I ever disappointed you before?” I added. I had, actually. Many times. This tongue was a liar’s. “I’ll do just fine this time, as well. Don’t you worry.” This time, however, I really would.

“All right, sweetheart,” said my father, trying to smile at my conviction.



“You’d really like me to sing here?” Aria’s voice wavered.

“Yes,” I said with a casual nod. I could understand her confusion. After all, this place was the small church where Aria played the piano on weekends.

“Did you think you’d start on a big stage?” I asked. Given her talents, Aria would have no trouble performing on any stage, of course, but storytelling was an important element in the birth of a star. “Taking slow steps is the most important.”

“I see. I understand,” said Aria, her eyes shining as she nodded despite the rather obscure explanation.

“Hey Aria, what are you doing?”

“Hey Aria, why aren’t you playing the piano for us today?”

“Can you play ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ for us?”

The stage was a corner of a small church. The audience consisted of the neighborhood kids as well as the priests and nuns. A few parents had also come along to be with their children, filling our shabby performance hall.

“She’ll be singing today, actually.”

“Singing?” said the kids, who all turned to Aria at once. They giggled excitedly at this prospect and soon they were chattering loudly, lost in their own little world.

“I can sing, too!”

“Mina wants to sing, too!”

“You’re tone-deaf!”

“What do you know!”

The sudden chaos made my head hurt. I put a hand to my forehead. *Will this be okay?* I had to quiet the kids first. “You kids, shut it!” I had meant to say, *Children, could you tone it down a slight bit?* But the children immediately went silent, ducking their heads nervously. “This is an opportunity to see a performance for free, one that you will never be able to see later even if you wanted and had the money for it.”

“Woohoo!”

“Hey Aria, are you a good singer?”

“I want to sing, too. I can sing ‘Little Star.’”

Children were children, no matter how many times you warned them. It didn’t take more than a few seconds for them to grow chatty again, and they were now approaching the piano.

“Play the piano!”

“I want to sing! Me too!”

“Why you little... Back to your seats!” *Kids... please, can we have a little silence?* I seemed to have made a mistake in selecting the venue. I’d selected the church thinking it’d be better for Aria if her first stage was familiar. At this rate, the chaos was unlikely to settle down.

“My lady, one moment.” Aria hadn’t lost her composure despite the kids running all over the place. She dissuaded me as I grabbed a child who’d run up to the piano. She patted the head of the child I was holding up in the air and said, “Want me to play your favorite song, Mina?”

“Yes, please.”

“Lady Aria...” I’d call her here to sing. She couldn’t be playing the piano like usual. I pouted. Aria grinned over at me and sat in front of the piano, her fingers traveling over the keys.

“Chicks go chirp, ducks go quack...” The child in my arms kicked excitedly and sang along. “Smack when eating, snore when sleeping.”

The other kids also sang along, no longer as unruly as before. *Who is she, the Pied Piper?* I was completely baffled. Seeming content after joyfully singing a whole song, the children stopped chattering and took their seats in front of the piano.

At least these kids are quiet now. I sighed and looked at Aria.

“Would it be all right if I sing this time?” she said.

“Yes!”

“But we get to sing again after!”

Aria nodded in agreement, having deftly controlled the children.

Plink-a-plink. A heavy melody filled the small church, contrasting heavily with the simple tones of the children's song.

"Wow..."

When Aria's voice spread over the piano after a short accompaniment, the parents and the other people in the church gave exclamations of surprise. All eyes were fixed on Aria. Her voice was mesmerizingly beautiful, as always. I watched, smiling with pride, at the riveted audience. It was a successful first performance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Clap, clap, clap! Thunderous applause filled the small, dilapidated church. The children who had been busy talking among themselves and the parents who'd been occupied with watching the children all looked surprised and captivated as they applauded enthusiastically.

"Again! Again!"

"Can't you come and sing every day?"

"I want to learn how to sing!"

The children clung to Aria, beaming. Aria smiled awkwardly and turned to me.

"No. Lady Aria will soon be very busy, and she won't have time to play with you kids." The children pouted and glared. *Looking at me like that won't change a thing. Aria needs to make her way out into a bigger world.*

"I'm sorry. But I'll stay here a bit longer today. Is that all right, my lady?" Aria asked. Her eyes shone with affection for the children.

I was going to go to a boutique, but I can't refuse if you look at me like that. "Perhaps... Just for an hour."

"Thank you, my lady." Aria smiled broadly and spoke to the children. "What song would you like next?"

"I want 'Baby Star!'"

"No, not that one. 'Puffy Clouds,' please!"

This was just like Aria, surrounded by children as though she were a kindergarten teacher. At a place like this, she looked like a saint.

"I didn't know Miss Aria had such a beautiful voice."

"Indeed, only an angel could sing like she does..."

"If I'd known, I'd have asked her to join the choir instead of playing the piano."

The parents, who'd only had eyes for their children before, exchanged comments about Aria.

This is good. Popularity always begins with gossip. The light tones of the piano ensued once more. *She can sing while playing the piano, and she's good at both. She's got the perfect talent.*

"But I wonder who that other lady is?"

"Is there anyone in this neighborhood who can wear such expensive clothes?"

"Even the dress Cotton was bragging about wasn't fancier than that."

You people know I can hear you, right? I was the mystery woman who had appeared with Aria and people were taking an interest. I wore clothes that looked obviously expensive, and it was easy to tell I had a temper. My presence alone was enough to attract attention. It was to be expected I'd attract attention as a noble lady—although in name only—who had suddenly appeared with another lady in tow.

Perhaps because of my fierce-looking face or the way I haughtily crossed my arms, no one came over to talk. Until the priest approached.

"Excuse me, miss. May God's blessing be with you always. I'm Father Taniel."

"May God bless you, as well."

This man had a friendly face. "I don't think I've seen you around here before. Was it Aria who told you about our church?"

"It wasn't because of her invitation that I came, but I did accompany her."

Father Taniel smiled gently and took a step closer to me. "How do you know Miss Aria?"

"What business is that of yours?"

He calmly continued, "Anyone who frequents this church knows that Aria is a pleasant young lady. But no one except the children has really approached her. Perhaps because of her noble status."

"Surprising. I didn't think she'd tell others that she was of the nobility."

"It wasn't her who gave out the information. Her father—"

Oh, that plague of a man. No doubt he'd barged into the church and shouted to everyone about his "noble house."

"There were people who tried to speak to her and befriend her before, but after that incident, as I said, no one but the children would approach her. It is nice to see her with someone her age," Father Taniel said with a gratified smile as he watched Aria play with the children. "And that led me to take an interest in you, Aria's friend."

"Her friend?" I thought for a moment. Aria and I had seen each other quite a few times, and we were now working together. Yet we still addressed each other as "Lady." Had we ever engaged in a conversation that wasn't businesslike?

"Are you not her friend?" Father Taniel asked, looking slightly troubled by my silence.

A friend? A friend... "Yes, I am her friend." Weren't enjoying each other's company and being able to trust each other the qualities of a friendship? There was no reason not to call our relationship a friendship. "I'm also her investor and

her fan.”

“A fan?”

Oh, the term may not exist in this world yet. How could I explain? I thought for a moment. “It means that I like her and wish to encourage her.”

“Oh, I see! In that case, I’d also like to be a fan of Miss Aria’s,” Father Taniel said with a genial smile.

I had nothing to lose by increasing Aria’s fanbase. I fixed my gaze on her. “All right. But I’m the number one fan.”

“Haha, I see. Though I’m not number one, I shall still cheer her on as passionately,” Father Taniel said, laughing. “I leave her in your care. I only say a few words of greeting to her every Sunday, but I have known her for a few years. I suppose it gives me the right to meddle. I’ve never actually seen her that happy.” Every word made it clear that he had Aria’s best interests at heart.

It was to be expected. Aria wasn’t attractive only to my eyes or those of the male protagonists, after all. It would be strange not to adore a glowing individual like her.

“I’m glad that she has a good friend.”

I nodded quietly as I watched the peaceful scene. Aria played the piano and children sat around her, singing along.



“How was today?” I asked. We were in the carriage on our way back to the mansion.

“It was really fun. I was a little nervous, but I was happy with all the compliments,” Aria replied excitedly. “I was worried I wouldn’t be able to sing with all the people watching, or that people might not like my singing. I suppose it was the children who helped me relax. I stopped worrying at some point.”

“You’re a natural on stage,” I replied with a shrug. I’d believed that she’d do well and that it would be fine even if she didn’t. This had been her first time, after all. “I wouldn’t invest in someone who couldn’t even do something like this.”

“Ha-ha,” Aria laughed, looking a little embarrassed. “I never thought it would be so much fun to sing in front of people. I thought simply watching someone else do it was a happy experience. Now I feel like I’m dreaming.”

“You can’t get this excited already. We’re just getting started.” Dreams had to be big. She couldn’t be satisfied with the way it was already. I continued, my mouth setting, “Today was just practice. You practiced standing in front of

people and singing with an audience. I told you, didn't I? With my capabilities, I could put you on the most prestigious stage in the empire right now if I wanted. But that would be meaningless."

The public appreciated success stories that began at rock bottom, rather than people who had always been at the top. If someone nobody had ever heard of suddenly appeared on some big stage just because she caught the eye of a marquess's daughter, the reception would be cold.

"It's meaningless for me to put you over the top by myself. What we want is love and acknowledgment from the public. You need to convince your audience on your own." This was crucial. She would start in the murky depths and make her way up to the light. "You want to let everyone listen to you sing. That means we have a series of steps to take."

Aria nodded. "I'll work hard. I'll be sure to pay you back for all your support."

"I don't need any recompense. What could I possibly want from you? Nothing you can give me would be more expensive than the things I already have." *I appreciate the thought, but please use the money for yourself. I have plenty.*

"It's the gesture that matters, isn't it?"

"Then all the more reason not to give me any gifts. But I appreciate the thought." My tone wasn't exactly the gentlest, but Aria beamed instead of looking offended.

"All right."

"By the way, you're better with the piano than I expected. I thought you'd only learned a little as a child. Have you been practicing?" Singing while playing an instrument was difficult. I hadn't checked on her piano skills because I'd known how amazing her voice was. I figured her voice would cover any slight mistakes, and such mistakes would make her only human at the start. However, what I'd seen her do today wasn't a hobbyist level of skill.

"I got permission to play whenever I wanted in return for playing on Sundays," Aria said shyly. "It was my only hobby."

I knew it. She really was a gem begging to be found. There's a saying that genius cannot beat effort, and that effort can't beat enjoyment. Aria was a genius *and* she kept putting in effort. She even enjoyed singing and playing the piano. "You're such a heroine..."

