

19세 미만 구독 불가

꽃을 얻은 뱀

Vol. 01

백설은 장편소설

설렘
W
ROMANCE

Information

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<https://moonlightnovel.com/novels/a-snake-entwining-flowers/>

Content Warning: Some scenes in this work may contain violent or sexual content. Please be warned before reading.

Charlotte Hegel heads to Mistymoor Hall after hearing the news that her mother is in critical condition.

There, she meets a man named Richard Kensington, the younger brother of the Earl of Kensington.

With his eerily handsome appearance and polite demeanor, Charlotte feels an instinctive sense of danger from him. He seems to change coldly at a moment's notice. She tries to distance herself from him, but like prey caught in a snake's grip, she finds herself increasingly unable to escape his clutches.

"Why are you trying to run away?"

Richard smirked as he looked down at Charlotte, who had instinctively recoiled. He looked like a hunter observing a cornered animal. There was a hint of pity and regret in his eyes, but it was overshadowed by a cruel glint.

“You’re going to run away?”

He scanned Charlotte’s trembling figure and announced,

“You won’t be able to escape.”

“Why not?”

“Because I won’t let you.”

He was determined to chase her to the ends of the earth if she even managed to escape. And then he would devour her slowly, from head to toe.

It wouldn’t matter if she begged, screamed, or prostrated herself before him.

Ch. 1 ASEF 1

Charlotte was sure of it. She was dreaming again.

In a desolate field, she was once again running away from something. With each breath, the cold air filled her nose and mouth. The merciless north wind whipped her endless, long, dark green skirt.

Her instinct whispered: she had to run away, she must not be caught.

Panting, she ran and ran, not knowing what she was running from. Her breath was ragged and her chest heaved. To make matters worse, her unkempt, tangled black hair, loosened by the wind, strangled her throat like a rope.

Desperation spurred her on, but the wet earth from a recent rain clung to her shoes with every frantic step. The wind howled, whipping her tangled hair and whipping the already low-hanging fog into a frenzy. It choked the once-silent wilderness, turning it into a swirling white abyss that swallowed the world whole.

Her breath came in ragged gasps, her legs burning with exertion. The feeling of being trapped intensified as the fog obscured her vision, making her feel like she was running blindfolded. The weight of unseen danger pressed down on her, a crushing sensation that made her feet feel like lead.

Then, a voice. "Charlotte."

It was a young man's voice, deep and melodious, but laced with an unsettling charm. It sent shivers down her spine, reminding her of a siren's song – beautiful, captivating, but ultimately a death knell.

Against every fiber of her being, she forced herself to keep running. But the chilling whisper returned, closer this time, laced with an icy possessiveness. "You can't escape me."

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through her heart. Charlotte gasped and clutched her left chest. Even then, her instinct kept whispering.

She had to leave. Leaving was the right thing to do. She had to leave to survive.

Then, she saw a man shimmering like an illusion in front of her eyes.

"You're mine forever."

The moment she instinctively reached out to him, she woke up from the dream.

A hand shook Charlotte's shoulder, jolting her awake. Disoriented, she blinked open her eyes, finding herself still in the confines of the carriage. It wasn't the most comfortable journey to say the least.

The wrinkled face of the old woman from the front seat peered down at her. "Miss? Are you alright? You were tossing and turning so much in your sleep, I worried I'd have to wake you."

“Ah,” Charlotte mumbled, a sheepish smile tugging at her lips. “Thank you. I must have had a bad dream, but I can’t seem to recall it.” It was true. The dream had been vivid, leaving a lingering unease in its wake, but the details were already fading. A recurring theme in her sleep, unfortunately.

Reaching out, she pulled back the worn curtain, revealing a seemingly endless panorama of fields stretching towards the horizon. It was the same landscape that had greeted her since leaving the bustling city two days ago. Traveling such a distance, especially in the confines of the bumpy carriage, wasn’t exactly a walk in the park. Her carefully styled hair was probably escaping its bonnet, and her backside was numb from the unrelenting wooden seat. Any attempt at adjusting her position with less than the utmost decorum would surely earn disapproving glances – the price one paid for maintaining the facade of a proper lady.

Despite her lack of a “ladylike” profession – a washerwoman wasn’t exactly high society – Charlotte held her head high. Starting as a maid at thirteen, her seven years of experience made her a valuable commodity, and she took pride in her work. But it was the sudden news of her mother’s illness that propelled Charlotte, ever the capable one, towards the countryside, just before the bustling Saint Michaela’s Festival.

Charlotte’s mother, Cynthia, held a unique position: wet nurse to the heir of Gredel Hill, the Earl of Kensington. Twenty-seven years ago, when the Earl’s precious second son was born, a telegram seeking a wet nurse echoed through Ethelwood. Freshly a mother herself, Cynthia fit the bill. Her husband, the family patriarch, lay injured from his work, and money was tight. So Cynthia left, leaving behind her own newborn’s cries.

Born seven years later, Charlotte enjoyed a peaceful childhood for three years under her mother's care, a stark contrast to her sister's upbringing. But peace rarely lasts. One ordinary day, another telegram arrived from Gredel Hill. The Earl's eldest son had finally fathered a child after over a decade, and Cynthia was needed again.

Back to Gredel Hill she went. The Countess, determined to breastfeed, re-employed Cynthia as a dry nurse¹, and Cynthia never returned. Not after seven years, not after seventeen. It seemed the Earl and Countess, perhaps in a twisted sense of atonement, kept having children, one after another.

Now, with three young children under her care, Cynthia remained the youngest's wet nurse. Since her mother's second departure, their visits were limited to four a year: major holidays or when the young master and his wife visited their maternal home. Sometimes, when the postman serving Gredel Hill fell ill, Charlotte would visit the Earl's house in his place.

These visits were cherished moments. Charlotte brought family letters, and Cynthia, in return, sent money to support her young daughter. The two-day journey by horseback meant they could spend a cozy night together under one roof upon arrival – precious memories Charlotte held close.

Grief gnawed at Charlotte. Just last year, her sister perished in a mountain accident, and the year before, her father succumbed to gambling debts and despair, taking his own life. Now, her only remaining family, her mother, lay gravely ill. Exhausted from the long journey, Charlotte closed her eyes for a brief moment as the carriage rumbled to a halt.

“Gredel Hill, miss,” the coachman announced, his voice booming through the stillness.

A gentle voice broke through Charlotte’s fatigue. It was the kind old woman, the midwife, who had shared the carriage ride. “Didn’t you say you were getting off here?” she inquired, explaining she was on her way to see her soon-to-be-born grandchild.

“Oh, thank you,” Charlotte murmured, mustering a grateful smile. She adjusted her coat and bonnet before the coachman helped her down. The damp, heavy air clung to her skin, a stark contrast to the warmth of the carriage. Stepping onto the uneven terrain, a shiver ran down her spine.

“There you go!” the coachman barked, tossing her luggage onto the ground before flicking the reins and disappearing with a clatter of hooves. Charlotte stood alone in the wilderness.

Unfurling the worn map, Charlotte’s heart sank. It was practically useless in the swirling fog. Following a narrow path that meandered like a lost thread, she soon saw faint outlines of houses through the mist. But they seemed impossibly far away.

Fortunately, Charlotte traveled light. Anticipating a swift return after visiting her ailing mother, she packed minimally. Now, her biggest concern was navigating the dense fog to find the Earl’s mansion.

“I’ll figure it out somehow,” she muttered, taking a deep breath and continuing her trek. Relying on hazy childhood memories, she pressed on, but the path seemed endless. Despair gnawed at her. Had she strayed off course? Was she lost?

Just as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her, a flicker of movement in the distance caught her eye. Squinting through the fog, she saw... something.

Panic flared. Raking her mind, she wondered if the Earl's house kept hunting dogs. But the sight before her defied that notion. This wasn't a leashed canine with a master; this was a ferocious beast, teeth bared, emerging from the mist. A wild animal.

Instinct kicked in. Charlotte wrapped her arms around herself, the primal fear of a predator unmistakable. Goosebumps erupted on her skin, and her body screamed at her to flee. But her feet remained rooted to the spot, as if paralyzed by terror.

The creature, a wolf shrouded in fog, lumbered closer. Its gray fur confirmed her worst fear. Trembling, she muttered, "This can't be happening!"

But it was, and the situation only worsened. More wolves materialized from the mist, two, maybe even three, a hunting pack. The alpha, its eyes glinting with savagery, locked gazes with Charlotte. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She was alone, utterly defenseless. The chilling image of being torn to shreds by the pack sent a wave of icy sweat down her spine.

Suddenly, her foot caught on a hidden rock, sending her sprawling onto the damp earth. This was her chance, the wolf's chance. A guttural growl resonated in the air, and Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the inevitable.

But the attack never came. A deafening crack echoed through the stillness, followed by the pained howls of wolves. More shots rang out, and then - silence. Cautiously,

Charlotte opened her eyes. The pack, whimpering, retreated into the fog.

The sound of approaching hooves filled the air. Charlotte lifted her head, a sliver of hope flickering within her. There, at the end of the path, silhouetted against the mist, stood a man on horseback.



Notes: I will keep Gredel Hill as the translation for 그레델 힐, some sources will say it's Grendel Hill but it should be 그렌델 for Grendel and not 그레델, which is the text directly referenced from the raws.

Please let me know if there are other mistranslations of the titles, names, and places that I might have missed, or if there are inconsistencies with the terms. Rest assured, I edit my chapters thoroughly before posting them to maintain consistency.

Lastly, I will update the tags as I go along. I'm sure the story contains mature themes, but I am not quite sure yet what exactly. Thank you for your understanding, the next chapter will be out tomorrow.

Ch. 2 ASEF 2

“Are you alright?”

The voice that came from above her head was as cold and smooth as a snake’s scales. She wanted to see his face, but the backlight only revealed his silhouette. He seemed to be a young man.

He patiently waited for her to answer, as she was momentarily lost in thought. Then he asked again.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Ah...”

Only then did Charlotte come to her senses and fumble for words. The cold voice returned, as if someone had poured ice water down her neck.

“Do I need to ask twice?”

“No. I’m fine. Thank you very much.”

She startled and hurriedly shook her head. The man’s face was still hidden in the shadows, but something else caught her eye belatedly. His riding suit was simple in design, but they were clearly expensive. Charlotte’s instincts told her that he was a young man who was wealthy enough to ride a horse around here and carried a gun.

She hurriedly took off her bonnet and bowed respectfully.

“Thank you again, my lord.”

“Do you know me?”

“You must be Richard, the younger brother of the Earl of Kensington, are you not? I am Charlotte Hegel, the daughter of Cynthia Hegel.”

There was a good reason for her guess. As far as Charlotte knew, there were only a few people in this area with such wealth — the Kensington family. The Earl himself was said to be in his forties, and his sons were young. That left only one person: the Earl’s only brother, Richard Kensington, who was almost twenty years younger than him. The young master whom her mother Cynthia had once cared for.

The man was silent for a moment, as if surprised by her quick thinking. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end with tension. She involuntarily swallowed hard, and at that moment, the deep well-like silence was broken by a voice that seemed to be chanting.

“Mother and daughter don’t look alike at all.”

“Pardon?”

As Charlotte tilted her head, the man spoke as if he had just finished a conversation.

“It would be proper to escort you, but I regret to say that I have an appointment.”

Despite what he said, Richard Kensington called for someone through his servant. As she stood alone in the middle of the wilderness, Charlotte soon saw an old man

approaching in a carriage. The old man spoke to her in a friendly manner, with a noticeable accent that contrasted with Richard's.

"Are you Cynthia's daughter?" the man asked in a friendly tone.

"Yes. My name is Charlotte Hegel."

"I'm Hans. As you can see, I'm the coachman."

As soon as he introduced himself, the coachman got down from his seat. Without even being asked, he lifted the luggage bag in Charlotte's hand and placed it on the carriage loaded with hay. Then he smoothly returned to the driver's seat he had just been sitting in and gestured to the seat next to him, pointing at Charlotte, who was staring blankly.

"What are you doing? Get in."

Charlotte hurriedly got in at his words.

It was a place where people lived, even if it was the countryside.

The carriage rattled along the dirt road trodden by pedestrians at a neither fast nor slow pace. Hans occasionally shook the reins as the two horses slowed down, and started a conversation.

"Cynthia must have waited a long time."

"My mother?"

"Yes. You look exactly like your mother."

Yes. This was the general consensus.

Except for their eye color, mother Cynthia and daughter Charlotte were identical. They were of average height, about 5 feet 3 inches (about 160 cm), with slightly pale white skin and black hair.

However, Richard Kensington, whom she had just seen, had said something different.

Charlotte replied, wondering inwardly.

“I’ve heard that a lot.”

“Is it okay to call you Charlotte?”

“Yes. Please feel free to call me that, Mr. Hans.”

The talkative coachman did most of the talking. The conversation consisted mainly of him asking questions and Charlotte answering them.

“Do you know the name of the place you’re going to?”

“Mistymoor Hall. Right?”

Charlotte answered, searching her memory. That was definitely the name of the Earl of Kensington’s mansion.

Mistymoor.

A misty moor.

It was a name that was honest to the point of being blunt. At the same time, it was a perfect fit.

The distance from the sparsely populated village to Mistymoor Hall was too far to travel on foot, and the surrounding area was nothing but wilderness. To make matters worse, when it rained or snowed, a low fog would

cover the area, making it impossible to see anything. However, if you made it through the fog, you would find a magnificent mansion with a beautiful garden. It was a strangely unreal place, like a mirage.

“You know well. That’s right.”

Hans gave a nod, his face breaking into a pleased smile after hearing the correct answer. Now, it was Charlotte’s turn to ask, and she did so with a hint of caution.

“How’s mother feeling these days?”

“It’s quite serious, I’m afraid. Just yesterday, she was sick enough to vomit a significant amount of blood.”

“And...how long does she have?”

The word ‘blood’ drained the color from Charlotte’s face. Hans made a tsk sound, as if he had anticipated this reaction.

“The doctors are saying a month, at most.”

“A month...”

The news of Cynthia’s illness, non-communicable pulmonary tuberculosis, had reached Charlotte through a telegram, leaving her in disbelief. She had imagined her mother in better circumstances, living comfortably and enjoying fine meals.

Given the Earl’s deep trust in his longstanding employee, Cynthia’s salary was notably higher than that of other nannies. Yet, despite the privileged environment, it seemed that illness could still find a way to strike.

“But still...” observing the shadow that had fallen over Charlotte’s features, Hans faltered for a moment, then bit his lip, “She’s had the best care available. It’s important you remember that.”

His next words summed it up. Richard Kensington, the man who had saved her earlier, personally brought a doctor who lived far away to the mansion in the middle of the night for Cynthia. It didn’t end there, he also paid for the expensive royal doctor’s fee and medicine at once. However, despite the quick response, Cynthia’s illness was already in its terminal stage.

“The Earl is truly a remarkable person. It’s rare to find someone who would go to such lengths for a former nanny, let alone an employee.”

“Yes, indeed...”

Charlotte nodded quietly in response to Hans’s words, recalling the scene she had witnessed just moments before. A man who shot a wolf dead without a moment’s hesitation. In that moment, alongside relief, fear surged within her, much like prey in the wild recognizing a predator hidden in the darkness.

However, she began to think that her instinct might have been a misjudgment. First impressions can be wrong, after all. Ignoring the voice inside her that said otherwise, she forced herself to come to that conclusion.

Hans, perhaps thinking her silence was due to deep sorrow, tactfully kept quiet. In the silence, Charlotte’s thoughts drifted and eventually reached her mother, Cynthia.

Looking back, she realized it had been three years since she last saw her mother. Her not-so-affectionate nature played a

part, but the infrequency of their meetings was mainly due to financial reasons. Although she had no romantic partner, at twenty, she was at the age where she should start thinking about marriage. Working through vacations and holidays meant double pay, so she couldn't afford to take a break.

Charlotte pondered how she should reunite with her mother, whom she hadn't seen in years and was now on her deathbed. Would a simple hug suffice? Or should she kiss her on both cheeks? Even for a parent and child, that might be too much. Yet, not doing so felt like she would be a heartless daughter.

While she was lost in these seemingly trivial worries, the dense fog gradually lifted, and her vision cleared. Hans, who had been silently looking ahead, soon announced their arrival.

"We're almost there."

At his words, Charlotte looked up, and her mouth fell open at the sight. A majestic stone mansion stood before them.

The garden was adorned with neatly trimmed bushes and sprawling red heather flowers. Mistymoor Hall, with its mysterious and antique charm, seemed to hold the essence of bygone eras.

Soon, the carriage smoothly turned a corner and approached the service entrance at the back of Mistymoor Hall, where the staff were allowed to enter. Charlotte clasped her trembling hands.

"It's been a long time, Charlotte."

"Ma'am."

The one to greet Charlotte upon her arrival was the housekeeper, Janice. With the Earl of Kensington not employing a butler, she held the highest position among the staff. Now approaching fifty, she was the experienced and esteemed commander of Mistymoor Hall.

As Charlotte stepped down from the carriage, Janice approached her more closely.

“Have you been well in the meantime?”

“Yes, I’ve been fine.”

“That’s good to hear. The last time I saw you, you were what, sixteen?”

“I was seventeen. It was three years ago.”

Despite her stern demeanor, which often led others to perceive her as strict and demanding, Janice always made an exception for Charlotte. This was because Janice had been long-time friends with Charlotte’s mother, Cynthia.

In the mansion, nannies, housekeepers, and cooks were typically considered senior staff. It was only natural for those of similar status and age to be close.

After a brief hug, Janice wore a quiet smile.

“How time flies. You were just a little girl, and now you look every bit the young lady.”

With a slight blush, Charlotte responded, “Not at all. You seem younger than ever, ma’am.”

“I know it’s just flattery, but it does make me happy.”

After exchanging these pleasantries, they ascended the back stairs reserved for the staff, a path Charlotte had often taken. At the top, under the roof, was Cynthia's room. As they climbed the stairs, Janice spoke up.

"You'll share a room with your mother. Cynthia has taken her medicine and is asleep now. It's a mix of painkiller and sleeping aid, so she probably won't wake up until the evening."

There was a beat of silence.

"I'm truly sorry things have turned out this way."

Janice's face showed genuine sorrow. After all, the fact that a colleague of over ten years was gravely ill was a sad and worrying situation for anyone. Considering the time spent together, Janice had arguably been with Cynthia longer than Charlotte, her own daughter. With this thought, Charlotte gave a bitter smile and shook her head.

"No... I've been told she received all possible treatments. Thank you for taking such good care of her."

The mansion had a total of four floors, including the basement. As they passed the second landing, they finally reached their destination on the top floor.

"Charlotte."

This was as far as Janice would accompany her. Janice stopped walking ahead.

"Today's Sunday, so the Earl and his family, as well as all the mansion's staff, have gone to church. It's quiet. You can greet the Earl and his wife at lunch."

Charlotte's eyes widened at the mention of 'Sunday.'
Indeed, it was the last day of the week, a day for attending services, when people of all ranks dressed in their finest and listened to the parish priest's sermon. At that moment, a voice echoed in her ears.



Ch. 3 ASEF 3

“The mother and daughter don’t really resemble each other, do they?”

There was one person missing in Janice’s statement. As soon as she realized this, as if she had read Charlotte’s thoughts, Janice continued speaking.

“Do you know the Earl’s brother, Sir Richard?”

Of course, she did. He was the young master whom her mother had breastfed and raised for 7 years. He was also the person who had just saved her from a wolf attack.

However, she had never properly seen his face. During her past stay here, she had kept to herself, quiet as a mouse, and just a moment ago in the wilderness, the backlight had prevented her from seeing clearly.

There seemed to be no need to mention that they had just met. Charlotte nodded, having made up her mind.

“Yes, I know him.”

“I’d rather you not mention his name in front of your mother.”

The response was unexpected. It was a relief she hadn’t mentioned their encounter already. A look of curiosity must have shown on Charlotte’s face, for Janice sighed softly. She

seemed to be pondering whether to speak further, and then she decided to continue.

“It’s just that your mother, Cynthia...”

Janice seemed to hesitate, choosing her words carefully, then she continued after taking a breath.

“Due to her poor health, her nerves have become a bit frail.”

“Nervous breakdown*¹?”

It felt like a choke and a sudden drop in her heart at the same time, as if someone had clenched her heart. As Janice watched Charlotte’s face pale, she placed a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder, as if she had expected this reaction.

“It’s nothing serious. She just occasionally fails to recognize the people in the mansion. But don’t worry too much about it. She’ll recognize them soon enough.”

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief at that last statement.

“But the problem is, there’s one person... Maybe it’s because they’ve been apart for so long, but she hasn’t been able to recognize Sir Richard for the last six months. She gets terribly startled whenever she sees him and becomes defensive.”

“...”

“That’s why I thought I should warn you, being her daughter.”

Charlotte instinctively knew that much was left unsaid in her words. Yet, she couldn’t probe further or press for more

information.

“Yes, I understand. Ma’am.”

At Charlotte’s compliant response, Janice spoke kindly, relieved.

“The lord will be back by one o’clock. You should change your clothes and wash up by then.”

“Felix.”

“Yes?”

“Cover your ears.”

Bang!

As the trigger was pulled, the smell of gunpowder filled the air. The recoil shook his wrist, and the throbbing headache he had been suffering from ceased instantly.

The bullet pierced through the prey’s chest in a single shot. The deer, which had been trying desperately to escape, bled as it ran a little further before collapsing with a thud. Richard dismounted from his saddle. As he approached with leisurely steps, the deer twitched its legs in a feeble attempt to cry out, a futile resistance.

Watching the animal for a moment, Richard aimed his rifle at the creature’s head once again. This time, the sound wasn’t as loud since he was shooting directly at the prey. As Richard casually wiped the blood splattered on his cheek and forehead with the back of his hand, Felix approached and offered a handkerchief.

“Hunting on a sacred Sunday. Aren’t you worried you might end up in hell for this?”

“Mind your own business. It’s not like you went to church either.”

“But at least I haven’t killed anything today.”

With a nonchalant shrug, Felix took back the blood-stained handkerchief and said softly, “You know...you’ve changed a lot.”

Instead of responding, Richard turned his head away.

“You used to be, how should I put it... A timid bookworm, oblivious to everything but your studies.”

The epitome of a top student. The embodiment of diligence.

That was the identity of Richard Daniel Kensington. Shy by nature and unfortunately born with a noticeable appearance, he even wore glasses to draw less attention to himself. What could have caused such a drastic change in him overnight?

It all started with his enlistment. Like many others, Richard was commissioned and sent abroad after graduating from college. Not long after his deployment, the colonial government forces instigated a rebellion, and during the ensuing chaos, he was reported missing.

Although the national forces emerged victorious, the battle was said to be fiercely contested. Everyone had concluded that Richard must have perished in the wilderness. However, against all odds, Richard returned. Somehow, he had changed.

It was a stormy night. As always on such evenings, people would gather in the billiard room of Mistymoor Hall.

Suddenly, the door swung open and a servant, pale as a ghost, entered.

‘The master... has returned.’

As if on cue, lightning struck outside the window behind him. The man who appeared before the startled crowd was the very same man for whom they had prepared an empty grave, believing him to be dead.

Felix remembered the man who calmly asked, ‘Did you see a ghost?’ as he brushed back his rain-soaked hair.

Felix felt a twinge of discomfort, like he was looking at someone else, but it was undeniably Richard Daniel Kensington. Unless it was his doppelgänger.

Contrary to the telegram that had reported him as gravely injured and missing, the Richard who returned appeared unscathed. His fine brown hair and agate-like purple eyes were unmistakable. Now that he no longer wore glasses to hide his face, he was besieged by admiring ladies.

What had changed was on the inside. Something fundamental seemed to have altered in him due to his experiences on the colonial island.

“Felix.”

Perhaps sensing his friend’s unease, Richard’s lips curled into a smile.

“If you’re scared, just say so.”

“What?”

“Stop spouting nonsense that makes me feel sick.”

With that, he turned away, leaving no chance for a rebuttal. Felix hurried after him.

“I never said I was scared. I just thought you seemed a bit different.”

No response came. Eventually, Felix reached out and placed a hand on Richard’s advancing shoulder. Before Richard could shrug it off, Felix blurted out once more.

“Since you’ve joined me for the hunt, come to my place today.”

“Are you planning to call over some prostitutes and indulge in some debauched games again?”

Before a cold rejection could be voiced, Felix quickly added, “It’s not like that. You’ll be glad to see.”

Kicking the flanks of their horses, Felix spurred his mount forward, taking the lead. As the two horses emerged from the dense forest, a lady was seen waiting not far ahead. Felix waved at her.

“Kiara!”

She was a captivating woman with her red curly hair tied up and a curvaceous figure. Both men dismounted in front of her, and Felix reached out to his cousin first.

“I didn’t know you were already here. Did you walk?”

“I came out to meet you since I heard you were here.”

Felix lightly kissed Kiara's cheek in greeting and said affectionately, "Kiara, meet Richard. The one I told you about."

Then turning to Richard, Felix introduced her, "Richard, long time no see. This is my cousin Kiara."

"...Kiara?"

As Richard murmured, trying to jog his memory, Kiara frowned as if she felt slighted.

"That's harsh. I know it's been a while since you've seen me, but you don't remember me? The three of us used to play together a lot when we were younger."

At her words, Richard blinked quietly and after a brief silence, he smiled faintly.

"Ah, it's been a long time."

Like a predator hidden in the bushes, eyeing its prey.

The Earl and Countess Kensington were welcoming to Charlotte. They were a couple known for their kindness and integrity even on regular days.

The Earl expressed his regrets about Cynthia's condition to Charlotte, who had come to greet them, and told her she was welcome to stay at the mansion for as long as she wished. Though he said "as long as you like," it was understood that the maximum stay would be a month.

When the introductions were over, Janice called Charlotte to the kitchen where the staff was gathered.

“This is Cynthia’s daughter, and she will be staying with us for a while. The lord has asked us to treat her like family.”

After exchanging greetings with the twelve other staff members, excluding Janice, Charlotte followed Janice around, getting explanations about the structure of the mansion. Time flew by, and soon it was evening, and the sun had set.

After dinner, rain suddenly began to pour outside the windows. As it grew dark, Janice handed Charlotte a candle before returning to her duties.

Charlotte was climbing the stairs, candle in hand, when a gust of wind, from nowhere, blew out the candlelight, plunging everything into darkness. Startled by the sudden absence of light, a wave of worry washed over her.

“What should I do? I don’t have any matches...”

Muttering to herself and sighing, Charlotte consoled herself with the thought that it would all seem like nothing by morning, and continued up the stairs, feeling her way along the wall. The next moment, she was startled and nearly tumbled down the stairs.

Whoosh.

Something black brushed past her. The moment she caught sight of its glowing yellow eyes, her heart dropped.

Frozen in place, barely able to catch her trembling breath, she then heard a soft meowing from behind. Taking a deep breath, Charlotte turned around and immediately felt relieved.

“Meow.”

The figure faintly visible in the darkness was a cat. Its jet-black fur made it difficult to see clearly in the already dim surroundings. Chuckling at her own sense of alarm, Charlotte lifted her head and hastened her steps.

It was when she had reached the top floor. The door she was sure she had closed was slightly ajar, with light seeping through the crack.

“Mom...?”

It was her mother, who, despite the strong smell of medicine, hadn't stirred even when her daughter arrived. Eager at the thought that her mother might finally be awake, Charlotte quickened her pace and pushed the door open wider. Cynthia, sitting up and leaning against the headboard, turned her head at the sound of the door opening.



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“Who...”

Her words trailed off midway. The moment Cynthia’s eyes met Charlotte’s, she closed her mouth right there. She looked surprised. At that sight, something flashed through Charlotte’s mind. A Nervous breakdown. Charlotte bit the inside of her mouth with anxiety, but the next moment, her worries melted away.

“Charlotte.”

With a faint smile, Cynthia called her softly. Charlotte, having let out a sigh of relief, finally took steps forward, one at a time. As she got closer, she saw her mother’s white-tinged hair and gaunt cheeks. It had been three years since she last saw this face, so much like her own. Her throat felt dry.

“Mother...”

“My daughter has come.”

Cynthia stretched her arms towards Charlotte, who had stopped by her bedside. Caught off guard, Charlotte embraced her and sat down on the bed, quietly closing her eyes filled with longing. All the worries she had on her way here were unnecessary. There was no place for awkwardness between parent and child.

After quietly breaking the embrace, the mother and daughter sat facing each other and had a long-overdue conversation. Cynthia expressed her regret for not being there during an important time for marriage talks as a mother should, and Charlotte shook her head, saying it was alright.

While they were sharing various stories, Cynthia suddenly coughed lightly. Though there was no blood, it was worrisome. Charlotte grabbed her mother's skinny hand.

"Are you feeling alright now?"

At Charlotte's worried question, Cynthia nodded softly and replied.

"Yes. It's just a dry throat. In fact, it has been somewhat better for the past few days, though I don't know why."

"That's a relief. Shall I get you a glass of water?"

"Would you? Thank you."

Charlotte nodded and opened the bedroom door. This time, she shielded the candle with one hand so it wouldn't blow out as she descended the long staircase. The mansion was utterly quiet, everyone likely in bed. She found herself liking this tranquility over the usual hustle and bustle.

The descent was smooth and uneventful, unlike the climb. Charlotte moved carefully, not wanting to wake anyone. But once she reached the empty basement, her movements became more relaxed. She quickly took a cup off the shelf and filled it with water from the kettle, then headed back up the stairs.

"...What's that?"

Halfway up, an odd sensation made her turn her head, and she saw the door to the main hall on the first floor wide open. Puzzled, she moved closer and noticed a long trail on the smooth marble floor.

Driven by curiosity, she brought the candle closer, and almost dropped what she was holding.

“Th-this is...”

Blood.

“No, that can’t be...”

Though she was a fan of horror stories and had read many, she never imagined such a situation could happen to her. Charlotte managed to calm her trembling heart and shook her head. It had to be a mistake. It was red, but it could just be some paint.

Bending to her knees, Charlotte swept her trembling hand across the floor and sniffed at the smudge on her index finger. The unmistakable metallic scent confirmed it was indeed blood.

Her head spun. Her shaky eyes naturally followed the trail of droplets to their source. Her steps, as if mesmerized, halted right in front of the reception room on the first floor.

Thump, thump, thump. Charlotte’s heart pounded loud enough to hear. Perhaps a burglar had taken advantage of the harsh weather to break in. Then, encountering a servant by chance, and then...The thought was too terrible to bear any further imagination.

“I need to call for help...”

Charlotte hesitated, about to call out for people. It seemed right to first understand what was happening. She was just a guest staying for a while, and it was her first day. Raising an alarm and waking up the entire household for what might be nothing seemed like a big deal too.

After a moment of serious contemplation, Charlotte opened her eyes, which she had squeezed shut, and with a determined face, slowly approached the closed door of the reception room. Lifting her heels to avoid making any sound, she cautiously grasped the brass doorknob.

“ ... ”

The door opened quite easily. It didn't make a loud noise like the servant's rooms do, perhaps because the hinges were well-oiled. Holding her breath, Charlotte stepped through the smooth opening.

The first thing that caught her eye in the spacious room, adorned with portraits and cabinets, was the lamp next to the fireplace, the sole source of light in the dim surroundings. In front of it, there was an armchair.

And someone was sitting in it.

Judging by the build, it was a man. His head was visible above the not-so-short backrest, indicating he wasn't short. At a glance, his short hair appeared blond, but it was actually a light brown.

Could he be the burglar? Or the owner of the blood?

If it was the former, the right thing to do would be to turn and run immediately. But if it was the latter, she might be ignoring someone whose life was in danger.

The dilemma was short-lived. Charlotte eventually quietly blew out the candle she was holding. She then carefully removed the candle from its holder. The end of the candlestick, which had held the candle in place, was quite sharp. If needed, she could use it to stab an attacker in the shoulder or leg in one swift motion, and possibly save the person who had been caught.

A sense of duty she didn't know she had swelled within her, igniting a fierce courage. With a firm resolve, Charlotte, stepping on the red carpet, slowly approached the man. However, as she moved closer, the fear she had forgotten began to creep back in.

...Maybe it would be better to just take a quick look at his face from the side.

It was the moment she had mustered all her strength to circle around the chair and stand in front of the intruder. As she saw the man's face, all thoughts in Charlotte's head came to a halt.

It seemed like a meticulously crafted bisque doll was placed there instead of a person. His skin was as white as if it were made of layers of thin white linen, with a neatly outlined forehead as if it had been painted. His eyebrows were slender, arching upwards before sharply turning, casting a long shadow from his dense and delicate eyelashes. His nose was straight and prominent, and his lips, firmly closed, were darker than those of a woman, with a sharp jawline beneath.

Her gaze continued to move downward. The man was in a comfortable shirt, not bothered with a vest. The distinct Adam's apple was visible beyond the slightly loosened collar.

Her gaze abruptly stopped at his abdomen, where his hands were clasped over it. In stark contrast to his pale chest, the area around his belly was drenched in red. Charlotte immediately realized what it was.

“Blood, there’s blood...”

She gasped without realizing and stumbled backward, too shocked to even feel something touch her back. A small chest of drawers toppled over, making a noise. At the same time, a large hand, like a claw, grabbed her arm.

“...What.”

A deep, low voice, as if scraping the bottom of a distant cave.

She was so startled that not even a scream could escape her lips. Pulled by the force, Charlotte reflexively reached out to grab the armrests of the chair. To anyone watching, it would appear as though she was pouncing on the man seated in the chair.

Their noses touched, close enough for their breaths to mingle.

“...!”

At that moment, Charlotte doubted her eyes. For an instant, the man’s pupils constricted vertically, resembling the eyes of a predator searching for prey in the darkness.

The man’s eyes were a deep purple, like crushed mulberries, a color known to be both regal and base, enchanting yet demonic.

A chill ran down her neck, and her captured arm felt hot.

“A maid?”

The man scrutinized Charlotte’s face as if confirming his prey. For a brief moment, surprise flickered in his eyes.

Seizing the moment his grip loosened, Charlotte scrambled to her feet. The man furrowed his brow.

“You...”

“Are you alright?”

She interrupted him before he could finish, pointing to his blood-stained abdomen.

“The blood...”

“ ... ”

“Should I call someone...”

At that moment, Charlotte was not concerned about who the man was or his status. The fact that losing so much blood usually meant a slim chance of survival filled her mind. She had thought he might have fainted from excessive blood loss.

The man, who had been watching Charlotte with an odd look, brushed himself off and stood up. He then stepped towards her without hesitation. Instinctively, Charlotte stepped back as much as he advanced, dropping the candle and candlestick she was holding.

The chase was short. Soon, Charlotte’s back hit the wall, and a shadow loomed over her, larger than her own. There was no further space to retreat. She closed her eyes tightly.

With a snap, a long, elegant hand landed on the wall right beside Charlotte's left face. He leaned in as if he might devour her at any moment, not to meet her gaze but to whisper in her ear on the opposite side where his hand was placed.

"Are those eyes just for decoration?"

"...What?"

It was an unexpected question. Charlotte opened the eyes she had shut. The man, removing his hand from the wall, brushed back his disheveled hair and said irritably, "This isn't my blood."

"Then..."

Before she could respond, he turned away. He stepped into the unlit area and kicked something towards her.

"This is..."

At Charlotte's feet rolled an old cloth that seemed to contain something. The visible bottom part was slightly worn, as if it had been dragged on the floor.

Upon closer inspection... It was soaked in blood. Charlotte slowly raised her head, her green eyes meeting his. The man, with his arms crossed, briefly explained,

"Hunting."

It was a barbaric yet straightforward word, also seemingly a signal of some sort.

Strangely, her rapidly beating heart calmed down. Charlotte gathered her thoughts.

His words likely meant he had brought a bag containing his prey. The blood on his shirt belonged to the prey. The bloodstains in the entrance hall... seemed to have been caused by dropping the bag upon entering and then dragging it along.

“Ah...”

The fear and tension that had consumed her eased considerably. Charlotte’s legs gave out, and she slumped to the ground, resembling a newly born fawn. The man looking down at her chuckled coldly.

“Quite a morning you’re having, Miss Charlotte Hegel.”

Despite his chilly words, he extended a hand to help her up. Charlotte, as if enchanted, took his offered hand and stood up. Then she doubted her ears. The name that came from the man’s lips was unmistakably hers.

“Do you know me?”

“We’ve met in the wilderness, haven’t we?”

The wilderness. That brought to mind a man who had saved her from a pack of wolves, his features obscured by backlighting.

My goodness, could this man be Lord Richard?

The realization made her head spin. She looked at him with uneasy eyes, feeling as if she had committed a great offense. Richard, slightly raising his eyebrows, let go of her hand as if to say his kindness ended there.

“Pick up what you dropped on the carpet and leave. Now.”

As he pointed with his eyes to the candlestick and candle she had intended to use as weapons, Charlotte felt a twinge in her heart. She quickly picked them up and moved towards the door, about to leave when a quiet but firm warning followed, "If you wander around at night again, you'll regret it."

It wasn't a tone that expected an answer. Charlotte gave a slight nod and hastily left the spot, holding the water cup she had momentarily set down in one hand and the unlit candle in the other.

As she hurried up the dim staircase, she silently repeated the man's name in her mind.

Richard Daniel Kensington.

Instinct whispered to her. They must never meet again.



Ch. 5 ASEF 5

The next day, the bright red bloodstains that streaked across the main hall had vanished as if they had never been there, immaculately cleaned away.

It felt like a bizarre dream. Though it was unclear who had taken care of the aftermath, the employees appeared as usual, as if the events of the previous night were nothing more than a nightmare of hers.

Time swiftly passed, and before long, three days had gone by.

Charlotte diligently heeded the warning she had been given. As a reward or perhaps by coincidence, she had no encounters with Richard Kensington. It was a natural outcome, given that their respective domains were strictly separated.

However, there was a minor issue, one that was beyond her control: she couldn't help but overhear snippets of conversations, like those of maids chatting while they worked. These snippets inevitably reminded her of that night.

"Right, Charlotte. Have you seen Mr. Richard Kensington? He's quite a famous lawyer. With his wealth, he could live comfortably without working a day."

It was the last thing she wanted to hear or be asked about. Charlotte responded with a forced smile, saying, "Is that so?"

Having joined the household staff, she couldn't just eat and sleep all day and started helping out voluntarily, but she was beginning to regret it. The five maids were constantly busy with laundry, cleaning, and endless chatter, especially when their supervisor, Janice, was away.

"Sooner or later, being in the military and of his age, he's bound to find a suitable wife, right?"

"Ah, if that happens, he'll live independently, won't he? It'd be a shame not to see his good looks anymore..."

"Such nonsense. Would the earl let his cherished younger sibling live independently? He's almost like a son to him."

"Speaking of which, there's a lady he's been close to recently, probably a cousin of a friend, if I recall... Oh? Where are you going?"

Charlotte's attempt to sneak away failed miserably. She kicked a bucket next to her, one that had been filled with water to wet mops.

Splash.

The water from the half-filled bucket spilled out all at once, and she pretended to be startled, jumping up.

"Oops!"

"Watch it, will you!"

A maid clicked her tongue at the water soaking the dirt floor. Charlotte, looking apologetic, grabbed the handle of the bucket.

“I’m sorry. I’ll refill it.”

“Alright, do that.”

No sooner had permission been granted than Charlotte picked up the empty bucket and quickly made her way out, turning a corner.

Thud.

Colliding with someone, Charlotte found herself on the hard ground, a pair of men’s shoes in her line of sight. A sinking feeling of dread began to creep up, wondering if it could be him.

Before she could see who it was, a large hand grasped her upper arm and pulled her up.

“Oh...”

The first thing she saw was auburn hair, followed by eyes as blue as the winter sky.

This man was also strikingly handsome, but he was not Richard Kensington. Relieved, Charlotte let out a breath she had been holding, but the man, misunderstanding her reaction, asked cautiously, “I’m sorry about this. Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine to me though...”

“I’m really fine.”

Dusting off her skirt and shaking her head repeatedly, Charlotte was about to hasten her step when suddenly a familiar pain in her stomach struck her. Biting the inside of her cheek, she wondered when was the last time she had something sweet.

Standing still to catch her breath, the man, noticing her discomfort, turned his back to her.

“Get on.”

The words were clear, but they didn’t quite register. He slightly bent his knees and said to the bewildered Charlotte,

“I said, get on.”

“Wha...?”

“I’ll take you to your room.”

“No, really... I’m fine.”

“You’re quite stubborn, aren’t you?”

Charlotte had no time to refuse.

“You’re hurt.”

The man, named Felix Barker, moved behind Charlotte, who was blinking her round eyes in a daze. He wrapped his arms around her knees and shoulders, lifting her up effortlessly. Charlotte’s vision swayed, and in the next moment, she found herself cradled in his arms like a princess.

Before Charlotte could protest, he had started walking.

Felix, who had introduced himself as Felix Barker, was kind. He was heading towards the fourth floor where the staff’s

rooms were located, but Charlotte insisted that the kitchen was enough and declined further assistance.

“Are you sure you can leave? You still seem to be in pain.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine. I’m grateful for the kindness you’ve shown me.”

Fortunately, the kitchen was empty. Charlotte sighed in relief internally. Her lower abdomen throbbed as if pricked by needles, but she managed to smile faintly.

“I think I’ll feel better after sitting for a bit. I’m sorry for the trouble.”

Felix smiled wryly and replied.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I insisted.”

At that moment, the door connected to the main hall opened, and someone came down the stairs.

“Sir Felix? What brings you here...?”

It was Janice. She alternated her gaze between Felix and Charlotte, then fixed her eyes on Felix again. Worried about being misunderstood as harassing a maid, Felix quickly explained.

“I was just helping her. She seemed to be in pain.”

“I see. Sir Richard is in his room.”

“Thank you. I was about to head up anyway.”

At the mention of “Richard,” Charlotte’s body flinched involuntarily. It was almost a reflexive reaction. Felix, looking

down at Charlotte sitting on a wooden chair with concern, bent his knees to meet her eye level.

“Are you really okay?”

He seemed ready to call a doctor if she said no. It was rare for a man to be this kind to a maid. Charlotte wasn't worried about any ulterior motives from him, but she didn't want to be involved in any scandals unnecessarily. She hastily shook her head.

“Yes, please don't worry. You must be busy.”

“I'll take care of Charlotte. Sir Felix.”

After Janice added this, Felix stood up, reassured.

“Your name is Charlotte, isn't it? That's a pretty name.”

“...Thank you.”

“Since we've met like this, if you ever need help, come find me in Cloverfield. It's right next door.”

The kindness and friendliness Felix showed, even though they had only bumped into each other for a moment, felt a bit excessive. Instead of responding, Charlotte nodded, and, feeling reassured, Felix left.

As if taking his place, Janice, who had come down the stairs, was about to speak to Charlotte.

“Charlotte...!”

Janice screamed in alarm.

With the curtains drawn, the spacious room was dim. Approaching him felt like nearing a beast coiled up in its den, tension enveloping Felix's body. As he entered the room and called the owner's name, a sense of apprehension filled the air.

"Richard."

Instead of a response, the sound of rustling blankets came back. Richard, with the blanket pulled over his head, furrowed his brow. Without hesitation, Felix snatched the blanket away.

"Get up. Do you even know what time it is?"

"...What time is it?"

"It's two in the afternoon. The sun is well past its zenith."

Richard, usually compulsively neat, was unusually disheveled. Felix momentarily lost himself in the oddly seductive disarray before turning away and walking towards the window. Pulling back the curtain, the influx of light made Richard groan and finally sit up.

"So, what brings you barging in here?"

His voice was low and rough, not yet free from sleep, resembling a feeling of standing before a growling beast.

"Kiara was wondering. She's been asking why there's been no word from you since the day before yesterday."

It was more than just curiosity; his cousin had even pressured him.

Just two days after meeting, the proud and haughty daughter of the ducal family seemed utterly smitten. Despite her always polite and kind demeanor, there was a moment when she would turn coldly away, seemingly tamed by him. In contrast, Richard's attitude hadn't changed much from the beginning.

At Felix's words, Richard, who was stretching his neck, twisted his lips.

"Are we even that close?"

"What...?"

"It's not like we've shared our hearts, or that we're physically intimate."

The bluntness was almost crude. Felix, momentarily speechless, finally managed to speak.

"You did give her some signs."

"What signs?"

"That, well..."

When pressed for details, Felix found himself at a loss for words again. There had never been a moment when Kiara and Richard were alone together; Felix was always with them. There was no secret encounter that could cause a scandal, nor any overt flirting.

Richard, who had gotten out of bed and changed clothes, turned around.

"By the way."

"..."

“Did you roll around in mud before you came here?”

The question was enigmatic. As Felix scrambled for an answer, Richard, who had approached him, picked up his tie and sniffed it like a hunter scenting prey.

“It smells like flowers.”

“What are you talking about...”

“Black hair, green eyes. A woman in her late teens to early twenties.”

Just as Felix was about to retort, Richard cut him off, causing Felix to blink in surprise. Letting go of the tie, Richard grasped his neck, and Felix felt a pressure as if his breath could be cut off any moment.

“She said she was helping with the maid work. So, perhaps, it was a misunderstanding.”

Richard tilted his head slightly, continuing with an impassive face. A subtle displeasure was discernible beyond his cool voice.

“Did you touch her?”

“What...”

“Did you touch her?”

Felix’s mind raced. The woman he had bumped into had black hair and green eyes, a rare beauty with a serene presence. She wasn’t as immediately striking as Kiara but had a clean, increasingly charming appearance.

It was a first. Since his return, or even before, Richard had never shown interest in any woman. Not even Kiara, dubbed

the “flower on the cliff” by high society, had been an exception.

A mischievous impulse to tease surfaced, but Felix, intimidated by the murderous look in Richard’s eyes, shook his head honestly.

“No.”

No response came, a silent prompt for more explanation.

“We just bumped into each other by chance. She looked hurt, so I carried her to the kitchen. That’s all.”

The tightness around his neck was released simultaneously.



Ch. 6 ASEF 6

Richard took a step back. Felix exhaled the breath he didn't realize had been blocked by the strange sense of oppression.

As Richard turned away, Felix spoke again, "Has she been the reason you haven't been coming out of the mansion for the past few days?"

There was no response. Felix decided to push harder.

"She's an employee. Are you planning to play around with her or something?"

"Shut up."

It was the first intense reaction Richard had shown. A human reaction Felix hadn't seen in a long time. Since coming back, he had seemed unusually disinterested in worldly matters. Felix wondered whether his interest was romantic or merely that of a host to a guest staying in his mansion. Leaning against the window, Felix continued.

"She seemed so innocent. Turns out you're the one who's crossed the line?"

"I told you to shut it."

It was the moment the tension between the two could escalate further when a knock pierced through the tense atmosphere.

“Master Richard.”

It was Janice. As soon as she asked what was the matter, the reply came.

“Charlotte has collapsed. Shall I call the doctor?”

In that moment, Felix distinctly saw Richard’s jaw set firmly.

The scent of peat from the nearby wasteland hung in the air, resembling the pungent smell of wet soil.

Charlotte turned her head to the side. The surroundings were all forest. Near a chopped stump, a black snake coiled itself, slowly uncurling its body, weaving through the dead branches towards her.

‘I need to move. I can’t stay here any longer.’

Charlotte thought to herself, trying to move. But she couldn’t even twitch a finger. Her senses were numb. Apart from the awareness of lying in the bushes, she felt nothing, as if her body was trapped inside a coffin.

The snake, flicking its forked tongue, was now close to her. Charlotte tightly closed her eyes.

Charlotte Hegel.

Then, a voice was heard. It was a familiar male voice, dry and cold, speaking again.

Get up. Right now.

At that moment, as if someone had pulled her up from the surface of the water, Charlotte opened her eyes.

“Haah, haah....”

When she regained consciousness, she found herself on a bed. Her body was drenched in sweat and her throat felt parched. With all her might, she turned her head. Someone was sitting by her bedside. Charlotte's lips quivered.

"Where is... my mother?"

"She's in her room."

"Water... some water, please..."

As soon as she finished speaking, as if someone had been waiting for this moment, her body was propped up with strong arms. A cup filled with cold water was offered to her. She grasped it eagerly and gulped down, the liquid passing several times down her throat before she could finally take a deep breath.

It was the moment she intended to thank the person who came to her aid.

"Thank yo—"

"You have the strength to give thanks, I see."

Her words were immediately cut off. The voice she thought was part of a dream wasn't a dream at all. Lowering the cup in her hand, Charlotte blinked several times and slowly turned her head towards the source of the voice. The halting movement made her resemble a doll that had forgotten to be wound up.

There sat Richard, arrogantly crossing one leg over the other, looking at her. It had been three days since they had faced each other like this.

Hours had passed since she lost consciousness, and it had become dark around her. Only the candle wick provided a faint light in the room. Suddenly, Charlotte remembered the night she had followed the bloodstains in the main hall.

“Did you see ghosts or something?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

Charlotte momentarily blanked out at his nonchalant attitude as if nothing had happened that night, then hastily shook her head.

“I was just startled. I didn’t expect you to be here.”

Her memory cut off right in the kitchen, where a man named Felix had carried her to a chair, and Janice had approached her. And then...

“Are you feeling alright?”

Yes. She had fainted due to a stabbing pain in her abdomen. Charlotte, having recalled everything, tried to calm her heart and responded calmly.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“For what?”

His reply seemed almost rhetorical to her polite remark. Even as she scrutinized him for any intention, Richard’s expression remained as inscrutable as it had been that night. No, he looked a bit more tired than before. Charlotte, choosing her words carefully, finally responded.

“Weren’t you the one who took care of me?”

“It was actually the doctor who did that, not me.”

It was hard to tell whether he was being polite or rude. He was courteous enough for an employer, yet there was an unmistakable arrogance in his demeanor.

Truthfully, she was in no position to complain. She was a servant's daughter. A mere guest. That was Charlotte's role at Mistymoor Hall.

"What brought you here?"

As he took the cup from her hand, watching her complexion darken, there seemed to be a fleeting touch, but it appeared to be noticed only by her. Feeling as if she had been teased, Charlotte's face flushed with heat, and she bowed her head, answering in a small voice.

"As you know... I came to care for my mother."

"Hmm. It doesn't seem like it."

His tone was mocking, prompting Charlotte to lift her head. At that moment, she felt a cold touch by her ear. Before she could even flinch, Richard gently brushed the hair sticking to her cheek behind her ear.

"Cynthia's condition is said to have improved, but do you have that much leisure?"

"...What?"

"Tell me. Who told you to work as a maid? Or did the maids ask for your help?"

His voice, though it seemed to whisper softly, was almost interrogatory. People would have likely confessed the truth, enchanted by his otherworldly beauty and sweet voice.

Charlotte's heart continued to pound. Whether it was the thrill of having a handsome man right before her eyes or a reaction to some unknown danger, she couldn't tell. However, she instinctively felt that a wrong answer now could lead to serious trouble. Swallowing, Charlotte slowly shook her head.

"I've never... It's my fault for meddling and causing trouble. I'm sorry about that."

At her words, the hand moving towards her nape fell away. Richard, who had seemed ready to pounce just a moment ago, stood up briskly, apparently satisfied with Charlotte's submissive demeanor.

"It's good that you understand. Don't wander around unnecessarily and focus on your mother's recovery."

He turned to leave, opening the door to exit.

"That might be difficult."

Richard stopped and turned back around. Despite the chill that ran down her spine when their eyes met, she knew she had to speak up. She wasn't a puppet.

"I appreciate your concern for my mother and everything else, but that doesn't give you the right to do as you please with me."

"..."

"So, how I live is my business to handle. ...Thank you for the concern, though."

Charlotte finished her statement, stumbling over her words. Though she spoke boldly at first, her voice inevitably grew

softer.

No sooner had she finished speaking than Richard approached her again. Before she could grasp the situation, she was suddenly pulled down, and her chin was tilted upwards.

“I hear you’re getting cocky, talking about rights and whatnot.”

“Sir...”

All she could see was Richard’s face filling her vision. But more than his face being so close, it was his cold breath touching her face that truly unnerved her.

“Do you think you can act as you please just because I’ve been kind to you?”

“...”

“I’ve been ignoring your presence even though it’s bothersome.”

With his free hand, Richard grasped the ends of her loose hair. The faint floral scent that had been lingering around his nose since the first day had become so intense it was dizzying. As he looked into Charlotte’s eyes, he slowly lowered his gaze to her contrasting pale skin and dark hair, feeling a blasphemous urge as if he were coveting the nape of a nun offering mass. He felt a compulsion to sink his teeth into her.

One sip seemed like it would be enough. Just one.

His lips moved towards her nape. At that moment, a tiny voice broke the silence.

“Sir...”

“ ...”

“Do I... annoy you that much?”

Richard paused his movement and looked at her again. Charlotte swallowed the sorrow welling up and continued speaking in a trembling voice.

“I knew from the first day that you didn’t like me but...”

It was the first time she had ever felt such unprovoked hostility directed solely at her. Unable to meet his overpowering gaze, Charlotte turned away and took a shaky breath.

“You don’t have to worry. I’ll be leaving this place soon... Could you please bear with me until then?”

She trembled with her eyes closed, resembling a lamb on an altar. Perhaps that was why she easily attracted others’ attention. Richard, after silently watching her for a moment, moved away from her. Realizing the pressure was gone, Charlotte opened her eyes.

“Miss Hegel.”

Richard had stepped down from the bed and was looking down at her. The man who had aggressively confronted her moments ago now wore the mask of a gentleman again. Adjusting his loosened tie, he spoke calmly.

“I heard from Janice that you can read and write.”

“Yes. I struggle with difficult words, but...”

Before entering the workforce, she had briefly attended a charity school for working-class children. It was a day school operated with the support of some nobles, attached to a convent. There, Charlotte received basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic. For someone from the lower classes, especially a girl, receiving even this level of education was rare.

Pleased with Charlotte's response, Richard nodded and walked towards the door, making a suggestion.

"Rather than working as a maid, why don't you work as my secretary? I'll make sure you're compensated fairly."

Though it was phrased as a suggestion, it didn't seem like she had much choice. Upon reflection, it was better than just being an unwelcome guest and helping out as a maid. And it seemed an easier task. It made her wonder if he really found her bothersome and disliked her that much.

Gathering all her courage, Charlotte asked, "Where? It won't be all day, will it?"

"In my study. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. From two to five in the afternoon."

That wouldn't interfere with caring for her mother. Despite the sudden change in circumstances, it seemed like a good deal.

"...Alright. I accept it."

As soon as Charlotte softly replied, the door closed.



Ch. 7 ASEF 7

Richard Kensington's private office was located at the end of the mansion's second floor. Since accepting the secretarial work, it seemed the maids had stopped asking her for other tasks.

Charlotte spent a week working at a desk set aside for her on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from two to five in the afternoon. Considering her capabilities, the secretarial work was less demanding than she had anticipated. It involved simple calculations and organizing requests—tasks that weren't exactly easy but became manageable with some familiarity.

Between Charlotte, positioned by the door, and Richard, seated with his back to the window, there was a distance of about six steps. For three hours, unless necessary, neither approached nor spoke to the other.

"Miss Hegel."

"Yes?"

As she looked up from her work, Richard, still focused on a document, pointed to something with one hand.

"Could you check this and put it back in its place?"

"Yes, understood."

He preferred crisp and straightforward responses when giving instructions. The same went for how work was to be done: it had to be completed without a single error before moving on to the next task.

Just as Charlotte stood to approach Richard's desk, the door burst open.

"Mr. Richard."

"...Miss Kiara."

The person who entered, with striking red hair, captivated attention immediately. She was a beautiful woman with a haughty demeanor, dressed in a bright blue dress that accentuated her figure. Charlotte, stopped in her tracks, watched her enter, while Kiara gave Charlotte a quick glance before breezing further inside.

"I've been waiting for 30 minutes. Didn't you hear I had arrived?"

Richard frowned and glanced at his watch.

"It seems we are past the appointment time. I wasn't aware."

Richard recalled that indeed, a servant had knocked on the door a bit earlier to announce a visitor. He thought he had asked the visitor to wait just five minutes ago, yet 30 minutes had passed.

As he massaged his temples, possibly due to a headache from Kiara's sudden appearance, Kiara leaned on the desk and pouted charmingly.

"I was so bored, I even called Peli."

“Is that so?”

“Yes. The earl and his wife aren’t around either, and there’s no one else to talk to...”

Kiara’s gaze then suddenly shifted to Charlotte, who stood silently to the side. After scanning her from head to toe, Kiara turned her head back toward Richard.

“Is this the first time I am seeing her? Did you hire her?”

Her direct question was likely because Charlotte’s attire made it unclear whether she was just a maid or a formally hired secretary. Frustrated by Kiara’s abrupt chattering, Richard replied irritably.

“She isn’t someone you need to be curious about.”

“Oh...”

Charlotte felt each word hit her heart, not because they were untrue, but perhaps because she had mistakenly thought they had grown somewhat closer after working together for just three days.

With a throb in her chest, Charlotte inhaled sharply. The wall clock showed it was past five. It seemed best to leave for the day.

“I’ll be going now...”

As Charlotte made a small bow to Richard and turned to leave, Kiara swiftly interrupted her.

“Oh dear. It sounds like I’m chasing you out. I really don’t want to play the villain here.”

“It’s simply the end of the workday.” Richard interjected in a low voice.

It was a warning not to detain someone unnecessarily.

Kiara quietly clenched and then released her fist. She was not accustomed to being treated dismissively anywhere in Ethelwood. Yet, this man had forgotten their walking appointment, making her wait alone in the sitting room for 30 minutes, and yet he was so nonchalant about it.

She would normally storm out, perhaps even throwing cold water in his face in anger, but the thought of not seeing his face, which she so admired, held her back.

“Just a moment, miss.”

Ignoring Richard’s warning to let her go, Kiara approached Charlotte with a friendly greeting as if she hadn’t ignored her earlier. She extended her hand with a warmth that made one question if she really had pretended not to see Charlotte before.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kiara Spencer. I’m currently staying in Cloverfield; I have a cousin there. What’s your name?”

“...Charlotte Hegel.” Charlotte responded, somewhat reflexively shaking hands.

She had heard of Cloverfield recently. It was the place mentioned by a man named Felix who had kindly escorted her to the kitchen.

Kiara had a faint smile on her lips.

“I see. It’s quite pretty. In Eastern pronunciation, it would also be read as ‘Charlote’*¹.”

“Thank you.”

Being in the same room with people she had never had any dealings with before made Charlotte’s head throb. She thought about checking on her mother’s condition and administering her medication when she got back, but then Kiara made an unexpected suggestion.

“Since we’ve met here, why not go for a walk together?”

It was getting dark, and going for a walk at this hour was unheard of. Confused by the suggestion, Charlotte just blinked until Kiara insisted again.

“I’ve been a bit lonely since I’m the only woman here. Let’s go together, Miss Charlotte, shall we?”

Unlike the damp and chilly air that usually enveloped Greidel Hill, the weather today was clear and mild.

Accompanied by three servants carrying oil lamps, a picnic blanket, and a basket with wine and glasses, the group of four made their way to a deserted hill.

Just a short distance from the gloomy mansion, they came upon small hills dotted with wildflowers and raspberry bushes. Under a broad-leaved horse chestnut tree, the maid chose a flat spot to spread the picnic blanket.

The blanket was large enough to comfortably fit six people. Charlotte and Kiara, along with two seemingly reluctant men, took their seats spaciouly.

Kiara quickly cozied up to Charlotte as if they were close friends and, linking arms, whispered as if she was sharing a

secret.

“You haven’t been here long, right? Just wait, Miss Charlotte. You’re in for a surprise.”

“Don’t feel pressured, Kiara. I’m sorry for making you come out here.”

Kiara’s cousin, indeed, was Felix. His behavior, typically blunt, was familiar yet apologetic towards Charlotte. When their eyes met, Charlotte smiled faintly, reassuring him. It seemed pointless to be grumpy now that she was here, especially since Janice had agreed to take care of Cynthia’s medicine.

“Oh, what are you saying? Coming out here was your decision, wasn’t it, Miss Charlotte?”

“That’s right. I was feeling a bit suffocated, but it’s refreshing to be out here. Thank you, miss.”

Charlotte responded appropriately to Kiara’s pretentious remark and turned her gaze downhill. Richard, seated diagonally below, had been mostly silent, merely nodding occasionally to the conversation between Felix and Kiara.

The talk mainly revolved around politics, society, and arts—topics mostly beyond Charlotte’s understanding.

Unable to join the conversation, Charlotte quietly took in the scenery around her. Her gaze, lost for a moment, landed on the profile of Richard.

His nose was like a sculpture, and his lips tightly closed. In the sunset, his light brown hair appeared a deeper shade of

blond. Startled by her own blatant staring, she was about to turn away when their eyes met.

She felt like an artist irresistibly drawn to their own creation. Like a butterfly pinned in place, Charlotte forgot to breathe. In the surreal setting, the man seemed impossibly perfect, almost as if he shouldn't or couldn't exist—a figment dragged out of imagination, too compelling to look away from.

“Miss Hegel.”

Startled by his call, Charlotte snapped back to reality. Unlike the other two who had addressed her casually, he had always used her last name, maintaining a distance that was undoubtedly formal and somewhat cold. Charlotte shrank a bit under his icy gaze as he continued softly.

“Look ahead.”

As if under a spell, Charlotte turned just in time to witness a breathtaking scene.

“Wow...”

An exclamation slipped from her lips unwittingly.

Dozens of fireflies, whose arrival was unnoticed, now surrounded them. The scene was more dramatic and beautiful than any meticulously staged play.

“How can there be such a spectacle...”

Overwhelmed by a sight she had never seen before, Charlotte couldn't close her mouth as Kiara grinned triumphantly.

“See? It was good that you followed me out here, wasn’t it?”

The magical display by the fireflies was brief, but it left an indelible mark on her mind.

Soon after, the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, and darkness settled around them. After a glass or two of wine, the four of them were ready to leave.

As they started down the hill, Kiara, pretending to be drunk, leaned on Richard’s shoulder. This naturally positioned Felix next to Charlotte.

“Ah...!”

While carefully descending, Charlotte stumbled over a sharp stone she hadn’t seen in the dark. Kiara clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Eek!”

“Miss Charlotte!”



Ch. 8 ASEF 8

Before Felix could even reach out, Charlotte had plunged into a pit beside the road. Instinctively, she clenched her eyes shut and braced for the pain that she expected to follow. However, no matter how much time passed, the pain didn't come.

The ground was softer than she had anticipated. While she was wondering how that could be, the pressure that had been on the back of her head and shoulders lifted, and she heard a low voice near her ear.

"...Open your eyes."

Charlotte's eyes flew open, and she found herself looking directly into the violet pupils of Richard, who was sprawled beneath her like a carpet. Her heart sank.

"S-Sir...Richard?"

With eyes wide as a frightened rabbit, Charlotte looked up at Richard, who twisted his mouth into a wry expression. The sight of himself, haphazardly thrown into the pit, seemed utterly ridiculous.

It had always been like this. For some reason, just seeing this woman made irritation bubble up inside him. He disliked everything about her, starting with the flowery scent she seemed to carry around. Yet, the biggest problem was that he couldn't just leave her alone.

Seeing Charlotte frozen, Richard spoke again.

“Do you intend to suffocate me?”

“Ah! I’m so sorry.”

Startled, Charlotte quickly scrambled off of him. Her hand that had touched his chest felt scorchingly hot. She felt as though all the blood in her body was rushing to that spot. Unable to lift her head, she could only look downward and breathe heavily. Just then, voices came from above.

“Richard! Miss Charlotte!”

“Are both of you alright?!”

It was Felix and Kiara. They peered down at them, lamps in hand. Felix raised his voice.

“Richard! It seems deeper than I thought. I can’t even reach you with my hand.”

As if he hadn’t been beneath Charlotte moments ago, Richard dusted himself off and calmly replied.

“I’ll escort Miss Kiara first, then send a servant for a rope or ladder.”

“Got it. We will just wait here!”

With a nod, Felix and the others left, and soon, only the two of them were left. Before Richard could turn towards her, Charlotte muttered softly.

“Thank you for saving me... Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine.”

That ended the conversation. As usual, when it was just the two of them, an awkward silence filled with tension followed. The only sound was their regular breathing.

Charlotte's heart beat faster and faster. She feared it might be heard. Just when she couldn't bear it any longer and was about to speak again, something dropped onto Charlotte's head. As she looked up, rain started to pour down heavily. A sudden downpour soaked her small head and slender neck, and the cold quickly followed.

"...Ah!"

A chill ran up from her fingertips, causing Charlotte to shiver. Suddenly, a large hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her close. Richard's broad chest touched her back. As she instinctively tried to pull away, Richard, having shed his coat, draped it over her slender back and restrained her movements.

"Stop trying to escape."

His voice was low, and his breath as damp as the weather. Charlotte shivered more from his strong scent than the cold.

"Calling a doctor would be quite bothersome."

She was too shocked to reply. As Charlotte held her breath to suppress her hiccupping, Richard reached into the collar of her coat with his other hand and pulled out her hair. It was a very natural movement.

"Don't move."

The small girl in his arms flinched every time his hand touched her, much like a touch-me-not that recoils at human contact, pretending to wilt.

His patience was tested to the limit, yet he refrained from crushing her completely, despite feeling utterly foolish.

After a moment of silence, Charlotte spoke.

“...Sir.”

Her words dispersed with each breath. With her head bowed, Charlotte bit her lip in confusion and slowly said.

“I can’t tell if you dislike me or not.”

“Why?”

“Your words and actions are cold, but you still reach out when needed...”

Even now, he had done so, clearly sharing his coat to shield her from lying down in the rain.

“And...”

“And?”

His voice seemed unexpectedly gentle. Surely, she was mistaken. Charlotte stammered.

“...And you suggested I take secretarial work over maid duties.”

Basic tasks, which he could easily do alone or assign to middle-class boys eager to learn under him, were things he offered to her, who came from a far less privileged background.

Richard, seemingly collecting his thoughts, slowly spoke, “Miss Hegel.”

“Richard! Charlotte!”

Just then, as the rain grew heavier, a voice came from directly above. Their gazes simultaneously lifted. Felix, holding a ladder with the help of a servant under an umbrella, shouted down to them.

“I’m lowering the ladder! Come up right away!”

It was then that Charlotte felt the weight on her shoulders. He had fully draped his coat over her.

“Get on my back.”

“What?”

Charlotte, taken aback, saw Richard’s hand move towards her ankle.

“You’ve twisted your ankle.”

Following his gaze, she noticed her right ankle beginning to swell and felt a sharp pain. A small sigh escaped Richard as he spoke again.

“Get on. If you don’t want to be carried.”

“...”

Hesitating, Charlotte saw him reveal a smile, showing his teeth.

“Or perhaps, you prefer being in that bastard’s arms?”

Realizing it was her last chance to respond, her voice was tinged with exhaustion.

“I’ll get on your back.”

Quickly, Charlotte climbed onto his back.

While examining Charlotte's swollen ankle, the young doctor said, "It looks like it'll take about two days to heal. You should avoid walking quickly for the time being."

"Yes, thank you, Doctor."

Fortunately, the ankle she had twisted the night before was not seriously damaged. After applying ointment to Charlotte's ankle, the doctor skillfully wrapped it with a bandage.

"How is Cynthia's condition?"

Her mother, Cynthia, was already in a state beyond help, so they had not called for a house visit. It would have been a waste of time. Thus, Janice had sent her to the clinic on the outskirts of Gretel Hill, coincidentally when she was due to pick up Cynthia's medication. The visit also served to treat her sprained ankle.

"She has improved quite a bit. Recently, she hardly tosses and turns at night."

"That's good to hear. Then I should prescribe a milder pain reliever."

After finishing the treatment, the doctor got up and turned his back, rummaging through a shelf. Failing to find what he was looking for, he turned around empty-handed.

"By the way, how are you planning to get back? It will be difficult to walk."

“Hans will be back in about ten minutes. He’s just finishing some errands nearby.”

The doctor nodded and responded, “That’s fortunate. I’ll go get your medication from outside. Just a moment, please.”

“Okay.”

After the door closed, Charlotte was left alone. She slowly lowered her leg, which had been resting on the console, and looked around.

The rural doctor’s office and clinic was a simple space, unremarkably furnished with a modest desk and chairs, starkly different from the office in Richard’s house. A bookcase filled one wall behind the desk.

Sitting in front of the fireplace on a bench, Charlotte slowly stood up. The bookcase packed with unnamed medical texts intrigued her. It reminded her of her brief time at school where only the upperclassmen’s much-read books were available, some so worn it was hard to read the text.

Approaching the bookshelf, Charlotte ran her fingers over the spines of the books. Anatomy, neurology, psychology... Her gaze stopped at one particular book.

“...What is this?”

She carefully pulled out a bound volume.