"Pardon?"

"Hmm? Did I say something?" The word had unintentionally slipped off my tongue.

Aria looked puzzled but I feigned ignorance. "You just said something about a

heroine—”

“I meant you’ll be the heroine on stage, of course.” I was getting better at cooking up lies. “Anyhow, that was a fantastic start. Remember what today felt like and keep working hard at it. All right?”

“Yes, I will work hard,” Aria said, nodding.

Stories of Aria would begin to spread from today onward, starting at the marketplaces. They wouldn’t be all that exciting at first, but the news that a singing lady with the face of an angel was going around the churches in the capital would soon spread. Then we’d go from church to street performances, then to small performance halls, then to bigger venues. This was only the first step in my plan. It was important not to get overconfident as we prepared for the next step, but so far so good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Have you heard?”

Mary Bell, the hot potato of high society, was once again the topic of conversation. Things were not at all surprising so far. However, one surprising twist was that this time it wasn't because of some mishap.

“Lady Mary has apparently been up to some strange things lately.”

“Oh my, tell me about it. When hasn't she?” said some obscure lady who laughed at Mary's expense.

Other women usually wouldn't have dared speak this way of Mary in such a public place, but she hadn't made a public appearance in a whole week. There was no need to lower voices today.

“She hasn't been seen at any banquet lately. What in the world has she been up to?”

“Well, she's been going around with a viscount's daughter and singing.”

“Lady Mary is singing?” said another lady, eyes wide in surprise.

The lady who'd spoken first waved in denial and corrected herself. “Oh, no. She has the other lady sing while she watches from the back.”

“She has the lady sing? Well, is that lady from a troupe or something? Or does she have experience as an apprentice?”

The chatty ladies gave their attention to the lady who'd brought up the subject. She talked excitedly. “No, no, that's not it. You remember the lady who spilled wine on Lady Mary?”

“I do. It felt so good to watch that.”

“That's who Lady Mary is hanging around with!”

The ladies murmured amongst themselves. Was this truly the Lady Mary Bell they knew? They would have doubted less if she'd set out to be a singer herself. She always made a racket whenever she thought someone else was hogging attention. But to hear that she was actually *supporting* someone?

“Are you sure this isn't some fake rumor?”

“Exactly. Not that we think you're lying, my lady. Even so, to think that Lady Mary would act in such a way...”

All of the women looked doubtful as they spoke amongst themselves.

“Has she really grown up, do you think?”

“I heard she had a private audience with the crown prince recently. The emperor seems to be quite interested in her—”

“Oh my, I heard about that, too. Come to think of it, the marquess’s new spice business was based largely on input from Lady Mary, wasn’t it?”

The ladies shared updates on Mary’s recent activities, each offering something they’d heard.

“I wonder how that lady charmed her way into the sights of the unruly Lady Mary.”

“I saw Lady Mary at the Schuherm mansion last time. She immediately got upset because Lady Iris said a few unpleasant things about her companion.”

A green-haired lady joined the heated conversation. She listened for a bit before speaking. “Is Lady Mary still bringing that lady along wherever she goes?”

“L-Lady Iris,” one of the ladies stammered. Iris remained calm.

“Pay me no mind. Please continue. What do you mean by Lady Mary is still going around with that other lady?”

“Hm, I suppose you didn’t know.” The lady cleared her throat in embarrassment. She began to detail the rumors about Mary and Aria once again. She summarized the rumors that Lady Mary had been acting strange, that after meeting Aria at the emperor’s birthday celebration, Lady Mary started going around with her—a lady from a ruined noble house—and making her sing. She said, “Lady Mary told people that she was Lady Aria’s ‘investor.’”

“Investor?”

“Yes. That dress Lady Aria wore at the Schuherm party was actually a gift from Lady Mary. She’s even staying with Lady Mary now and receiving special treatment.”

“My goodness. At the marquess’s house?”

The news was getting harder and harder to believe. Lady Mary would never invite another lady over privately unless it was for a party.

“Not even Lady Ashley nor Lady Lester are invited privately that often...”

Iris bunched her fists inside the sleeves of her dress. Mary had always ignored her requests for an invitation. “Has she really changed or something?”

“Well, from the way she talked last time, I don’t think she’s changed a bit...” said one of the ladies, throwing a cautious glance at Iris.

Iris didn’t think Mary had changed, either. If Mary seemed like a completely different person, she wouldn’t have felt so betrayed. In fact, she would have welcomed the change and doubled her efforts to approach and befriend Mary. “Of course, she didn’t change. She’s always been very fickle. I suppose her interests have simply switched focus for the time being,” Iris said.

Mary herself hadn't changed, even if she was no longer showing up at parties and accompanying herself with different people. Mary was still as careless with her tongue as ever, not caring what her listeners thought.

"I'm sure she'll forget about this new fad of hers soon enough and return to the parties," Iris said with a forced smile.

"So, how good is this lady at singing?" asked a woman, trying to change the subject.

"She can't be *that* good. She's not even from a troupe."

"If she really was skilled, Mary would have had her join one."

"Exactly. If she really wanted to show off, she would have bought a theater by now and sent out invitations everywhere. I don't know the lady, but the poor, innocent thing is going to end up disappointed."

The conversation, which had settled briefly, was now getting fired up once more. None of the ladies expected Aria to be a good singer. But they were curious. Truly, if she were talented, Lady Mary would have already made the rounds with her bragging. She loved that sort of thing. Lady Aria must be a terrible singer, which must be the reason why she was only performing in the streets.

"I would like to listen to her sing, though."

"Apparently, they're visiting the churches in the capital, where the lady is made to sing. I suppose I could use a prayer since I haven't prayed in a long time. Maybe I could run into her."

"Oh, you wicked girl."

The ladies exchanged jokes, falling deeper into gossip. Iris, who'd been biting her lip in quiet irritation, started to feel a little better and joined in. "I pity the lady, actually. Doing such useless things will only make marriage harder for her. As if it wasn't hard enough," Iris laughed. There was no reason for Iris to see Aria as a competitor. She would be nothing once Lady Mary abandoned her.

"When that happens, I'll perhaps pay her a visit. I owe her an apology for my rudeness last time," Iris said, letting her anger cool. "I'd like to hear her sing, as well. What is it about her singing that managed to capture Lady Mary's attention, even if it's to be short-lived?"



"Hmm. Shall we go to this place tomorrow? Or here?" I was deep in thought with a map of the capital spread out before me. *I've already been to this place, and that... It's closer to the main street, so we could probably go there after*

word spreads a little more.

“What in the world are you up to?” May said, giving me a look of scorn as I stared gravely at the map.

“It’s none of your business.” *But May, when my plans are complete, you’ll see me differently.*

“My friends make fun of me because of you, and I have nothing to say to them. It’s embarrassing.”

“Cut them off, then.” *You really shouldn’t be friends with people who say things like that.*

“You know what? Forget it. There’s something you should know, though.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve been invited to the imperial palace.”

“What!” *An invitation? I don’t have good memories of that place.* “What for?”

“I don’t know what’s in His Majesty’s mind. You’re not going by yourself this time. It’s the ‘children of the House of Bell’ who have been invited,” said May. He held out a letter. I quickly snatched it from him and opened it.

“Huh? It’s not just us who have been invited.” Contrary to my concern, the invitations had probably been sent to others, as well. It was an invitation to a tea party at the palace. The invitation said something about the “future leaders of the younger generation gracing the party with their presence.”

“I’m busy, though,” I said, glancing over at May.

“Don’t tell me you’re not going? You must go this time. You can block out one day, can’t you?” May said.

But every single day matters right now.

“Father’s been letting you have your way because he made you a promise. But if you reject an imperial invitation because of your hobby, he might stop supporting it.”

I can’t let that happen. It looks like I have no choice. I checked the date in the invitation. It was a week from now, so I had plenty of time to inform Aria. “I wonder how many invitations have been sent out? They must not have invited just anybody. I’m sure only people my level are invited.”

“Well, I’d guess around twenty,” May shrugged.

Ethen would be invited, of course. It wasn’t likely that Aria would be, though.

“Anyway, I won’t try and stop you from whatever you’re doing right now, but make sure you come to the tea party.”

Was an imperial tea party in the novel? The story was focused on Aria, so I can’t be sure... I don’t remember this part. This can’t be the emperor’s another

attempt to set up blind dates or something, can it?

“I’ll have to stay with Lord Ethen that day.”

“Yes, you do that. I doubt anyone will try to pick a fight with you when you’re with your fiancé, the hereditary duke,” May said, nodding enthusiastically as if begging me to do just that.

“No one will dare pick a fight with me, even if he’s not with me.” *They’ll most likely fear that I’ll grab them by the hair or something.*

“Yes, yes. Just remember what I told you.”

“All right. Get out if you’re done.” *I’m sorry, May, but setting a day aside for something else means my plans will be disrupted. I’ll be busier than usual for the following week, so please understand.*

“This isn’t your room, you know,” grumbled May.

He had a point. This was a shared study. “Stay, then.” *Do what you like.* I turned back to the map. *This place won’t do... I should go check out that church tomorrow.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You were invited, too?” I was so shocked that my jaw dropped after hearing what she said. I even forgot to nag Aria for being late.

“Yes. My father stopped me to ask what the letter was about, and that’s why I came late. I’m sorry,” Aria said, looking remorseful. Had that man attached an alarm to the post box? How did he manage to read all the important letters like this?

“Give it here.” *Can I see it, too?* Aria handed her letter over without hesitation. It was the identical invitation I’d received, complete with the imperial seal. It featured the words, “To Lady Aria Peridot.”

“Hmm...” *How should I interpret this?* The way I saw it, there were two possible reasons. The first possibility was that word was starting to spread about Aria, leading the emperor to take an interest in her. It wasn’t likely that the emperor recalled seeing Aria at his birthday celebration since that hadn’t been the case in the novel. But now that rumors had spread about me going around with some viscount’s daughter, the emperor might have invited her to lure in the one he was truly currently interested in, me.

The second possibility was that Edville was behind this. I didn’t know how things were going in that quarter, but from the way Count Schuher’s daughter was introduced, the two seemed to have continued their secret meetings. That would mean that, although things were progressing rather unpredictably at the moment, their romance was making headway.

This wasn’t entirely probable, though. In the story, Edville revealed his identity to Aria close to the hunting tournament. That meant Aria didn’t know who Edville really was yet. It wasn’t likely that Edville would invite her in such terms.

But things were different from the novel right now, and word about Aria must have had started to spread. It might mean that Edville wanted to make clear to everyone that he was interested in her, and that she was off limits.

“Hmm...” I pondered, staring down at the invitation.

“Is there something wrong?” Aria nervously asked.

Whoops. I was making my concern too obvious. “It is indeed from the imperial palace.”

“What do I do? The imperial palace! Can a person like me really go to a place like that?”

What do you mean, a person like you? If you don't deserve to be there, then no one does. "Don't worry. I'll be there with you." I'll draw the attention away from you, so don't you worry.

"But everyone there must be used to those gatherings. I haven't even fully familiarized myself with the etiquette required at banquets and tea parties. I'm worried," she clutched her hands together.

"You don't need to be worried. It's not like you'll be kicked out for making a few mistakes." If that were the case, Mary would have been kicked out hundreds of times by now. Aria might be dismissed as a girl from an insignificant family, of course, but she had nothing to worry about as I would be with her the whole time. "We won't be able to visit any churches on the day of the event, so we need to get busy beforehand," I said. My decision to make a church Aria's first stage had brought great success, and Aria's angelic looks and heavenly voice had won over many listeners in a short period of time.

"Could you come to our church again next week?"

"We're not trying to buy your services with money, but we'll make sure you don't leave empty-handed..."

There were already people who were trying to get her to come again, even if it took compensating her in secret. But we haven't started this just to be satisfied with paltry rewards.

"This time, we're going to plan out where to go next in advance. If we inform people where we're going, there will definitely be people who will come to see you again."

"To see me?" Aria asked incredulously.

Aria, don't underestimate the devotees and manic fans. They will come to see you even if you perform in a different country.

"Oh, she's an angel!"

"What a privilege to hear that voice."

Aria didn't know, but I always watched the crowd from the back and saw their reactions. The audiences watched her not with surprise, but with admiration and passion.

"The look on their faces... We've already won. Ha-ha-ha..." I said with a menacing laugh, hands on my hips. I was getting used to this evil laugh. I guess humans really are adaptable.

"What look?"

"Never mind that," I said, changing the subject quickly. "Starting next week, you'll be performing outdoors, not indoors. Best prepare yourself."

Word had already spread a bit throughout the capital. There were rumors that an angelic woman was making the rounds visiting churches and singing beautiful songs. And that her voice was the sound of the heavens... But my plan wasn't to get Aria into some church choir, and I couldn't have her visiting only churches. It was time for the next step.

"I'm telling you, I'm only going to give you the minimum amount of help. I'm not going to mobilize a crowd or rent a venue." This was the most important part of the plan. It had to look like Aria was doing this on her own.

It hadn't been hard to ask Aria's church to give her a chance. As for the other churches, I would be lying if I said I hadn't exerted any influence.

"Change your schedule."

"Pardon?"

"I'll pay you, if need be. I need to use the room with the piano during busy times in the church." It wouldn't have been good for her publicity if she were to be rejected from her random church visits trying to sing. Although Aria didn't know it, most of the places we'd gone to had been plied with my threats and money.

"I'm not saying that I'm leaving you on your own. I'll help you select a place, give you advice, and all that."

"All right, my lady. I'll work harder," Aria said confidently, her eyes shining. I'd expected her to be at least a little worried. "I can't rely on you forever," she said, clenching both of her fists.

That's my girl.

"To be honest, I didn't expect anyone to be interested in my singing. There are so many great singers out there, after all."

"I told you to trust me. I've never even once entertained the thought of failure." Aria was being modest, but I was unable to hide how proud I was. My long history of being a fangirl was serving me well. I bet I could show those entertainment companies a thing or two.

"Success is only possible when it's built sturdily from the ground up. Though it was only possible because my plan was immaculate, of course. Ha-ha!" We were only just getting started, but I was already excited.

It was Aria's voice and her great singing skills that made it possible, but it was still hugely satisfying to see that my plan was such a success.

"I hope there are only good things ahead, though I know that's a lot to ask for. I think I'll enjoy going places with you more than going to an imperial tea party."

“Even so, you need to get used to this. You can’t let people hold you in contempt forever.”

It was a relief to hear that Aria was enjoying her achievements, but I couldn’t have her focus on singing alone. She had a long way to go. She was one who would end up at the highest rung on the social ladder. I had to help her adjust to life in high society. Since an imperial invitation couldn’t be refused, this was a great opportunity to strengthen her standing.

“You’ll need a new dress for the party.” Dresses were not just clothes. They were like a suit of armor, one that grew sturdier and offered better protection the higher the price and the greater the number of gems.

“The dress you’ve given me is more than enough. I can just—”

“No.” She had no clue. How could she possibly survive in the high society jungle?

“That’s for an outing, not for battle.”

“Battle? Are we hunting or something at the palace?” *Oops.* Aria couldn’t understand such things yet.

“I suppose you might not be familiar with the concept, but in even in high-society life, you have to fight to survive every single day.” Trying to cover for my blunder, I let random words spew out as I tried to think of a way out.

“Anyhow, you need a new dress. Word has already gotten out that I’ve been bringing you along everywhere, and it will hurt my dignity if you’re seen wearing some common dress. You should be wearing something similar to what I wear, at least.” I wasn’t entirely wrong. As May had said, people were already talking about how I was up to some strange new pastime with Aria. I couldn’t give gossipers more to blabber on about. I had to let people know that this wasn’t something I was doing on a whim.

“We’ll have to take your measurements again and get a custom dress fitted.” It had to be a dress immediately recognizable as classy, but not so fancy as to look cheap. *Hmm, what could I use?* “I have some fabric my parents brought in from the desert. We should be able to make a nice dress with that. Annie!”

“Yes, my Lady!”

“Ask Madam Rosalie to visit the mansion tomorrow and have her ready her best garment cutters.” I’d made my decision and showed no hesitation as I asked for the services of the most prestigious designer in the empire.

“My lady, I’m really fine.”

“But I’m not.” I had mostly been ignoring the rumors circulating in high society, instead focused on how things were going on the street. But it was about

time I acted.

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about staying healthy, all right? It would be disastrous for you to catch a cold or something.” *Please focus on yourself for once, Aria, and don’t worry about me.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“E-Excuse me, Miss Angel?” said a child who had approached us. There were five days left until the imperial tea party, and we were visiting almost every church in the capital.

“Are you... talking to me?” Aria said, crouching to meet the child’s eyes.

“Yes.” The skinny girl carefully approached Aria.

“I’m not an angel, but I’m happy to hear that I look that way to you.”

“I heard you sing at Yutrea Church. I begged my mother to come see you here when I heard you were coming to Minue Church today,” the child said quickly, blushing. She’d come a long way to see Aria and sounded excited. “I loved your singing so much I begged the priest at my church to start teaching me piano. My dream is to be like you one day and sing while playing the piano.”

“Really?” Aria replied, touching her throat in surprise.

“Yes. Th-that’s why... I’d like to make a request if I can.”

“What is it? Please tell me,” Aria said, caressing one of the child’s blushing cheeks.

“I-I’d love it if you’d listen to me play, Miss Angel...” she said, staring at the ground. “I-I practiced hard, and I’d love it if you could sing along.” She fidgeted with her fingers; her cheeks couldn’t possibly get any redder.

Aria suddenly gave me an earnest look. I said, “Th-there’s nothing I can do, you know. Madam Rosalie is coming at four.” *I’m not opposed to making good memories for kids, but today really is not a good day, Aria.*

“My lady—” Eagerly, her eyes shone up at me, her hands clasped together.

I sighed and proposed a compromise. “Hey, kid.” *Dear, sweetheart.*

The child paled.

Well, you don’t have to react like that, even if I do look a little scary... “Where do you live?”

“I’m-I’m sorry,” the child apologized and trembled.

I haven’t done anything, though! “We can’t use the church past the time allotted to us,” I said. *I’m just saying maybe we can do that next time.* “We can’t do what you ask right now because Miss Angel here is rather busy. But if you can tell us where you live, she could come to see you when she’s free.”

“Oh!” The child finally relaxed and smiled again. “Really?”

“Yes. I don’t lie.”

The child grinned brightly, with no trace of the anxiety she’d shown moments

before. She told us where she lived and which days she went to church. "I'll practice every day until she comes."

"Good. Miss Angel will have a hard time singing along if your playing sounds terrible. Not that she won't do her best to sing for you, of course."

"My lady, please..." Aria's face had turned red like a strawberry.

"What's your name?" Aria asked.

"Maryanne."

Aria approached Maryanne and held her tiny hands. "We'll be sure to come and see you, so practice hard until then. I'll be looking forward to it."

"Yes! I'll do my best!" Maryanne nodded so fiercely I worried she might feel dizzy.

Aria beamed at the child. "Yes. I'll see you then."



"Would you prefer a white dress or a sky blue one?" I asked in the carriage as we headed back to the mansion. *Considering the comparisons to an angel, white isn't a bad choice. But then sky blue doesn't seem that bad, either...*

Aria didn't reply to my question.

Huh? Does she not like either? I looked up at Aria, who was seated across from me. She was staring out the window, lost in thought.

"Are you ignoring me?" *Aria, could you lend me an ear?*

"Oh, did you say something? I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else," said Aria, startled.

I could guess what she was thinking. "It's an odd feeling to meet someone who likes you, huh?"

"Ah, yes. I felt shy and surprised, as well. But... it felt good," she said, shrugging a little as her cheeks reddened again. Because she currently maintained a mysterious image, Aria had never had any direct interactions with her fans.

"I'm happy enough to be able to sing in front of other people. But I still find it so unexpected that there are people out there who appreciate my singing." Her eyes were full of excitement and energy.

She had the look of an idol who'd just experienced their first fan meeting. "You shouldn't be satisfied already. More people are going to feel that way about you. You can't be overwhelmed just yet. Set your bar higher." *I'd like you to never forget that feeling, Aria. But being completely satisfied with just this isn't wise. You need to dream big.*

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget today,” Aria said with a sheepish smile.

“Well then, don’t.” *I didn’t mean that you should.* “By the way, which color would you prefer for your dress?”

“What colors were they again?”

“White or sky blue.”

Aria was already becoming known among the people of the capital as the “Church Angel.” Though word about her hadn’t spread in high society just yet, the nobles would soon hear of her, too. She wouldn’t be some noblewoman’s toy, but an angel of music. A good strategy would be to build on this angelic public image for people to see and remember from the beginning.

“Must it be one of those colors?” Aria asked after some thought.

The suggested two colors seemed best, but I supposed I could listen to her opinion if she thought otherwise. “Is there another color you have in mind?”

“I think green would be good, too.”