<Study on Abnormal Blood-Drinking Impulses and Blood Dependency Disorders>

Unlike the other books, this one was unusually thick and vividly red. The cover was worn, and there were signs of mildew on some pages, indicating it had been published

some time ago. The book felt heavy in her hands, so she placed it on the desk and flipped through a few pages.

[The experimenters in this study have hypothesized that 'Abnormal Blood-Drinking Impulses and Blood Dependency Disorders' are caused by a hereditary metabolic disorder affecting blood and tissue... First, I will describe the characteristics of the subjects. They exhibit severe aversions to sunlight and garlic, complaining of anemia and headaches when exposed directly to them. However, individual differences exist.]

Her hands trembled as she turned the pages. A chilly sensation seemed to pass over her skin, causing the hairs on her neck to stand up. Taking a deep breath, Charlotte slowly continued reading.

[One of the most notable findings is that these subjects' blood, when kept at room temperature, undergoes rapid self-destruction. If injected with animal blood, they absorb it frenziedly to maintain volume, but this does not last long. Human blood, on the other hand, sustains them longer, but it also has its limits. Ultimately, they require the blood of other living beings to survive, and not in small quantities.]

A noise caught her attention as she was reading the last line.

Thump.

As the door opened, the book on the desk fell with a thud. Charlotte hastily turned her head.

“Miss Charlotte? What were you doing?”

The doctor, holding a bag of prescribed medicine, looked puzzled. With a flushed face, Charlotte bent down to pick up

the dropped book.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have without permission...”

“Oh, you were looking at the book.”

The doctor took the book from Charlotte, quickly flipped through it, and then placed it back on the shelf.

“It’s certainly an interesting book. It was quite difficult to obtain.”

Blood. Vampirism. Dead animals.

The images that flashed through Charlotte’s mind made her hands tremble uncontrollably. It seemed like a ridiculous notion even to her, yet her lips moved independently of her thoughts.

“...Do people like this really exist?”

“Well, opinions vary in the academic field. I tend to believe they exist.”

“Why is that?”

“My professor, who guided me, claimed to have seen them. He said they are incredibly beautiful, both men and women. Perhaps it’s an adaptation for survival. It would make sense to attract prey.”

Prey. He was clearly referring to people. Charlotte shrank her shoulders. The doctor chuckled playfully, his tone more like that of an uncle telling a scary story to a niece than his earlier serious belief.

“It’s chilling to think about, but I’d be curious to see one.”

“...”

“Ah, was that too gloomy for broad daylight?”

Seeming to think he had frightened her too much, the doctor apologized and handed her the bag of medicine.

“They are said to be active at night, so as long as you don’t go out then, you don’t have to worry. Besides, it’s unlikely they’d be in a rural area like this. Here, take your medicine.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte quickly nodded and took the medicine bag, eager to leave the room. Her mind was troubled, and she wanted to get away as soon as possible. Just as she was about to open the door, the doctor placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Take this too. It’s the medication the Earl ordered; it just got finished.”

The doctor handed her a palm-sized bottle of dark glass, difficult to see inside.

“It seems the Earl has gotten a new hunting dog. Must be quite a fierce one, huh? There aren’t many occasions to use a sedative this strong.”



Ch. 9 ASEF 9

Having picked up the medicine, Charlotte headed straight for Mistymoor Hall. Throughout her return, the doctor's words circled incessantly in her mind, only ceasing once she arrived at the mansion.

She took the medicine she had collected to the maid's room and handed it to Janice, who initially looked puzzled but soon smiled gently, as if something had occurred to her.

"Ah, it's finally ready. Thank you."

"Not at all. I should be the one thanking you. ...How is mother?"

"She's sleeping now. She seems to be getting better since your arrival."

"That's really good to hear."

It was exactly as she said. Contrary to the doctor's estimation that she had at most a month, Cynthia's complexion was visibly improving day by day. Hans mentioned that she might even live a few more months. Charlotte hoped so too.

Sitting opposite her, Janice briefly set the medicine bottle aside and changed the topic.

"By the way, how do you find working with Sir Richard?"

“He treats me well. There’s nothing particularly hard or difficult.”

“That’s good to hear. Still...”

Janice, who looked pleased by the positive response, paused and closed her mouth for a moment.

“You do know not to misinterpret his kindness, right?”

“...”

“I know you’re not one to do so, but there are kids who sometimes plunge themselves into the abyss due to misunderstanding. ...You’re not so young anymore, so I believe you understand.”

It was a deeply felt warning. The fate of maids who became overly close to their male employers was often grim. Once gossip began, they could not stay long in the mansion, and even if they managed to leave under decent circumstances, the lack of a character reference made finding another job almost impossible.

The outcome for those who couldn’t secure employment was all but certain. They would end up entering brothels, contracting syphilis and other venereal diseases, or, at the very end, starving or freezing to death in poorhouses.

Charlotte was all too familiar with such situations, having experienced something similar before. Strictly speaking, she hadn’t come here to work as a maid, but to others, there appeared to be little difference.

“Don’t worry about that, ma’am.”

“That’s a relief.”

As Charlotte quietly responded, lowering her eyes, Janice looked at her with an unreadable expression and handed her the medicine bottle.

“Actually, this medicine belongs to Sir Richard. Could you deliver it to him?”

It was an errand but perhaps also a test. Charlotte nodded and took the medicine.

Standing in front of the office, Charlotte took a deep breath. It took her a moment to place her hand on the doorknob and knock.

“It’s Charlotte, sir. Are you there?”

She spoke as she slowly opened the door, but no response came. Gathering her courage, she pushed the door open wider and entered.

Contrary to her expectations, the office was empty. Heavy curtains darkened the room despite it being broad daylight, though it wasn’t so dark that she couldn’t see.

“Excuse me...Sir Richard?”

As Charlotte called out and stepped forward, she noticed the office was as tidy as usual, suggesting the maid had cleaned it in the morning.

Charlotte was in charge of laundry but was skilled in various chores. She knew that curtains were usually drawn back when cleaning, which meant that Richard must have been working alone and quite possibly until just before.

Richard Kensington typically worked as a lawyer until before six o’clock on weekdays. He often met clients outside but

usually entertained them in his private reception room or organized paperwork in his office.

Janice had mentioned that he didn't work as a lawyer on weekends. Instead, he would either ride into town with the earl to meet others or visit Cloverfield alone to play cards or billiards with Felix.

Thus, it was odd for him to be working today since it was the weekend.

Charlotte moved further inside, her eyes settling on Richard's desk. The documents were unusually disheveled, and an ink bottle had toppled over, its cap off and black ink leaking out. She hurriedly set it upright.

Just then, the sound of breaking glass rang out as if on cue. Charlotte's body jolted in shock. Clearly, she was alone in the room. She glanced around and noticed that a door on the left wall, likely leading to a bedroom, was slightly ajar.

With a worried heart, Charlotte approached and knocked. As if the previous sound had been an illusion, no noise came from inside. Her palms were sweaty. She knocked once more and cautiously opened the door.

"This is Charlotte. I'm coming in."

The room, engulfed in darkness like the office, seemed no different from a bedroom in any other mansion she had worked in before. Somehow reassured, she let out a sigh of relief.

Taking another step inside, Charlotte scanned the room. A king-sized bed came into view.

A hand peeked out from between the bed's covers. Large and white, it seemed powerful enough to make veins protrude if clenched. Seeing that hand made Charlotte's face flush with heat, recalling how it had covered her shoulder and embraced her waist the night before. She also remembered the breathing she had heard close to her ear.

"You do know not to misinterpret his kindness, right?"

Suddenly, Janice's warning came back to her. Charlotte swallowed and spoke carefully.

"I'm here on an errand. Janice asked me to..."

Again, no response came. He appeared to be asleep. Thinking it best to place the medicine on the bedside table so he'd see it when he woke, she quietly moved towards it and was about to set down the medicine when a sharp pain suddenly overtook her.

"Ah...!"

Looking down, Charlotte realized that a sharp shard had embedded itself in her foot. A reflexive moan escaped her lips.

"Uh..."

It had to be the foot she had twisted. The piece seemed deeply embedded, bringing tears to her eyes. Just as her legs began to give out, a hand reached from behind her, enveloping her waist and pulling her onto the bed.

"Sir Richard?"

Caught off-guard, Charlotte sat on the bed and cried out his name. The hand then withdrew.

“...Janice.”

Lying under the covers up to his waist and with his eyes closed, Richard murmured the housekeeper’s name in a sleep-drenched voice. Before she could clarify that she wasn’t Janice, Richard spoke again.

“...The medicine.”

“What?”

“Give me the medicine.”

His voice was so dry it was almost cracking. Charlotte, barely pulling herself together, looked over to the table where she had just placed the medicine. She noticed a small glass she hadn’t seen before. Thinking she should pour the medicine into the glass, a remark she had heard when receiving the medicine suddenly flashed through her mind.

The doctor had definitely said it was a suppressant suitable for a ferocious hound.

No. There must be some mistake. It must have been just a way to describe the potency of the medicine.

Taking another deep breath, Charlotte reached for the bottle on the table. She calmly removed the cork from the bottle. Meanwhile, uncomfortable breathing came from behind her, and she sensed him trying to sit up.

“ ... ”

Her hands trembled with tension, causing a few drops to fall on the back of her hand as she poured the medicine into the glass. The liquid felt unpleasantly cold and slimy.

“Here, please drink this.”

Finally regaining her composure, she handed him the half-filled glass. She kept her eyes down, not knowing where to look. Richard was shirtless. In the dim light, the outline of his abs was faintly visible. Charlotte felt her face grow hot.

“I’ll leave now...”

She hastily made a move to get up, feeling as if she were drowning in a river. Being near this man always evoked this overwhelming sensation. The stimulation was too intense. It was hard to breathe. She wanted to escape and catch her breath.

Then a voice from behind her said, “Wait.”

Before Charlotte could react, Richard swiftly grabbed her hand.

“Ow...!”

Startled like a rabbit in a trap, she barely regained her senses when his wet tongue touched the back of her hand. Her body stiffened as if venom was spreading through her veins.

It felt as if a wild dog was thoroughly licking the remnants off the hand that fed it. There was no sense of threat or aggression, yet it felt like sharp fangs would sink into her skin the moment she pulled her hand away.

She couldn’t move at all, only holding her breath, waiting for whatever was on her hand to be gone.

It was only moments later that her hand was released.

“It’s strange. I smell blood on you. It shouldn’t be time to feed yet.”

“ ... ”

“Did the Earl say I’m a mad beast who needs to be fed early?”

Richard licked the last traces with a greedy fervor, his tone casual yet authoritative, unlike how he addressed Charlotte. He seemed not fully awake yet.

His words sent a chill down Charlotte’s neck, snapping her suddenly blurry mind into sharp focus. She couldn’t understand what he meant, but she instinctively knew these were words she shouldn’t have heard.

I shouldn’t be here. I mustn’t be caught.

Desperately shaking off his hand, Charlotte limped away from his territory. With each step, the glass shard in her foot dug deeper, but she couldn’t stop.

She clasped her hands together, desperately trying to stifle the breath that threatened to burst forth. Barely making it to the door, Charlotte opened it just as someone stood on the other side.

“Why are you here?”



Ch. 10 ASEF 10

Charlotte slowly lifted her head to find herself face-to-face with Seymour Arthur Kensington, the Earl and master of Mistymoor Hall.

“Ah...”

The moment she met his violet eyes, so similar to Richard’s, Charlotte felt like a child caught stealing. She knew she should say something, but her words failed her.

The Earl’s eyes narrowed momentarily. His cold gaze scanned her from head to toe, pausing at her feet. Seeing the blood on her feet and the trail it left behind, he furrowed his brow. For a moment, Charlotte couldn’t believe her ears.

“Why are you unharmed?”

“Excuse me?”

His tone suggested it was wrong for her to have emerged from the bedroom unscathed. The Earl’s demeanor was completely different from when they first met; it was cold and sharp, almost cutting.

While Charlotte blinked in surprise, the Earl reached out as if to confirm something. A sense of foreboding made her close her eyes tightly, but then a voice came from behind her.

“An errand.”

“ ... ”

“They said you had come.”

Charlotte tensed up. Slowly opening her eyes, she turned to see Richard standing there. He spoke in a restrained voice, then glanced briefly at her before turning back to the Earl.

“What brings you here, brother?”

“Ah...”

It seemed the Earl had come back to his senses. He lowered his hand and raised his head, his stern look softening.

“I came to deliver this. I didn’t trust it with anyone else.”

He handed Richard a letter, sealed with the Spencer family crest. It was obvious who had sent it even without opening it. A flicker of annoyance crossed Richard’s face.

“Thank you.”

“ ... ”

“Is there anything else?”

His demeanor was cool and formal, almost distant, as if he was addressing a stranger rather than a brother. The Earl hesitated as if he wanted to say more, then shook his head.

“No, rest well.”

“Yes.”

As soon as Richard responded, the Earl turned and walked away. Charlotte, feeling like an intruder, hesitantly stepped

back. Richard, with a cold laugh, turned his back and headed toward the room.

“Come in.”

It was not a suggestion, but a command. She hesitated briefly, fearing the repercussions, but eventually entered like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse.

As soon as the door shut, the curtains were drawn back and light flooded the bedroom. Startled, Charlotte looked up at Richard’s voice.

“Sit here.”

He gestured to a seat across from him by the fireplace. Unaware in her confusion, she was relieved to see he had put on a shirt. Tentatively, she approached and sat down, only for him to grab her ankle and place it on the table.

“My lord!”

“You’ve held up well.”

Though Charlotte cried out, Richard remained detached, examining the injury with a straightforward expression, embarrassingly undisturbed by her overreaction.

Flustered, Charlotte could only stare wide-eyed as Richard twisted his mouth.

“If I intended to take advantage, it wouldn’t be here. Would it?”

Her face turned red. His blunt words, spoken so casually on his impeccable face, were unbearably embarrassing.

The seriousness of the wound seemed worse than she thought, as he frowned deeply but soon got up from his seat.

“Just wait quietly.”

Richard walked to his office, disappearing briefly before returning with bandages and tweezers. Realizing his intentions, Charlotte tried to pull her foot away, but he wouldn't let go.

“I can do it myself. Let me go back...”

“Go back? With that foot?”

He scoffed softly, speaking as if coaxing a stubborn child.

“Bear with the pain. It will be over quickly.”

And it was true. She felt a quick pull, then a cold ointment followed, much less painful than she anticipated.

Surprised, Charlotte's gaze fell on Richard's neatly combed hair, gleaming and finely textured like satin, almost tempting her to touch it.

“Miss Hegel.”

Her hand had been reaching towards his hair when she suddenly snapped out of it at the sound of her name. Hastily, she withdrew her hand, but Richard had already seen it and looked up at her.

“Try putting your foot down. If it's not painful, try walking.”

Charlotte cautiously stepped down with her bandaged foot. Miraculously, it wasn't painful. She managed a few steps, feeling only a slight prickling sensation.

“That looks fine.”

Richard watched her flushed face light up, then got up and sat back in the armchair. Charlotte flinched at the next command.

“Now, sit.”

“Yes...?”

Her face, which had brightened like a child receiving candy, quickly fell. She seemed incapable of hiding her feelings or lying—a seemingly naive woman, yet not quite.

Hesitant, she finally sat across from him as he leaned back, opened his lips, and began to speak.

“Do you have anything to say to me?”

“...To say?”

Taken aback by the question, Charlotte asked for clarification, to which Richard simply nodded.

“Anything at all.”

There was much she wanted to say, feelings and thoughts suppressed down to the pit of her stomach. Why did he seem to dislike her, or did he really? Was it just capriciousness, or something else entirely? And what about that medicine?

However, feeling the moment was not right to ask such things, Charlotte held back and thought of another question.

“Why are you so familiar with this?”

“With what?”

“With removing splinters from feet.”

Even as she spoke, she felt the absurdity of her question, breaking the tension of their earlier conversation. Internally scolding herself for the foolish query, there was a pause before Richard tilted his head back and chuckled lightly.

For a moment, Charlotte forgot her train of thought, struck by the refreshing laughter that seemed almost boyish.

Returning to his composed demeanor as if he hadn’t laughed, Richard saw Charlotte’s dazed expression and answered.

“I was in the military.”

“How many years?”

“Just over two years.”

“Ah...”

Two years—a time neither short nor particularly long. Charlotte remembered stories she had heard from the maids about Richard. They said he had gone to a colonial island, had been missing for a while, and then one night, he returned without any forewarning.

The past that must have been painful, yet his face remained impassive, as casual as discussing the evening’s dinner menu.

“Then let me ask you something now,” Richard said, seizing the opportunity as Charlotte was lost in thought. She nodded, and he continued.

“Who sent you on this errand here?”

Realizing she had been half-asleep earlier and might have misunderstood something, Charlotte quickly answered.

“It was Lady Janice. She asked me to deliver a message...”

“I thought so.”

Something about his reply made her feel uneasy, but she forced the apprehension out of her mind. Richard gave her a cryptic look, then leaned back from the chair and stood.

“It would be best if you kept everything you’ve seen and heard today to yourself.”

“Yes... I understand.”

The conversation seemed to be over. Charlotte felt relieved, and she was about to quietly rise from her seat when he called her name again.

“Miss Hegel.”

She looked up to find Richard standing by the window, continuing the conversation.

“Have you ever been down to the village?”

Charlotte shook her head in response as she looked at his broad back, an implicit “no.”

“I would like to, but...”

There hadn’t been a chance. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she assisted him with his work, and on other days, she cared for her mother Cynthia—preparing her meals and bathing her. Richard, still facing away, seemed to understand the words she had swallowed.

“Good timing. I was free today.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have to go down today. Come with me. I’ll take you.”

Charlotte opened her mouth to object but then closed it, knowing any refusal would be futile.

The covered carriage glided smoothly over the dirt road without a coachman; Richard held the reins. Charlotte sat beside him, taking in the scenery.

Gredel Hill was a vast area. Unlike the barren wasteland she had seen upon her first arrival, the road to the village was lush with greenery.

It was Richard who broke the silence, “I heard your hometown was near the sea.”

It seemed Janice or another servant had tipped him off. Charlotte nodded.

“Yes. A small village called Dallas.”

People were often surprised to learn she was from a coastal village, imagining someone more open and cheerful from such a locale.

“Actually, I only lived there until I was thirteen, so I don’t remember much except that it was quiet.”

Dallas was a tiny village, barely a hundred households. Exaggerating slightly, one might say everyone knew each other’s business. Unlike other seaside villages, it was notable for having no fishermen, thanks to the harsh winds

and violent waves that continually eroded the cliffs, making fishing unsustainable.

Recalling the place, Charlotte was surprised by how much she had to say.

“Sometimes, during storms, we would all huddle under one blanket in the living room. It was terrifying, but also exciting.”

Of course, her mother Cynthia wasn’t there at those times; she was already in Gredel Hill. But the days when her sister came home on vacation from the house where she worked, and her father wasn’t lost to gambling, were memories Charlotte cherished.

Richard glanced at Charlotte, seemingly lost in her reminiscences, then looked away.

“You had a strong family. Like now.”

His voice was so soft Charlotte barely heard him. Puzzled, she tilted her head, but he just nodded forward.

“We’re here.”

As if passing an initiation ritual for outsiders, the fog that had slightly obscured their view lifted, revealing the bustling marketplace and its busy inhabitants.



Ch. 11 ASEF 11

Contrary to the tranquil first impression of Gredel Hill, the village was bustling with life, a stark contrast to the pastoral Mistymoor Hall. It could easily be considered a different region altogether.

As they reached the entrance of the village, Richard brought the carriage to a stop and extended his hand to Charlotte, just as he had when helping her into the carriage earlier. She had blinked in surprise at his earlier gesture of escort, but this time, without hesitation, she took his hand and stepped down. At that moment, Richard caught her by the shoulder and gently pulled her towards him. Simultaneously, a horse narrowly missed Charlotte as it passed by, its rider seemingly oblivious to her presence.

While a cool gaze followed the horse, a stable hand approached and took the reins from Richard, who then turned back to Charlotte.

“I’m heading to the bank for a bit. Do you have any plans?”

His tone suggested she was welcome to join him if she had no other plans. Charlotte responded immediately.

“I thought I might explore the area a bit... since it’s my first time here.”

“Understood. Let’s meet back here in an hour.”

She hadn't expected that he would also accompany her back, but it made sense given the distance was quite a walk. Charlotte nodded and watched Richard curiously as he seemed to ponder something. Then, from a pocket in his vest, he pulled out a small pocket watch, intricately made of silver. It was clearly an expensive item, prompting Charlotte to wave her hands in refusal.

"I can't accept this."

"I'm lending it to you. I detest waiting."

"But still..."

With a crooked smile, he cautioned her, "There are many eyes watching."

"..."

"Shall I make it grasp your hand instead?"

At his words, Charlotte looked up sharply. It was true; people passing by did glance their way, most of them at Richard Kensington, whose striking appearance commanded attention wherever he went.

Charlotte muttered to herself in disbelief.

"...Grasp it?"

"If you wish."

He seemed to offer a choice, but realistically, he had blocked off all paths but one, guiding the situation in the direction he wanted. Charlotte hastily reached out.

"Thank you. I'll make good use of it."

“It’s two o’clock now; let’s meet at three.”

Before she could nod, Richard had turned and disappeared into the crowd. Left alone among the throng of people, Charlotte too began to move busily.

The first place Charlotte visited was a glove shop. The array of gloves caught her eye: satin gloves, gloves adorned with frills, and others embellished with pearls.

As she entered, an attentive clerk approached.

“Do you have a specific type of glove in mind?”

“No, just looking around.”

Feeling too embarrassed to ask for the cheapest gloves suitable for church, she avoided further engagement with the clerk and scanned the area. The shop was quite renowned locally, judging by the number of customers.

While she examined gloves on display, she overheard a conversation between two women browsing nearby.

“Did you hear the latest news?”

“What news?”

“The wolves around here have become more ferocious lately.”

The word ‘wolf’ made Charlotte stiffen. She remembered a pack of wolves that seemed ready to pounce and tear at her neck.

“Really? Is that true?”

“Yes. There have been animals found dead and left in the wastelands and forests. Mostly wild ones.”

“That’s odd. They kill but don’t eat? Isn’t it usually for food?”

“Exactly, it’s strange...”

The more she heard, the more the conversation chilled her. Unknowingly, Charlotte clenched her fists. Then, someone touched her shoulder, startling her. She turned to see bright blue eyes looking at her.

“Miss Charlotte.”

“Ah...”

“I didn’t expect to see you here. What are you looking at?”

The man was Felix Barker, who greeted her with a friendly face. The tension seemed to drain from her body, and her legs nearly gave way. Felix quickly steadied her by the waist.

“I’m sorry, did I startle you?”

“No, not really.”

Charlotte straightened up and shook her head, and Felix’s hand fell away.

“What brings you here, Sir Felix?”

“That title sounds a bit formal. You’re not a maid, and I’m not your employer.”

If Richard made her tense, this jovial man made her uneasy. He was a type she hadn’t encountered before and wasn’t

sure how to respond.

“Then... Mr. Felix?”

“Just Felix is fine.”

“...Felix.”

“That sounds much better. It’s not like we’re at the mansion anyway.”

Pleased like a child who had answered correctly, Felix smiled broadly and responded to her earlier question.

“I’m here because it’s Kiara’s birthday soon. I came to buy her a gift.”

“That’s nice. Please extend my congratulations to the lady.”

Charlotte remembered the letter Richard had received from the Earl. The seal was unfamiliar at first, but it seemed to be from the Spencer family. Felix glanced at the gloves Charlotte had been looking at just moments ago.

“Were you looking at these?”

The price tag on the gloves exceeded her monthly wages several times over. Charlotte shook her head.

“No, I haven’t chosen anything yet...”

Before she could finish speaking, Felix called over a passing clerk and asked for two pairs of the same gloves to be brought out. He then immediately took out his wallet and paid for them.

Moments later, two boxes tied with satin ribbons were brought back. Assuming they were gifts for his cousin,

Charlotte began to walk towards another display, but Felix extended one of the boxes to her.

“Take this. It’s a gift.”

“For me?”

“It’s fate that we met like this.”

Charlotte gasped at the small box suddenly placed in front of her.

“No, really, I can’t accept this.”

“You would really embarrass me by refusing?”

His reaction was like that of a man rejected after a confession, looking like a big dog with its ears drooping.

Charlotte was flustered. The shop was crowded, and many eyes were watching. Not surprisingly, murmurs were already spreading.

“Isn’t that Felix from the Cloverfield family?”

“Who’s the lady with him?”

“She doesn’t look like Kiara...”

The idea of becoming the subject of gossip was exactly what Charlotte dreaded. If those who appeared to be ladies knew her position, what would their faces show?

‘Such a quiet look, and yet...’

‘How could she be with the son of the household...’

Voices she imagined made Charlotte internally shake her head.

“In that case, I’ll accept it. Thank you.”

She had no other choice. Hastily taking the box from Felix’s hand, she bowed in gratitude. Her priority was to get out of there. She could always return the gloves later.

“Let’s go outside.”

Whether he sensed her mood or not, Felix had already strode to the door and held it open for her. With a sigh, Charlotte stepped outside, and that’s when she heard it.

“...Richard?”

“Felix.”

Felix spoke with surprise. Richard’s presence was equally unexpected. His cool gaze shifted between them before settling on Felix.

“If you’re here for Kiara’s gift, you’re too late. I’ve already bought it.”

“That’s unfortunate. But that wasn’t my purpose.”

“Ah, is that so? Well then, we’ll be going.”

Charlotte was bewildered to find herself included in ‘we.’

“Miss Hegel.”

A voice as soft as melting butter came from above. Charlotte looked up to find Richard observing her, unblinkingly, as she clutched the box he presumed she had received as a gift.

“What if you had suddenly disappeared? I’ve been looking for you.”

She felt the weight of many gazes again. She felt like a fickle woman who had just weighed and discarded two handsome men.

Her face heated up. Yet, despite her flustered response, Richard seemed in no hurry to leave.

The eyes of the two men met over her head. Eventually, Felix conceded.

“Ah, I didn’t realize there was a prior engagement. My apologies, Miss Charlotte.”

“No, thank you again for the gift, Felix.”

With a friendlier address, Richard’s eyebrows twitched slightly. Felix, as if flaunting his farewell, smiled and said, “It was nice to meet you like this. Until next time.”

“Yes, it was nice. See you again.”

After Charlotte bowed her head in greeting, Felix gave Richard a nod and left. Now, only Charlotte and Richard remained.

As Felix’s figure receded, Richard spoke softly, “It seems you’ve gotten quite close in the meantime.”

“That’s... a misunderstanding. It’s not like that.”

The suggestion sounded almost like an accusation, and Charlotte quickly denied it. Being close was not an appropriate description for their respective social standings.

In her time assisting the maids, Charlotte had learned various tidbits of information, including that Felix was the sole heir to the Earl of Barker—a position she could hardly compare herself to.

Richard's gaze softened as he looked at her flushed face again, though his voice was no longer as gentle as before.

"You seemed quite familiar when you called him."

"It felt uncomfortable, so I..."

"I see."

His eyes lingered on the luxurious box that she clearly could not afford on her salary but soon dropped away.

"Felix is generally kind to all women."

The implication was clear—it wasn't anything special, and perhaps it was even an extravagance she didn't deserve.

"I'll return it."

"What do you mean?"

"This gift that I received from him."

Richard's lips curled into an unreadable smile. Silently, he turned and began walking toward the village entrance. Charlotte followed, and when she asked if they were returning, he briefly confirmed they were. As she faced forward again, feeling a pang of regret, Richard stopped abruptly.

"You can just keep it."

"Excuse me?"

“It’s a gift, after all.”

His tone implied it should have been obvious. Just moments ago, he seemed displeased as if it was improper for her to have such an item given her status.

As Charlotte wrestled with this sudden shift in his demeanor, Richard suddenly stopped walking. Lost in thought, she nearly bumped into his back. Wondering what had caused him to halt, she looked ahead and saw a young woman approaching them.



Ch. 12 ASEF 12

She was a beauty with elegantly swept-up blonde hair and vibrant blue eyes.

Crossing the street, the woman who stopped in front of them smiled faintly as she spoke.

“Mr. Richard.”

“...Miss Denoir.”

Charlotte’s eyes looked upwards. Richard’s expression remained largely unchanged. However, his voice suggested that this meeting was unexpected. The woman’s eyes softened.

“I didn’t expect to see you here by chance.”

“Indeed, it’s been a while.”

His voice was so dry, it bordered on terse. At times, he seemed almost annoyed. In contrast, the woman called Denoir had a look of lingering affection. It was an intriguing atmosphere, almost as if she was facing an ex-lover.

As if noticing for the first time, Denoir shifted her gaze to Charlotte standing next to Richard, then turned back to him.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

It felt like an arrow had suddenly struck. Charlotte clenched her fists around the box she was holding, and a brief reply came.

“She’s my companion.”

“Excuse me?”

As if doubting what she heard, she tilted her head, prompting Richard to repeat himself.

“She’s my companion. Is there something you’d like to know?”

“Well...”

Denoir seemed caught off guard by his demeanor, hesitating before she responded.

“I see. You’re under no obligation to explain.”

Her smile was strained as if she could hardly manage to pull herself together. Charlotte wondered what expression he was making. She wanted to look up and see but didn’t dare muster the courage. His face probably exuded a chill, like a finely sculpted porcelain doll.

“I’m glad you made it back safely. ...I know it’s a late greeting.”

“Thank you.”

Richard nodded with a lack of enthusiasm, visibly embarrassing Charlotte.

“You’ll be coming to Miss Kiara’s birthday celebration, won’t you?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then I’ll see you there.”

No reply came. Overcome by the awkward silence, Denoir was the first to end the conversation.

“I... have somewhere to be, so I must be going. It was nice seeing you.”

“It was nice seeing you too.”

The brief conversation felt more like a scripted dialogue from a predetermined play. Only after the other had left did the suffocating silence finally break. Richard began walking again, and Charlotte quietly followed him, or rather, attempted to, but then Richard stopped and turned around.

“Stand beside me.”

Charlotte shook her head.

“No, I prefer it this way.”

Standing side by side in such a public place was almost like inviting rumors. Charlotte emphasized her point.

“Really.”

Richard looked down at her silently. Her green eyes were wide; initially, they smelled of flowers, now they smelled like freshly cut grass. It was a wonder she spoke her mind so directly, seeming naïve and yet audacious.

He was becoming more curious and intrigued by her.

“I didn’t know my secretary was lacking in memory.”

He murmured to himself, then added, "You sat beside me on the way here."

"But, that was..."

Back then, there were no prying eyes, and there were only two seats available.

She choked on her words but swallowed them back. The thought of sitting next to him on the return journey made her heart pound retrospectively.

"How could I have talked so much on the way here?" She pondered in silence, amazed that he had just listened without interest.

"Still, I thought it would be rude to you."

Her voice was nearly a whisper now.

"What rudeness?"

"Well..."

No further words came to her as she looked down, fumbling for words, when a large hand approached her face. Before she could stiffen in surprise, he tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and moved away. Charlotte froze, heart thumping strangely.

"Richard."

"...Yes?"

"Call me by my name. I prefer it to any formalities."

"..."

“‘Sir’ and such are irritating to hear.”

With that, Richard started walking again, and Charlotte quickly followed, her face flushed. The brief encounter felt almost dreamlike.

They had barely resumed walking when the carriage they had arrived in came into view, already being brought over by a stable boy who had been notified in advance.

Upon returning to the manor, everything was quiet. Charlotte went through the back door to the basement kitchen, where she finally heard people talking. She passed by the kitchen, where the cook and the maids were busy, and went straight to her room.

She climbed the stairs without meeting anyone and was about to open her room door when she found her mother, Cynthia, awake and knitting. Raising her head, Cynthia called out to her daughter.

“Charlotte.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Regaining her composure, Charlotte approached her.

“Where have you been? I woke up and you weren’t there.”

“I just went for a short walk. The scenery nearby is quite nice.”

“There’s a lot to see around here. The lake is just a 20-minute walk away.”

“Really? That sounds wonderful. I should go see it sometime.”

“Yes, take some time to go.”

They exchanged mundane, everyday conversations. A sudden question burst from Charlotte as she sat on the carpet.

“Do you know a Miss Denoir?”

“...Miss Denoir?”

Her mother’s hands, busy with her knitting, suddenly stopped. Charlotte regretted her impulsive curiosity that led to mentioning the name.

“She was Sir Richard’s former fiancée.”

The use of the past tense made Charlotte lift her head.

“After the young master returned from the war, they broke off the engagement. Sadly, both of them...”

Cynthia murmured, sighing deeply, a weight in her voice. Charlotte stiffened at her mother’s words.

‘Remember, Charlotte, don’t mention Richard in front of your mother,’ Janice’s warning echoed in her mind. Cynthia, frail in nerves, was oblivious to this one person.

‘No, Mom. Sir Richard, the young master, he’s not dead. He’s alive. He was with me just a moment ago.’

Suppressing the lump in her throat, Charlotte rose abruptly. The once comfortable setting now felt like a bed of thorns. She could hardly bear seeing her mother like this.

Caught off guard by her sudden movement, Cynthia looked at her curiously. Before her mother could speak, Charlotte preempted her.

“Mom, have you taken your second dose of medicine today?”

“Ah... I suppose it’s time for that, isn’t it?”

“You’re supposed to take it three times a day.”

The scolding was merely a diversion, and Charlotte felt ashamed even as she spoke. Unaware or not of her daughter’s intentions, Cynthia smiled weakly.

“I didn’t realize. I haven’t looked at the clock.”

“I’ll get some water for you. Just wait here.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte quickly left the room and headed downstairs, feeling a tightness in her chest despite having just arrived. She planned to ask the maids to return the pocket watch she had forgotten to give back, not feeling up to facing the owner directly. She would simply ask them to leave it on the bedside table during cleaning.

Descending to the basement, the first person Charlotte encountered was Janice, not surprisingly, since the housekeeper’s room was next to the kitchen. Janice’s eyes widened in surprise, then returned to normal.

“Charlotte.”

“...Madam.”

“Coming from somewhere?”

Charlotte was taken aback by the unexpected question. She had sent her on an errand involving medicine bottles, so she assumed Janice knew about her outing with Richard. However, Janice's expression suggested she was clueless.

"I just went down to the village for a bit."

While she omitted some details, it wasn't an outright lie. Given Janice's disapproval of her closeness with Richard, it wasn't wise to divulge everything.

"...I see."

Janice nodded, lowering her eyes to close a container of tea leaves she had been organizing. Charlotte, watching her carefully, reached for a pitcher on the table to fill a glass.