Green? What are you saying, Aria? I mean, you would look good in any color, of course. But colors like green, purple, black, and red are the ones that suit me, not you. That would be a huge strategic mistake!

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

“No, I don’t. Could you reconsider, Aria?” After denying her opinion outright, I said, “Green? I might consider *light* green, but green won’t do. It doesn’t fit the image that people have of you right now.”

“But—”

“What do you mean, but? No buts, Aria. If you must choose green, there are green earrings, green necklaces, and the like...” I offered and felt a little guilty at the stumped look on Aria’s face.

“It’s not that I like green that much. To be honest, I really loved the dress you were wearing when I first saw you. It looked great on you.” The reason she provided was completely unexpected. “I want to be as confident and cool as you looked in that green dress, so...”

“The color of your clothing won’t give you confidence. What use is the color in that regard?” *The color isn’t what matters, Aria.* I thought back to what I was wearing when we first met. Did she mean the dress that totally made me look like a villainess? “I threw it away because of the wine stain. What was so good about it?” Besides, it was an ill-omened dress.

Again, green won’t do. I shook my head once more. “Again, that’s a no. Choose one of the colors I suggested.”

“In that case... I’ll just go with whichever you choose,” Aria said glumly.

Uh-oh. This inauspicious phase was showing a bit too early. *Has it already reached a point where she insists on wearing an outfit that does not suit her image at all?* That was a dangerous sign, and usually came much later in an idol’s career.

“Do you not trust me?”

“That’s not it!”

Good. You should trust your boss. “If you don’t like either color, it’s all right. Madam Rosalie should be waiting for us at the mansion, so we can put the things in a professional’s hands.”

“All right, my lady,” Aria quietly replied. She slumped a little, but I was relieved that she wasn’t being obstinate, at least.

“There’s nothing to worry about since I’m here by your side. I never fail,” I said, running a hand through my hair, trying to inspire confidence. Aria nodded with a bit of renewed enthusiasm.

I’d spent one-fourth of my life as an idol fangirl. I was pretty sure I could do a better job at marketing than people from the Middle Ages.

“Things will go well, of course. I trust you.”

Though I’d had a brief moment of doubt, I had a heroine blessed with the ability to trust in someone who, in this case, knew better than her. What couldn’t we accomplish?

“Oh, we’ve arrived.” The carriage had entered the grounds during our short conversation.

I gathered myself and moved toward the carriage door. “Becoming a singer and winning over high society are the two things we’re aiming for. A singer who I’m backing myself should do at least that, don’t you think?”

I imagined Aria as the empire’s greatest prima donna and the wife of the crown prince. The thought gave me a thrill. She would be the most beloved woman in the empire. How amazing was that? Picturing that perfect ending, I grinned.



“Oh my, Lady Mary. It’s been such a long time. Why, I think you’ve grown even more beautiful,” said Madam Rosalie and she rubbed her hands together and plied me with compliments.

“Of course, I have,” I said lightly. I must be getting used to people like this. “I need a dress in five days.”

“I’m... sorry?” Rosalie froze. She seemed to think that five days was too short.

“I can pay more, if needed. And, by the way, did you think that it’s easy to acquire silk from a desert kingdom that hasn’t even begun distribution in our empire?”

Madam Rosalie was known as the best designer in the empire. It was the silk my father had imported from a desert kingdom that had motivated her to come running at my summons. It’s the silk that hadn’t even been distributed because of the spice that had become a priority.

“Five days, huh... Of course, I respect you so greatly that I would shove everything aside to make a dress for you, but five days...” She was a perfectionist. Five days? She seemed to think it was impossible. I sensed her gearing up for a refusal.

I couldn’t let that happen so easily. I added, “By the way, the dress will be worn to the imperial tea party.”

Madam Rosalie’s eyes sparkled at the mention of a tea party. Not only would the job involve a completely new fabric, but the dress would be shown at an imperial tea party—you couldn’t ask for a better venue than that to attract attention.

I could practically see the calculations rush through her brain. She finally opened her mouth, looking as though she’d made up her mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“I—should do the job. Who else could complete it in such a short timeframe? I’ll make sure the perfect dress is ready by then,” she said resolutely.

She truly was a great designer and businesswoman. She was making a very wise decision. “I’ll see if I can find a design that you’ll like, my lady, and—”

“No, the dress is not for me,” I corrected her, cutting short her enthusiastic words. *I have enough dresses to last me a lifetime.*

Madam Rosalie stiffened. She apparently hadn’t imagined that I’d ask her to create a dress for someone else. “Then whose dress am I to make?”

“She’s standing right here,” I said, looking at Aria.

Aria had her head down, having been completely ignored thus far. “I’m Aria Peridot.”

“Oh, right. Lady Aria,” Madam Rosalie said as she scanned her up and down.

Her eyes paused at Aria’s hands. “You’re really making the dress for her?”

Noticing Madam Rosalie’s gaze, Aria slowly hid her hands behind her back. They were scarred from the sewing she’d had to do to support herself and her father. As Madam Rosalie was considered the greatest designer in the empire, there was no way she could miss the traces of hard work on Aria’s hands. Even if Aria wore nice clothes, it was obvious that she’d had an impoverished upbringing. *The dress is to be made for this lady?* seemed to be the question on the Madam’s face.

“Yes.” I nodded at her firmly. “I already have a dress for the party.”

“Hmm...” Madam Rosalie scanned Aria rather rudely and gave an obvious look of disappointment.

“Do you have a problem with that?” I asked, worried that she might not want to make a dress for a mere viscount’s daughter.

“No, of course not,” Madam Rosalie said, waving dismissal, but her disappointment showed plainly on her face.

“Um, excuse me—” One of Madam Rosalie’s assistants interrupted with a trembling voice. The assistants usually remained silent.

Why did this one butt in? Is there a problem? I remained silent, wondering what was going on. The assistant gulped air nervously.

“Aren’t you... the Church Angel?” she asked in a shaky voice.

Madam Rosalie, looking taken aback, tried to stop her assistant from saying more. “Joanne, what are you doing? It’s rude of you to speak up in front of Lady

Mary!”

“No, you can leave her be,” I said, stopping Madam Rosalie to watch the situation unfold. *Things are getting interesting.*

“I’m not an angel, but if you’re talking about the person who has been singing at churches, that’s probably me.”

“I knew it!” the assistant said. She jumped in place and clapped her hands together. “I’m a huge fan. I didn’t think I’d see you in a place like this. If I’d known, I’d have brought something for an autograph!”

One thing I’d found surprising during my research was that autographs were actually a thing in this world. Young ladies and gentlemen would get autographs from singers and show off to their friends all the performances they’d been to. I had thought people everywhere were all pretty much the same, but I hadn’t expected the concept to be familiar to commoners in this world, too.

“I enjoyed your singing so much that I even had a dream about you. Oh, if only I’d known we’d meet this way, I really would have prepared something,” Joanne rambled on.

Madam Rosalie seemed to finally realize there was more to Aria than what met the eye. She asked her assistant cautiously, “Joanne, do you know this lady?”

“Oh, I-I’m sorry, Madam.” Joanne paled and backed away after realizing her mistake. It was unimaginable for an assistant to interrupt a conversation between Madam Rosalie and a noblewoman.

“I will let this slide, so tell me.”

“W-well, this is the singer I told you about last time,” stammered Joanne, blushing.

“What would a person like this be doing here...” muttered the Madam under her breath. By this point, I was left wondering if I had unusually sensitive ears or if everyone in this world muttered rather loudly.

I pretended not to have heard and said, “This is the singer I’ve been investing in.”

“She is?” Madam Rosalie gasped. She’d also probably heard about the peculiar activities I’d been up to lately. But she probably hadn’t known I was this serious about it.

“Oh my, I see.” Her eyes rolled about before coming to a resolute stop. “In that case, I’ll have to come up with a dress that suits Lady Aria as soon as possible.”

“Yes, you should. Anna? Go bring the silk, would you?”

“Yes, my lady.”

There was renewed determination in Madam Rosalie’s eyes.

Anna returned and handed the desert fabric to Madam Rosalie.

“Oh, my goodness. How soft and light it is...” She said, looking moved as she felt the silk. It was the best possible lure for an ambitious designer.

“If you can complete a perfect dress for the tea party five days from now, I could ask my father to have the silk delivered to your boutique before anywhere else. But if you don’t think you can pull this off, I can always go Madam Graila—”

“My-My lady! I have a god-given talent for designing clothes. Five days? That’s more than enough,” she said immediately, suddenly burning with zeal.

I seemed to have supplied her with enough energy to work with. “Angel... A Church Angel... I think white would be best as the primary color,” she said as she studied Aria with a new seriousness. She wasn’t gauging Aria’s worth as a person this time but checking her figure. “You have pretty shoulders... Hmm... With this kind of fabric, I think we could try this...” she muttered, lost in her own little world.

Pulling out a small notebook from her bosom, she began to sketch. Now that I’ve given her enough motivation, I was sure she would come up with something amazing.

While I watched Madam Rosalie with satisfaction, Aria approached the assistant who had recognized her. “Did you say your name was Joanne?”

“Y-yes!” said Joanne, trembling.

Aria tried to calm her down. “I never thought anyone would recognize me here, of all places.”

“Nearly everyone in this area knows you. My mother loves hearing you sing, and one of my friends even went to a different church just to see you again.”

Aria bounced on her heels, obviously excited to have met in a single day two people who loved her. She beamed at Joanne. “Really? I’m so glad. That must have been difficult...”

“I-I would have gone that day, too, if I hadn’t been working. I... I would have brought something if I’d known I’d meet you here.” Joanne bowed her head.

“All I have is fabric and a sewing box.”

“Um...” Aria thought for a moment. Then she hesitantly came over to me and said, “Could I do a little something before they take my measurements?”

“What is it?”

“It won’t take long.”

I looked over at Madam Rosalie, who was busy working on something. “Go ahead, then. There’s nothing much for you to do right now, anyway.”

Aria went over to Joanne and began talking. Joanne seemed puzzled at first, but she soon pulled something out from her pocket and gave it to Aria.

Huh? What are they doing? I stuck my head out for a peek. Joanne had given her a sewing box. Aria skillfully threaded a needle. When Joanne held out her hand, Aria began to sew something into Joanne’s sleeve. “There!” Aria said with a bright smile before knotting the thread and cutting it.

It appeared that Aria had sewed something into Joanne’s sleeve in lieu of an autograph.

“Oh, my goodness...” Joanne appeared deeply touched as she lifted her arm. There was a small blossom sewn into the sleeve.

“To be frank, I wouldn’t have been able to give you my autograph even if you’d asked. I don’t have one. I can sew, though... I’m relieved I can at least do this for you.”

What are you saying, Aria? If a signature from one’s favorite singer is precious, then an article of clothing that the singer has sewn something onto herself is important enough to be a family heirloom.

I glanced over at Joanne’s sleeve. *Damn it, I’m jealous.*

“All right!” Madam Rosalie suddenly looked up from her notebook and dropped her pen. “My lady, leave it to me. I’ll make my greatest work yet.” Madam Rosalie lifted her chin high and appeared to burned with enthusiasm. She didn’t seem at all like the person who’d been scanning Aria up and down in contempt moments ago. “Once the tea party is over, the two of you will be the hottest topic in high society. In a good way, of course.”

“Oh, so you’re confident about this?”

“Of course, I am. I’ll make you a dress that people like Graila couldn’t even dream of. Joanne, what are you doing? Take the lady’s measurements.”

Joanne seemed to find it unbelievable that she’d get to touch the “angel.” She approached Aria hesitantly. “I-I’ll take your measurements now,” she said. Her hands trembled pitifully.

I could understand her, though. I’d acted pretty much the same way when I’d gone to my first-ever fan meeting. I’d stood there nervously and didn’t even notice when the idol gestured for a high five.

“Get your things. We don’t have a second to waste,” Madam Rosalie said.

After the measurements were taken, she and Joanne hurriedly said their goodbyes and left. I’d see how this dress turned out. If it was acceptable then

perhaps I'd request another proper stage dress for Aria. She would need one, only the best.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“That’s who Mary Bell is. She never fails! Ha-ha-ha!” It seemed I was starting to enjoy talking like this. I laughed shrilly and smiled.

“People are raving in my neighborhood, too. Word got around about how Aria embroidered a design on Joanne’s sleeve, and some people have started to do the same on their partners’ sleeves,” said Annie, looking even more excited than me. She no longer seemed to be on her guard against me or Aria and spoke as though she’d never felt nervous in my presence. “That’s why I did a bit of bragging myself about how I’ve done Lady Aria’s hair before.”

Who would see this chatty girl as the same lady-in-waiting who’d trembled in my presence? Feeling a bit satisfied at the thought that we’d perhaps grown a little closer, I replied in a relaxed tone, “You’ve bragged about serving me as well, right?” *You feel comfortable around me now, too, right?*

“Uh... O-Of course. Lady Aria is a wonderful person, but you, Lady Mary, are the person most worth serving,” Annie stammered and hurriedly dropped her gaze.

Huh? Maybe I’d been wrong. I hadn’t meant to pressure her. “Haha. Of course, you did. So, it’s now trendy to embroider something on your partners’ sleeve?”

“Y-Yes. It’s romantic, the thought of leaving a trace of yourself on such a prominent area...” Annie said, sounding a little envious.

This wasn’t exactly what I’d been expecting, but it was a good development. Aria was a beautiful and talented woman who was being described as the “Church Angel.” Not only that, she’d started a new trend. I felt confident that things were ready for the next step. “The tea party at the palace—it’s three days from now?”

“Yes, my lady,” Lilian, who’d been listening quietly in the back, nodded.

After the tea party, the next step would be street performances. *All right!* I chortled. “Everything is going perfectly.”

“By the way, do you really intend to ignore Lord Ethen’s invitation, my lady?”

My laughter was cut short by Lilian’s words. Of course, I’d been the one to suggest that we could meet privately. “Well, what can I say? It’s his cross to bear for having a busy fiancé.” *I didn’t know he’d contact me so often, though!*

Ever since our last meeting, it seemed like Ethen sent me invitations to his mansion every other day. I hadn’t yet been able to tell him yes. It wasn’t that I

found him uncomfortable. I was simply too busy. We'd be together all day at the imperial tea party, anyway.

"Absolutely," Lilian said with a bow.

Besides, there was a more pressing matter at hand. I'd noticed that the churches in the central area of the capital were nibbling at my line. Libertan Church, where Aria and I would visit tomorrow, was the biggest one in the capital with a greatly varied congregation. "A church like that must have great acoustics," I said, chortling at the thought.

Aria had been practicing hard ever since she'd been requested to do a solo hymn performance for the event. We'd decided to stay home today so that she could practice. Happy with the well-deserved break I was getting, I hummed cheerfully.

"Oh, and you got a letter from Lady Ashley and Lady Maia," Lilian said as she pulled out a few envelopes.

"Bring them here." I took the letters from Lilian and opened them at once.

[Lady Mary, it has already been a week since the last time we've met. Truth be told, I'm worried that I'll forget what you look like at this rate!]

Ashley went on to ask me whether I'd forgotten her and Maia, commenting that she'd found a certain lady despicable for bragging about her accessories, and asking when I would introduce her to my new friend.

"Hmm." These ladies would not have picked on Aria in the novel if Mary hadn't picked on her first. Since I couldn't be Aria's sole friend forever, perhaps it would be a good idea to introduce her to some other ladies. Likewise, Maia's letter ended with:

[Both Lady Ashley and I are eagerly waiting.]

I thought for a moment and then instructed Lilian to bring me paper and a pen. This could be a better opportunity than I thought.

[Since you say you are so eager, I suppose it can't be helped. I am very busy, however, so I'd like you to come yourselves if you wish to see me.]

My tone was haughty, and I wrote that I'd be taking the lady friend I was talking about to Libertan Church, where they could come to see me if they truly wanted. It was quite a large church frequented by nobles and wealthier commoners, and it wouldn't seem out of place for them to visit. It would be perfect if these blabbermouths spread the word about Aria's skills.

"Now, go and deliver these letters," I said as I sealed the letters and gave them to Lillian. Then I congratulated myself on concocting the perfect plan.

Little did I know that there was something I overlooked that day. These ladies

were much more bigmouthed than I thought and very quick to act.



“Of course. You all know that Lady Mary is indeed on very close terms with us,” Ashley announced as she showed the ladies Mary’s reply.

“She ignored all the other invitations. She really does treat you, Lady Ashley, and Lady Maia, differently.”

“She seems to be affectionate in her own way.”

The ladies murmured amongst themselves as they gathered around Ashley.

“She says she’s going to Libertan Church tomorrow.”

“Oh my, isn’t that your church?”

“Tomorrow... There’s going to be an annual event at the church tomorrow.”

The ladies whispered and exchanged glances.

“She probably plans to take that lady from the Peridot family with her, right?”

“She’s called the Church Angel or something. It’s hilarious.”

Iris was among the ladies who’d gathered. She threw her hair back and said, “Why don’t we go take a look ourselves?”

“You mean we should go in person?” asked another lady, hand rising to her lips.

Iris shrugged. “If she’s such a great singer, it’ll be worthwhile to have a look, don’t you think? I know this might sound a bit harsh, but what do commoners know about music anyway?”

“Well...”

The ladies nodded. Iris’s suggestion had a persuasive ring to it.

“The commoners have never been to an opera, much less seen an actual singer. The most they get to see are child choirs. If they think she’s amazing, I can’t say I’m too excited.”

“I think Lady Iris has a point.”

The ladies around Iris nodded and followed suit.

“Commoners don’t know proper music.”

“From what I’ve heard, she’s been getting a lot of praise after visiting a bunch of churches. But will her singing satisfy the ears of someone with experience in actual music?”

“I have a feeling I’ll be disappointed if I go there with any kind of expectation.”

The general tone was suddenly one of pity for Aria. Iris, feeling pleased, said, “She’ll only embarrass herself if she performs at a big church like the Libertan

and no one applauds.”

“You’re right. Most of the people who pray there will have listened to proper music.”

This time she’ll really embarrass herself, and Lady Mary will abandon her. It’s the only possible outcome. Smiling, Iris added, “It would be a pity if no one applauded. Why don’t we go and help out, at least?” She talked like she cared, but her real intentions were obvious.

“Oh my, how considerate you are!”

“I’m considering going myself. Monikers like ‘angel’ are only fitting for ladies like Lady Priscilla. I’m going to see for myself exactly how good she is. I doubt she’ll live up to the rumors,” said the lady who’d claimed to be a lover of *proper* music. She looked indignant. “There’s no way that the scruffy performance of someone who can hardly be considered a proper lady will please people who know *real* music.”

Things were getting a bit heated now. Iris said, “No need to get all excited just yet. We can see for ourselves tomorrow.”

A few ladies moved to a different topic, but five or six were still talking about it and sounded resolved to have a listen to Aria’s singing themselves.

“I’m worried that her singing will be so bad, it’ll harm Lady Mary’s reputation...” said Iris, cupping her chin. Her words made her sound worried for Mary but, in fact, they contained displeasure at the fact that Mary had selected such a woman in the first place.

Ashley listened cautiously for a while. The conversation was taking an unexpected turn. Then she said, “Even so, there must be a reason Lady Mary likes this lady. I’ll go and judge for myself.” Her tone hinted that she found the conversation uncomfortable.

Maia nodded next to her. “That’s right. I trust Lady Mary’s judgment. Don’t you, Lady Iris?”

Taken aback, Iris waved hurriedly in denial. “That’s not what I meant. I was just worried—”

“I doubt Lady Mary would need you to worry about such things,” Maia glared at Iris.

Wait, this isn’t what I wanted. Iris quickly moved to end the conversation. “Y-Yes. Of course not. In any case, this is an opportunity to hear the famous Lady Aria’s singing for ourselves. This is great. Everyone’s been curious.”

“Yes. This isn’t about Lady Mary. Lady Maia, I’m sure Lady Iris didn’t mean it that way,” said one lady, trying to calm Maia while taking Iris’s side.

Maia acted as if she'd been personally insulted. "Hmph. Who knows what she meant? Would she have spoken the same way even if Lady Mary was here with us?" said Maia rather nastily. She seemed to insinuate that Iris should know to lay low after being humiliated once.

"Haha... I think you mistook my meaning. I really didn't mean it that way," Iris said with a smile. She fumed inside. *You're nothing without Lady Mary.*

"Well, I'm sure we'll find out tomorrow. Why don't we end it here and see it ourselves tomorrow? This will do us no good," a lady intervened. The topic ended but the mood didn't improve much.

"Indeed. In any case, Madam Rosalie's declared that she'll be taking no orders for a week. Does anyone know what's going on?" asked another lady. It didn't take long for the ladies to start chattering again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Please come this way,” said a benevolent-looking priest, guiding Aria and me toward the service hall.

Unlike the churches we’d visited so far, the corridors at Libertan were lavishly decorated and had the largest main hall.