As Janice turned to leave, she suddenly spoke again.

"There's something in your pocket."

"Ah, this is..."

Charlotte was caught off guard by Janice's sharp observation, unsure how to explain.

"Madam Janice."

While Charlotte was trying to think quickly, a maid connected to the main hall peeked in. She was a personal servant to the Countess. As Janice looked up, the maid spoke.

"The Countess is looking for you."

"What for?"

"Just that she's asking for you to come up..."

The maid trailed off ambiguously. Officially, she was subordinate to the housekeeper, but in reality, their influence was nearly equal, each the only one who could truly challenge the other at Mistymoor Hall.

“Alright. I’ll go up right now.”

Janice wiped her wet hands on her apron and headed for the staircase.

“Yes, I need to prepare the tea service. You go ahead.”

After a brief exchange of glances, they passed each other on the stairs. Charlotte seized the moment to grab the filled glass. She intended to quietly head back upstairs.

As she moved towards the servant’s stairs, a voice called from behind.

“Wait a moment.”

“Me?”

“Who else would it be?”

The maid, who had been organizing the tea leaves, snapped back, not even looking at Charlotte as she continued her task.

“I heard you’re the nursemaid’s daughter. If you want to stay here long, it’s best not to rely too much on that woman.”

It was clear she meant Janice. Charlotte felt an immediate indignation; though Janice was somewhat enigmatic lately, she had always been a kind and close friend of her mother.

“I don’t understand what you mean. Isn’t that my choice?”

The maid scoffed at Charlotte's defiant response.

"Just some advice since you seem bothered. But do as you please if you want to fall out of favor with the lady."

Why would being close to Janice disturb the Countess? Charlotte watched silently as the maid then removed a steaming teapot from the hearth, adding, "From your reaction, it seems you didn't know. Janice Brown was the Earl's mistress before his marriage."

"..."

"Be smart about how you handle yourself. She's a snake, and you don't want to stir trouble unnecessarily."

Left speechless, Charlotte stood frozen as the maid quickly arranged the tea service and ascended the stairs.



Ch. 13 ASEF 13

The maid's words had a deeper impact than Charlotte had anticipated. Even during Sunday worship, the advice continued to unsettle her thoughts.

Perhaps the maid's warning against getting too close to a male employer was based on her own experiences.

The pastor's sermon failed to reach her ears; her mind was so troubled and complex. Her gaze naturally drifted to the Earl and his wife sitting together in the family pew, looking every bit the harmonious couple.

Why hadn't the Countess dismissed Janice, knowing her relationship with her husband? And how could the Earl keep his former lover in the same house while raising three children with his wife?

Perhaps it was because Janice and the Earl's relationship had truly ended? Did the wife trust her husband that much?

It was futile to ponder someone else's family affairs, but living under the same roof made it hard not to worry about it. The more she thought about it, the more her head ached.

It seemed foolish trying to understand these strange people.

The absence of Richard also weighed on her mind throughout.

Charlotte only managed to escape her turbulent thoughts when the hour-long service finally ended. She rose silently from a corner seat and left the church without speaking to anyone.

Just as she turned onto the small path leading back to Mistymoor Hall, someone called out to her.

“Miss Charlotte.”

There weren’t many men who would address her so familiarly here. Charlotte turned around to greet him.

“It’s good to see you again today, Felix.”

“Does seeing me more often mean you’re glad to see me?”

His reply seemed to be more a reflection of his easygoing nature rather than any particular intent. Felix, with his innocent sheepdog demeanor, made Charlotte feel foolish for taking the maid’s severe words to heart.

Charlotte chuckled, and Felix, noticing her worn gloves, looked somewhat disheartened as he spoke.

“You haven’t worn the gloves I gifted you. Did you not like them?”

“Oh... no, it’s not that. They just seemed a bit too much for me...”

“What do you mean too much? It’s just a pair of gloves.”

He seemed genuinely puzzled, a privilege of those who’ve never had to live under the scrutiny of others. Telling him she wanted to return them would only confuse him more. Charlotte sighed inwardly before responding.

“You’re right. I should start wearing them next Sunday. Thank you again, Felix.”

“I’m not fond of repeated thanks, but if you’re really grateful, could you do me a favor?”

“Yes?”

It seemed he had a purpose in striking up a conversation. Curiosity piqued, Charlotte leaned in as Felix got to the point.

“The weather’s nice; how about we go boating?”

“Boating?”

She had heard from her mother about a nearby lake just yesterday, but the sudden mention of boating took her by surprise. Felix winked playfully, seeing her startled reaction.

“Before that, let’s wake a sleeping cat on the boat this sacred Sunday afternoon.”

The lake was nestled deep within a forest. Bright marigold flowers scattered their yellow petals over the tranquil water.

“There really is such a place...”

“It’s famous for its flowers blooming beautifully each season. It’s part of the Earl’s private property, so not many can come here.”

The ground was damp from an early morning rain, and the sound of Charlotte’s dress hem brushing against the wet grass filled the air.

“That’s unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

“Ah, no particular reason.”

Felix stopped in front of an empty boat. There was no cat, only a blanket and two cushions on the boat floor. Charlotte suddenly thought that one could easily nap here. How luxurious and idle it would be to sleep in the sun in the middle of the lake on such a day.

Felix, who had been silent as if pondering something, spoke up again.

“There’s another boat, so it might have gone out on that.”

His comment seemed cryptic. Charlotte, turning away from the boat, gave Felix a puzzled look.

“The cat?”

“A very clever cat. Quite temperamental, too.”

“Is it a cat you’re raising?”

When Charlotte asked, Felix smiled enigmatically.

“Raise? The moment you try to tame it, you’d see blood.”

He then looked towards a small shack, likely a storage space.

“I’ll go get the oars. Just wait here.”

“Alright.”

Charlotte couldn't grasp why someone would go to such lengths to look for a cat, especially one not even his own. But she had no other option. As she nodded, Felix turned and walked away. Left alone, Charlotte naturally turned her gaze towards the lake.

The breeze was cool and the weather warm, washing away the lingering unease Charlotte had felt. While waiting, she decided to take a walk along the lake's edge.

With each step, the sound of twigs crunching underfoot filled the air, a noise she found oddly satisfying. Before she knew it, she had wandered quite far from the cabin.

"I've gone too far."

Just as Charlotte turned to head back, something caught her eye. It was a small boat, seemingly hidden under the shadow of a tree at the water's edge. It was probably the boat Felix had mentioned. It blended so well with its surroundings that it was almost invisible unless one would look closely.

Curious if the cat might be there, Charlotte approached the boat. When she was almost there, she stopped abruptly and gasped.

There was something there. It wasn't a cat.

"...Richard?"

The person in the boat was unmistakably Richard.

He was lying down, his dark blue tie loosely undone, legs stretched out, and his left arm shielding his eyes. Even in the faint shadow, his sharp nose and chiseled jawline were distinct. His slightly parted lips were a striking red.

His beauty, which she thought she would have gotten used to by now, was still disarming, like a flawless marble statue.

“Miss Charlotte?”

Felix’s voice called from a distance just as Charlotte turned to tell him Richard was here. A swift hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards the boat, tipping her into it.

They lay face to face in the narrow boat, and Charlotte hiccupped in surprise.

“...Richard?”

“Shh.”

A single syllable was his response as he barely opened his mouth. His eyes, a strange shade of twilight purple, were intensely close.

“Miss Charlotte? Where are you?”

Felix’s footsteps were getting closer.

“ ... ”

Her heart thumped loudly, contrasting with the calm breathing right in front of her.

Her throat tickled. Just as another gasp threatened to escape, Richard pulled her closer by the neck.

Her face pressed against his firm chest, their posture could easily be mistaken for that of intimate lovers. The awareness of his body heat paralyzed her; she could neither push him away nor escape. Lifting her head was all she managed.

Richard lifted the corner of his mouth as he looked down at her. Her expression was like that of a prisoner unjustly condemned or perhaps a trembling young rabbit caught in a hunter's trap.

A sudden urge to crush her close surged through him. The skin beneath his hand was warm and soft, as if it would melt right through his fingers.

"Miss Charlotte!"

The next moment, a voice sounded very close by.

"Strange. Where did she go?"

Felix was nearby, seemingly looking for her. As Charlotte almost moved her lips to respond, Richard whispered softly.

"Go ahead and scream."

"..."

"If you want this kind of scene to be discovered."

She had to choose. The man who looked ready to devour her now or the scandal that would surely reach her mother's ears soon enough.

Charlotte chose the former. The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slipped away.

"Where did she go....."

Fortunately, within a few minutes, Felix's footsteps faded as he seemed to go looking in another direction. Finally, she could breathe freely.

"Haah..."

Richard let go of Charlotte and sat up. He looked down at her still lying down, then swept back his tousled hair. His appearance was reminiscent of a man just after lovemaking, adding a languid, decadent air totally at odds with the peaceful Sunday afternoon.

Lost in his gaze, Charlotte was jolted back to reality when Richard teased her.

“Do you make a hobby of watching people sleep?”

Her senses snapped back, and Charlotte quickly got up.

“No, I... I didn’t know you were here.”

“On a holy Sunday, not at church.”

“...”

She recalled the first day she had met him at Gredel Hill. That Sunday, he had been armed, shooting a wolf dead from his saddle without a change in expression.

Feeling somewhat teased, Charlotte retorted.

“Don’t you attend services, sir?”

“Richard.”

“...Don’t you go to church, Richard?”

Reluctantly correcting herself, Richard replied as if it were compensation for her proper address.

“I don’t have time to waste listening to an old man’s sermons.”

His remark was so irreverent it would have stunned the aged parish priest to faint.

“Weren’t you taking a nap?”

“Until someone woke me.”

Unable to respond to her own question, she received a cool reply.



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Charlotte was at a loss for words, embarrassed by the sudden realization that Felix was still searching for her.

“I’m sorry for waking you. ...You should continue resting.”

She nodded slightly in apology, about to stand up, when Richard grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down.

“Now it’s my turn to ask a question.”

His face bore an expression she had seen once before—in the pit when she hesitated at his command.

“Why are you with that guy?”

Richard’s question came out with a biting edge, and Charlotte shivered, sensing that a careless answer could lead to serious consequences.

“Have you become so close to him? Since when?”

His lips curled into a smile, but it was a cold, unsettling one.

Charlotte felt as if a noose tightened around her neck. She struggled to breathe easily, the groundless accusations causing her to clench her teeth and shake her head vehemently.

“How could you think that!”

The emotions she couldn't express welled up in her eyes. She bowed her head to hide her heated gaze.

"Are you insulting me, Richard?"

She wanted to sound calm, but her voice trembled with indignation more than anger.

"You think because I'm from humble origins, uneducated, and possess nothing, I don't understand the concept of propriety..."

"Who said that?"

His interjection cut her off sharply. Charlotte lifted her head in surprise, meeting his intense violet eyes that narrowed like those of a serpent.

"Who said such a thing?"

His voice was a harsh growl, as if scraping up from his throat.

"Tell me, Miss Hegel."

His formality returned as if he had never growled like a predator before its prey.

Every time this happened, Charlotte felt a chill at the politeness of Richard—a politeness that seemed more like a guise for deception. It was as if civility was merely a camouflage he used temporarily to better devour his prey.

"No one..."

"You should look at someone when you're speaking to them."

His command was as cold as a stern tutor's as he tilted her chin up with his fingertip. That was all he did, but she felt as if she was immobilized by fangs sunk into her neck.

"Tell me."

"..."

"Who said such things?"

Her lips quivered. His eyes, intense and close, seemed painted with crushed hydrangeas. He held her gaze, unrelenting, from that first day in the wilderness to now.

"...No one."

A gut feeling told her that she must not reveal anything. Voicing it might mean she'd never see him again, a sense of foreboding filling her.

"It's just how I felt."

Silence followed. Her mouth dry, she barely managed to swallow when his response came.

"There's never been such a thing."

His words were disarmingly straightforward, loosening the tension. As he moved to rise, Charlotte found herself blurting out without thinking.

"...Were you worried about Felix?"

It was a plausible guess. She was currently under the care of the Kensingtons. Any scandal involving her and Felix Barker would undoubtedly implicate the Kensington name as well. That would make sense.

“If that’s the case... don’t worry. Nothing like that will happen.”

Her voice trailed off quietly. Richard chuckled briefly.

“It won’t happen?”

“Just like you, Felix has no interest in me.”

What Felix showed was likely just curiosity or pity towards a poor woman. That’s what Charlotte believed.

Stretching his long legs, Richard stepped out of the boat and added, “What if he becomes interested?”

“...Excuse me?”

“What if he’s already interested in you?”

Richard adjusted his loosened tie, his expression unchanging as he continued.

“What then... Are you planning to run away?”

Instinctively stepping back, Charlotte looked up at Richard as he smirked at her, his gaze like that of a hunter contemplating a trapped animal. There was a touch of sympathy and regret in his eyes, but it was overwhelmed by a cruel anticipation.

Charlotte, trembling slightly, received a chilling declaration from Richard.

“You won’t be able to escape.”

“Why not?”

“Because I won’t let you.”

His words implied that even if she did manage to escape, he would chase her to the ends of the earth to bring her back, utterly and thoroughly consume her. No amount of pleading or screaming would deter him.

Richard decided to admit it—he was drawn to this rabbit-like woman. Whether it was lust or some kind of craving, he couldn't tell, but it didn't matter.

A pleasant impulse moved his hand slightly forward. Just a little stretch, and he could touch her heated nape, delve into the hollow of her clavicle, and trace the soft scars in between...

Rustle.

It was then that his predatory gaze was interrupted by a sudden noise, pulling both their attentions sharply to one spot.

“Richard!”

It was Felix who had appeared.

One week later, the birthday gala for Kiara was held.

Being the only beloved daughter of the Spencer Duke family, who dominated the central political circles of Ethelwood, the gala was magnificent. Not only Cloverfield but all the nobility from nearby regions competed fiercely to receive an invitation.

Nobles who had passed strict standards to be invited from the capital arrived one by one, proudly filling the spacious earl's manor by evening, dressed splendidly.

“I never expected you to host the gala here this year, after last year’s lavish event in the capital.”

“Indeed. It gives us a chance to make an impression on Duke Spencer, doesn’t it?”

“Even the children of prominent families from the capital have come to make a good impression on Miss Kiara. Perhaps we’ll find a suitable match for our daughter among them.”

Though the atmosphere was consistently warm and elegant, the guests were fiercely pursuing their own objectives.

For Charlotte, a member of the working class, everything she saw was like another world.

There were ice sculptures of swans surrounded by exotic delicacies and rare fruits, and waiters circulating with silver trays carrying wine worth her monthly wages.

Young men and women clasped hands and danced in the central dance hall, while ladies exchanged secretive conversations behind jeweled fans on velvet couches, and gentlemen shared serious talks over cigars.

The servants, on standby for any unforeseen issues, lined up along the walls, observing the exchanges of the nobility.

Standing among them, Charlotte overheard two maids she had come to Cloverfield with from Gredel Hill whispering.

“It’s a feast for the eyes, sure, but it’s all just out of reach. Today was supposed to be my day off, too.”

“We must follow Madam Janice’s strict orders, no choice for us lower folks. At least we can look forward to taking some

leftovers after the party.”

“And how does Richard stand out even among these distinguished gentlemen?”

“What’s there to say? Such beauty is rare in this world or any other.”

Following the maids’ gazes, Charlotte saw Richard. His auburn hair was impeccably styled, and his skin and profile looked as if it was carved by divine hands. His thick, lowered lashes framed perfectly sculpted, tightly sealed lips.

Even among tall men, he stood out, his physique honed by two years of military service, broad and solid. Charlotte, who had been staring blankly, remembered the well-defined muscles she had glimpsed before. His voice had been low and sharp, scraping the ground.

Just then...

“...”

Richard, who had been conversing animatedly with the surrounding people, turned his head and looked directly at her. It felt as though time had stopped. Her heart trembled, and her thoughts stalled.

“Ah! He saw me just now, right? He did!”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Why would he notice a freckled nobody like you?”

Was it a moment of eye contact? No, it seemed not. Amidst the chaos stirred by the maids beside her, her mind swirled with confusion.

I need to get out of here.

A chill ran down her spine instinctively. Even if he had recognized her, it was not a good sign. She remembered the murderous look in his eyes the last time she had mentioned her role as a maid.

“...Oh, where are you going?”

“Just to the restroom for a moment.”

“You must come right back, Charlotte. You know you shouldn’t be away from your post for too long.”

“Understood.”

With a slight nod, Charlotte quickly made her way through the crowd, escaping the gala hall to the empty back door.

Once outside, the oppressive feeling lifted from her chest, and a wave of frustration hit her.

“Who does he think he is, not showing his face for a whole week?”

The day they lay side by side in the boat at the lakeside, and then Richard abruptly left for Gredel Hill on urgent business, not returning to Mistymoor Hall for a full week.

During that time, a young lady went missing, and Gredel Hill was shrouded in fear. As she lay trembling next to her mother at night, Charlotte foolishly thought of Richard.

‘What if he’s already interested in you?’

That playful, perhaps meaningless remark sounded so sincere. Every glance, gesture, and smile seemed laden with meaning, keeping her awake all night.

It had been a torturous night. When she did manage to fall asleep, her dreams replayed the days spent with him, over and over.

The day he shot a wolf charging at her with his shotgun.

The day she fell into a pit and he caught her in his arms.

The day they rode side by side in a carriage, and she told him stories of her hometown.

As dawn broke, Charlotte admitted to herself how dearly she had missed him over the past week.

The thrill she felt every time their eyes met was not just out of fear.

A bitter laugh escaped her. It was ridiculous. But upon reflection, it wasn't all that unusual. Countless women had fallen under Richard Kensington's spell.

"To think I've become just another one of them, how awful..."

Tears warmed her eyelids. The realization from seven days of absence was as clear as it was miserable. She felt like sitting down and crying.

As she closed her eyes, a rustle from the tall bushes behind the backyard hinted at an approaching presence.



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At this moment, she didn't want anyone to see her. As Charlotte reflexively bent her knees and hid in the bushes, two figures emerged from the darkness.

"Miss Kiara seems to have run out of patience. She even threw her cherished teacup on the floor yesterday. I heard she followed him secretly all the way to the capital, but he refused to meet her."

"Goodness. That arrogant Miss? She's pushing it too far."

"That's right. Everyone already knows. If she doesn't accept his proposal, what will become of the Duke's dignity? What about the favor she requested?"

"Ah, here. Pass it to the servant. If he gets drunk, he can be escorted to Miss's room."

Charlotte's ears perked at the suspicious conversation. She had heard of such things before. Schemes brewing beneath the surface of the social gatherings.

"What's the name of that man?"

"Richard Daniel Kensington."

Her heart sank.

No.

As soon as she caught wind of some conspiracy, a strong sense of resistance surged deep within her chest.

The hand that had once embraced her inside her coat.

The hand that had bandaged her injured ankle.

The hand that had lifted her chin to avoid gazes.

She couldn't imagine Richard embracing someone else with those hands. It felt audacious even to think so, yet denying it was difficult. It was less a rational judgment and more an instinctive discomfort.

"I have to stop this."

She knew Richard Kensington was not someone who would simply yield. If he were entangled in an unjust plot and forced into marriage, his partner would undoubtedly be unhappy. In the first wave of jealousy, Charlotte, cloaked in what seemed like a plausible excuse, made her decision.

"...Let's follow for now."

Once the decision was made, action followed swiftly. Charlotte shadowed the woman who had received the favor from the two conversing people. Fortunately, as they entered the mansion, they didn't attract much attention amidst the crowd. The woman headed towards the temporary powder room prepared for the ladies, up the spiral staircase in the main hall.

Suddenly, two familiar figures caught her eye in the direction the woman was heading. Kiara Spencer and Felix Barker. Charlotte pressed herself against the wall, fearing she might be discovered.

“She asked for what you told her to bring, Miss.”

This is really about to go wrong.

Charlotte’s hand trembled. It felt like her mind had been bleached white. As she desperately searched for a solution with closed eyes, someone placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you alright? Are you feeling unwell? You look pale.”

“No, I’m... fine...”

Trying hard to maintain her composure as she answered, her gaze met another’s, wide with surprise.

“...Who are you?”

Charlotte, equally startled, widened her eyes in response.

Without a doubt, Kiara Spencer was the epitome of perfection in Ethelwood.

She had a father who would grant her any wish, a title as the Duke’s beloved daughter, her stunning beauty, and of course, the string of suitors trailing behind her.

There were people who sneered, calling her and her entourage the queen bee and her drones, but she paid them no mind. After all, fragrant flowers attract not only butterflies but also the occasional pesky insect.

But perfection was always elusive. On a day when her spirit felt a bit weary, Kiara ventured down to the rustic countryside where her cousin lived.

Felix Barker, her childhood friend and beloved cousin, greeted her. With a face somewhat similar yet different, he suddenly asked, "Do you remember Richard?"

"Who?"

"Yeah. The Earl of Kensington's brother. We used to hang out together back in the day."

Hmm. Kiara tilted her head, seeming to recall. The name sounded familiar.

After Felix added a few more words to his puzzled response, Kiara finally remembered who he was.

"You said you'd marry him. Though you changed your mind later."

"Oh! That gentleman?"

Certainly, his appearance had suited her taste. She remembered being smitten at first sight and rushing home to inform her family. But it didn't last long.

"That man, his personality wasn't to my liking. He seemed like someone who would spend his life buried in thick books in his study."

No matter how much Felix insisted, he was just a cousin's friend. She had only looked at him as such, nothing more, despite his charming face.

"Richard, you say."

With her nonchalant response, Felix warned her with a chuckle, "You'll regret saying that."

Though she brushed it off, the warning hit home. When they met again... she was simply breathless.

“Kiara, meet Richard, the one I mentioned to you before.”

After Felix introduced him first, he added, “Richard, long time no see. This is my cousin Kiara.”

The moment their eyes met, she made up her mind. That man was hers.

“That’s harsh. I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen me, but you don’t remember me? The three of us used to play together a lot when we were younger.”

With a teasing tone, Kiara spoke first. The mundane country life seemed to become a bit more enjoyable. Entertaining the idea of dating a handsome man without leaving any traces was one of her favorite pastimes.

A pastime.

Yes, she initially thought of it as just that. It didn’t take long for her to realize how arrogant her past self had been. She painfully admitted it soon enough. It was her own superficiality that was the issue.

Felix was right. Richard was nothing like the gentleman she once knew. He was utterly different. Horribly, chillingly so. It was almost as if they didn’t share the same bloodline.

“Miss Kiara Spencer.”

The tables had turned from juggling countless suitors. She was already halfway enchanted by his courtesy and gentlemanly demeanor, but that was an absurd delusion. His polite façade was nothing but a mask.

The man, who had been coolly resistant to subtle invitations and temptations, asked bluntly, "How long are you going to bother me?"

It was a rejection and insult as direct as it could get. Yet, his face remained handsome, sending a flush of warmth beneath her ears.

This couldn't continue. It couldn't be like this. Her long eyelashes trembled. She had always had to have the best of everything, obtaining whatever she desired, whether it be objects or men.

"Bother you? Have I been bothering you all this time?"

Looking at Kiara, who had barged into his study unannounced, Richard extinguished the cigar he had been holding against a glass ashtray. His movement was so exquisitely graceful that it felt even more offensive. It felt like being treated like an unwanted intruder who had opened the door without permission.

Lowering his eyes and massaging his stiff neck, Richard spoke with a somewhat authoritative tone, "Sit down for now."

"Are you ordering me?"

"This is my study, and you've come without an appointment."

"...Fine."

As Kiara reluctantly sat on the couch, Richard rose from the leather-clad chair and turned his mahogany desk slightly to face her.

Just as Kiara was about to speak, Richard interjected, "Wait."

As soon as he interrupted her, a knock came from beyond the door. Kiara shivered. She had thought she had a good intuition, but this was almost animalistic. As the maid who had entered with trepidation placed the tea and snacks on the table amidst the uneasy atmosphere, she quickly retreated.

An awkward silence lingered for a moment. The silence broke only when Richard took a sip of his tea and set the cup back down.

"Do you mean to say that I've been playing with you?"

"I'm not so ignorant of the world's affairs."

"Then tell me. How have I been playing with you?"

Though it was a rather ordinary question, it sounded strangely suggestive as it rolled off his lips. Feeling the heated air, Kiara clenched the fabric of her dress with her gloved hands.

"That night, we were alone together."

It had actually been three days ago. At Felix's request, Richard had escorted her all day from the nearby city. They had sat side by side in a box seat at the theater, which they had reserved a month ago. He had been consistently gentlemanly and polite, as if escorting a queen.

"After dining at a cozy restaurant together, I felt weak due to anemia."

When she looked at him as if questioning if he remembered, he nodded slightly.

“You took me to your private townhouse. Suspiciously.”

Richard twisted her words as if that were the reason.

“It was too far to go to Cloverfield, and there was a reputable doctor nearby.”

“But why did you offer wine after the doctor left?”

“You seemed startled, so I offered it to calm you down. I said you didn’t have to drink if you didn’t want to.”

A nonchalant response followed the continued probing. Indeed, he was the epitome of a cold-blooded man who was called the ruthless one in court. Even when his clients were pushed to the brink, he always managed to dramatically turn the situation around and win in the end.

“Oh, don’t you know that nickname? The killer of the courtroom.”

A friend who had warned her had added this remark.

“You might not know, but because of that man, there have been quite a few suicides. He relentlessly pursued them with such cruelty.”

At the time, she had actually rather liked that nickname. Women who rushed in without realizing he was celibate and had a reclusive nature would inevitably fall by the wayside.

She never dreamed she wouldn’t be an exception herself.

“We kissed.”

At the sudden rebuttal, Richard raised an eyebrow.

“I did initiate it, but you didn’t refuse. You can’t deny that.”

It was an impulse born from intoxication. She had stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms around his neck. The thrill of the moment when their tongues tangled was still vivid. It felt like electricity coursing through her entire body.

Although he didn’t hold her by the nape of her neck or waist, he just stood still like a statue, letting her fall until she collapsed, he made no effort to stop her.

The decisive moment came next.

“I have no memory after that. When I woke up, I was on the bed. I was dressed in pajamas.”

That was the last memory she had, with her head resting on his neck. As she fell backward, screaming briefly as the sharp sensation pierced her flesh, he grabbed her waist firmly.

It was time to present irrefutable evidence. Although it would be embarrassing if anyone saw this, she had to catch the man somehow. Kiara, with her hands clad in gloves, daringly showed the left side of her neck.

“These marks on my neck. You made them.”



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Now blurry but distinctly red marks, like spots, remained, which had definitely not been there before.

Her lips felt dry. Tension made her spine stiff. Only the clock on the edge of the study made a ticking sound. The unexpected retort cut through the long silence.

“So?”

“So, what?”

Richard looked at her with a puzzled expression. No, he smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. The imbalance sent shivers down her spine.

“So, you’re saying that I’ve been taking advantage of you and pretending not to know.”

“W-what...?”

Kiara was dumbfounded by such brazen words, fit for alleyway ruffians. The person who spoke so coarsely just now smoothly probed again, “You heard me, Miss Spencer.”

“I... I don’t understand how you could say such a thing...”

“I have my own preferences, unfortunately.”

In one smooth movement, Richard approached from behind Kiara and grasped her shoulders. His long and slender

fingers trailed discreetly over the scars on her neck before descending to her shoulders.

“...!”

From muscle to skin, to nerves and tendons, the stimulation tingled. As she struggled, her pale complexion turned crimson. Just as she was about to protest, a tender voice whispered in her ear.

“After all, because of your damn thirst, it seemed like my head was going to explode. So I thought, let’s have a taste of that blatant arrogance, but unfortunately, I couldn’t get into it because of the stench of that vile perfume. I took a bite and spat it out.”

As Kiara recoiled in humiliation, a card from the theater fell onto her head.

“If you understood, then leave, Miss Spencer, before my cowardly rabbit sees you.”

Rabbit? What was that supposed to mean? She didn’t even have a chance to ask. That was truly the end. Even though she followed the rumor that he had gone to the city, she was rejected even at his townhouse door. Though she tried to keep it under wraps, if it had continued a little longer, the rumor would have spread like wildfire.

“...So there’s no other choice.”

Even after receiving such cruel treatment, she couldn’t give up. If that was the case, she could only possess him. Being the son of a deceased viscount meant nothing. Despite his lack of title, he was still an attractive man.

Wealth derived from the vast and fertile land inherited from the deceased Viscount Kensington long ago. The wide and deep connections he had and the reputation as a lawyer made him famous for being undefeated.

“On top of that, if you marry me, you can become the next viscountess.”

It was a well-known fact that was almost public knowledge. The Duke of Spencer had declared that he would pass it on to his son-in-law, who had only one title. That was also another purpose of the suitors who followed Kiara. Men who whispered love with eyes full of greed. She scoffed at their hypocrisy.

Leaving the powder room with resolve, Felix was leaning against the door, waiting.

“Well, well, well. Look who decided to grace us with her presence, Princess. Do you have any idea how much trouble I went through to bring Richard here?”

“Sulking again, I see. I already thanked you enough for that, Felix.”

“That nickname sounds too girly, I told you I didn’t like it.”

“Oh, are you throwing a tantrum now?”

Kiara lightly kissed her cousin’s cheek, which was wrinkled in annoyance, and scratched his chin like petting a satisfied cat. Felix, satisfied like a well-fed pet, was about to say something when a maid carrying two glasses of wine approached.

“Miss, here are the items you requested.”

“Thank you. Felix, come with me.”

“I’ll gladly accompany you, Your Highness.”

Kiara was satisfied, and placed her hand on Felix’s arm. As they arrived at the banquet hall side by side, several pairs of eyes were immediately drawn to the picturesque pair. Followers flocked to them regardless of gender.

“Miss Kiara, are you feeling alright? We were worried you might have fainted.”

“Thank you, Russell. It was just a moment of dizziness.”

“If you’re feeling well, perhaps tomorrow at my sister’s dinner party...”

“As I mentioned before, we’ve hired a new maid from a famous salon. She has such excellent taste that I wanted to introduce her to Miss Kiara. Perhaps...”

Felix interrupted the flow of the conversation around them. Upon recognizing a familiar profile, he waved.

“Oh, there you are, Richard. Found you.”

At the sound of a familiar voice, Richard turned his head. The crowd that surrounded Richard made way. Kiara, with a strange smile, played coyly with her lips.

“It’s been a while, Mr. Richard.”

“It has indeed.”

“You’re a bit late. It’s disappointing.”

“I had a lot of work. I hope you understand.”

His face, seemingly indifferent as if asking when the meeting had taken place, was incredibly unaffected. It made one wonder if he was really the man who poured out such unbearable insults. Despite feeling choked up, Kiara couldn't show any sign of distress with all the eyes on them.

Those in the know were already aware of the situation. The Duchess of Spencer was holding onto the younger brother of the Earl of Kensington. But the only person conscious of the rumor was her. As if to prove his point, Richard's dry voice continued.

"I made a brief appearance, but I should leave soon. Although I'm a little late, happy birthday."

Trying to escape like this? No way. Frustration and anxiety made Kiara's perfect smile slightly tense. Felix, who seemed ignorant of the situation, interjected, "After winning the recent case, quite a few clients have been coming in. You understand, right?"

"I know that much, Felix. Are you trying to make me into a narrow-minded woman?"

Kiara playfully scolded Felix while glaring at the maid standing behind him.

"Since you're busy, I won't keep you any longer. Instead..."

At the agreed signal, a maid approached. Kiara handed a wine glass from the silver tray to Richard and added, "You should have a congratulatory drink before you leave. Of course, you wouldn't mind."

It was coercion without coercion. At least, a gentleman couldn't behave aggressively towards a woman who was the

center of attention and deserved respect in such a public setting.

A trap cleverly woven like a spider's web. She smiled confidently. After a brief silence in front of her, Richard scoffed and reached out his hand sarcastically.

"Gladly."

As he took the glass, he was about to drink the wine without hesitation.

"Mr. Richard."

"...!"

Just as success was within reach, an unwelcome guest appeared. All eyes in the room turned to her.

A tempting blonde with blue eyes. She was a beauty, but at least she shouldn't have been here. After a shocked silence, murmurs spread quickly.

"Oh my, it was worth trying to get an invitation. The situation has become quite interesting."

"So, she's the current mistress and the former fiancée. Are the three of them in a love triangle?"

"How did the powerless Miss Denoir even get invited? Lady Barker isn't one to make such mistakes..."

An unexpected unwanted guest. Kiara, who couldn't hide her intense resentment, took a deep breath for a moment. Then she struggled to control her facial expression and forced a smile.

"...Miss Denoir. What brings you here?"

“If I’ve interrupted, I apologize, Your Grace.”

Polite as ever, Denoir extended something to Richard, who was looking at her.

“I found this necktie pin on the balcony, and it seemed to belong to Mr. Richard.”

She tried to remain composed, but her voice was subtly trembling at the end. Sensing the lie, Kiara was about to speak sharply when Richard calmly cut her off.

“That’s right.”

With a casual smile, Richard interrupted Kiara, who was about to retort. His dry demeanor instantly transformed.

“...!”

“It’s something I treasure. Thank you.”

“I see... I’m relieved. I was worried that I’d made a mistake.”

Denoir’s face brightened instantly. Along with her smile, her cheeks flushed red. As the tension eased, her legs, which had been tense, began to relax. In the midst of sighs of envy and longing from the women around her, Denoir lowered her gaze. Just that alone was enough to make her feel ecstatic, but when she heard Richard’s words, her mind went blank.

“If you’re feeling unwell, may I escort you?”

“Uh... yes. Thank you, if you insist.”

“Mr. Richard!”

“Your Grace.”

Ignoring Kiara's forced interruption, Richard informed her mercilessly, "I'm afraid I'll have to escort this young lady, and won't be able to join the toast."

Without a moment's hesitation, the two of them quickly left the mansion, leaving behind the birthday celebrant in front of the multitude of people.



T/N: Damn, Richard is so cold. brrrr. XD

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"I have to break off the engagement with Richard Kensington."

"Father!"

"If he went missing on the battlefield, then he's probably dead."

"But..."

"Just know this. Find a better match for yourself."

After breaking off her engagement with the Kensingtons following his disappearance, Viscountess Denoir walked the path of ruin. People who had invested solely in the name Kensington turned their backs one after another, and despite the Viscount's boasting, his youngest daughter, Louise Denoir's reputation was tarnished, and she couldn't find a decent match.

In the midst of this, Richard Kensington, who was thought to be dead, returned.