“One of the women in our congregation was quite adamant that the hymns for our special prayer service had to be sung by you, Lady Aria. Haha,” said the white-haired priest.

Aria blushed. “I’m honored.”

“We heard that you play the piano yourself when you sing, but our piano player also takes great pride in playing for the special prayer service. I hope you’ll understand,” the priest said.

I hadn’t intended to demand that Aria be allowed to play the piano, anyway, and judging from the way Aria looked now, it was probably a good thing the priest had mentioned this first.

Aria’s hands trembled. She’d never looked that apprehensive before. “Are you nervous?”

“Maybe just a little—actually, yes. I think I am.”

Looking at Aria began to make me nervous, as well. I let out a deep breath. “Only amateurs get nervous.” *Maybe I shouldn’t have talked after all...* “Are you going to content yourself with this? I told you I’d make you the greatest prima donna in the empire.” I knew I’d already failed in offering her encouragement. I continued to speak, however, to loosen her up as much as I could. “Since we’re here, you should show them a good performance. People don’t go to performances to see anxious performers.”

My intention had been to tell her that she needn’t be so nervous since we were only getting started, that we would look to the future and keep up our efforts. I could only hope at least some of my message had reached her.

“There’s still quite a bit of time left until the special prayer service, but I asked that you come early so that we could rehearse,” said the priest as he opened the doors to the service hall. The doors, carved with intricate patterns, parted slowly to reveal a grand, spacious hall.

“This is Mr. Scherben, who plays the piano at our church.”

“Nice to meet you,” said a strict-looking middle-aged man who seemed to have a chip on his shoulder.

I didn't like his attitude. *Couldn't he be a bit nicer if he's going to say hello?*
"I'm Aria Peridot."

"Scherben Rute." It was immediately obvious that Scherben took great pride in his role. He turned to the piano and took his seat. "Let's get started."

I was worried that this man's stiff-necked attitude would only make Aria's anxiety worse. *Will she be okay?* I turned to study her expression.

"Yes."

My worries seemed unfounded. She not only looked less nervous, but her voice even sounded confident.

"Have you memorized the hymns?" asked Scherben as he shuffled through his sheet music.

"Yes, I've practiced hard."

"Let's get started then," Scherben said and placed his hands on the keys.

Aria looked a little taken aback that Scherben started playing without so much as a signal.

"Ah, ah—" It took a few seconds, but Aria found her tempo and sang just as well as she usually did.

My heart swelled with pride as I watched her sing—having practiced the whole day, she didn't make a single mistake. It was Scherben rather who made mistakes.

Plink! The disjointed sound made me want to block up my ears. I turned to the piano with a frown.

"I-I apologize," Scherben said, placing a hand on his forehead. He took a breath then put his hands on the keys again. "Let's go again. I'll play properly this time." He had a look of resolve, which was in stark contrast to the bored look from earlier.

It was obvious what he was thinking. Not having expected much from these random noblewomen and their little gig, he'd changed his mind after hearing Aria's singing.

Plink plonk! The same melody filled the empty service hall again. But two things were different this time. The look on the pianist's face had become serious, and he was actually playing properly this time.

"He should have played properly from the start..." *If you could play this well, why didn't you do so from the start?*

The priest sitting next to me flinched slightly. "Haha. It seems Mr. Scherben was a bit nervous earlier."

I hadn't really meant to have him hear that. The priest looked worried about

what I'd think. "It doesn't matter," I shrugged, turning back toward Aria.

Aria was once again singing perfectly even though the accompaniment had been abruptly cut off moments ago.

"I can see why Anne was so insistent. Her voice is indeed heavenly," the priest said, his eyes shining as he marveled. "In fact, I have half a mind to ask that you come again," he said with a laugh.

I can understand that, but unfortunately, she'll be quite busy.

Clap clap clap! The priest and I clapped when the hymn ended. A priest who had been listening in the back also applauded.

Aria just smiled. She seemed nervous earlier, but she was fine now. I breathed deep in relief.

"That was excellent. I'm sure the congregation will be moved."

"You're too kind," Aria told the excited priest.

Two hours remained until the special prayer service. The congregation members would soon fill this place.

"Must we stay here until the service starts?"

"Oh, of course not. We've prepared a place where you can rest until then," the priest said. "Please feel free to have a look around if you wish. It's fine as long as you stay inside the church."

"One moment!" A voice stopped us from leaving the service hall.

We turned toward around and saw Scherben holding out his arm toward us urgently. "Please, can we speak for a moment?"

He'd obviously spurned Aria just ten minutes ago. *Look at him, trying to have a moment with us now.* "What do you want?" I said none too pleasantly, crossing my arms.

Scherben twitched and frowned. Perhaps I'd scratched his pride. "I'd like to make a request," he said to Aria.

Aria seemed taken aback but said calmly, "What is it?"

Scherben took a deep breath. His stiff expression was nowhere to be seen, leaving only a look of urgency on his face. "I'd like to write the perfect song for you."

My eyes grew wide. I hadn't expected this. Him, wanting to write a song for Aria? I'd expected him to request to hear her sing a few more times or maybe to play for her again.

"A song?" Aria sounded just as surprised, and her hand splayed over her chest.

Scherben nodded. "I've never experienced such a powerful stimulus in the 40 or so years of my life. I know this may sound rude, but I wasn't expecting to see

much... It was shocking to hear you sing.” Aria listened. Scherben seemed in a hurry to speak, as if he regarded this as a golden opportunity. “I have quite a bit of knowledge about music, and I thought I knew most of the good singers in the empire... But I couldn’t help being stunned after hearing you sing. It also filled me with a certain desire.”

“My, my. Mr. Scherben is hardly the talkative type. He must fancy your singing quite indeed,” said the priest.

Scherben continued as if he hadn’t heard. “I’d like to marshal all the knowledge I’ve gathered throughout my life and create the perfect song for your voice. It’ll be the best song I’ve ever written, I’m sure of it. If you’ll allow me, I promise I’ll spare no effort.” He finally took a deep breath. Even I felt out of breath just by listening to him.

I lapsed into thought. A song for Aria? This was a good idea, but wasn’t it too early? If we were going to have a song made, wouldn’t it be wise to choose someone better?

“That sounds lovely!” said Aria before I could even consider. Her green eyes sparkled. “I’m honored that you would make such an offer.” She blushed with joy, making it hard for me to refuse.

It was probably better to sit on this for a while. I tried persuade her. “You can’t agree so easily! We don’t even know him.” Strike that. I’d forgotten no persuasion was possible with this tongue of mine.

“I-I understand I may seem lacking, but I promise to do my best if you’ll have me,” said Scherben, looking flustered. “I’ve written about half of the hymns that we use at our church, though the one Lady Aria sang isn’t one of them. I’ve been writing songs for nearly 20 years, and—”

“I’m not very interested.” *I wasn’t ignoring your experience, so you don’t need to go to the trouble of explaining.* “We’re a bit busy at the moment. And, to be frank, we don’t need a new song right now.”

“Is that right...” It was Aria, not Scherben, who responded in a disconcerted tone.

Wait, this isn’t supposed to go like this. “If you’ll excuse us,” I said, finding it embarrassing to stand there any longer. I didn’t want to leave Aria looking disappointed, either, so I made to hurry out. “We just need to be back here by the time of service, right?”

“Y-Yes,” said the priest, who alternated flustered looks at me and Scherben.

I glanced at Scherben before leaving. His head was hanging low as if he’d been sentenced to death or something. I felt a little sympathetic. *But you really*

should have done it right from the start.

But when I looked at Aria, my heart sank, and guilt made me suddenly heavy. Her lips were pursed, and she watched me with clear discouragement.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Did you like it that much?”

“What?”

I was the first to speak amid the silence. “Did you like the offer that he’d write a song for you that much? If so, then you shouldn’t have acquiesced so quickly, you know.” *We should decide on such things together.*

“Is that so...”

I tried to decompress the mood but wasn’t really doing a good job. Aria hung her head, looking even more glum. “It made my heart beat fast to hear that suggestion.”

“Why?”

Aria seemed to think for a moment. After quite a long pause, she spoke but averted eye contact. “It means I’ll have a song of my own, a song meant for me alone. How could I not be excited?”

A song of your own, huh. I supposed it *would* feel different to sing a song made exclusively for you, rather than just doing covers. In interviews, singers often said that their debut song meant the most to them. I supposed this was similar.

But this wasn’t twenty-first century Korea, where new songs were released every day. There was not really any concept of a song being exclusive to single singer, either.

“The songs that other people sing are all meaningful, too, aren’t they?”

“Even so, thinking I’d get a song of my own made my heart beat so fast. I said yes before I could even think,” said Aria, looking at her feet. “Do you remember what he said? He said listening to me sing made him want to write a song.”

Right. I nodded as I listened to Aria.

“I knew I wanted it as soon as I heard him say it. It was a brief moment, but a million thoughts raced through my head.” Aria smiled brightly.

She didn’t look at me while she spoke. It seemed obvious that she resented that I’d immediately refused a suggestion that had filled her with excitement. “But it can’t be helped. I guess now isn’t the time,” Aria said, tucking her hair behind her ear and smiling brighter in an attempt to hide her disappointment.

But her feelings were all too clear to me. Maybe I shouldn’t have refused so quickly. She was acting so mature that it made me feel guilty. I realized I should have asked her what she wanted first. But it was too late for regrets.

"I'm not really interested."

"We're a bit busy at the moment. And, to be frank, we don't need a new song right now."

How could I go back and retract my words?

"I'm sure I'll get another opportunity one day," Aria said, her eyes full of conviction.

"That's right. An opportunity will come. If it doesn't, I'll make one and ensure it lands on your lap."

"I wonder how many people will come. Though I suppose there will be more than at those tiny neighborhood churches we've been to so far," I said, trying to change the subject. I felt guiltier by the second.

The biggest church we'd visited was tiny in comparison to Libertan Church. The service hall was obviously big enough to hold hundreds of people. It even had second-floor seats overlooking the hall.

"I hope I do well."

I took a deep breath and said, "It's time to show people what an amazing person I'm investing in. This will likely be your last time singing at a church, so give it your best." I sounded a bit too assertive, but Aria finally looked straight at me and gave a smile.

"I'll sing so you needn't be ashamed of me. Or me of myself, for that matter."

"You saw how that man, Mr. Scherben, changed his behavior after hearing you sing. Other people will likely act the same way," I said, encouraging her and brushing her hair back. This was the final stop in our church tour. A successful conclusion would be nice.

"Yes, I'll do my best. Don't worry."

"What makes you think I ever worried?" I retorted, turning away. *I've got nothing to worry about. You'll pull it off wonderfully.*

"It'll all be fine. Every day is a miracle."



"Well, this isn't half bad."

"There are quite a few people here today. Maybe it's because this is a special prayer service. We won't be able to take the front-row seats like this."

Women dressed in simpler clothes chattered as they entered. The ladies, Iris, and another five or six young women entered the service hall.

"We're here to hear singing. There's no need to be in the front seats, is there?"

"You're right. Besides, if we did that, we might run into Lady Mary..." said a

lady who'd been mocked to bits by Mary in the past.

It was Iris who encouraged the nervous lady. "What does it matter if she sees us? We're only here to attend the prayer service." Iris strode forward casually. The other ladies relaxed and followed suit. They'd thought they'd come early, but the front seats were already taken. Left with no other choice, the ladies split themselves along the middle seats. They began to chat briefly before the service.

"There are more people here than usual. This church is quite popular, but it usually doesn't fill up like this..."

"It has to be because this is a special prayer service. It can't be because of Lady Aria," said Iris. But it wasn't hard for Iris to spot people who seemed excited to be here. *How good can she be anyway?* Iris shrugged.

"Well, I suppose it might be because of her. Even if she's just an amateur, this is an unheard-of opportunity. The commoners don't get to hear music much, do they? I can understand their excitement," said the lady from the House of Horde, the same woman who'd evinced such pride in her knowledge of music. She crossed her arms and glared at the altar. "I suppose people heap such praise on her because she *can* sing, even if it's just a little. I think I'll be quite disappointed if it's bad."

"Oh my, who do we have here?" said a familiar voice.

The lady who'd just spoken turned and found Maia and Ashley approaching. "Oh, look who is here."

"Oh my, Lady Maia."

Maia gazed down at Lady Horde and Iris. "We'd just met Lady Mary outside on our way. Did you ladies greet her, as well?"

"Wait, she hasn't come inside yet?" asked a lady, flinching and turning toward the door.

"My lady, why do you seem so nervous? It's not like we're not allowed to be here."

"Exactly. You twitch like you're up to something."

"What do you mean, up to something? That's nonsense. We're just here to pray and listen to Lady Aria sing."

"Oh, my lady. I find that offensive. I didn't say that you had an ulterior motive, just that you acted like you did." Ashley pretended to be surprised.

"Since we're already seated, I'm afraid we can't go out there to greet her. We can do it on the way out."

"Yes. In any case, Lady Mary has reserved seats for us. I'm sorry, but we won't be able to sit near you."

“My goodness, what a pity!”

Both smiled but each word had a fine edge.

“Why didn’t you tell Lady Mary that you’d be coming, Lady Iris? Then we could have sat together.”

“I didn’t want to bother her. Thank you for the consideration, my lady,” Iris said through a forced smile.

Ashley noticed that Iris’s teeth gritted as she spoke. But she didn’t miss the chance to poke fun. “We’ll be going to our seats, then. Hopefully, we can see each other on the way out.”

“Yes. I do hope we get to do that.”

Having achieved victory in the little spat, Ashley and Maia stepped lightly toward the front of the service hall while Iris ground her teeth. *You girls are nothing without Lady Mary. Let’s see if you’re still so sassy a few hours from now.*



“I’d like to thank all of you who here today for the special prayer service at Libertan Church,” said the priest, signaling the start of the event.

Iris and the other ladies clapped stiffly as they listened to the opening speech. “Looking at so many of you who have come to our church today, I can’t help but feel happy and fulfilled that our efforts to prepare for this special service have paid off,” the priest said with a chuckle.

Iris’s eyes were directed elsewhere. She stared at Aria’s shining blond hair and Mary’s red hair that seemed to burn like a flame.

“Moreover, we have special guests with us today. I believe that today’s praise will be something to remember.”

Some of those seated cheered and clapped at the priest’s words.

Iris flinched. *Were all these people here to see Lady Aria?*

“However, we’re not only here for the singing, are we? Let us also focus on the prayers and have an enjoyable special service.”

Clap clap clap.

“Now then, we have brothers and sisters who have worked hard preparing for this special day...” The service began in earnest after a short speech. The priests of Libertan Church took turns speaking, and there was a session of prayer after each.

“The Holy Spirit fills our hearts, and we offer our hearts back up to you, Lord.”

“To you, Lord,” the congregation echoed.

“Now, Father Roman will speak for us again.” The long prayers were finally over. The white-haired priest appeared at the podium with the same genial smile. “Next, our Libertan Choir will sing songs of praise for us. We also have with us today a special guest.”

At the mention of this, those seated—who had begun to slump in their seats during the long prayer sessions—brightened up again.

“The choir and Lady Aria Peridot will sing praise for us. Please greet them with a round of applause.”

The main event was finally here.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Aria moved to the center of the stage.

“There she is, finally. I hope she doesn’t disappoint us,” said Lady Horde as she sat obliquely and stared at Aria. *She can’t be that good. It’s probably at the level of a troupe apprentice at best. The talk of her having the voice of an angel or something must be exaggerated.* She sat there with her arms crossed. But only a few moments later, she found herself clapping, her jaw slack.



Clap clap clap. Thunderous applause filled the service hall. Some had gotten to their feet, roaring and cheering. There was one person there who refused to clap.

What in the world? Her voice was so perfect, Iris couldn’t say anything bad about it despite the jealousy that filled her. Even her companions, who had looked skeptical, became immersed as soon as the singing began.

“She’s every bit as good as Lady Priscilla...”

“I think I understand why people call her an angel.”

The ladies seated next to Iris clapped and complimented Aria. Lady Horde was also spellbound and poured out praise. “I’ve been to many performances... I never thought I’d feel such emotion at a church performance, of all things. If I’d known, I’d have listened to her singing sooner.”

“Haha... I guess her singing is all right. I can see why people like her.” Even the lowliest of peasants had *something* they were good at, she supposed. There was no way Lady Mary would have chosen that lady for no reason. *But being able to sing nicely wouldn’t hold people’s attention forever. This had excited their curiosity, but that’s it. It won’t last long.* Iris did her best to downplay Aria in her head. No matter how much she tried to deny it, however, the mood in the service hall was all too evident.

“She truly has a heavenly voice. There could be no expression to put it better.”

No matter how much Iris tried, she hadn’t been able get any closer to Lady Mary. Lady Mary was the greatest lady in the empire, someone Iris had dreamed of being on good terms, being close with—even if it took being insulted and humiliated.

“I can see why Lady Mary invested in her.”

She would not have minded if nobody had succeeded in becoming her friend,

or if a lady with higher social status that Iris had taken the spot. Even when some random, piddling lady had come along and taken the spot, she'd dismissed it as a moment's whim.

"That's right. I was wondering why Lady Mary had chosen a lady like that. I can see the reason now."

Hearing Aria sing only made her feel more insignificant. That lady from a humble family—one that could hardly be regarded as nobility—apparently had more value as a person than Iris herself.

"Iris, you should be friends with noble children like your brother."

"You know what? Forget it. The only lady I can think of is Lady Mary Bell, but she's famous for being picky."

"That would have been better..." Iris had put in great effort to befriend Lady Mary despite the humiliation she was subjected to. But Aria had won Lady Mary's attentions with only her voice. It was so unfair.

"No. I can still prove it," Iris muttered amid the clapping all around her. *Lady Mary has poor judgment. It doesn't mean that I am worthless as a person. It's all because people don't know Lady Aria for who she really is.*

"Lady Iris?" Lady Horde studied Iris as she'd been quiet for a long time.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else for a moment."

"If we have the chance, would you like to come and listen to Lady Peridot's singing again? The others have all agreed," said Lady Horde excitedly, completely unaware of how Iris felt.

Iris gritted her teeth again at their stupid excitement. She forced a smile. "Of course. Let's do that if we have the opportunity."

It was obvious everyone was being fooled. Aria had a bit of talent but was nothing but a daughter of a ruined noble family. What was so great about her? She would obviously turn out to be less and less attractive the more people learned about her.

"I'm all for it," Iris said. She bit her lip. She would do everyone a favor and reveal the kind of person Aria really was.



"Today was all right, haha. Though it's to be expected, I suppose."

"It wasn't just all right. It was by far the best!"

Ashley and Maia, seated to the side, eagerly clapped and praised Aria.

"Lady Horde and Lady Iris were watching, as well. I'll bet they learned a thing or two."

“What were those ladies doing here?” I asked. Lady Iris was the lady I’d humiliated last time. How had she heard about today?

“She heard yesterday about how we were coming to see you, my lady, and apparently decided to come see herself.”

“She said she wanted to hear Lady Aria’s singing for herself.”

Iris wanting to listen to Aria sing? I supposed everyone knew by now that Aria and I were working as a team. Iris hadn’t seemed to like Aria much.

“She seemed to mock Lady Aria, saying that it was likely the commoners had poor taste. Today’s performance showed just how wrong she was,” Maia said with a shrug.

These two like to wag their tongues, but I hadn’t expected them to spread the word quite so quickly.

“We were quite surprised, too. You could have told us earlier, you know.”

“That’s right. We would have come every time if we’d known.”

The two took turns complimenting Aria, and Aria smiled softly. “You’re too kind.”

“Oh, not at all. I’ve watched quite a few opera performances. You were every bit as good as a real singer. Better, in fact.”

“How much do you practice every day to become this good?”

The questions kept coming. Aria seemed a bit overwhelmed but replied to each one. I had succeeded in making some friends for Aria. The final church performance had gone well, too. Now all there was left to do was to get through the imperial tea party and move to the next step. We’d move from church to street, and from street to the small theaters. I had a well-organized plan in my head.

“I doubt the other ladies—at least the ones who were here today—will be able to ignore you anymore.”

“That’s right,” Maia said, nodding. “I didn’t like the way the other ladies acted all knowledgeable about ‘real’ music and all that,” she whispered.

Aria awkwardly smiled. “It’s not like that. As they said, I’ve never learned music properly, nor accomplished anything with my voice. I think it’s to be expected that they’d think that way.”

This was why Aria was an exemplary showcase of the angelic female protagonist. She could have felt offended, but she didn’t seem to mind at all. She plainly said that she understood them.

“They know so little that they can’t even think properly.” *That’s right, they could only talk like that because they don’t know you.* I approached Aria. “Don’t

let them discourage you. Take pride in the fact that I, Mary Bell, have chosen to invest in you.”

“That’s right. Lady Mary wouldn’t do that unless she had a very good reason,” Ashley chipped in.

I’d thought that these two followed Mary to advance their own interests in the novel, but it seemed that the three had built a surprising bond.

“Let’s spend some time together next time.”