She was branded as an undesirable woman. Those who had previously ridiculed her as a frivolous woman now laughed at her. Acting as if nothing had happened was all she could do in the face of relentless gossip that followed her wherever she went.

Even when they had met by chance in town not long ago, she had to suppress her bitter feelings while looking at his expressionless face as if he were an inanimate object.

So being alone with him like this was something she had never dreamed of. After urging her daughter to find a gentleman who could help, Viscountess Denoir reluctantly rented a carriage to match the out-of-date dress she wore. They almost had to walk back due to lack of money, if it hadn't been for the Kensington's carriage.

"...I apologize for making you come out because of me."

"No, it was just an excuse I needed."

It was an honest and somewhat rude response, but she was pleased that he wasn't as cold as he had been last time. But that was the end of it. After a brief conversation, silence fell between them.

Louise, who had been holding the fan unnecessarily, slightly lowered her head as if she had made up her mind.

"Um... Richard."

Instead of a response, purple pupils stared at her. Suddenly, a face flashed through her mind.

"It's a really strange story, Miss. Could you please do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Please, prevent Richard from taking Kiara's glass. I'm begging you."

"Why..."

"I can't tell you why. But if you don't, Richard will..."

Desperate green eyes looked at her. Her trembling voice was pitiful. What was her name, Charlotte? She had to tell him. If the man in front of her had truly received help, the credit belonged to her, not herself.

"...Thank you for bringing me here."

But what came out of her lips was just that one word. Petty jealousy. Guilt rushed over her immediately.

"And I'm sorry."

An out-of-place apology. Once again, there was silence. After looking at her for a moment, he turned his gaze out the carriage window with an unreadable expression.

"No need to apologize."

The carriage had arrived at Viscountess Denoir's residence before she knew it. Richard, who got off first, skillfully escorted her.

"Please, go in."

This might be the last chance to speak to him like this. The opportunity to mix words like this. Out of anxiety, words escaped her lips involuntarily, "If you'd like, I could at least offer you a carriage..."

"It's too late for that."

Richard's rejection was so blunt it felt spiteful, and he turned away with a nod. Suddenly, the guilt of earlier negligence surged up, reaching even her throat.

"Wait!"

Louise, who had resolved to stay silent, managed to open her mouth.

"I...I have something to say. Actually, this whole thing wasn't my idea, it was..."

"I understand."

"..."

Without even turning back to face her, he replied firmly, "You're just like a fool who knows her own limits."

A foolish woman.

"You're Richard, the brother of Earl Kensington, right? I'm Charlotte Hegel, Cynthia Hegel's daughter."

That was the first impression. A reckless outsider crossing the wasteland with nothing but her bare hands. The surprising thing was that she spoke her mind straight and true on such a subject.

"I appreciate your concern in many ways, but that doesn't give you the right to make decisions on my behalf. So, how I manage things is my own problem."

Her presence grated on his nerves. That's why he was so cool-headed.

"Do I...bother you that much?"

But gradually.

"Why... Do you dislike me, or do you even dislike me at all? Your words and actions are cold, but when push comes to

shove, you always lend a helping hand.”

Gradually.

“Richard...”

Gradually.

“Richard.”

Porcelain-white skin. A slender neck. Hair as black as a raven’s wing. Jade-colored eyes. A gentle gaze and stubbornly sealed lips. And... the scent of wet violet flowers.

Somewhere along the line, that timid woman had always managed to get under his skin. Like an animal catching the scent of a female in heat and getting excited.

It was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. It felt like someone was rummaging through his mind and messing things up haphazardly. Yet amidst the unpleasant stench that surrounded him, he identified the woman fully, like a watchdog recognizing its master in an instant.

So, when he noticed Kiara Spencer’s shallow deception, the minor detail wasn’t the issue. He focused on the eyes that were watching him from afar, rather than the minor details in front of him.

“Have a congratulatory drink before you leave. Of course, you’ll do this much, won’t you?”

Charlotte Hegel stared at him with a desperate gaze from a distance. Desperation, rejection, sadness, and anger. He laughed at the tangled mess of emotions without bothering to decipher them. The gaze that looked at him so desperately on such a cowardly subject was so pitiful.

If you don't step up, it will be taken away from you.

That was his warning. It was also his last chance to feign ignorance. Even the way he looked around, pretending to be close but keeping his distance, was a tactic.

He approached her on the waterfront, so now it was her turn. She had been given a week's grace. If she still hadn't realized by now, he would engrave it into her bones.

If she didn't step up, he planned to make her feel the effects of her insignificance. He wanted to see her crying, hands tied, in disarray, a woman calling out his name amidst despair and pleasure.

Whether it was breaking her ankles or choking her with a leash, there were many ways to do it. Ever since he became aware of his foul desire, these thoughts had come to him countless times.

"Richard."

The woman had only made subtle gestures, but she hadn't stepped up herself. He merely laughed when he saw the uninvited guest without a clear identity.

It was time to mete out punishment.

"Have you seriously gone crazy?"

"What on earth happened?"

When Miss Timor returned alone and the other maids heard about what happened at the reception, they all blushed with excitement.

“Isn’t it so romantic? It felt like something out of a romance novel.”

“It was quite interesting to see the haughty Spencer lady unable to handle it and leave.”

“Everyone thought Lady Kiara would claim Mr. Richard, but whether she likes him or not...”

“I wish I hadn’t left! I missed a scene you can’t even see for money.”

“Oh, it wasn’t like that, Mary. What happened afterward was really brutal.”

When Richard Kensington left with Louise Denoir, the atmosphere froze. No one openly gossiped, but everyone was suddenly alert to the unusual incident.

“Just before the Duke of Spencer arrived! If he hadn’t, things would have been really awkward.”

“Really?”

The conversation showed no signs of ending. After quietly clearing up in the bustling kitchen, Charlotte got up and opened the back door. The surroundings were quiet in the late night. The sound of the wind brushing against the leaves, the scent of sand from the wasteland, and the stars pouring down as if to cover her head.

As she took another step, she suddenly felt something cold touch her cheek. When she raised her head, snowflakes were falling. Charlotte wasn’t surprised. According to her mother Cynthia, such things sometimes happened at Gredel Hill. Strange occurrences like snow in summer or flowers blooming in winter.

Living in this strange and beautiful place made all the injustices of the past feel like they had happened a long time ago.

"It's the end of the world. A mere laundry maid dares to covet the young master of the household!"

"No, madam. It's a misunderstanding. Let me explain. Please give me a chance—"

"What misunderstanding? The evidence is clear. People need to know their place, Miss Hegel. If you had behaved properly, Janice wouldn't have sent such a letter."

"Madam, please..."

"You have no manners or education, so of course you don't know what dignity is."

"..."

"This is a proof of identity. A letter of recommendation. This is my last favor to you. Get out. Immediately."

It was the memory of being held back from stepping up at the reception.

It wasn't a nightmare. It was a common, mundane story experienced by most women of the working class. The reason she wasn't shocked by Janice's warning was because of this.

"The worlds we live in are different..."

Ultimately, she was right. Who would listen to the words of a laundry maid? The only reason her manipulation worked somewhat was because Miss Denoir was a noblewoman.

"I'm afraid I'll have to escort this young lady, and won't be able to join the toast."

The thought made her heart clench. Richard, who had still so deftly supported his fiancée with skilled hands, passed by her without a glance, not even once. Like a worthless object. Like one of the common pieces of furniture.

"Sir Richard..."

She knew, but it still felt like her fingertips were growing cold. Shock ran through her bones, making her knees weak. Unable to stand any longer, Charlotte sank to her knees, burying her face in her hands. All that remained was a pitiful sense of jealousy and self-loathing.

"...How foolish."

"I agree."

"...?!"

An answer came to her meaningless murmur. Before she could even raise her head in surprise, her wrist was caught. She was pulled up by strong force, muscles tense from head to toe as if struck by lightning.

"R-Richard!"

In an instant, their noses touched. It felt like her breath was being stolen. Before she could grasp the situation, amidst the darkness, a menacing glint caught her eye, ominous and dangerous.



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He had eyes that sparkled like amethysts, or perhaps akin to hidden mulberries. No, the person bearing them wasn't elegant or noble. Instead, they resembled an animal, lurking in dark and secretive places, revealing its true nature.

"Your small and inadequate head must have worked hard to come up with that plan. It's so cute that I almost want to swallow you whole."

"Ah...!"

It was futile to resist belatedly. The weak hand shrugging off the shoulder felt ridiculous. With a cold chuckle, the man wrapped his arm around her waist, pressing her trembling hand with his own, and slid his finger under her knuckles.

"It's annoying how you took a step back and let things happen. The more I think about it, the funnier it gets."

"W-What do you mean...?!"

It felt like cold water was poured over her head. The more she struggled, the stronger the force became, rough and firm like a trapped prey. Mocking her helpless struggles, Richard exposed his teeth and asked, "So, do you find me amusing? Is that it?"

"Ah..."

"If not, then tell me. Whose tie pin is this?"

Lies wouldn't work. In the face of his implicit warning, Charlotte bit her lip.

"Have you been cozying up to someone during the week I gave you to breathe? Is that why that someone gave you this pin as a gift?"

"P-Please stop..."

"Tell me, Miss Hegel."

With the intensity that could tear through bone, his voice was tender, like coaxing a child.

"I haven't! There's no such person!"

Charlotte instinctively understood. Like someone desperately struggling not to be swept away by rising seawater, there was nothing she could do but deny it.

"It's true."

Like a convict denying their crime on the verge of execution, she desperately denied her guilt. Unfortunately, the man she faced only showed mercy by closing the eyes of prey shot by a bullet.

"Pitiful."

With a gaze tinged with sarcasm, Richard laughed. He remembered the deer he once saw, struggling and crying out, unable to stand the thought of its meat being enjoyed. He hadn't eaten it out of respect. Instead, he had severed its head and mounted it above the fireplace in his villa.

"Richard..."

The snow that had fallen softly. The blush staining her white cheeks.

Before he saw her like that, he had thought about slitting her throat. If Charlotte Hegel died, he wouldn't feel this annoying sensation anymore. It was an impulse, but he refrained from acting on it.

Because...

"Charlotte."

Because those eyes, trembling without restraint when called tenderly, were endearing.

"...?"

For the first time, she was called by her name instead of her title. Moisture gathered in Charlotte's eyes. Often they had threatened to overflow, as though suffocating, yet he was a man who never crossed the line, and even this small gesture filled her heart.

"Then please explain."

Softly questioning, Richard bowed his head deeper. Overwhelming height cast a deep shadow upon his pale face. Yet his eyes, still meeting hers, seemed surprisingly gentle, almost illusory. He called her name once more.

"Charlotte."

...Was it another illusion? Once again, she felt as though she faced an unknown creature amidst a veil-like mist. Though her body froze with a chill, heat surged from her nape. Charlotte nodded.

“Yes, yes! It was something I bought a while ago. To give to my father...”

It had been her first luxury item, saved for and bought with meager wages over the years. She never got the chance to give it to him before he passed away.

“I see.”

The grip, once crushing, loosened slightly. Yet simultaneously, she felt a rush of air, as if her throat had cleared. Though he didn’t release her, Charlotte pleaded with her flushed face.

“Please, let me go now... if anyone sees...”

The response was refreshing.

“If anyone sees?”

Surely, it wasn’t meant as a threat. Yet the face she faced remained calm.

“Is there someone you shouldn’t be seen with? A butler? A servant? Or perhaps, a gatekeeper?”

Charlotte was taken aback. She had denied it just moments ago. She couldn’t fathom the man’s judgment. Before she could gather her thoughts to speak, her vision flipped.

“Richard?!”

“Keep quiet.”

He grabbed her waist lightly, like luggage, and strode toward the main entrance without hesitation. As she struggled, her waist and thighs tensed under his grip. All her focus was on the large, firm hand beneath her clothes.

“Let go, what’s going on...!”

Her mind was spinning, unable to comprehend the situation. Her protest, barely escaping her lips, was ignored by his cold warning.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“ ... ”

“If you don’t want to see what’s going to happen.”

There seemed to be no room for further objections. As Richard chuckled at the sight of Charlotte, gasping for breath, he continued confidently into the house.

Thud.

As the door closed with a resounding sound, she sank onto the soft bedding behind her. Fortunately, it was late at night, and apart from the bustling maids in the dining room, all the servants were in bed.

“Richard...!”

It was a relief that no one had seen them from the entrance hall to his bedroom upstairs. Yet Charlotte’s situation remained precarious.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

He gently placed her on the bed as if tossing her there, then proceeded to remove his jacket and loosen his tie. His neat, swept-back hair caught her attention, with a few strands out of place. His prominent Adam’s apple and collarbones stood out. She felt a tightening in her gut as his cold gaze bore down on her.

“You don’t need to be afraid. I’m just going to check something.”

“W-What are you checking?”

“Just confirming that no one else has touched you.”

“ ... ”

“Don’t worry. If not, there won’t be any trouble.”

In the darkness, he seemed like a lamb standing on an altar. What was even more shocking was the casual demeanor of the man. Despite uttering words that could raise suspicion, his tone remained purely businesslike.

“Why...why do you need to check that?”

Charlotte trembled slightly as she weakly pushed herself back. She couldn’t understand any part of his psyche. He seemed cold one moment, then hot, and when hot, icy and aloof. As he approached the bed, she reached out to stop him.

“I, I’m, I’m Sir Richard’s maid, and, uh...”

“Have you not learned your lesson?”

Her words turned into a terrified scream. After brushing lightly with his fingers, Richard licked his lips, inspecting her like a predator examining its prey. There was a savage and moist sensation. Charlotte’s body stiffened like someone caught in a spider’s web.

“I told you not to call me that or try to escape.”

Then, his lips touched her hand, and his lips moved up to her wrist. Her attempt to escape from the bed was thwarted

before it could be executed. He pushed her down and climbed on top of her. Charlotte's body was engulfed by his overwhelming physique. Even in the dim light, his jawline, hardened by determination, was visible.

"I knew you had that timidness, but you should have at least stayed put."

Wiping the tears that trickled down her eyelashes, Richard whispered as he wiped them away.

"If you had, I might have endured my paltry patience a little longer."

His neat fingertips brushed her pale cheek before descending to her jaw. If clenched, it seemed like it would leave a red mark. Swiftly, his fingers began unbuttoning her blouse one by one. His cold fingers gripped her swollen throat and then her plump breast.

"Ah...!"

Charlotte's neck was bitten as if she were prey. The strange sensation made her lips part involuntarily. As Richard inserted his fingers into her mouth, he lowered his head and nibbled on her tender neck.

"Ah... it hurts...! Ah... ahh..."

As Charlotte, kneeling, pushed back the man's shoulders, it felt like pushing against solid rock, or rather, an ice wall. Before she could voice her refusal, Richard, who had seized her delicate wrists together, restrained her. His face buried in her hair, his cheeks reddened, and his eyes teary, met hers, and they shared a deep kiss.

"Ugh..."

As their lips momentarily parted during the long kiss, Charlotte stammered as she wept.

“The master I worked for before, he...he was like this at first, so kind...I wondered if he was always like this, and it felt exciting...I liked it, but...”

“...”

“But in the end, he wasn’t like that. Even though it was my first love, to him, I was just a maid to play with...”

“...Charlotte.”

“Is...is that the same for you, Richard?”

It was a long-standing wound. His voice, as if vomiting out the name she hadn’t heard, was painful to hear.

“Goodness.”

Though someone else might have pitied him for what he heard, Richard simply laughed.

“You hear all sorts of fucking things.”

His smile, more menacing than chilly, made Charlotte instinctively shrink her shoulders. Then, as he rose from the bed, it returned to its original position. With a sudden change in the situation, his cold voice fell.

“...Get out, before you get ruined.”



T/N: There was no clear indication in the raws that they travelled somewhere or how much time have passed ever since Richard and Charlotte exited the birthday banquet. I was also lost in the scenes when I was translating this, as there were lots of flashbacks sandwiched in the present events. But just to be clear, this is the order of events: Charlotte serves at Kiara's birthday party > Charlotte goes outside to take a breath of air > overhears some maids talking about Kiara's plan to lead Richard into her room > bumps into Louise Denoir > asks Louise to 'save' Richard from Kiara's plan > Kiara gets mega-dumped on her own birthday party (oof) > Richard figures out Charlotte was the one behind the 'plan' > takes her back home to his study to "check her purity" for some reason. whew. this chapter was kind of...intense. I was almost sure it was a smut scene. But ah, unfortunately we are not quite there yet 😊

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"The condition has improved significantly. It would be best if this state continues," the doctor diagnosed, now without his stethoscope. He had examined her ankle before.

"Thank you," Charlotte hesitated before responding, recalling his name, "Dr. Brown."

"It's just my duty. Honestly, I didn't expect the condition to improve this much."

"I'm also glad. My mother..." Charlotte's gaze drifted towards Cynthia, who lay sleeping in the middle of speaking. "She's been through a lot since she was young."

Her peaceful sleep resembled that of a child.

"Yes...Taking care of her must have been tough for you too, Miss Hegel."

"No, it's the least I could do."

She was her only mother, her only remaining family. Even though they hadn't spent much time together growing up, seeing her mother's tired face always pained Charlotte.

"When I'm able to move around a bit more, I'm thinking of returning to our hometown. I can't stay here forever."

"True. I'm sure there are good doctors there too. I hope you'll be well."

After tidying up his medical bag and getting up from his seat, Dr. Brown extended a hand. Charlotte shook it, then reached into her pocket.

“Oh, the payment...”

“It’s alright. The payment has already been taken care of.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know? Mr. Richard paid in advance.”

“I see...”

Dr. Brown chuckled at Charlotte’s puzzled expression and picked up his hat.

“Well, then I’ll be off. No need to see me out.”

As the visitor left, the room was once again left with just the mother and daughter. When the sunlight streaming in through the window shifted from Cynthia’s head to her feet, she finally woke up.

“...Charlotte?”

“Mother.”

“What time is it now? I’ve been sleeping a lot lately, and it seems like it’s already dusk when I open my eyes.”

“It’s not yet evening. You can sleep a little longer.”

“That won’t do. I feel light and well-rested for the first time in a while. Can you support me? I want to look outside.”

“Of course.”

Turning her daughter around, Charlotte supported Cynthia's shoulders and helped her to a chair near the window. The vast fields surrounding the mansion didn't look much different from when they first visited two months ago. The only thing that had changed was the people.

As her daughter stared pensively into the distance, Cynthia gestured for her to sit.

"Sit down."

"...."

"You've seemed quite down lately. Is something bothering you?"

As they sat opposite each other after a long time, mother and daughter resembled each other like looking into a mirror; contrary to what the man had said, that they were nothing alike.

Brushing aside the tendrils of thought that reached out to one person, Charlotte shook her head.

"It's nothing. Nothing at all."

Charlotte paused mid-sentence and closed her mouth for a moment. What she was about to say concerned Richard's secretary duties. Unable to deceive the absence from his desk for hours every day, she had claimed to help Janice temporarily.

"I no longer need your services."

After that night, Charlotte didn't go to the study anymore. When she didn't show up for two days, a young servant boy came to her room and handed her the wages she had

earned. When he cautiously asked if there was any message to convey, he just shook her head instead of answering. That was the end of it.

“Mother.”

“Speak, Charlotte.”

“You might not feel it yet, but how about we return home now?”

“Home?”

“Yes. To Dallas.”

Objectively speaking, this place wasn't as flat and fertile as their hometown, but it was where they had grown up. Cynthia, who had been silent for a moment, soon agreed.

“Yes...that would be a good idea. We can't keep serving the master forever...”

“Yes. When we return, I have some savings stored up, so we can live for a while. We can take our time finding jobs.”

They might not have the luxury of a good room and good food like they did now, but at least their hearts would be at ease. That was the conclusion reached after the past three days. It was better to give up before things got deeper. Ignoring the pain in one corner of her heart, Charlotte smiled.

“Things will get better.”

“Yes. Thank you, my daughter.”

Cynthia responded with a smile and reached out to hold her daughter's hand. Charlotte had always been polite, quiet,

and considerate. Despite only sending her wages regularly, Cynthia was grateful for her daughter's growth.

"...If only the young master hadn't died, by now..."

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself."

Cynthia hastily changed the subject after unintentionally blurting out those words.

"By the way, I'm a bit thirsty."

"Oh, right. I see the water bottle is empty. I'll get a new one."

"Sure. Thank you."

"I'll be back soon."

With the empty water bottle in hand, Charlotte headed downstairs. As she descended, she heard a crying sound she had heard before.

"Meow."

"A cat?"

Somehow, she felt uneasy. She thought she should ignore it, but her steps continued toward the source of the sound. The crying stopped as she passed through the kitchen and reached the linen room at the back. A sleek black cat sat there, as if waiting, and smoothly slipped through the open door as if invited. It wasn't an empty room; voices could be heard inside. One was a familiar voice, Janice. The other was a husky male voice.

“...So the master is having trouble with the ‘feeding’ supply. Investigators have already been here due to the recent disappearance...”

“...Since the master vehemently refuses, even if he’s the Earl, what can he do? For now, we have no choice but to ‘sustain’ him as a ‘substitute’...”

“But if the ‘thirst’ continues, it will lead to the worst-case scenario...”

Fragmented sentences sporadically continued.

Feeding? Substitute? Thirst?

Strange words caught her attention. It was time to listen more carefully.

“Meow.”

The cat that slipped through the crack rubbed its head against its owner’s ankle. Janice had stopped the conversation momentarily to pick up the cat.

“Oh, you must be hungry.”

After gently petting the cat’s head, she soon put it down.

“Then let’s see the situation as discussed earlier, Mr. Gayle.”

“Understood. Madam. I’ll go out first and see what’s...”

The tall middle-aged man, with a brief nod and a raised hat to greet, suddenly stopped. Then, the sound of footsteps approaching rapidly from the direction of the door reached their ears.

No, please no.

Her heart pounded rapidly, warning of danger. Panicked eyes searched for a hiding place. It was at that moment, with eyes tightly shut in desperation, a strong force pulled her away.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I felt someone’s gaze. Probably just a mouse.”

“...Really? That’s strange. It hasn’t been long since we cleaned thoroughly.”

“Well, I’ll go check it out.”

“Yes. Goodbye.”

As the two people finished their conversation and moved away, Charlotte held her breath. If someone hadn’t dragged her down under the stairs and covered her mouth, she surely would have screamed.

“...We should be careful. Didn’t you learn not to eavesdrop on others’ conversations?”

The voice of a boy—just a few years short of puberty—came from behind. Charlotte was startled, but she was able to calm her mind. The boy who had appeared out of nowhere extended his hand naturally, like flowing water.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

Gratefully accepting the help, Charlotte stepped back and looked up. Then, she was shocked.

The boy had purple eyes like a wolf’s bane flower, and perfectly chiseled features with a chilling gaze. The only

difference from 'him' was that his hair was blonde. And he was much younger, standing about the same height as her.

"Who are you?"

"Franz Ewin Kensington."

"Franz? Then..."

Charlotte searched her mind and found the answer.

"You're the eldest son of Sir Seymour."

Bits and pieces of sentences continued to surface.

Did he say he attended a boarding school in the capital? It shouldn't be vacation time yet. He must be around fourteen or fifteen years old...

"Yes, that's right. And who are you?"

"Ah, I'm Charlotte Hegel. Cynthia Hegel's daughter."

"Ah, I see."

Franz let out a light sigh, as if recalling something, and smiled faintly.

"Nice to meet you, Charlotte. I was just curious."

Two days ago, in the capital.

"Aah!"

He was thrown into the carriage like an uncontrollable beast, and it was dim inside.

Without mercy, a hand grabbed his collar, slamming his face onto the seat. Thankfully, there was a goose feather cushion; otherwise, he might have spilled his nosebleed. As the boy released his grip, the door closed.

“You’re too much, Uncle. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, do you have to treat your nephew like this?”

“Shut up before I treat you worse.”

Though he meant it as a joke, it fell flat. Instead, the chill in the air grew stronger. Franz lowered his gaze and scratched the back of his head with a forced smile.

“I really feel unjustified this time. Please believe me.”

“Why should I?”

“I admit I broke the nose of the senior, but he provoked me first!”

Despite genuinely feeling wronged, his pleas were disregarded. He could only be grateful for being brought here physically.

After that, Richard kept his eyes glued to the documents he had brought. It was only after flipping through about a dozen pages that Franz, who had been watching his cue, cautiously spoke up again.

“Uncle, three seconds.”

He called with a mix of broken voice, but the atmosphere remained chilly. It felt like standing in front of a colossal ice wall. There was no one to appeal to about his beauty. With an unacknowledged heart, Franz stretched his words as far as he could.

“Father seems lenient toward you. Can’t you just say one word?”

“If you say one more word, I’ll throw you out.”

He answered coldly as he turned the page. There was no room for surrender here. Following the desperate plea:

“Please, I’m begging you. I really don’t want to go all the way to the monastery. They control everything, even the monks who are completely bald. You have to learn boring Latin. You can’t even ride horses.”

“It wouldn’t be bad for you to become a proper person there.”

“You’re really too much.”

His round eyes sank down despondently. He wasn’t like this before. Although he always lived buried in books, he was sometimes a kind uncle who played with him.

“Uncle! It’s me, Franz! I’m really glad you’re back safely!”

“....”

“Uncle?”

When the person who was supposed to be dead returned, he was happier than anyone else. However, the person he met after two years was not the same as before. He couldn’t forget the gaze that looked down on him as if he were a bug.

He felt hopeless and crestfallen. So, off he went and appealed to his father.

However, the response that came back was indifferent.

"I heard that most of the colleagues we worked with during the war are dead. He must have seen and experienced a lot during the war. It's impossible for him to be the same as before."

"But still, he's changed so much..."

"Franz."

The Earl, who forcefully called his son's name, grabbed his small shoulder.

"In the Kensington family, there's a hereditary disease that passes down through generations. It usually manifests every other generation, and your uncle was a carrier and eventually manifested it there. That's why he's 'sick.'"

"...."

"We don't want others to know about this 'disease.' That's it. Do you understand?"

This felt like an unspoken coercion under the overwhelming pressure. Even in his young mind, he felt the subtlety of the elaborate lie covering the truth, but all he could do was nod in confusion.

"Then, I'll take a nap, since there's still a long way to go before we arrive."

Unable to bear the suffocating silence, Franz closed his eyes for a moment.

"But if you're truly repentant."

"Uncle?"

At the comforting words, his head involuntarily turned. As Richard closed the last page, he spoke softly, "There might be a way, Franz."

Their eyes met, the gaze tender enough to send shivers down his spine.



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Franz struggled to swallow back his exuberant smile that was threatening to burst out.

Charlotte Hegel appeared even more innocent than he had heard. Since they were bound by circumstance, he couldn't bring himself to reject her invitation to chat, despite being somewhat curt. To become closer, he pretended not to know the family history he was already aware of, and he played along. It was a bit boring, but having someone to talk to made it bearable.

"So, you came all the way here from that distant place because of your mother."

"Yes. I'm really grateful that she's much better now."

"It's really unfortunate. I wouldn't want my mother to be sick either. Oh, would you like some of this?"

"I'm okay. I just had a meal."

Charlotte politely declined the scone Franz offered and set down the tea.

"I'm not even a guest, so I'm not sure if I should be treated like this."

The couch Charlotte sat on was one she had never sat on before in this place. It felt uncomfortable, like wearing ill-

fitting clothes. Reading Charlotte's thoughts, Franz smiled brightly.

"If you're the servant's daughter, then you're like family to me. Don't feel too burdened."

"Thank you, Young Master. But I think I should be leaving now."

As if in agreement with her words, the grandfather clock in the foyer chimed. Rising to bid farewell, Charlotte froze in place. Someone on the other side of the door was shouting.

"I can't believe this is happening to me! What crime did I commit!"

The voice sounded familiar, like one she had heard before. As she moved towards the door to see what was happening, Franz blocked her path.

"It's something that happens occasionally."

"...."

"The losing side in Uncle's cases comes here and causes a commotion from time to time."

He spoke nonchalantly, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. With a disdainful glance that seemed to say he was tired of seeing it, Franz chuckled behind Charlotte's shoulder.

"Usually, they're kicked out without even seeing a strand of Uncle's hair. It's already a done deal, yet they cling to futile hopes. How foolish."

"Let me go! Let me out! You devil!"

The voice faded as if it were getting farther away. Franz turned Charlotte's attention back to him.

"Have another cup of tea before you leave. Hmm?"

Once again, a day slipped by in no time.

The next day, through Janice, the Earl responded with a brief acknowledgment when told that she would spend only the summer here before leaving. Charlotte hadn't expected anyone to hold her back, but somehow, she felt a hollow feeling inside.

"Still, we should be thankful for the attention we've received, Charlotte. Once Lady Cynthia's illness was known, the Countess offered to let us stay in the estate."

"Such excessive kindness is unnecessary."

"Of course, you'd say the same thing as your mother. That's why it fell through."

Janice responded firmly yet with a hint of regret.

"Mother and I share many similarities. It's been that way for a long time."

Charlotte concealed her tension and forced a smile.

She had discovered an unexpected aspect of the woman she had thought was simply a gentle mother. She was the Earl's mistress. Remembering her conversations with the unknown man in the cold, passionless voice only added to the mystery. It felt like she had overheard something important, something related to Richard.

But it was already too late to delve deeper. A gut feeling told Charlotte that there was nothing good to find, so she closed her eyes and ears to it.

In the midst of these contemplations, Janice casually brought up a topic.

“Lately, it seems you’ve become close with Young Master Franz. You’ve been going for walks together and even out into town?”

“We’ve become acquainted, on his part...I’m just grateful for his kindness.”

Charlotte replied as she rolled the flower dipped in honey into sugar. It was a humble response, which seemed to satisfy Janice.

“Yeah. Even though you’re older and Young Master Franz is still a minor, as long as you’re careful, nothing bad will happen.”

“....”

“Whenever something goes wrong, it’s always the woman who bears the blame, even if both parties were involved. And especially if you’re like us, who work as servants.”

Feeling a subtle anger in Janice’s voice, Charlotte lowered her gaze instead of replying.

“I’ll keep that in mind, ma’am.”

The conversation ended there. Both remained silent for a while, focusing on their work. As they neared the end of their tasks, Janice straightened up first.

“We should stop here for now, as it needs some time to mature.”

“Is there anything else I can help with?”

“No, there isn’t. Just some cleanup left.”

“I’ll assist with that.”

“Alright. I feel bad for sending you to Cloverfield earlier; I can’t burden you further. Go on.”

“But I can’t just...”

“Go when I send you. Weren’t you supposed to be somewhere? You kept looking at the clock.”

“Oh...”

Realizing it belatedly, Charlotte took off her apron.

“You’re right. Young Master Franz wanted to hear more about Dallas, so we arranged to meet in the study.”

“Then go ahead. It would be rude to keep him waiting.”

Instead of replying, Charlotte nodded and started up the stairs. Janice called out to her in a soft voice, “Oh, Charlotte.”

“Yes?”

“Did you happen to come downstairs last night?”

A chill ran down Charlotte’s spine.

“ ... ”

Turning her head like a malfunctioning puppet, Charlotte asked, "Um...no. Why?"

"Never mind then. It's nothing."

She was curious yet didn't want to know the intention behind the question. Charlotte licked her dry lips, wanting to see the other's face, but Janice was standing with her back to her, so all she could see was her silhouette.

After a brief silence that seemed intentional, Janice continued, "I've been a bit on edge lately, with all the things I've had to take care of."

With her usual faint smile, Janice turned around.

"Go on upstairs, Charlotte."

Knock knock.

"Excuse me. Is anyone here?"

There was no need to knock; the study was open.

Stepping in quietly, Charlotte found herself in a spacious room. Curtains were drawn all around, casting the room in shadow.

"Your Grace?"

With a feeling like stepping into a mysterious realm, Charlotte glanced around. It felt like she was entering a small library.

Due to the Countess of Kensington's love for old books, the Mistymoor Hall was renowned for its extensive collection,

almost rivaling the Queen's private library. True to the rumors, the elongated rectangular room was lined with bookshelves made of polished oak, and personalized reading desks, tailored to adult men's heights, were scattered throughout.

"He hasn't arrived yet..."

Muttering to herself, Charlotte's eyes caught something. Among the reading desks, there was one protected by a square glass pane. On the unfolded shelf, there was a depiction of a majestic tree. Charlotte read the inscription on the left edge.

"A Noble Genealogy?"

Where the branches of the tree extended, the crests of ancient noble families were displayed like fruits. It was said that distinguished lineage often proudly presented their genealogy, akin to a proof of pure bloodline. Considering the household of Kensington had inherited Gredel Hill for several centuries and even produced a queen a few generations back, it wasn't surprising to find this book here.

As she read with interest, something caught her attention.

"...erased?"

In the past, that is, in the Countess's grandfather's generation, there was a long, blotchy trace of erasure. It skipped a generation, passed from the head to the second son.

"Why would that be?"

Erasing a name from a genealogy, akin to erasing one's identity from the noble world, was a disgrace unparalleled

even to Charlotte, a member of the working class. Lost in thought and forgetting her purpose for entering the study, she was startled by a sudden voice.

“It’s usually one of four reasons.”

“Your Grace?”

Startled by the unexpected interruption, Charlotte widened her eyes. Franz approached, casually extending his fingers as he spoke.

“Insanity, physical disability, or marrying without consent, tarnishing the family’s honor.”

It was a chillingly rational world. Internally amused, Franz continued his explanation.

“In the second case, they are usually killed at birth, so their names never make it onto the genealogy. Though things have somewhat improved nowadays.”

“I see,” Charlotte nodded with a troubled expression, prompting Franz to ask a question.

“And the last one. Do you know of hereditary diseases?”

“Diseases passed down through the bloodline?”

With a smirk that suggested she’d given the correct answer, Franz continued.

“Bingo. Inheritance-based, and it runs in our family too. My great-uncle had it. Unfortunately, due to it affecting the eldest son, my uncle inherited the family line, and he became my great-uncle.”

It sent shivers down her spine. It was a revelation she hadn't expected to hear. Feeling like she had stepped into territory she shouldn't have, Charlotte couldn't ignore the unsettling feeling in the air.

With an awkward expression, Franz made a suggestion to Charlotte.

"Let me show you something interesting."

"Your Grace!"

Without waiting for her objections, he rummaged in his pocket and produced a key. Placing it directly into the slot on the glass cover, he turned it. Without hesitation, Franz retrieved the genealogy and flipped through a few pages before sliding his finger down.

"Take a look at the lower section, Charlotte."

"..."

"Why do you think Richard's uncle's name was erased?"

Charlotte's fixed gaze followed.

Seymour Arthur Kensington. Indeed, there was an erased name next to his.

"Unfortunately, my uncle is suffering from an incurable disease. It's the hereditary disease I mentioned earlier."



T/N: What could this hereditary 'disease' be? 🤔

Ch. 21 ASEF 21

Illness. Incurable. Richard.

Charlotte's mind went blank. A single, vivid image flashed through her confused thoughts.

On her first day, Richard had been slumped in the armchair, pale as a lifeless bisque doll. Touching him felt as if he might shatter into pieces, making it difficult to even breathe.

"But... he doesn't seem that way at all."

Yes, that had been true only on the first day. Richard was physically fit and muscular, looking no different from an active-duty officer. Tilting his head slightly, Franz responded to Charlotte's observation.

"That's just the way it appears. There are quite a few incurable diseases out there that don't show obvious symptoms. Hemophilia, for example."

"So, is he undergoing treatment?"

The question came out trembling. Franz shook his head.

"No. We're secretly researching medications, but it's still in a hopeless stage. The disease is so rare that it doesn't even have a proper name. I heard our poor great-grandfather ended it all at just thirty."

"Ended it..."

“The typical ending is usually one of two—premature death or suicide due to madness.”

“That can’t be...”

Frozen in shock, Charlotte could only move her lips. Facing her pallid expression, Franz shrugged.

“That’s why Father dotes on my uncle, more than me, who is his own son. I’m a little resentful of that, but—Ah!”

His grumbling was cut short as Charlotte suddenly grabbed his shoulders, stammering.

“Wh-what are the symptoms? The cause...”

That’s when it happened.

Bang!

“Aaaaah!”

“Protect the young master!”

“Bring a gun!”

Gunshots rang from outside. All their attention was drawn in that direction. Franz rushed to the window, quickly pulling the curtains shut. Below the window, the household staff was gathered in a panic.

An ominous premonition enveloped Charlotte. As she staggered towards the window, a desperate voice cried out, piercing her ears.

“Sir Richard has been shot! Call the physician!”

Her mind went blank. Amidst the confusion, a man was brought in, struggling against those restraining him.

“Let go of me!”

The familiar voice from years ago. The auburn hair and pale skin, haunting her like a nightmare.

The assailant who fired the gun was none other than the young master of the household where Charlotte once worked.

More precisely, he was her first love.

A week had passed since the shocking incident.

“That guy sure is lucky,” Felix muttered, looking at his friend lying lifeless-like.

Memories of the recent events flooded back into his mind.

‘I’ll never forget this.’

‘...Kiara.’

‘Thanks for sticking by me till the end, Felix. I’ll miss you.’

Kiara dabbed at her reddened eyes with a handkerchief. It was a few days later that Duke Spencer, who had traveled to the duchy with his daughter, learned the full story.

‘How dare that man disgrace my daughter?’

Upon hearing the details, the enraged Duke Spencer had wanted to personally go and thrash the so-called noble. Felix had had to put in a great effort to calm down his hot-

tempered uncle, who was determined to drag the man back to the duke's mansion by any means.

"You have no idea how difficult it was to placate the one who was ready to use every resource to bring you back. And you go and solve it all in one fell swoop. You."

There was hardly any good to come from butting heads with him.

The Spencer family had long held seats on various parliamentary standing committees, and they were a prestigious lineage not far removed from the queen's own bloodline. The Kensingtons were no less than them. They had amassed a great fortune early on through shipping investments, and recently, their growing influence in the parliament could no longer be ignored due to the booming trade.

While Felix was stuck, unable to do anything as the two lions were about to collide, unexpected news arrived.

'Lord Felix! Lord Richard has been shot!'

Hearing those words, his heart seemed to turn to stone. More than the shock of Richard being shot, it was the worry that his father might have lost control and caused trouble that worried him.

The reassurance that it was not at the Duke's behest was brief, as a wave of self-loathing soon followed. No matter how much Richard had changed, he was still Richard—Felix' close friend of over 20 years. Feeling relieved that his apprehensions were unfounded made him feel pathetic.

Looking at the motionless face, conflicting emotions surged within him.

“Well, it did work out in the end. ...You didn’t do it on purpose, did you? No, not even you would go that far, as crazy as you are.”

“I appreciate you worrying about Richard’s mental state.”

Startled by the sudden voice, Felix whirled around.

“S-Sir?^{*1}”

“As you said, that issue has been resolved, so you won’t have a headache about it later.”

Seymour, who had apparently been there for some time, glanced at the startled Felix and strode into the room, approaching the window.

“If you realize that a lawyer gets shot while on the job, you might just convince Kiara to give up, won’t you, Felix?”

“ ... ”

The rhetorical question was accompanied by Seymour sharply pulling open the previously tightly drawn curtains. Blinded by the sudden influx of sunlight, Felix instinctively shielded his eyes.

“In fact, even if that old man had declared an all-out war, it wouldn’t have really mattered.”

“Haha...”

Felix realized Seymour was not just joking around. The usually amiable Earl was exceptionally ruthless when it came to matters involving his own brother. Forcing a chuckle to hide his chilling discomfort, Felix stood up from his seat.

“I think I’ve stayed too long, so I’ll be on my way now.”

“Alright then. Thank you for coming. Sorry I couldn’t give you a proper reception in a situation like this.”

“Not at all. I’ll come by again.”

“Janice will see you out.”

As Felix stepped out, Janice, a long-serving employee, led the way to the foyer. Since they were familiar with each other, it wasn’t too awkward.

“It’s fortunate the bullet only grazed his shoulder. There’s no life-threatening injury.”

“God was watching over him. But I worry he may not wake up soon, since he hit his head when he fell.”

“He’ll be up and about soon. Dani has been through wars, so he’ll shake this off quickly.”

The conversation flowed naturally, until Janice suddenly paused.

“Ma’am?”

“...Nothing. It’s just been a while since I’ve heard that name.”

Only then did Felix realize the implications of his earlier words.

“Ah, I see.”

It had been the childhood nickname they used to call Richard. Not just Felix, but the Earl and his wife as well. At

some point, they had stopped using it, and after Richard returned from his service, the name had been forgotten.

“I do miss those carefree days sometimes. We used to race each other on horseback.”

Nodding in agreement, Janice shared the sentiment.

“I was there too, and I know how close you two were, then and now.”

“Well...We were,” Felix replied, a tinge of melancholy in his voice.

Felix shrugged, brushing off the response in the past tense. As he looked around, feeling a bit awkward, someone came into his line of sight—a young Richard? For a moment, Felix almost couldn’t believe his eyes. The startled youth quickly changed his expression and approached, greeting him with a bright smile.

“How’ve you been, Felix?”

“...Franz?”

“It’s been so long!”

Felix, still surprised, asked on impulse, “Are you supposed to be on vacation?”

“Well... this is a special vacation I got for the excellent grades I received! Haha. Don’t you know that, even as a graduate?”

There was an unspoken pressure in his gaze, as if asking Felix to play along. Intrigued, Felix decided to go with it.

“Ah, right...I must have forgotten. It’s been a while since I graduated.”

“I understand. Memory does start to decline as you get older, after all.”

“What? Hey, that’s not quite—”

“Janice!”

Cutting off Felix’ indignant retort, Franz turned to the person beside them.

“I’d like to chat with Felix for a bit. Could you please tell Charlotte to bring us some tea?”

As soon as the drawing room’s door closed, Franz heaved a sigh of relief.

“Thanks for going along with my lie earlier, Felix.”

“It was nothing, really.”

Plopping down on the couch, Felix rested his arm on the armrest. Shortly after, Franz, sitting across from him, spoke up again.

“Were you visiting my uncle?”

“Yeah. I was so surprised. I heard the culprit was some nobleman’s third son?”

“That’s right. You probably don’t even know his name. He’s from some backwater village, and his family’s nothing special.”

“How did someone like that manage to find his way here and do such a thing?”

“Well...”

As the question flowed naturally, Franz instinctively started to respond, but quickly covered his mouth with both hands. Seeing his suspicious behavior, Felix narrowed his eyes and probed in a subtle tone.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh, you heard, didn’t you? He lost the case in court.”

It was just another one of the dozens of petty lawsuits heard in local courts every day—a dispute over tenant farmer rents between landowners and their tenants. Such minor district court trials were often handled by country gentry lawyers or young, inexperienced attorneys.

The sudden surge of spectators at the trial was due to the rumors that the lawyer representing the tenant farmers was none other than Richard Kensington.

“So why did he take on such a trivial case? And for free, no less.”

“Well... Maybe it was some kind of volunteer work? A chance to take a break and do some good...”

The lame excuse prompted Felix to burst out laughing.

“Let’s be honest—is your uncle really the type of person to do that?”

“Well, it’s just that...”

“It’s just that?”

“...Not anymore, at least.”

As the responses kept getting worse, Felix wore a smug smile, causing Franz to bite his lower lip. If he kept losing ground like this, Felix might not let it go. A chill ran down his spine. Sensing an opportunity to counterattack, Felix unleashed his barrage.

“Richard getting shot... was it intentional?”



Ch. 22 ASEF 22

“What?”

“Think about it. The other guy was just barely twenty, a rookie who had never even enlisted. Someone like Richard, who’s been through hell and high water on battlefields, wouldn’t have gone down so easily to a kid with no real shooting experience.”

“But, that’s...”

Franz hadn’t considered that angle. Clenching and unclenching his fist, he was impressed by the plausibility of Felix’s reasoning.

“Tell me. What was the real intention behind it? What was he trying to accomplish?”

The interrogation became more persistent and specific. Franz averted his gaze, opening and closing his mouth a few times. It wasn’t time to talk about it yet. Not yet...

“Franz, isn’t this your second suspension? I heard that after the second time, they’ll send you straight to the monastery without mercy...”

“Alright, I’ll tell you what I know. But it’s a secret, okay?”

Felix simply nodded in response. As Franz got up and headed towards the door, footsteps could be heard approaching.

Just a little closer.

“This is really confidential...”

When he was at the perfect distance, Franz spoke up firmly.

“It’s because of the maid’s daughter.”

“...Charlotte?”

Stunned by the unexpected revelation, Felix drew a sharp breath.

Addressing the two rapt listeners, Franz continued in a measured tone.

“Apparently, the day after my uncle caused a ruckus there without even seeing her, that man found out Charlotte was working here and secretly snuck in to try and meet her, suspecting her involvement in the current lawsuit.”

“So then, with Richard...”

“Yeah. Uncle had bad luck too. When he tried to intervene, the other guy suddenly pulled out a gun. And then...”

Felix finished the sentence.

“He got shot.”

Clang!

Before Felix could even finish, a loud noise came from outside the door.

“Lord Richard has been shot! Call the physician!”

It was pure pandemonium. The shocking incident had instantly turned the Mistymoor Hall upside down.

Charlotte was utterly distraught. Voices echoed through the vast hall, urgent footsteps resounded. Tears welled up in her eyes as she watched the bewildered maidservants, the composed but commanding Janice, the steward hurrying off to fetch the physician, and the footman attempting to stop the bleeding. So many people rushed past her in a blur.

“Sir! You must open your eyes! You must not lose consciousness!”

“When will the physician arrive? We’re running out of time!”

“Has the Earl been informed? What about the mistress?”

The man being carried on the servant’s back was paler than ever. Amidst the swarm of people, he was unmistakable—the blood-soaked white shirt, the limp hands, the composed yet unconscious face.

“Richard...”

The moment she grasped the situation, her breath caught in her throat. Despite the spacious hall, the air felt stifling. Her mind was wiped clean, unable to process anything. A sharp pain, as if someone had plunged a knife into her left chest and ripped out her heart. Though it was Richard who had been shot, the agony felt as if it was her own body.

Someone suddenly grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Charlotte.”

“...”

“Charlotte! Pull yourself together!”

With great effort, Charlotte turned her head to look at the young boy. Just as pallid as her, Franz hesitated to speak for a moment, then calmly continued.

“It’s alright. Uncle isn’t going to die. Janice said the bullet missed the vital areas.”

“But... there’s so much blood...”

“Charlotte.”

Gripping her shoulder more firmly, Franz spoke gently.

“I’m telling you the truth. Why would I lie?”

“ ... ”

“Charlotte!”

As the unclear reassurance sank in, Charlotte’s legs buckled, and she sank to the floor, finally releasing the breath she had been holding.

“And the culprit?”

“The magistrate has been notified, he’ll be detained soon.”

With her breathing restored, the next question quickly followed. Carefully organizing her thoughts, Charlotte spoke slowly.

“Could it be the person who visited yesterday?”

After a brief pause, gazing into her tear-filled green eyes, Franz belatedly replied.

“...Seems like it.”

The news of the assault on Richard Daniel Kensington spread like wildfire across all of Gredel Hill. In the otherwise peaceful and boring region, such a shocking incident was a rare occurrence, amplifying its impact. The Mistymoor Hall servants were kept busy with guest reception and nursing, barely catching a break.

“We had exactly fifteen visitors today. Half of them came from the capital.”

“I heard even Earl Edwin, the Queen’s nephew, sent a letter from abroad to express his concern.”

“That’s not all! To comfort the grieving Countess, he even sent a set of coral teacups and diamond earrings as gifts. It seems they have a very special relationship.”

“Anyway, it’s a relief the bullet only hit his shoulder.”

“Yes. He sustained an injury to his right shoulder, so he won’t be able to write for a while, but at least he can rest.”

“I hope he recovers soon. Don’t you agree, Charlotte?”

Charlotte nodded awkwardly, half-distracted as she wiped silver cutlery with a linen cloth.

It was an inconvenient time due to the unexpected visitors. Though she wasn’t employed as a servant anymore, like at the last banquet in Cloverfield, Charlotte found herself stepping forward to lend a hand.

“Yes, I’m glad he’s safe.”

She still couldn't shake the chilling feeling of seeing the unconscious Richard. It was like a stubborn stain, impossible to erase, like the bloodstains on her sleeve.

A week had passed since the dreadful event. In truth, now would be the best time to leave, when everyone's attention was diverted elsewhere, and no one would notice her and her mother's departure.

Yet, she couldn't bring herself to leave. Even with the bags packed, the words to announce their departure wouldn't come out. It felt as if something was gripping her throat, choking off her voice.

It had been like this since childhood. Whenever she had to make a decision, it would take her ages. She despised her own indecisiveness, yet never managed to overcome it. When she once confided in her mother about this struggle, Cynthia had gently taken her daughter's hand.

'That's because you have a caring heart, my dear.'

'Is that so?'

'That's right. Whichever you choose, the other will be abandoned. You can't make a clear judgment because you worry and consider the consequences for the one you don't pick.'

Was it really just that simple?

As Charlotte was lost in her thoughts, the maids' conversation reached her ears.

"Well, it all depends on when he wakes up. The physician said his life is not in danger, but since he still hasn't

regained consciousness... It's worrying. What if it takes a year or two..."

"Mary, don't say such inauspicious things! He's a man who's been through war, so surely he won't end up like that. He'll open his eyes soon."

Yes, until he regains consciousness.

That was the conclusion she had arrived at after much agonizing deliberation. Her every waking moment was focused on the room upstairs. The physician was on standby in the adjacent room, and to ensure the patient's absolute rest, even visitors were only allowed once a day.

Each day felt like her blood was drying up, though she tried not to show it. At least, if she could see that he was unharmed, as he had been before, she would feel a little better. Even though he had recently intimidated and mercilessly cornered her, looking back, the times he had helped her were more.

It had taken only a little bit at a time for her gaze to linger on him, to give a part of her heart, to be inexorably drawn in. It was an inappropriate sentiment. Sorting it out was the right thing to do. As soon as he regained consciousness, that very day...

In the midst of reaffirming her resolve, Charlotte's busy hands paused. This time, she didn't miss the chance, lifting her head to face the other person.

"What is it, Mary?"

The maid carefully opened her mouth after briefly biting her lower lip.

“Charlotte, I have a favor to ask.”

“Yes?”

Having finished meticulously cleaning the last knife, Charlotte tilted her head.

“What is it?”

“You’re the one assigned to clean Richard’s room today, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Could you let me do it instead?”

Charlotte’s eyes wavered. Just as she was about to refuse, the sound of a door opening upstairs reached them. Simultaneously, her back stiffened. The three of them bowed their heads almost in unison.

“Madam Janice, you’ve arrived.”

“Yes.”

Janice scanned them all with a penetrating gaze before slowly calling out one name.

“Charlotte?”

“Yes.”

“Felix has arrived. Please take some refreshments and tea to the drawing room.”

“I’ll prepare and bring them up shortly.”

In the end, it was Mary who went upstairs. Charlotte, carrying the tray of refreshments, headed towards the room Janice had indicated.

“Felix is a bit... uneasy, but...”

She recalled the man who had been with Lady Spencer at the ball. Surely they hadn’t conspired together, but...

“Since he’s with Franz, it should be alright.”

Pausing briefly to take a deep breath, Charlotte resumed her steps. She had reached the drawing room door, about to knock.

“This is really confidential...”

An unexpected, hushed voice reached her from the other side.

“It’s because of the maid’s daughter.”

A chill ran down her entire body. Her ears, frozen like plaster, barely registered the words.

“Apparently, Charlotte used to work at that man’s house.”

No, it can’t be.

“When he tried to intervene, the other suddenly pulled out a gun, and then...”

No!

“He got shot.”

As if mocking her desperate head-shaking, a slightly gruff voice delivered the coup de grâce.

Clang!

The silver tray in Charlotte's hands crashed to the floor. The sound of something shattering echoed through the hallway.

"Who's there?"

Flinging the door open, it was Felix who confronted the unexpected intruder.

"Miss Charlotte?"

"Is it true?"

Before she could even meet his startled gaze, Charlotte rushed at him. Stepping back from her fierce onslaught, Felix found his jacket seized as she clung to him, interrogating rapidly.

"It's not, is it?"

"..."

"Richard, it's because of me..."

It felt as if poison was spreading through her veins. Her pale, quivering lips and reddened eyes convulsed.

"He got shot because of me..."

"Miss Charlotte, calm down first..."

Felix was the first to regain his composure. Assessing the situation, he tried to soothe Charlotte, gently prying her hands off his jacket.

"Richard..."

“Sir Richard has regained consciousness!”

At that moment, someone upstairs called out urgently.



Ch. 23 ASEF 23

The summary of the past week was concise.

“You did fairly well. There was a bit of commotion, but...”

“It would have been perfect if there was no aftermath, uncle.”

Ignoring the slightly irritated tone, Richard kept his gaze fixed on the view in front of him.

A flock of crows was heading towards the horizon in the distance. The sight of their large black wings spread out as they flew was a magnificent sight, even from afar. As his indifferent eyes were tracing their destination, Franz, who had been watching Richard’s broad back, reminded him.

“Uncle, the physician said you shouldn’t be out in the open for too long.”

It wasn’t a genuinely worried statement. The expected response never came. Shrugging his shoulders, Franz added one more comment.

“So I’m free now, right? Since I did as you asked.”

It’s not as if his conscience was bothering him. Thinking of his innocent face made one side of Richard’s chest ache. But what could he do? He hadn’t killed or harmed anyone. And he had clearly tried to give a ‘warning’.

“Give me what I asked for. It’s not a difficult task for you, right uncle?”

“I put it on the top right shelf above the fireplace.”

Slowly turning his body, Richard leaned against the window frame. Even before his illness, he had been an exceptionally aristocratic man, but during his recuperation, he had grown a bit leaner, making his already gloomy and precarious aura more pronounced. Franz, who had jumped up, rummaged through the shelf and found the envelope.

“Thank you, uncle!”

With an excited expression, Franz began to tear open the envelope, only to pause as he realized there was only one sheet inside.

“The promised thing isn’t in here.”

“What?”

Richard tilted his head slightly. His face, calmly spewing lies while fully aware of the situation, was as arrogant and somehow threatening as always. As the baffled Franz struggled to find the words, Richard settled into the familiar armchair in his study, crossing his long legs.

“What I promised was to cover up the incident you caused.”

That was the truth. The paper Franz was holding was a letter Richard Daniel Kensington had written to the headmaster of the school to which he was once indebted, requesting that the punishment be commuted to a commendation, not a suspension.

“But, uncle, you said you’d also give me money to go on vacation for a while.”

“That was just an additional offer, as long as you did well.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“You said something unnecessary.”

“Huh?”

Stunned by the icy remark, the anger on Franz’s face instantly froze. Leaning his elbows on the mahogany desk and interlocking his fingers, Richard fixed him with an indifferent gaze.

“Why did you tell her about my hereditary illness?”

“How did you...!”

“Was it out of some misguided conscience? Or did you think it would be better to run away before the incident blew up?”

A chill ran down his neck. Trembling, Franz struggled to calm his fingertips as he asked hesitantly.

“How...did you know?”

“You didn’t think that you’re the only sly little rat*¹ here now, didn’t you?”

A faint anger could be detected beneath the composed tone.

“...”

“Of course, I didn’t expect you to believe such a pathetic lie.”

Franz swallowed hard.

What he had been instructed to do was merely to 'stall for time'. Soon, an 'incident' would occur, and he just needed to drop a certain remark at the appropriate time.

Though he didn't know the details, he had an instinctive sense that something was amiss. That's why he had tried to subtly warn the naive young lady. Little did he expect a gunshot to ring out right then.

"Why are you doing this? What did Charlotte ever do to you, uncle?"

He was a man who had never given his time to anyone but he was oddly obsessed with a certain existence. At first, it was curiosity, then suspicion. Even to the young man, Charlotte Hegel was undoubtedly beautiful. She had the face of a first love from a man's memory of growing up in the countryside. Her innocent purity was enough to catch the attention of many gentlemen.

"Does that ordinary woman have some kind of value of use?"

But that was not enough. That level of beauty was abundant in high society. The advantage Charlotte Hegel had over the more cultured and refined aristocratic ladies was that she could be easily played with and discarded. So he had not been entirely free of impure thoughts. He had seen his school seniors often toying with and taking maidservants.

If it were just for that reason, it would have been easier to understand his uncle.

However, this strange and twisted obsession was of a kind that could not be explained by that.

“Racking your pathetic brain won’t get you anywhere.”

Unperturbed by his nephew’s defiance, he chuckled deeply.

“That woman is already in my grasp, and if I wish, I can easily break her shallow fear and rationality.”

Franz knew this was no empty boast. In fact, after his return, there had been a young woman who attempted suicide after his persistent courtship. Some lady had even come up and slapped him during a ball after she was coldly refused in a private conversation.

Although the Earl had investigated these unusual incidents, the only thing that came up was that they had simply crossed paths a few times at social events. And after that, the women’s health had gradually declined.

The man before him possessed the power to captivate someone instantly. It wasn’t just his appearance that drew gazes from afar, but a mysterious aura about him. As if some invisible force was moving at his will.

Unbeknownst to himself, Franz had already reached the truth. He stepped closer towards the desk.

“Then why go through all this trouble?”

He shouted forcefully, but soon found himself unable to breathe, like a fish pierced by a spear.

The predatory violet gaze of the beast within the cage swept over the young boy. Cowering under the overwhelming pressure on his shoulders, Franz trembled.

“Why?”

Drawing the word leisurely, as if toying with his prey, the man spoke softly.

“Shall I tell you?”

For a moment, he saw a hallucination—a savage beast crouching in the deep shadows, baring its fangs. The feeling of standing in front of a gun barrel. An urgent warning siren that had never rung before kept blaring in his head. Before he could catch his breath, Franz frantically shook his head.

The heated atmosphere suddenly turned icy cold.

“Leave.”

Only after being dismissed and leaving the room did the youth vomit. His pent-up breath burst out in lumps.

The security guard, whose hearing seemed not so good, furrowed his brow as he heard the name again.

“Jamie Linton?”

“Yes. I was told he’d be detained here.”

“He is, but... What’s this about?”

“I just want to visit him for a moment.”

Moistening her parched lips with her tongue, Charlotte gripped the hem of her dress with one hand. The guard found the sight of this young woman suddenly appearing in this bleak temporary prison both suspicious and intriguing.

“Why? Are you acquainted with that person?”

“Well...”

Although Jamie Linton had not yet been tried and sentenced, he was already being treated as a criminal for shooting a prominent figure from the Earl’s family. In cases of heinous crimes, even direct family members were restricted from visiting. His mother, who had come a few days ago, had been chased out after just 30 minutes, and his wife had met the same fate.

“Leave while I’m being nice, miss.”

Curiosity fleeting, the guard quickly regained focus on his duties and firmly rejected Charlotte’s request. After a moment of hesitation, Charlotte presented the bribe she had brought, just in case.

“You always work so hard, sir. This is nothing much, but...”

The guard’s expression softened momentarily. Seizing the opportunity, Charlotte immediately opened the small box’s lid. It was the gloves Felix had once given her. She never thought she’d end up using them this way to give to someone else.

“I’ve never used them. Your wife would be delighted to have them.”

“Hmm...”

Scratching the back of his head, as if savoring the idea, the guard’s expression turned slightly sly.

“So, you’re that kind of woman, aren’t you?”

Before she could even express her confusion, an insulting remark followed.

“You must be Jamie Linton’s ‘mistress’ or something, right?”

Overwhelmed by shame, the tips of her ears flushed scarlet. She wanted to shout that it wasn’t true, but she couldn’t. Interpreting Charlotte’s reddened face as confirmation, the guard grinned.

“You don’t look the type, but you never know with people.”

“ ... ”

“Alright, you seem so desperate that I’ll let you see him just this once. But you have to be out in 15 minutes.”

It was a stingy reward for the bribe she had offered, but she hadn’t planned to stay long anyway.

“Understood. Thank you so much.”

Mustering a faint smile, Charlotte expressed her gratitude.

The reason she had taken the hired carriage all the way here was simple—she needed to find out precisely what had transpired between Richard and Jamie.

At the same time, Jamie Linton clutched the bars with a frantic expression.

“This can’t be happening!”

One of the guards, tired of his constant shouting, clicked his tongue.

“What’s there to complain about? Sounds like it’s your fault, isn’t it?”

“Shut up! You don’t know anything!”

Snapping sharply, Jamie overturned the tray in front of him. It only contained a watery, tasteless porridge for lunch.

“I don’t remember! Why would I have shot that man if I was in my right mind!”

“Oh, come on, you just had a bit to drink, that’s why you don’t remember, right?”

It was true that he had had a drink before going to see that woman with the intention of catching her like a daytime prostitute. But it was only one drink. Even for someone with a strong tolerance, the lapse in his memory made no sense.

Fuming, Jamie eventually slumped down on the makeshift bed. Whenever he tried to retrace his memories, his head throbbed as if something was preventing him from recalling that moment. Only vague snippets would surface, as if something were blocking his recollection.



Ch. 24 ASEF 24

“Go ahead and shoot.”

“What?”

“I brought the gun myself, so why can’t you do it?”

Glancing down at his hands, the man saw he was gripping something. A gun...

“N-No, I can’t...”

Shaking his head, he watched as the man slowly approached him, like a predator leisurely approaching its prey. The piercing gaze was chilling, like a sharp blade. Facing such an overwhelmingly dominant adversary was unnerving.

“Don’t... don’t come any closer!”

“It would be easier to just accept it.”

Accept what?

Danger.

His instincts were warning him. He wanted to drop the gun, but his grip tightened around it. And it felt as if someone was pushing him forward from behind.

“I told you not to come! Aaaah!”

Screaming in sheer terror, the man was met with the other's composure. Before he could react, his index finger pulled the trigger. He felt a searing pain as the bullet grazed his skin, the sound of the gun, startled birds taking flight, the stinging recoil on his wrist. And then...

People came rushing in. His hands were swiftly twisted behind his back, and his face crashed to the ground.

"...He was smiling."

"What?"

"That guy, he was smiling when he got shot!"

"My goodness...My lord, does that make any sense? He's not a monster."

The anecdote ended there. The guard had let out a derisive laugh, turned and walked away. A woman passed by him.

Jamie, who had been about to lie back down on the bed with a gloomy face, turned his head a moment later.

"What, who is it now..."

"It's been a while."

"You..."

Separated by the bars, Charlotte spoke to him.

"I came to ask you something."

"What?"

"Did you come to Mistymoor Hall to see me, and that's why you shot him? Or was he your target from the beginning?"

“No!”

Jamie hastily shook his head, surging forward to grip the bars.

“It’s true I came to see you. But I had no intention of shooting that bastard!”

Charlotte watched him silently as he continued his desperate pleas.

“I’m being serious. Why would I dig my own grave by shooting a Kensington?”

“There’s an eyewitness.”

“I did shoot, but it wasn’t of my own will!”

Unconvinced by his nonsensical defense, Charlotte lightly clenched and unclenched her fist.

“Then why did you have the gun?”

“That—it just ended up in my pocket somehow—”

Listening further was a waste of time. The man who had been so smooth-talking was now making claims that didn’t add up at all.

Satisfied that she had confirmed the facts, Charlotte turned to leave without a word. But his desperate voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Charlotte!”

She paused. Facing her retreating back, Jamie warned her.

“I advise you, out of our past acquaintance, to never get close to that man. He’s... not human.”

No response came. The hands gripping the bars fell limply. The sound of footsteps faded away.

In the week following the shooting, Ethelwood was once again in an uproar.

Despite the efforts of the accused’s mother and wife to find a lawyer, no attorney in Ethelwood was willing to take on Jamie Linton’s case, so the trial proceeded swiftly to the verdict.

As soon as the judge struck the gavel, reporters rushed out of the courtroom.

<Jamie Linton, the Kensington Family Shooter, Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison!>

For the gossiping aristocracy, it was a juicy morsel they simply couldn’t resist. The news of the verdict spread quickly from the heart of high society to the furthest corners. Some blamed the foolishness of Linton’s younger son, sympathized with his elderly mother, and criticized the ruthless speed of the proceedings from detention to sentencing, but they were in the minority. The overall public sentiment favored the victim, Richard, especially in Gredel Hill.

“In 25 years, he’ll be nearly an old man by the time he’s released.”

“Well, he deserved it. Sir Richard hasn’t fully recovered yet, either.”

“He had to take a temporary leave of absence to his office in the capital, so there must be financial losses as well.”

“But we don’t need to worry about that, with his estate being over 10,000 acres.”

“That’s true. Anyway, how are we planning our vacation this time?”

The maids’ conversation, which had briefly touched on the master’s affairs, smoothly transitioned into more personal topics. Unable to assist the invalid directly, Charlotte, who had been wiping her mother’s pillowcase with a detergent-soaked sponge, wiped the sweat from her brow.

Mary, sitting beside her, casually spoke up.

“By the way, Charlotte, how is your mother doing these days? She seems to be much better.”

“Ah...Yes, thanks to you.”

Charlotte replied hesitantly, as if someone had poked at her weakness. The half-lidded gaze briefly swept over her as she kept her eyes lowered.

For some reason, these days, there was a strange, unsettling undercurrent in the eyes that followed her. Feeling the uncomfortable atmosphere, Charlotte quickly finished her chores, about to get up first. But Dyna, one of the maids who had been displeased with Charlotte’s involvement in Richard’s affairs, suddenly blurted out.

“But is that rumor true?”

“Pardon?”

“That you were Jamie Linton’s mistress. Is it true?”

Mistress.

Charlotte’s eyes widened. It was the first time she had heard of this. At that moment, the meaningful glances of the past few days made sense.

Her heart began to race, and her mouth went dry. She felt as if she had been doused in filthy water. Without even realizing she had dropped the laundry in her hands, she took a moment to compose herself.

Stay calm.

“What are you talking about?”

“You went to visit him, didn’t you?”

She had visited in secret. No one, not even her mother Cynthia, knew about it. Sensing the questions in Charlotte’s eyes, Dyna added.

“My cousin is a guard there.”

“That’s...”

She couldn’t honestly confirm it, nor could she simply deny it outright. Hiding her trembling hands in the folds of her dress, Charlotte tightly closed her eyes.

“Lady Janice asked me to.”

“What?”

“As you know...Everyone’s been quite busy lately. So she asked me to run an errand.”

Once the lie started flowing, it kept going smoothly. It was just a temporary expedient, as she would have to explain the real reason later.

A brief silence swept over them. Silently observing the two, Mary interjected.

“Ah, I see. So that’s how it was.”

The tense atmosphere instantly dissipated, like a taut string snapping.

“I made an absurd misunderstanding. I’m so silly.”

“Dyna, you should apologize to Charlotte.”

Dyna’s face flushed at the sudden shift in mood. As the blame turned on her, she momentarily faltered, but then stubbornly glared at Charlotte.

“No way! My cousin said the woman with the teal eyes and long dark hair is definitely his mistress, and the name matches too. If it’s just an errand, why hide it?”

It was a fair point. With Charlotte at a loss for words, Dyna seized the opportunity, gripping her wrist.

“To be sure, let’s go and confirm it with Lady Janice.”

Just as Charlotte was about to be dragged inside, the relatively neutral Mary stepped in.

“Hold on, what if Charlotte is telling the truth?”

“Then I’ll do the entire central hall floor cleaning all by myself for a while.”

“Alright. I’ll go with you. We can’t all barge in together.”

Sighing, Mary reached a conclusion.

Dyna took the lead, with Charlotte and Mary following behind. Charlotte tried to stop several times, but felt trapped, unable to break free. A tangle of scenarios swirled in her mind.

It made the situation worse. It would have been better to be honest.

Regardless of her regrets, the three of them soon arrived at the housekeeper's office. Without a chance to intervene, Dyna stretched out her arm and knocked on the door.

Knock, knock.

"Madam Janice, are you in? I have something urgent to ask you."

Charlotte had hoped she wouldn't be there, but a response came immediately from the other side.

"Come in."

As soon as the doorknob turned, the door swung open. Beside Janice, there was one more person in the room.

"Ah..."

"What are you doing? Come in and greet us properly instead of standing there."

"You've returned, Sir Richard."

The violet eyes swept over Dyna, then Mary, and finally lingered on Charlotte for a brief moment. Though fleeting, it felt eternal to Charlotte.

He's...awake.

Heat rushed to the corners of her eyes. To conceal the burning sensation, she quickly bowed her head. A whirlwind of indecipherable emotions surged violently within her.

Even after hearing Jamie's explanation, she still felt like a culprit. Whether or not the shooting incident was directly her fault, there was no doubt that her presence here was the root cause.

Closing her eyes, the image of the blood-stained white shirt flashed in her mind. The anxious, uneasy days. Now that she knew he was safe, a tingling sensation rose from her fingertips. Relief, jubilation, and something unsettling deep within her chest.

Seeming displeased at the interruption to their conversation, Janice stood with her arms crossed, coldly addressing the newcomers.

"Well, what is it? Why have the three of you come?"