“Yes. In fact, there’s a tea party at my mansion next week—”

“No. She’s busy.” *I’m sorry, but we’ll be quite busy for the foreseeable future and won’t be able to accept your invitations.*

“Oh, I see. Well, I suppose lots of people will be wanting to see her sing. Do allow me to invite you next time when you have the availability,” said Maia without missing a beat. She didn’t seem at all offended or embarrassed.

“Yes, please invite us,” Aria said with a smile. She didn’t seem to notice my rudeness, either.

These people are much too mild, aren’t they? I was starting to worry for them.

“We should head back. Madam Rosalie will be bringing the dress tomorrow.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Wait, Madam Rosalie?” Ashley asked, her eyes wide.

I nodded and she launched into an excited discourse. “My goodness! I’d heard Madam Rosalie hasn’t been taking any orders. That she’s holed up in her studio and needs to focus on something. Is the thing she’s working on for you?”

Wait, people know about that, too? It wasn’t a bad sign, though. I needed the impact at the tea party to be as large as possible.

“Yes. I ordered a very special dress.”

“We’re very much looking forward to seeing it. I wish I’d been invited. Every new dress you wear is a work of art, and it’s great fun just to watch.”

“Well, this one isn’t for me, actually,” I said.

Ashley went wide-eyed again.

“You’ll see it in a few days’ time. You can look forward to it,” I said with a chuckle. These ladies were too gossipy for me to provide any details right now. The dress would have to be revealed on the day of the party for it to have the greatest impact.

“We’re dying to know. Can’t you tell us?” Maia complained.

I smiled. This was going to be a great tea party.



“*Hic*. Goddamn it.” Edward Peridot, Aria’s father, tottered along the streets again, a bottle of alcohol in his hand. “That damned girl doesn’t even come out to see her father...”

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen his daughter. He didn’t quite want to, either. His daughter meant nothing to him as long as he had food to eat and access to the money pouch inside the cabinet. But things were different today. The money pouch had been fatter than usual, and he’d grown excited and gone gambling. He’d lost everything.

He’d bought himself a bottle with the few coins he had left, and now he was angry at Aria. *If she’d been capable of bringing back this kind of money, she should have done so much earlier and been prompt about it. Has she had been hiding money from me?*

“Aria!” Edward threw open the door to his daughter’s room. His daughter, who normally would be sitting there and sewing, was nowhere to be seen.

“Damn it, where has she gone?” The sewing kit that was usually on the corner of her desk was gone, too.

He also noticed something else....

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“What is this?” Edward picked up a piece of paper from the desk. It was a musical score.

“What useless whim is this?” He knew that Aria played the piano every Sunday at church, but this was no church hymn. Though he’d fallen quite low, Edward had been a cultured noble in his youth. He could tell the difference between a song and a hymn.

“Aria! Aria!” Edward raised his voice. *Where has this girl gone to?*

It was late. His drunk voice rang out through the quiet neighborhood.

Bang bang bang! “Can we have a bit of peace and quiet, please!” After a bit of shouting, a someone pounded on the door and demanded, “Do you know what time it is?”

“What’s wrong with shouting in my own home?! You lowly commoner, how dare you!” Edward immediately dashed to the door. He threw it open, but as soon as he saw that it was a bulky man and not the middle-aged woman he had expected, he hiccupped and lowered his voice. “Oh! Uh... I’m in my own house. I can shout if I want to, can’t I?”

“Commoner or no, we’ve got children to put to bed and need to get some sleep. Are nobles entitled to be noisy?” said the strong-built man, his face distorted with displeasure.

Edward fumed, indignant that a commoner would dare to speak to him this way. He simply frowned, however, unable to speak after noticing how thick this man’s arms were. *If only I had some friends... I would have lowly people like this licking my boots!*

Edward said nothing. The man’s wife, standing just behind him, tutted as she watched the foolish man. “To think that Lady Aria is such an angel.”

Edward frowned at the sudden mention of his daughter. *Why is she bringing up Aria? She is a fool of a girl with no talent for anything. She’d even failed to get married.*

“An angel? Hardly. All she does is sew,” Edward said mockingly.

The woman corrected him indignantly. “You’re her father, aren’t you? You don’t even know what she’s been up to?”

“What’s all this ruckus about, anyway? What has she been doing? She should be finding herself a husband, not rambling about and getting nothing done. She should be ashamed of herself.”

“She sang a hymn at the special prayer service in Libertan Church today. I’d have gone today if I’d known.”

A hymn? What is this about? Edward furrowed his brow. “What nonsense is this?”

“Do you really not know about it?” asked the woman, lip curling in disgust.

How am I the only one who doesn’t know? I’m her father! Edward screamed, “That’s why I’m asking, isn’t it? Spit it out already!”

“Look here. Where’s the need to shout like that?” said the large man, stepping in front of the woman again.

Edward took a step back. He didn’t dare talk that way to a man much bigger than him. “She could have told me from the start. What about Aria? What has she been doing?”

“Everyone’s talking about her these days. People call her the ‘Church Angel.’”

“Pfft. What? Angel?” *She was anything but that.* Edward mocked the woman. “What has she been doing to be called such a silly name?”

“She’s been touring around churches and singing. She sings like an angel, hence the nickname.”

“Singing?” Edward scowled. *The girl had been singing in front of others?* “Is she out of her mind? Does she really want to end up a spinster? I’m going to...” Still drunk, Edward muttered as he reached out toward the bottle again, violently this time—a threatening gesture, one that could have ended badly for Aria had she been present.

“What is the matter with you? People love Aria.”

“Love her? You must be kidding. They likely find her hilarious. She’s full of it, I’m sure. Damn it. I should have married her off early...” said Edward, breathing hard.

“What’s there not to like? Do you know how popular she is? Everyone’s asking her to come back and perform for them again.”

“Blast it! She’s acting the clown in front of people, that’s what she’s doing!”

“Look here, man. You better watch it.” The muscular man snatched the bottle from Edward’s hand as Edward grew more and more worked up. “What’s wrong with your daughter having a little success?”

Edward growled, “Success? The only success for a girl is getting married. How’s her little clown act going to get her anywhere?”

“Famous singers rake in money by the ton, I’ve heard. Who knows? Your daughter might bring home a million gran.”

“Mi-million gran? Singers make that much money?” Edward’s eyes went

round. “That’s nonsense. You can’t make money off music.”

“Would you listen to yourself? That may have been true decades ago, but not anymore. Lady Priscilla gets thousands of gran for every performance, they say.”

Edward’s brain worked fast at the woman’s comment. Several thousand was enough for him to do nothing but relax. He could spend all he wanted and still last a few months.

If Aria really made that much money, he wouldn’t have to marry her off and could still enjoy the rest of his life.

“Hmm... So, Aria has been making a bit of money, huh?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she’s being paid yet. But I’m sure she’ll start making money soon enough,” the man said with a shrug.

“No. She’s got no backing. She won’t get anywhere.”

“What do you mean? She’s been going about with a lady who looks obviously very rich.”

“A rich lady?” asked Edward. *A lady? Not even a man?* “Do you know who she is?”

“Well, it’s not like I’ve spoken to this lady. She was wearing extremely expensive clothes, though. Aria’s been changing into new clothes every day, too. They looked expensive and new, though not as luxurious as the dresses the red-haired lady wore.”

Expensive-looking new clothes? Edward’s anger welled. She was wearing expensive new clothes every day, and yet hadn’t said a word of this to him, only bringing him paltry sums! “Do you know where she is now?”

“The special prayer service is over now. I expect she’ll be back soon. In any case, please quiet down at night.” The two, having delivered their message, left the shabby house.

Alone, Edward fumed as he waited for Aria to return. But she didn’t come home that night, not even in the wee hours of the morning.



“I’m really not sure about this.”

“He’s no child. You said you left plenty of money, didn’t you?”

Aria was worried about her father. From the sound of things, he was more like a three-year-old son and not her parent. I reassured her. She had no cause to worry like this. “If something happens after all you’ve done, it’s not your fault.”

She’d left plenty of money behind and done all the housework before leaving. There was no issue here. A grown man wouldn’t starve because Aria left the

house for a mere three days.

“Though, of course, I’d love it if something did happen to that man...” I muttered under my breath.

To my relief, Aria was lost in thought and missed my heartfelt words.

“Even so. I left a message that I’d be away for a few days, but I should have left it somewhere easier to find. I’m worried he might not have seen it.”

“You left three days’ worth of money, didn’t you? He’s no idiot. He wouldn’t spend it all in a single day, would he?” She had no cause for concern but had been like this for two days straight. I was reaching the limit of my patience.

“Enough worrying about that. You should be worried about the event tomorrow. You don’t know any customs and etiquettes at a tea party, do you?”

The tea party at the imperial palace was tomorrow. We had lots to prepare so that Aria could make a perfect impression. I had no worries regarding her appearance. She was a beautiful girl, and she’d be wearing a beautiful dress. The maids here would skillfully apply her makeup, too. I was confident that I could make her look the perfect heroine she was.

The problem was that Aria had never been invited to a tea party before. I recalled a scene from the novel in which she was humiliated for not knowing the rules of high society etiquette. But now that I was with her, nothing like that would happen.

“Stop it now and come sit. You need to memorize all the rules so you won’t be humiliated tomorrow,” I said, sitting at a table that had been set with tea.

“Everyone knows now that I’ve been going everywhere with you. If you don’t even know the basic—”

“You have a knack for repeating yourself,” May said acerbically as he leaned against the doorway. “Since when did you study etiquette that hard?”

“I can start now. Stop nagging.”

As May said, Aria wasn’t the only one who didn’t know much about etiquette—and this was true for the original Mary, as well.

“*What are you looking at?*” I’d say. There had been no one brave enough to point out errors to this irascible marquess’s daughter.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I suppose it’s not a bad change.” It turned out May was here not to pick fights with me, but to teach us both etiquette.

“Thank you for helping us,” Aria said with a bright smile and got up from her seat.

May hurriedly corrected his posture. “Thank you for having me, Lady Aria.”

“I’m worried you might have other matters to attend to,” Aria said, taking a step toward May.

May slightly lowered his head and looked shy. “Oh, not at all. I’m quite free today.”

Liar. He’d acted very busy when I’d asked him, but he demanded to know what I was up to. *Well, he always acts differently around Mary. Maybe this is what family is like.*

“Ahem, would you take a seat, then?” May said and pulled out a chair for Aria.

When did you start behaving so nicely?

“Now then, let’s start with the basic manners at the imperial palace...”

I quit my inner diatribe and focused on May’s etiquette lesson.