No, this can't be. Charlotte hastily lifted her head, about to say something, but unfortunately, Dyna was a step faster.

"We came to confirm if you had sent Charlotte on an errand to the temporary prison a week ago."

"What?"

Janice raised her eyebrows at the unexpected question.

"Did you, in fact, ask Charlotte to visit Jamie Linton?"

"Hah..."

Letting out a derisive chuckle, Janice's gaze fixed on Charlotte. This was the worst-case scenario. Feeling all four pairs of eyes on her, Charlotte clenched and unclenched her fists.

"Charlotte, what is the meaning of this?"

It's all over now. Because of petty suspicions and curiosity, she had ruined herself...

Holding back the heat welling up in her eyes, Charlotte trembled as she parted her lips.

"The truth is..."

"I asked her to go."

The words left Richard's mouth before Charlotte could finish. All eyes turned to him.

"It was a secret errand, but I suppose it was too much to ask."

Unfazed by the frozen gazes, Richard stepped forward in front of Charlotte and smiled gently.

"Did you have a safe trip, Charlotte?"

Like a clever rabbit that had willingly stepped into an expertly crafted trap.



Ch. 25 ASEF 25

Chapter warning: this chapter contains scenes of sexual content. Please be warned before proceeding.

Charlotte stared at him blankly. The world had never been kind to the poor girl. While there were individual differences, girls from working-class families generally came to realize the harsh realities of life quickly. That there were no absolute allies in this world.

Charlotte was no exception.

“Can you believe a lowly girl like her is hiding such a large sum of money?” Even when her cousin, who had come to visit, stole the savings she had carefully hidden.

“Do you have any idea how much this is?” When her hand slipped while doing the dishes at another master’s house, breaking a plate and cutting her hand on the shards.

“You must have flirted first. Such an ignorant girl.” Even when betrayed by the man she thought was her first love.

“So you were the one to blame.”

“How incredibly stupid.”

Whether she was at fault or not, the arrows of blame always seemed to be aimed at the weakest. Shaking her head in

denial, making excuses, or bursting into tears—none of it made a difference.

Somewhere along the line, Charlotte realized. The world wasn't unusually harsh to her: that was her fate from the moment she was born. Her fate was sealed in the wrong place.

That's why the voice cutting through the silence was like a lightning bolt striking her heart.

A person who approached without hesitation and offered their hand.

Confusion, surprise, fear, joy, sorrow, doubt. All those emotions tangled and seized control of her mind.

It was only after the gentle voice called her name once more that Charlotte became aware of the many pairs of eyes fixed on her.

"Ah... Well..."

Quietly taking a deep breath, she slowly lifted her head. The upright forehead, the finely angled brows, the amethyst-like violet eyes. After his long absence, he was still slender and haughty.

And beautiful.

She had always thought so. If civilization and savagery were to coexist, this would be the embodiment.

Swallowing to moisten her dry mouth, the words finally escaped her.

"Yes, I...returned."

Her breathing was ragged. Gazing into her reddened eyes, the man smiled.

Even leaving that frozen scene required his help.

As if reading her mind, he immediately instructed her to fetch what he had requested. Thereafter, Richard promptly exited the room, and Charlotte, after a hasty farewell to Janice, hurried to follow him out.

“Phew...”

It was only after composing herself that she ascended to his study. She hesitated to knock, as the door was slightly ajar. Belatedly recalling the night of the ball, she paused, but having come this far, there was no turning back. Mustering her courage, Charlotte gently pulled the doorknob.

“Excuse me...”

The room was still spacious and tidy. The camel-hair rug, the olive-green curtains subtly embroidered with iris patterns, the rosewood fireplace.

He was seated in the chair facing the door, writing something. But as she tentatively entered, he momentarily paused his movements. The moment the scratching of the pen ceased, his gaze, as indifferent as before, met Charlotte’s.

“Sir Richard...”

It was but a fleeting moment. Lowering his head again and resuming his writing, Richard spoke in an offhand manner.

“So you came. I thought you were a coward.”

“I...wanted to express my gratitude.”

“For what?”

“For what happened earlier.”

He asked with an indifferent tone, as if not even remembering the earlier incident.

“So is that all?”

“Huh?”

Before she could find the words to say, Richard bluntly cut in.

“It seems your tongue has grown stiff, so let me speak in your place.”

“ ... ”

“You must have wanted to know the truth. That man is not the kind of person to do such a thing, so you must have thought there was some hidden background.”

“No, Mr. Linton...”

The desperate rebuttal was cut off by his cold interjection.

“I’d advise you not to utter that name in my presence.”

The pen Richard had been holding broke with a snap. He lifted his head to face her again. She felt her nerves standing on edge. Unlike the icy warning, his voice was slow and monotonous, as if a venomous snake was flicking its tongue, waiting for the chance to swallow its prey.

Richard, who seemed ready to swallow her whole at any moment, suddenly tilted his head, as if realizing something. Before she could ask worriedly, his muttered words reached her.

“Ah, I see.”

“...”

“Am I also one of them? Another despicable wretch who treats you as a ‘plaything’ to toy with?”

“No, it’s not like that!”

“Leave.”

Despite her frantic denials, not even a derisive snort came in response. Giving her one last glance, Richard commanded.

“Leave.”

“No, it’s true!”

Her voice rose. Shaking her head unconsciously, Charlotte approached him of her own volition. It couldn’t be. Jamie Linton and Richard Kensington were different. Various memories flashed through her mind.

When they first met, he had saved her from the wolf of the wilderness.

When she fell into a pit on a rainy day, he had unhesitatingly pulled her into his embrace and rolled them out.

In the manor, he had given her work and silently covered the cost of her mother’s medicine.

He had listened tirelessly to her hometown stories that no one else cared about, and had even... treated her injured foot himself.

The touch of skin, the damp air, the rapidly beating heart.

At first, she had thought the feelings towards him were fear. But in every moment, she trembled and was captivated by him. A pull she couldn't resist or refuse.

Her heart had already acknowledged this as love. But she was afraid.

"That day...I was just startled and scared."

"..."

"Truly, it wasn't because I disliked you."

After pushing him away, she was frightened that he would turn his back completely. That he would never look at her again.

So she desperately revealed her feelings.

"When you were shot..."

Slowly, she stopped in front of his desk. Extending her arm, her trembling hand touched the back of his. Fortunately, Richard did not reject her.

"I thought your heart would stop."

"Charlotte."

"I was afraid you'd never open your eyes again..."

The terrible, heart-wrenching pain repeated itself. The blood-stained shirt, the unconscious, pallid face...

"It's all yours."

"..."

"Helplessly...my body, my soul, everything."

Panting like a newborn seeking its mother's milk, Charlotte desperately pulled his large, veined hand to her cheek. The cold temperature soothed the warmth rising in her flushed face.

"So please..."

Not fully understanding what she was saying, she whispered as if pleading with a fickle lover.

"Don't tell me to leave."

His arm reached out from the darkness and swiftly pulled her in, his lips crushing hers.

"Mmph!"

Like a starving beast, he attacked. Backpedaling was futile. Their tongues intertwined. The hands embracing her waist were large and firm.

He was like a muzzled ferocious hound that had been let loose. The ruthless greed that plundered to the root of her tongue left her breathless.

"Can't breathe, I can't..."

At her plea, his lips relented. The moment the long kiss was broken, a fit of coughs erupted from her throat. But it was

only a brief respite.

“Ah...!”

Just as it seemed he would grant her some mercy, Richard laid her down on the table. The various items atop it tumbled to the floor with a clatter.

“Sir Richard!”

“Shh.”

Startled like prey with its neck in the jaws of a predator, Charlotte trembled.

“I said I’d give you everything.”

His head bowed, Richard caressed her pale cheek. He maintained the thin veneer of a gentleman, his eyes like those of a male.

“Be good, Charlotte.”

Then he ruthlessly reclaimed her lips.

“Mmph... Ah!”

It was a savage, bestial kiss, like mating in a dark cave. The invading tongue entwined and pulled at hers, as if trying to swallow it. Before she could regain her senses, the buttons at her collar were torn open.

Richard, who had slipped his hands behind her delicate back, skillfully snipped her corset strings one by one with a paper knife he had found. Momentarily dazed as her teeth, palate, and every corner of her mouth were conquered, Charlotte belatedly recoiled from the cold air, but it was too late.

When she failed to focus on the kiss, Richard withdrew his lips. He mercilessly grasped her budding white breasts.

“Aah!”

“You cry so adorably.”

Kneading the soft mounds with both hands, he firmly pinched the left nipple. The strange sensation that rushed in with the pain seized control of all of Charlotte’s senses.

“Nngh...!”

“They look delicious. May I have a taste?”

It was a question that didn’t require an answer. Charlotte instinctively squirmed. Chuckling briefly, he took the other breast into his mouth. Rolling and languidly licking the nipple, he persisted like a child nursing from its mother’s milk, while his other hand continued to torment the left breast.

“Aah...!”

The searing pain made Charlotte twist her body even more. In the throes of shame and pleasure, Richard suddenly bit down at the peak. As she finally broke into sobs, he soothed her with gentle licks on her earlobe and neck.

“Hnng... Ah...”

As her whimpers subsided, he slowly trailed his face downward. Leaving a trail of his crimson tongue, blooming marks appeared across her pale skin—her earlobe, behind her ear, her neck and collarbone, and her breasts.

The feeble attempts to push him away grew weaker under his persistent caresses. Seizing the opportunity, he pulled down her undergarments. And before she could resist, he slid his long fingers inside her.

“Ow...!”

Thrashing like a fish impaled on a spear, Charlotte experienced a sensation she had never felt before. Stroking her disheveled hair, Richard busily worked his hand while gently caressing her cheek with the other.

“I won’t go all the way today.”

“Ah, ah... Nngh...”

Though he spoke softly, she was already beyond rational conversation. Smiling fondly, he placed a brief kiss on her small forehead.

“It’s just part of the preparation.”

He desperately wanted to burrow into her right away, but she was a rabbit he had only just caught. She was too delicate and frail to be devoured in one bite. In the end, he could afford to delay the feeding a little. Of course, on the condition that she continued to obediently submit.

Greedily licking the tears trailing from the corners of her eyes, Richard slowly inserted his index and middle fingers into her. His blatant, slow movements soon scratched her moist walls.

“Can you feel it?”

“Nnnh...!”

Charlotte had already lost all reason and shame. Wherever he touched, the current of pleasure flowed, involuntarily curling her toes. Panting heavily, she writhed under his touch.

“Aah...!”

Smiling contentedly, he buried his face back in her breasts, sucking on them like a thirsty man. The gentle in-and-out of his fingers gradually quickened. Every time he withdrew, her clitoris swelled, pushing her closer to the edge.

“Ah, mmh...!”

Exhaling short breaths and moans, at some point Charlotte stiffened. Her eyelids trembled, and her entire body convulsed, freezing for a moment. Something was coming.

“Nngh...!”

The next moment, everything went white before her eyes. The crashing wave of her climax swept over her body.

“Haa, ha...”

Charlotte closed her eyes, feeling weak. She felt the chill of his lips on her forehead. Her limp body was enveloped in his embrace.



T/N: my face after reading the last scenes of this chapter (◆
—◆)

Ch. 26 ASEF 26

Everything that happened a few days ago felt like a dream. Charlotte had to pinch the back of her hand several times before she could actually believe it was reality. Cynthia, seeing her daughter so lost in thought, looked at her with a worried expression.

“Are you alright, Charlotte?”

The mother and daughter were having a modest breakfast in the room.

“It’s nothing. The meal was great, thank you.”

Charlotte, who answered half a beat late, quickly set down her utensils and stood up.

“Are you going to see Mr. Frantz today as well?”

“Yes. I’m glad I can be of some help.”

“I see. Is organizing the study not too difficult?”

“Not at all. It’s actually quite fun.”

Cynthia watched her daughter’s back as she sat at an old dressing table, combing her flowing black hair that cascaded down like a waterfall.

Through the cracked mirror, she could see Charlotte’s slightly flushed cheeks and lively eyes, reminiscent of a

young lady newly in love. It seemed like ages ago that she had acted as if she would leave this place at any moment. Cynthia guessed that her daughter might have a suitor by now, but she didn't ask.

"I decided to follow you into town today to buy some books. Do you need anything?"

"Nothing, dear. Have a good trip."

Charlotte, now ready to leave, turned around and gave her mother a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'll see you at dinner."

"Alright, don't worry about me."

Charlotte nodded and was about to leave the room when Cynthia called her back.

"Oh, Charlotte."

"Yes?"

"It's been a long time since we went to church. I'd like to go this weekend. Could you help me then?"

"Of course."

Charlotte's steps were light as she left the room.

The lakeside was still serene and peaceful. Wildflowers at the water's edge boasted a variety of colors.

Charlotte quickly entered a small cabin, which was used to store boats.

“Sir Richard? Ah...!”

As she closed the door and surveyed the dim surroundings, suddenly a hand reached from behind and wrapped around her waist, like a rabbit bristling in front of a predator. The man whispered.

“It’s as if you’ve met a villain.”

“...You scared me.”

Her heart sank. His voice, already deep and hoarse, sounded even huskier in the confined space. The heat rose to her ears as his breath touched them. As Charlotte struggled to get free, blushing fiercely, Richard, finding her feeble resistance amusing, smiled and let her go.

“You’re usually so bold.”

“What are you talking about?”

The man, who had been nothing but a gentleman to the point of being cold until recently, had become bolder as their secret meetings continued. It was as if he was testing how far she could handle. But he had never crossed the line except on the day he confessed.

If the caresses that make her feel embarrassed just thinking about them are considered within the bounds of what’s acceptable for a lover, then...

“I was talking about sneaking in here like a cat burglar.”

“That’s because you came here like—”

Charlotte’s stammering protest was cut short as Richard’s hand gently stroked her nape. In the darkness, his presence

was as menacing as a beast baring its teeth.

“Who insisted on keeping this relationship a secret?”

“...”

“And who acts like they’d cut ties and run away at the slightest disagreement?”

“That’s...”

Charlotte’s eyes fell, frozen. His words were true. It was all because of her, sneaking around like a stray cat, struggling not to be discovered by those around them.

Meanwhile, Richard had never cared about others’ opinions from the start. The morning after she had fainted in his arms, he had proposed to her.

“I’ll take social responsibility. You just have to nod.”

His words implied a single intent. Despite feeling overwhelmed and teary-eyed, Charlotte rejected him with a trembling voice and a face about to burst into tears.

“I can’t do that...”

His beast-like frenzy halted at her unexpected refusal.

“It would all fall apart.”

She was known to be overly fearful, worrying about damn social statuses. Even now, knowing what little worries plagued her mind, he felt an urge to throttle those fears.

“To reject a proposal yet continue this affair doesn’t make any sense. I can’t tell if it’s stupidity or wisdom.”

Charlotte shuddered under his chilly rebuke. Richard withdrew his hand from her neck as she looked like she might turn and flee any moment, but instead, he embraced her tightly.

“You said you’d wait. And...”

A nobleman marrying a maid. He seemed able to disregard all the curiosity and scandals, but she couldn’t. Charlotte thought about how this would affect him, how his social circles would shrink, and his reputation would plummet.

It was only after that she considered how ugly she felt about herself. She feared his feelings might change because of her. She knew the contradiction in her fears, but that was how she felt.

“You knew I was foolish from the very beginning, didn’t you?” The tense atmosphere hung between them like a taut string. She was a woman who never backed down on this issue. Unusually, he relented.

“I thought you were a rabbit, but maybe you’re a fox.”

“What?”

A cunning rabbit or a foolish fox.

Suppressing a chuckle, Richard pulled her head close and kissed her forehead briefly. The distance between them hadn’t changed. Facing her puzzled eyes, he lifted her chin with his index finger and kissed her nose, cheek, and lips sequentially.

“If it’s the scandal you fear, we’ll just go somewhere the scandal can’t reach.”

Her head nodded unwittingly, and a breathtaking smile returned. In the darkness, the only beauty he acknowledged was Charlotte. Having gained her acceptance, he reached for the shelf.

“Put this on.”

He handed her a beautifully wrapped satin dress, shoes, gloves, and a hat. It was so beautiful she hesitated to wear it. Charlotte shook her head.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too expensive...”

It was the reaction he had expected. She knew her place too well, so much so that it bound her. Irritated, Richard ran his hand through his hair sharply.

“It’s only a luxury from your perspective.”

“...”

He had purposely called the tailor to choose the simplest design, enduring the prying eyes while personally selecting it, yet her response was just as he had anticipated. His limited patience wore thin. As his violet eyes flickered, Charlotte stepped back.

Richard’s offer to dress her himself came with a slow, deliberate stroll, as if he was observing prey caught in a trap. Charlotte quickly shook her head in alarm, her hiccup betraying her nervousness. Ignoring her desperate refusal, Richard had pushed her against the wall and whispered into her ear.

“You will pay the price for making me serve you like this.”

Chills ran up her spine. His gaze was the same as that day he had pulled her onto the table, intense and overpowering. Kneeling, he lifted one of her legs onto his knee and slid his hand up her skirt.

“Ah!”

She had no time to resist. His fingers, undeterred, climbed up her thigh, unfastening her corset hooks and sliding down to strip off her garter stockings. His posture was as deferential as a servant before a queen, but his touch was bold and unrestrained, like a male in a cave toying with his mate.

“No!”

She tried to resist reflexively, his hands reaching for her fine hair. The soft touch of her fingers through her hair triggered another hiccup.

She covered her mouth with both hands too late to stop the hiccups. Each touch from him felt so intense it seemed to burn. As his hand moved to her other thigh, Charlotte summoned all her strength to shout.

“I’ll wear it!”

“...”

“I’ll dress myself.”

She looked up at him, barely managing to continue.

“So, please...”

Her eyes, welling up with a mix of excitement, curiosity, shame, and fear, were a mess.

“Step outside for a moment.”

Her voice was more of a plea than a request, but it did not sway him.

“It’s too late.”

Like a predator that had cornered its prey to the edge of a cliff, Richard issued his command with a relish.

“Move your hands, Miss Hegel.”

Finally, Charlotte’s hiccups stopped, stifled by the demanding presence of her lover.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to come here.”

The hand she held through her glove was hot, but what was hotter were the glancing eyes around them. Despite hiding her face behind a fan, it was only a temporary solution. Seated in a box at the expansive opera house, the audience was naturally drawn to young couples.

“You speak as if I’ve brought you to a prison.”

Richard smoothly responded to Charlotte, who was blushing and had her head bowed. The hand not holding the fan was firmly clasped in his. As Charlotte tried to shake off his grasp, his hold only tightened. Despite their brazen behavior in a public space full of elegantly dressed gentlemen and ladies, Richard’s expression remained unruffled.

“...I don’t belong here.”

She should have realized when he dressed her like a noble lady and took her in a carriage. She should have lied about feeling ill due to the unexpectedly long distance they had traveled. But this man would have seen through any excuse.

Entering the grand, ornate opera hall had left Charlotte trembling as if she were a plucked bird, vulnerable and exposed. When the manager approached to greet them, the curiosity in his eyes was evident, yet Richard did not ease her discomfort by clarifying who she was.

“There are many eyes on us; please let go of my hand.”

After repeated pleas, Richard finally relented. He removed his grip and gently traced his fingertips over the back of his timid lover’s hand, then quietly raised his hand. Soon, an attendant waiting behind the curtains approached them. After whispering something to the attendant, Richard turned back to Charlotte.

“I’m not sure by what standards such things are judged, but since I’ve brought you here, you should carry yourself with confidence.”

“There’s no need to invite unnecessary trouble, is there?”

“Miss Hegel.”

The polite use of her surname was a gentle warning. Knowing better than anyone what could happen if she pushed his patience too far, Charlotte quickly shut her mouth.



Ch. 27 ASEF 27

As the lights dimmed one by one, indicating the start of the play, the audience hushed in anticipation. The heavy damask curtain in deep green lifted, revealing a beautifully dressed actress stepping onto the stage.

A server, who had momentarily stepped away, returned with a silver platter bearing two glasses of wine. Richard picked up one and handed it to Charlotte.

“Drink.”

Her gaze fixated on his elegant, long fingers, Charlotte lifted her head. Under the dim light, his piercing violet eyes shimmered mysteriously, reminiscent of an alligator’s—enticing yet unreadable.

“Before I have to feed you.”

As her hesitation lingered, Richard’s patience wore thin. Charlotte finally reached out towards the man who seemed about to drop his facade.

“I’ll drink.”

With that, she downed the wine in one go.

As the performance unfolded, Charlotte was quickly drawn into the unfamiliar world presented on stage. The beautiful singing, elaborate costumes, the orchestra’s play, and the lyrical narrative of the play absorbed her attention.

Unconsciously leaning towards the balcony, she felt a heavy weight on her hand. In the dim light, Richard covered her hand with his own, intertwining their fingers with firmness.

The warmth felt through their gloves sent a tingling sensation starting from where they touched. Charlotte instinctively straightened her back as Richard delicately began peeling off her glove, moving from the back of her hand upwards.

“Ah...”

Caught in a discreet yet provocative seduction, Charlotte’s breath grew shallow. The stage that had just captivated her gaze now faded from view. Just as she felt as though she might faint from lack of oxygen, Charlotte suddenly stood up. The audacious man grasped her waist, almost pulling her back down before she whispered urgently.

“I feel dizzy... maybe it’s the wine. I need a moment.”

The excuse seemed desperate, a hurried fabrication to escape a potential devouring, but the intoxication was real. The unfamiliar, expensive alcohol had not agreed with her. Feeling overheated, Charlotte quickly left the hall without giving Richard a chance to detain her.

Without him by her side, she felt a liberating breath of air. Guided by an attendant, Charlotte headed to the ladies’ powder room. It was still early for intermission, so the room was empty.

“I’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“There’s no need, but thank you.”

Her polite refusal masked her discomfort, and Charlotte entered. The powder room was spacious, typical of a large theater, complete with dressing tables for freshening up, comfortable couches, and decorative plants, all contributing to a cozy atmosphere.

“...It’s hot.”

Charlotte approached a wide window and opened it. The night air, edging into early winter, was notably chillier. The cool breeze soothed her flushed cheeks. As she closed her eyes to enjoy the cold air, the sound of the door opening behind her was nearly imperceptible.

“You...”

A cautious voice made her turn too late; someone was already close. The woman who had approached startled Charlotte, who stumbled backward but thankfully landed on a couch right beneath the window. They awkwardly sat facing each other on the couch, and the woman smiled.

“Charlotte, right?”

“...Miss Denoir.”

“It’s been a while. I didn’t expect to see you here like this.”

“That’s...”

Unlike the pleased woman, Charlotte’s face was pale. Louise realized her oversight in thinking about Charlotte’s distressed expression.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

Richard Kensington was known for his cold demeanor towards clingy women, which even led to rumors questioning his sexuality. That such a man was now openly escorting a woman with tenderness was noteworthy. The pretense of nobility must have cracked for those watching, whose sharp, scrutinizing glances Charlotte could easily recall. It was clear why Charlotte was fearful.

Louise, staring into Charlotte's frightened, innocent green eyes, recalled an event from a few days ago.

It was a day when even her father was absent. The sudden announcement by a maid that he had come was enough to make Louise doubt her ears. She had thought their connection was completely severed, that she had moved on without a trace of lingering attachment. Yet, a faint hope had smoldered within her. Seemingly to cut off even that last possibility, Richard, whom she hadn't seen in a long time, arrived with an indifferent expression and dropped a bombshell.

"I have a small proposal to make."

"A proposal?"

The chilling truth that followed felt like ice water poured over her head. The man she had thought would marry a duchess or a foreign princess had a lover—and it was the maid who had clung to her at that day's ball, pleading for her to save him. She seemed pretty but destitute, always tearful.

Frozen by the shocking revelation, Louise watched as Richard rose from his seat without having sipped his tea.

"...and I would like you to look after her as a friend. She'll try to run away every time she is brought out in front of

people.”

He seemed to consider his request already concluded as he picked up his coat and pulled something from his pocket.

“Of course, there will be a sufficient reward.”

It was a blank check signed by him. Any amount written on it would be honored at the bank.

With her family’s fortunes dwindling and the last hope severed, the head of the Denoir household showed willingness to trade his daughter for a suitable price whenever a man was ready to pay. For Louise, desperate in her circumstances, it was a powerful temptation that was difficult to ignore.

As her trembling hands accepted the check, Richard turned his back as if expecting her acceptance. She couldn’t help but ask, “Why are you going to such lengths?”

“...”

“Is it really that serious between you two?”

Asking a noblewoman like her to become friends meant he intended to integrate his lover into aristocratic society, implying an intention to marry her. The questions continued to pour out once she started.

“Noble men are not supposed to marry a maid.”

“That’s not for you to know.”

“Have you thought about how much she’ll get hurt in the process?”

Her question was not out of jealousy. Born into nobility and a part of high society herself, she had learned brutally as her family became impoverished that there was no class as hypocritically arrogant and exclusive as the aristocracy.

“If you love her that much, wouldn’t it be better to elope?”

She couldn’t continue her passionate plea. Richard turned back.

“Miss Denoir.”

He looked up defiantly at her, confronting the woman who challenged him. Before Louise could retreat, he reached out and lifted her chin.

“You seem to be under some misconception, but I am not a fool who throws everything away for love, rushing headlong into the flames.”

His polite address had naturally shifted to a more disdainful tone. His unhidden contempt was clear in his icy gaze.

“Nor am I one to blubber about love and wait, only to seek out the next fiancée immediately.”

“...”

“Do I look like a naive boy who tearfully promises a safe return over and over?”

As he spoke, Louise’s eyes widened. She had thought those memories erased, forgotten.

The man who had returned from the brink of death had never sought her out, and on the rare occasions they crossed paths, he quickly turned his head away. She would

have preferred it if his indifference stemmed from hatred, but it was simply a lack of interest.

Her lips trembled. After witnessing the storm that had passed over her face, Richard finally withdrew his hand.

‘If you understand, I’ll be waiting for your call.’

As Richard strode purposefully towards the door and exited the reception room, Louise hurried after him, grabbing his arm in desperation.

“Just this, please tell me just this one thing.”

“ ... ”

“Did you love me at all, even a little, two years ago?”

A tense silence passed between them. Richard tilted his head slightly, as if pondering, before he quietly responded.

“Perhaps.”

His tone was detached, as if relaying someone else’s message—a stark, chilling distance in his voice. Louise had no time to digest this dissonance; he left as abruptly as he had arrived.

The flashback ended. Louise opened her eyes, which she had briefly closed in reflection, and smiled at Charlotte. She then rose from the couch, picked up a teapot from the table, and poured it into a cup placed in front of them.

“It seems you’re a bit tipsy. Drink this.”

Richard Kensington was a man of unsettling thoroughness. He was well aware that his relationship with Charlotte Hegel was on tenuous grounds, always on the brink of breaking.

Therefore, he was likely planning ahead, blocking any possible escapes and tightening his hold on his lover however he could.

He intended to have it all, not giving up on anything.

The shy, quiet young man who hadn't yet come into his own was long gone. The man who had returned was someone else entirely. Louise had finally come to accept this reality.



Ch. 28 ASEF 28

When she woke from her nap, she heard a rustling noise inside and then a knock on the door. The door opened without permission, and Cynthia, seeing who it was, smiled faintly.

“Janice.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Just like today.”

Her face, once pallid from months of illness, now noticeably radiated vitality. Janice was as delighted with the change as if it were her own. Without realizing, she had come up to the bed and sat beside Cynthia.

“That’s good to hear. Where’s Charlotte?”

“She stepped out for a bit.”

“She came in late yesterday too.”

Cynthia almost brought up Franz’s name but decided against it. It was something that could be acknowledged if asked, but there was no need to mention it prematurely. Charlotte had also mentioned she did not want to be misunderstood.

A woman from the working class and a nobleman. Even if the age difference wasn’t an issue, to some, the relationship

seemed entirely improper. Sometimes, what was rumored to be mere gossip turned out to be true.

Cynthia, managing a stiff smile, shrugged.

“It must be stifling for her, coming from a big city to here.”

“She’s still young; it makes sense. Does she have a lover?”

“Perhaps.”

“Really?”

Janice’s eyes sharpened at Cynthia’s evasive demeanor. Cynthia averted her gaze and spoke slowly.

“...Just my guess. It seems she might be seeing someone.”

“Don’t know his name?”

“Not yet.”

“How old is he?”

“I’m not sure. Probably around her age.”

The probing was persistent. Like a cornered herbivore, Cynthia grew anxious and fixed her gaze towards the window, changing the subject.

“It seems winter is starting already.”

No answer came. Patiently, Cynthia continued, “It was around this time we first met, remember?”

“...How could I forget?”

Tracing back the connection between Janice Brown and Cynthia Hegel required revisiting over two decades. Precisely, the noisy announcement of the birth of the second son of the Kensington family marked the beginning of their connection.

Cynthia's first day at the Mistymoor Hall as a servant was memorable. After passing various health checks and receiving a formal recommendation from her previous employment, she passed the interview, but the night fell without even a glimpse of the young master she was to care for.

In a house full of peculiarly exclusive individuals, while she was busy learning about the estate's structure and the hierarchy of the servants, a woman approached her.

"You must be the one. The servant for the young master."

"...And you are?"

"I'm Janice Brown, Lady Seymour's maid."

The woman was about her age, which meant if she were married with children, her child would just be a baby. She had long, curly chestnut hair and black eyes, beautiful features but with a stubborn look.

She was tall and thin with a somewhat worn impression, but her eyes, seasoned and sad as though she had weathered many storms, captured one's attention.

"Are you married?"

"Yes, I have a daughter."

"...I'm envious."

That was all that was said in the conversation. It was a time when nothing was known about Gredel Hill, so it was unclear whether the envy was about having started a family or if there was another underlying meaning.

Soon after, the two became as close as childhood friends. Janice, who smiled like a hollowed-out shell of a clam, soon got promoted to a housemaid. Although Cynthia had left Mistymoor Hall for a while, when she returned, the two remained as close as sisters.

After reminiscing for a while, their conversation continued with trivial matters. They chatted about the weather, illnesses, and other employees until the noon clock in the hallway signaled the end of lunchtime.

As Janice was about to leave the room after a formal goodbye, Cynthia hesitated and called her name.

“Janice.”

“Yes?”

“Could you get me a lily?”

“ ... ”

“Sir Richard’s memorial day is coming up soon.”

Janice looked at her friend lying on the bed for a few seconds before nodding.

“I will, Cynthia.”

Charlotte reached for a bookshelf after climbing a ladder. She pulled out an old novel, thick with dust, and read the

title.

“Carmilla.”

“No, the book next to it.”

The response was cool. Charlotte quickly looked down, but frustratingly, the man was out of her sight, at the opposite bookshelf.

“I didn’t realize I’d have to teach you every little thing.”

Her voice tinged with annoyance, Charlotte, feeling a surge of emotion, pulled another book from the shelf as well. Their eyes met through the gap in the now-empty bookshelf.

The two were currently organizing books in the library. Ostensibly, Charlotte had volunteered to help Richard, who needed people for the library organization. The idea had been Charlotte’s.

“A child?”

The word oddly reminded her of a previous incident. It wasn’t her fault that day. It was all because he had forced her into unwanted clothes in an unwanted place.

The opera had been mysterious and a new experience, but she could hardly concentrate as her heart pounded. It didn’t matter that no one recognized her. Especially, Richard’s cruel prank had almost driven her to tears. If she hadn’t run into Miss Louise in the powder room by chance, she might have made a huge blunder.

“If I’m a child.”

As if waiting for her to say something more, his calm face eventually pushed her to explode.

“Then, sir, you are dating a child.”

She deliberately elongated the word ‘sir’, a term he detested for it starkly highlighted the difference in their social status. As she gathered her courage, the words flowed more freely.

“Come to think of it, I am seven years younger.”

It was a defiant statement, not quite a rebellion. Richard’s lips curled coldly. Goosebumps rose on her skin, but it was already too late.

“Well, it looks like we’re done here then...”

“And so.”

As Charlotte averted her gaze, trying to backtrack her words and descend the ladder, a hand reached out and caressed her cheek. Where his long fingers touched, a warmth spread like a mild fever.

“So, have you come to dislike me?”

“ ... ”

“Do boys your age, who are still wet behind the ears, catch your eye now?”

His tone was smooth and affectionate, but his kindness was more akin to poison. It was as if he was a predator that blinds the enemy with camouflage colors and swallows them whole, leaving not even a bone behind.

Charlotte shook her head urgently. She tried to lower her gaze, but even that wasn't allowed. His cold hand lifted her chin.

"No. I didn't say that."

"Then what?"

Richard asked leisurely, as if biding his time to pounce, while his gaze traced her delicate neckline.

"It sounds to me like you prefer inexperienced young men who are still wet behind the ears."

"Richard..."

Her voice trembled, followed by a thunderous tone.

"Of course, that's my preference."

"Stop it...!"

Her face, which had paled from his earlier words, now flushed with heat. Charlotte managed to tilt her head back, pulling away from his grip as she descended the ladder. Thankfully, the bookshelf was in the way. She turned her head and hurried away. Her long skirt entangled her legs.

"I think we've done enough organizing for today. I should be going..."

She had to run. Instinctively, her steps moved towards the door. She was almost there. As she breathed a sigh of relief and reached for the doorknob, a larger hand covered hers.

"Who?"

"..."

“Who said you could stop?”

His voice resonated above her head, deeper than usual. It felt like facing a starving beast. Growling, Richard then wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into his embrace.

“Let go, please!”

“Why.”

“If someone sees...”

“No one can come in.”

“But still...”

“You don’t really mind.”

Her floundering resistance was effortlessly subdued. Richard looked down at her ears, now indistinguishably red whether from embarrassment or anger, and chuckled quietly.

“...It’s cruel.”

Knowing full well she couldn’t refuse.

As Charlotte mumbled, her body seemed to lift off the ground, and she was cradled like a princess in his broad arms. Closing her eyes tightly, her body swayed several times before his steps halted. He then sat down with her still in his lap, and she felt a soothing hand patting her back.

“What are you doing?”

“Consoling a little tantrum.”

“What...?”

Incredulously blinking, she listened as he calmly retorted.

“You seemed upset, didn’t you?”

“I thought you weren’t even paying attention...”

“How could I not when you’ve been sulking for days?”

It was a conversation that could be mistaken for one between ordinary lovers. It felt like just yesterday when her heart raced from a mere touch, but now Charlotte was comfortably nestling into his lap, familiar and deeply affectionate. She wanted to fall asleep just like that, soothed by his warmth.

The man who once shot wild dogs without blinking an eye, who dragged home the game he hunted in burlap sacks. She used to be horrified at the sight of blood and his harsh, intimidating gaze. Once, she would have fled from him in fear, but now he was her lover.

Her lover, known only to her.

The sound of curtains being drawn echoed behind the couch where she sat, and with it, the dazzling sunlight vanished, cocooning the room in a comforting, cradle-like coziness.

“If you’re tired, then go to sleep.”

Richard closed her eyes for her.

“Won’t you sing me a lullaby?”

“I can’t sing.”

“Maybe a hymn then?”

“ ... ”

Thinking she might have asked too much, Charlotte quickly added, "I'll just sleep then."

"Instead, I'll read you a passage from a book."

Holding the book Charlotte had just pulled out, which he seemed to have brought over without her noticing, Richard began to read softly.

"Carmilla whispered, 'My love, your little heart is wounded. Do not think of me as cruel. I merely follow my instincts. If your lovely heart is hurt, my rugged heart will bleed with you.'"

The rest of the passage drifted to her in bits and pieces as she fell into a light sleep.

"You belong to me, and I will make you mine. You and I will be one forever."



Ch. 29 ASEF 29

As early winter set in, Gredel Hill rapidly grew colder. Due to the northern climate's tendency for brief autumns, it felt as though the season had abruptly shifted from summer to winter.

The day after the first snow, the gardener and an apprentice were busy from dawn, clearing snow from the settled bushes. The servants, now dressed in winter clothing, diligently swept and cleaned the dirt path leading from the entrance hall to the main gate. The maids, too, were overwhelmed with winter preparations, changing curtains and bedding from the count's room to the guest rooms.

It was a time when even ten more hands would not have been enough. When Charlotte offered to help, Janice assigned her to the relatively quiet bedroom chambers. Her tasks mainly involved mending servants' uniforms with missing buttons or repairing torn seams in curtains.

The bedroom chamber, located directly beneath the attic, was cozy and harmonious. Her only colleagues were a taciturn old woman and the maid, Anna, who had taken a liking to Charlotte from the start.

"Charlotte, have you ever been to Corlen Island in the south?"

"No, but I've heard a lot about it. It's famous as a vacation spot, isn't it?"

“Yes, half the year feels like summer there. Even in winter, it’s warm. Not just the climate, but the sea there is spectacular—surrounded by emerald colors and filled with trees unlike any you’ve seen...”

Charlotte stopped her sewing for a moment and looked at Anna, whose tone suggested familiarity.

“Why?”

“I wondered if you were from there.”

“Oh, no, not from there. But I’ve visited a few times.”

Anna smiled and returned her focus to her sewing.

“The Earl owns a villa there. It’s smaller than Mistymoor Hall here, but it’s still quite elegant and beautiful.”

Corlen Island, being the closest island to the continent, was a mandatory stop for visiting dignitaries. Owning land and building a villa there required not only wealth but also a degree of social prestige or proof of a substantial family lineage. It was said that to meet some of the most prominent nobles in Ethelwood, one should go to Corlen Island.

“That’s news to me.”

Despite being lovers, it was a story Charlotte had not heard from Richard. He wasn’t much of a talker. Usually, she spoke, and he listened. Though one might think this could cause dissatisfaction, Charlotte was too caught up in their fleeting time together to mind.

“This winter, if you end up going, it would be wonderful. The palm trees there are beautiful, and every fruit is delicious.”

Anna chattered away as her hands moved busily.

“The best part is getting two days of reward leave if you stay for two weeks. You can relax by the sea or dine elegantly at a respectable restaurant.”

Two weeks—a long time for newly minted lovers. Charlotte casually asked, “Will Sir Franz and Sir Richard be accompanying you?”

“Sir Franz always goes. Sir Richard hasn’t since he returned. But this year, who knows? It might be good for him to build connections before he likely receives his title.”

Charlotte’s expression darkened slightly, but fortunately, her head was bowed. Amid their conversation, the old woman silently went about her duties, eventually sending Anna to fetch some water. With Anna gone, the bedroom chamber quieted down again. Charlotte, feeling she might have spoken too much, tried to focus on her work when the old woman spoke.

“There are no eternal secrets in this world, child.”

“...Yes?”

“When you’re standing on a dangerous line, think about what’s beneath you.”

She didn’t fully understand the meaning, but the words sent a chill down her spine. She wanted to ask if the old woman knew something or meant something specific, but as quickly as she had spoken, the old woman’s lips were sealed again.

“At least by next week, we should arrive, so it’s best to send a telegram to the villa keeper now.”

“It’s already written, sir. Just need to stamp it and hand it over to the postman.”

“Well done.”

Seymour responded as he flipped through the documents, with winter sunlight pouring in through the open window behind him. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed pale blonde hair.

In the room, there were not only the two of them but also a maid. After a few routine exchanges and glances, Janice looked down.

“Everything will be ready before the villa keepers arrive.”

“Should I bring up some warm tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

With a smile, Janice signaled, and the maid behind her was the first to leave the office. Janice, about to follow, stopped and turned back.

“Arthur.”

The man, who was picking up his pen again, looked up. A housemaid calling her master by his middle name. It would have caused a stir to any outsider, but between them, it was normal.

It was a name only permitted when they were alone. An unspoken rule from the days they were just boys and girls, before they were even aware of their class differences.

Although their relationship had evolved into that of master and servant, devoid of any romantic or special connection, this tradition had remained.

“Should I not prepare the salon this time either?”

The salon was a space for the lady of the house. Since getting married, the Countess had never accompanied him to Corlen Island. The week-long carriage journey was too much for her frail body, and the sea air was considered detrimental to her health, according to the doctor. However, since mingling with other families was crucial even outside the social season, the Earl visited the island once a year.

The entourage always included Janice to manage household affairs in place of his wife, along with a few other maids and servants. Expecting the same response as last year, the reply she received was shocking.

“No. This year, prepare for it.”

Seymour commanded indifferently, fingers interlocked.

“Make sure it lacks nothing.”

“Arthur!”

Unable to hold back, Janice raised her voice. Seymour’s eyebrows lifted.

Janice Brown was born into the working class and understood her place well, or so she thought. She had accepted that instead of her, a noble of suitable rank had been brought in as a spouse. After all, the world didn’t run on love alone.

But even she needed something to endure it all. That something was her vacation to Corlen Island. The idea of having that one sanctuary taken from her, to bring that woman there, was unbearable.

“What if someone hears you?”

She clutched the hem of her dress as she coldly rebuked the man.

“...It will be a strenuous trip for the lady. It wouldn't do for her to overexert herself.”

“We'll take Doctor Brown with us. The entire family is going.”

“Is Sir Richard going too?”

Seymour nodded instead of replying.

“It's time he found a marital partner.”

“What if.”

Her grip tightened, nails imprinting on her palms.

“What if he already has a lover?”

“That would be unexpected but a cause for celebration. Who is it?”

It was news to him but a relief. Since publicly rejecting Lady Spencer of the duchy, other respectable families had been wary of offending the duke.

Now that he had succeeded to the earldom, Richard was to inherit the title his grandfather had held. It was preferable

to arrange his marriage before he received a new surname from the queen, to solidify his standing in noble society.

Or maybe it was all just an excuse. An excuse to deny that the Richard who returned from the war was no longer human. An attempt to fit him into a mold, to confirm that he was still normal.

“It sounds like you’re willing to make the connection.”

“As long as there are no significant flaws.”

There was a willingness to overlook a certain level of imperfection. It had taken a long time to lower his standards this far, to a point where he’d be thankful just for Richard’s survival. Had there not been a time when he had prayed just for that?

“If she’s a lady worthy enough to marry, at least...”

“You won’t kill her with your own hands.”

“Janice!”

He couldn’t finish his sentence, but Janice did, her expression twisting painfully.

“The lover thing was just something I said in passing. This time, I’m thinking of bringing Charlotte along. I’ll assign a caregiver to Cynthia.”

“Why her?”

“She’s skillful and has a good head for work. She’s very useful in many ways.”

“You’re not planning any mischief, are you?”

“Of course not.”

She smiled coldly, turned back, and grasped the doorknob to leave the room.

“She’s all I have left.”

Her final words were barely audible over the sound of the door closing.

The private lakeside was tranquil, a place they had visited before. The vibrant greenery of the dazzling summer had transformed into a more serene and elegant scene. Oak and arborvitae trees covered with snow, and the lush grass blanketed in white. It was a static landscape painting, perfect in its stillness. But as soon as they boarded the boat, everything went dark.

“Open your eyes, Charlotte.”

The rippling of the lake calmed. Richard, who had stopped rowing, spoke again soothingly.

“It’s less frightening than you think.”

When she didn’t respond, he gently lifted her chin, forcing her to look up. Charlotte pressed her eyelids tighter. Then, a cool temperature touched her forehead. Like comforting a frightened child, Richard gently pressed her brow with his thumb and called her name tenderly.

“Charlotte.”

His touch was as gentle as a hand soothing a sobbing infant, patting its back. Slowly opening her eyes to a calmer scene

on the boat, she saw the face in front of her.

Flawless skin as if sculpted from wax, a proudly arched nose. Above it, a pair of agate-like eyes in which she could see her reflection. Caught off guard by his unfamiliar beauty, Charlotte lost herself for a moment until Richard lightly tapped her cheek.



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“You claim you lived in a seaside cliff village, yet here you seem as hesitant as a cat by the water.”

“...I never actually fished or dug for clams myself. I’ve been working in service since I was young...”

“Ah, is that so.”

He smiled as if he just remembered, though he likely knew all along. At that moment, as Charlotte pouted, a shadow fell over her and the bun she had meticulously twisted up slowly unraveled.

“Stay just like this in front of me.”

Richard gently commanded as he let her hair down, evoking memories of the office they were in before. It was the only other time she had let her hair down in front of him. Suddenly recalling that memory made Charlotte’s cheeks flush, and as she clamped her mouth shut, Richard emphasized,

“Only in front of me.”

He was smiling, but his gaze was cruel. Charlotte now fully understood what that smile meant.

Since they had become lovers, he had been kind and gentle, but he was a man who could switch his facade at any moment. His possessiveness was strong, and he was prone

to jealousy. There had been times when a friendly chat with a stable boy had led him to a breathless embrace in a corridor corner.

‘Ugh... Mmh.’

She couldn’t muster a proper resistance, only managing to gasp a stifled breath.

‘Ah...’

Despite pushing against his solid chest out of fear of being seen, Richard did not back down an inch, satisfying his desires. It was only when she felt like she was losing her breath that she was freed. Her legs nearly gave out, but he caught her and whispered in her ear.

“Do it more.”

“What... do more?”

“Resisting.”

His veins bulged, and his hand swept lightly across her waist.

“It excites me more.”

Only after seeing her pale, drained face did he let her go. There was no further touch, but Charlotte knew it was merely a reprieve he granted.

Barely nodding as the memory surfaced, Richard appeared pleased as he played with the ends of her long hair.

“You seem to have gotten used to it.”

“What?”

“Your hand, it’s not shaking anymore.”

Looking down, she noticed her once trembling hands were now steady. Gathering courage, she looked around and saw a scene even more beautiful than before.

“It’s truly... so beautiful.”

The exclamation slipped out unintentionally.

“Did you come here often as a child?”

“From time to time.”

“On Sundays?”

She added cautiously, prompting a slight smile from Richard.

“I was more devout than you’d think.”

“But why don’t you attend services now?”

She had always wanted to ask this delicate question. In Ethelwood, religion was considered sacred, transcending class. There had been much gossip about him since he never showed his face in church after his military discharge. Though the name ‘Kensington’ prevented direct criticism, the undertones were clearly disapproving.

“It’s a boring story.”

“Please, tell me.”

Resting his elbows on the railing, Richard leaned his cheek against his hand and closed his eyes as if sinking into a nap, languid like a cat stretching after a hearty lunch. His long

eyelashes cast deep shadows across his face, reminiscent of a bisque doll.

“I nearly died when I was captured by rebels on a colonial island.”

Charlotte barely dared to breathe as he spoke. It was a story she was hearing for the first time, likely a secret he hadn't shared with anyone else given his nature.

“My nails were pulled out, and my back was shredded by whips. During the day, I'd struggle not wanting to die, and at night, I would beg to be killed.”

His tone was calm, contrasting with the content of his story. It was a tale that might have left permanent scars on anyone else, but he continued as if it was nothing.

“One day, I started hearing hallucinations.”

“Hallucinations...?”

“Yes. It was a voice I had occasionally heard since I was quite young.”

Richard opened his eyes and twisted his lips as if challenging her to believe him.

“A formless ‘monster’ offered to save me if I gave it something in return.”

“And...?”

“Anything.”

His answer was succinct. Richard clenched and then relaxed his fist as if feeling the weight of his own body for the first time.

“I told it I’d give anything—my flesh, bones, soul—anything to not die in that hellish place.”

Charlotte’s eyes wavered aimlessly.

He recalled that time emotionlessly. Surrounded by enemies, subjected to continuous torture, he was just waiting for death each day. In that desperate situation, he didn’t care who offered a helping hand—be it a monster or a devil.

“So then...”

As Charlotte hesitantly asked, shrinking back, Richard smiled. His lips parted to reveal even teeth, his expression saintly yet eerie under the winter sun, like a priest draped in a thin veil but also chilling, as if reaching out could reveal a demon licking its lips in greed.

Suddenly, Charlotte bowed her head. The man’s eyes narrowed.

“Why?”

“...”

“Am I frightening you?”

His gaze traced the flushed tips of her ears, the smooth line of her throat, the waist encircled by his arm.

“Are you afraid that the monster from back then is in front of you now?”

As sweet as butter on the tongue, absurdly soft, and easily melting.

Like a young, frail animal unaware of the snake hidden in the bushes.

Richard, ceasing his taunting, lifted his hand from his chin and leaned forward. A vast shadow enveloped Charlotte just as she was covered.

“It must have hurt a lot...”

Her hands trembled, not from fear but from sorrow. Her small face tilted up towards him, her lips spasming in an effort to form something resembling a smile, as if the tears falling weren't her own.

“It must have been lonely, desperate, and very painful...”

Her words were abruptly silenced by his lips covering hers. It happened in an instant. The boat rocked dangerously due to the sudden shift in weight.

“Ah... No!”

Charlotte gasped, a primal fear surfacing. She tried to shake off the hands gripping her wrists.

“The boat, the boat is...”

“Shh.”

Charlotte had forgotten. Her lover was a ruthless man. He wiped the cold tears from her cheek with his thumb as if he were brushing off sugar, and then licked it off. Afterward, he kissed her trembling eyelashes and whispered like a devil seducing an innocent girl.

“You don't want to do this here, do you?”

What exactly? She dared not ask.

“...”

“Yes?”

His expression, while suggesting something unmentionable, was as innocent as a boy pleading with his sister for an afternoon treat. He was a man who offered choices without giving a way out, claiming to let her decide while actually cornering her completely. It was more than cruel; it was monstrous.

“Sir Richard is... really...”

Her cheeks flushed, her eyes wet and unstable. Charlotte, her body slackening, sobbed in surrender.

“He’s really... a terrible person.”

“Ah.”

He responded tenderly as if he had received a compliment, and then their lips met again.

“Typical.”

The place where she stood was a bizarre wilderness.

A dry and desolate area with neither the random growth of ferns nor the damp moss that usually adorned such landscapes. Knowing it was a dream made it less frightening. Even though she was dressed in a roomy white chemise, she felt no cold. She walked barefoot on the withered grass, facing the chilly wind, feeling like a ghost wandering through ruins.

Charlotte relaxed and took deep breaths as she surveyed her surroundings.

“Where is this?”

There was a single house on the barren hill, an old and dilapidated shack.

She needed to go inside. Her instinct whispered. She had to go inside to return. As if under a spell, she walked up the rocky incline.

When she reached the house, she suddenly wondered. Go back? Where to? Should I really go inside?

Hesitating, the door opened.

Creak.

“Is anyone there?”

She didn’t expect an answer but asked out of politeness. Naturally, no response came. As she stepped inside, the door closed behind her immediately.

Inside, the shack was surprisingly cozy compared to its exterior. A couch, a rocking chair, a Turkish carpet on the floor, a cast-iron stove, and a small kitchenette adequate for light cooking. The place was dust-free, as if someone was maintaining it.

After scanning the area, Charlotte cautiously sat on the couch. As she relaxed, drowsiness quickly overcame her. Her eyelids drooped, and she dozed off briefly until, suddenly, the door opened and something entered.

A sleek and menacing form. Sharp eyes and fangs. It was a black panther.

“Purr...”

Before she could scream, the panther elegantly leaped and pinned her down by the shoulders and legs. Her pale face reflected in the purple pupils of the panther. Thump thump. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

The sharp claws felt as if they could tear through her delicate skin at any moment. The eyes of the beast opposite her were as deep as a swamp. A primal fear. The helplessness before an overwhelming predator. The panther growled softly, its breath close.

It has to be a dream. It’s just a dream, and she would wake up.

That thought was her only shield. Charlotte tightly closed her eyes. But just then, a strange sensation overtook her, and she writhed in shock.

“No...!”

The beast licked her nape. The rough and damp sensation pierced through to her veins. Confused and only able to shake her head, a familiar voice suddenly reached her ears.

“Charlotte.”

“Sir Richard?”

She wanted to call out, but no voice came. She tried to open her eyes, but the weight on her eyelids kept her vision shrouded in darkness. A low, soft voice continued.

“Did you want to escape?”

Escape? Her?

There had never been such a thought. Impossible. Her mind was a jumble amidst the confusion. Surely what was atop her was a massive, ferocious beast, yet why—

“Let, let me go!”

“I understand. Frightened, foolish rabbits often fail to recognize their master.”

“What...?”

“It’s the master’s duty to make himself recognized.”

Richard mocked gently in response to her feeble resistance.

“You won’t have any trouble living even without your Achilles tendons.”

The beast’s paws, which had gripped her wrists, slowly transformed into human hands. He pressed down each trembling finger firmly, interlocking them with strength.

“It’s okay. It will all be over soon.”

No! I don’t want this!

“Stop...!”

It was only a moment later that Charlotte’s body, which had felt sunk in a bog, was released. A scream erupted from her, and she exhaled a sharp breath that had risen to her throat, sweat cooling as it trickled down her forehead.

“Charlotte...?”

Awakened by her daughter's scream, Cynthia asked worriedly.

"Are you alright? If you're not feeling well, you don't have to come to the island."

"No, I'm fine. It was nothing, Mom."

Charlotte shook her head and forced a smile.

"It was just a nightmare, that's all."



Ch. 31 ASEF 31

She had such a shameless dream.

Even days later, the mere thought of the dream made her face burn. Each time a wave of embarrassment crashed over her, Charlotte blamed the man in the carriage ahead for her discomfort.

No, it's not her who was strange. It must be because she had been tormented too much.

On the tranquil surface of the lake, the man devoured his lover's skin like a beast fresh from hibernation, cleverly choosing spots not easily seen by others—behind the neck, the insides of the wrists, above the collarbone.

At first, it tickled so much that she writhed, but later, she pushed him away due to the sharp pain. She learned the hard way that resisting only made things worse.

He knew she couldn't swim when he brought her onto the boat. Otherwise, why would he...

Underneath her thin white gloves, Charlotte fiddled with the faint marks left behind as she sighed deeply. Across from her, Anna, noticing her deep breath, suddenly asked.

"Charlotte? Are you in pain? You've been so quiet the whole trip."

"No, I'm just tired."

The inside of her swollen lips stung with each word she spoke. Somehow, she had ended up going to the island. Although the carriages for the earl's family and the servants were distinctly separate, eliminating any chance of being alone with Richard, Charlotte was relieved. It was probably for the best.

The swollen lips and the bite marks were healing. The struggle to hide them from Anna during showers was almost over. Charlotte quickly changed the subject.

"By the way, Anna, how much longer until we reach Corlen Island?"

"Well..."

Anna counted on her fingers and then folded one or two before answering.

"It's the third day since we left Gredel Hill, so we should arrive at the dock by this evening."

It was a half-day's journey by boat from the southernmost dock to Corlen Island. It was her first time visiting the island, and her heart fluttered in anticipation.

The small passenger ferry to Corlen Island, which only took a few guests and sailed every third day, was efficiently run under the captain's strict but silent command. The crew and stewards were excessively polite to the earl's family, behaving almost like mice wary of a cat.

Among these cautious people, one stood out. It was during a meal when Richard glanced at a steward bringing food.

“Yikes!”

Startled, the steward dropped the wine. As the red wine spilled not into the glass but onto his jacket, he quickly bowed at a sharp angle.

“I’m so sorry!”

“My goodness, Richard!”

The countess across from him stood up in shock.

“It’s alright, Countess.”

The bewildered steward kneeled, pulling a napkin from the tray she was carrying. As she bowed her head, her nape was exposed. A strand of black hair slipped out from under the coif that was supposed to cover her face from cheek to chin.

Black hair... It had been too long. His purple pupils narrowed for a moment.

“Here, at least...”

Without knowing what she was doing in her panic, the steward hastily tried to wipe the wine-stained area when a large hand overlaid his. Richard removed her hand and reassured once more.

“It’s alright.”

The steward’s head slowly lifted. This man, whose mere presence made her nerves tingle, had just made eye contact, causing her heart to drop. The pungent scent of white musk mixed with a faint hint of arborvitae. Lightly tousled sandy brown hair, slightly raised long eyes, and indifferent purple irises.

The chill of his gaze made her feel as exposed as if she were naked, her face flushing with heat.

“I’ll get your jacket washed right away. Please give it to me...”

“What’s your name?”

In the midst of her rambling, the man who had just removed his jacket cut her off. Their eyes met, his gaze cool but not angry.

“...My name is Selma.”

“I see. I am Richard Kensington.”

Richard, having introduced himself, handed over his jacket.

“Then, Selma, please take this to Miss Hegel.”

“Yes, I truly apologize...”

She was likely a laundry maid. Deeply bowing, the steward turned to leave when a voice resonated in her head.

– Come to my room tonight.

Richard looked contemplatively at his bed, where a woman with disheveled black hair lay with a pale face, eyes closed.

She wasn’t dead. He rarely killed, after all. And it hadn’t been long since he had replaced the woman with a beast.

While pondering how to ‘restore’ her, someone knocked and entered without waiting for a reply.

“Richard...!”

The earl, looking anxious and scrutinizing the room, spotted the steward. His face contorted with realization as Richard called out to him.

“Seymour.”

“...You could have fed on the island.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve had the blood of a virgin.”

“So you haven’t violated her.”

“Never have.”

His tone implied it was unnecessary. There was no sign of guilt or moral conflict, just like a lion hunting a doe or a wolf devouring a sheep, his feeding was always ‘justified.’

The unfortunate woman affected by this would be fine by the next day, thinking it all a bizarre dream, just as others who had disappeared briefly thought.

It was an unspoken rule. The ‘feeding’ was always Richard’s responsibility alone, and Seymour never interfered.

With a shrug, Seymour placed what he brought on the bed.

“I came to return this.”

Seeing the freshly laundered jacket, Richard’s eyebrows raised. Reading the implication, he added,

“She seems to get seasick. She asked for it when I bumped into her.”

Cynthia’s daughter, who had looked as pale as death, had stirred a rare kindness in him because of her face. Having completed his errand, Seymour turned to leave.

“She’ll be off the ship by dawn. Get ready.”

As expected, there was no response.

It felt like lying on the waves. This had never happened before.

Charlotte muttered to herself as she felt utterly empty inside. Throughout the journey on the ship, she had felt dizzy. Soon her stomach churned, and she ended up retching violently. Anna, who shared the room, continued to look worried.

“I’ll be back soon, Charlotte.”

“I’m much better now. Don’t worry, and take your time with dinner.”

Even as Anna left the room with a concerned expression, Charlotte truly felt fine. Just close her eyes and sleep, and it would be morning. She’d be off the ship soon.

That was until an unexpected face flashed before her.

“Sir Richard asked me to give this to you.”

“...I see.”

Her face was flushed, her expression shy—it was a familiar sight. Women enchanted by a beauty they had never encountered before. She had briefly forgotten this since the night of the Cloverfield gala.

Her lover, Richard Daniel Kensington, was a man who captured attention wherever he went, regardless of age or

gender. Though most were too intimidated by his coldness to approach him.

The jacket was stained with wine, and only that stained part needed cleaning. It should have ended there, if not for the steward's ensuing question.

"Um... what does he like?"

"What...?"

"Oh, nothing."

The woman blushed and smiled shyly before she quickly moved away. At the same time, a whirlwind of thoughts stormed through Charlotte's mind.

Had the two of them spoken without her knowing?

Considering Richard's typically cold and meticulous demeanor towards relationships, it was a ridiculous notion, but physical ailment had a way of unsettling the mind.

"If that were really the case... I wouldn't let it go."

"How so?"

"What do you mean, how?"

Her reply was abruptly cut short as she heard a response.

"Richard...?!"

"Shh."

Before she knew it, Richard had silently entered and was sitting by her bedside, leaning forward. She felt his cool forehead against hers as soon as she shut her eyes. Their

noses brushed, their breaths mingled. Richard then stroked Charlotte's nape, not with a strange caress but with a straightforward touch.

Their eyes met from an incredibly close distance.

"You don't have a fever."

"How did you get in here... I mean, if we get caught..."

"We won't."

"..."

"Even if we do, it's easily handled."

His reply left Charlotte speechless.

"The dead don't speak."

"...You're joking."

"..."

Instead of responding, Richard straightened up.

"You said you get seasick. Seems that was true. Thought it was just an excuse."

"With the steward..."

Her words burst out before she could think. It was something that had been bothering her, and she had blurted it out unintentionally.

"What did you say?"

Richard blinked, taken aback by the sudden question. It was an expression she had never seen on him before—surprised, perplexed, absurdly incredulous.

His answer came a beat late.

“You were worried about that even though you’re sick?”

“...!”

The embarrassment was all hers. Charlotte turned towards the wall and pulled the blanket over her head in a flush of mortification, writhing in further embarrassment.

“What are you doing!”

Lying next to her, Richard wrapped her in the blanket, his hand gently stroking her hair.

“Sleep.”

“...”

“It’s better if you don’t think too much.”

She had momentarily forgotten. He wasn’t just a kind man who would be considerate of a sick lover. Rather, he was utterly ruthless... As his grip tightened, Charlotte quickly said anything else she could think of.

“Good night.”

She felt like an obedient child complying with a simple command, but before she could contemplate the nuances of their interaction, her eyelids had already closed.



Ch. 32 ASEF 32

As soon as the ship reached the island harbor, a welcoming party was already there to greet the Earl of Kensington and his family. The group consisted of the couple managing the villa and some porters.

As the Earl stepped onto the island, holding his wife's hand, the managing couple bowed deeply in greeting on behalf of their employers.

"We've been waiting since morning, my lord," they greeted.

"It's been a while. You've been working hard," the Earl replied.

"Yes, and it's the first time we meet the lady," the manager added, his gaze shifting to the countess.

The Earl smiled and said, "Ah, my apologies for the late introduction. This is Mr. and Mrs. Zennon, our villa managers."

"It's an honor to meet you, my lady," they responded.

"This is my wife, Chloe."

"I should have greeted you sooner. It's a pleasure."

The countess graciously extended her hand for a kiss on the back of her hand, smiling as Thomas Zennon, the husband, complimented, "You are as beautiful as I've heard."

“Oh, thank you,” she replied, his words not flattery but fact. Chloe Kensington, with her silver hair and ash-grey eyes, was indeed near perfection in beauty, aside from her chronic frailty.

Mrs. Zennon joined in with a laugh, “We’ve all been hoping you’d visit the island soon, my lady.”

“Thanks to your well wishes, I’m feeling much better. It’s lovely to see you, Mrs. Zennon.”

It was a polite lie. Ever since giving birth to her son Franz, her condition had worsened, making even short trips difficult. Nevertheless, she had insisted on accompanying them, fearing that she might not be able to try at all next year, according to her doctor’s advice.

As his wife trembled slightly, the Earl embraced her shoulder and tactfully changed the subject.

“It’s quite chilly, we should head inside.”

“Yes, I’ve prepared some warm tea in advance,” Thomas added, leading the way to the carriage he had arranged for the Earl’s family.

Following the Earl and his wife, the servants also started moving. Unlike the men, the maids only had their own luggage to manage, so they boarded the servant’s carriage first. As Charlotte placed her luggage on the carriage and took her seat, she overheard Anna speaking to another maid across from her.

“Did you see? Madam Janice looked absolutely furious.”

“Really?”

“She was clutching her fists so tightly while staring at the Earl and his wife, I thought she might commit murder.”

A warning from the countess’s maid flashed through Charlotte’s mind—hadn’t she said Janice was the Earl’s former lover?

“It’s impressive that Janice even came if she dislikes seeing them together so much.”

“Exactly. She could have just stayed behind.”

Unable to listen anymore, Charlotte turned her gaze out the window, feeling a sharp pang in her heart.

Was her situation any different from Janice’s in her younger days?

“I would’ve taken what I could and left long ago if I were her. It’s not like they’re a stingy family. Why cling to a place where you’re not acknowledged?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

Their words were true. It couldn’t last. The nobility would never accept a woman from the working class. No matter how acceptable he found her. Feeling suffocated, Charlotte closed her eyes.

They had arrived at Seoren Hall, a manor quite different from Mistymoor Hall in its charm. Situated amidst a cluster of villas and uniquely encircled by a forest of white trees, Seoren Hall had the prime location with a view of the sea. Smaller than Mistymoor, but it had a mysterious and artistic aura about it.

The manor boasted tightly stacked marble bricks and tall chimneys, with an emerald-colored roof. From the entrance of the main hall, terraces stretched out on both sides, crowned by walls curving into small turrets, making a grand statement.

“Our servants reside on the hidden third floor,” Anna pointed out as they disembarked.

“It’s different from Mistymoor Hall; here, you can have a single room. But unlike when you were just in the sleeping quarters, you’ll have various chores and also attend to personal needs.”

“Personal servitude?”

“Yes. The Earl and Countess already have their own servants, so you’ll likely be attending to Sir Franz and Sir Richard.”

Originally, even unmarried men of noble status would have personal maids, but the Kensington men were exceptions, a measure put in place by the previous Earl to prevent incidents like that with Janice.

As they ascended the servants’ staircase, Anna continued, “Well, Janice will decide later, but both gentlemen prefer not to be fussed over, so it really won’t be too demanding. It’ll mostly be bringing them washing water and changing clothes.”

“I see,” Charlotte murmured, a faint smile crossing her lips. She hadn’t expected to be constantly by his side; just being under the same roof on this island was satisfaction enough. Just to see him from a distance was enough, and now there was a chance to be closer.

“Unpack and rest up. You’ll need to help with serving dinner later. Here’s your room key, I’ve picked it up in advance.”

“Thank you, Anna.”

As Charlotte reached out, Anna playfully tucked the keys back into her pocket.

“Ah, nothing comes for free.”

Seeing Charlotte’s puzzled face, Anna grinned mischievously.

“The chef here is quite kind to pretty girls. I’m feeling peckish; why don’t you go and get us some snacks, eh?”

With a face that looked like it wouldn’t take no for an answer, Charlotte sighed lightly and headed for the kitchen.

“...Maybe I’ll just say I was turned down.”

Arriving at the kitchen but lacking the courage to enter, she hesitated at the door, not daring to touch the handle. Suddenly, the door burst open from the other side, and someone shouted.

“Who’s loitering about so suspiciously!”

“Ah...”

The sharp voice came from a boy who looked slightly younger than Charlotte. Wearing a chef’s hat and apron, he seemed more like a kitchen helper, his untidy brown curly hair and freckled cheeks giving him a cute appearance.

“Oh?”

He also seemed taken aback, his angry expression quickly turning to surprise, then to embarrassment. After a few seconds of silence, Charlotte finally spoke.

"I'm sorry. I was just..."

"...You're the maid from Mistymoor Hall, aren't you?"

Before she could continue, the boy interrupted with a sigh of relief.

"It's good you ran into me."

Introducing himself as Finn, he then explained that it was like a small initiation for new servants at Seoren Hall.

"The head chef is really scary. Not one or two have gone back with tears. It's a good thing he's not here right now."

"That's good to know... thank you for telling me."

As Charlotte responded with a smile, Finn blushed and scratched the back of his head.

"Honestly, if it weren't for your uniform, I might have thought you were a relative of the Earl."

At first glance, he had wondered if she was a fairy. With her petite frame, gentle eyes, perky nose, and small, full lips, her black hair simply braided yet potentially stunning if let down, and large green eyes were reminiscent of midsummer foliage, almost mystical in ambiance.

Suddenly, he recalled a chilling tale his brother used to tell at night.

"Don't rush towards something just because it's dazzling. Next to every fairy, there's always a monster lurking."

While it sounded like something out of a fairy tale, Charlotte knew such creatures didn't exist and speculated he might be nobility, but his calloused hands and modest clothes soon dispelled that notion.

Her face was as innocent as her voice was soft and kind. Misinterpreting Finn's bashful reaction as shyness, Charlotte quickly got up.

"I better go. You must be busy with the food prep, sorry for bothering you."

"Ah, wait!"

Finn jumped up and dashed into the kitchen. Moments later, he returned with something in his hand.

"Take this."

"What's this...?"

"I saved some for myself to snack on later. Don't worry, I have more."

He handed her a scone wrapped in a napkin. Reluctantly accepting it after catching the sincere look in his eyes, Charlotte thanked him.

"Thanks. I'll wash the napkin and return it."

Finn's face turned a shade of red.

"I live nearby and come here every morning. See you around."

Perhaps, he thought, during her stay they might become friends.

“Remember, kiddo, if you ever spot a fairy on this island, run. The monster beside them won’t spare you,” his brother’s voice echoed in his mind, fading away.

Charlotte felt an intense gaze on her as if someone was boring into her. She struggled as if pinned down by sleep paralysis and only managed to break free after what felt like an eternity.

Gasping, she opened her eyes to complete darkness.

The room assigned to her was clean but far from cozy. Although Seoren Isle was more temperate than Gredel Hill, the faulty window latch constantly rattled, and the straw-filled mattress lacked the softness for a good night’s sleep.

But the real problem wasn’t the room; she didn’t expect luxury. The issue was her unexplainable heaviness after just unpacking and helping prepare dinner, despite having rested on the boat.

Well, it wasn’t quite the rest she would have liked.

Richard, who had slipped into bed beside her unnoticed, was gone by the time she woke from a light doze. It was always like this. Unlike her, constantly anxious about their secrets being discovered, he was ever calm and composed.

“What would you do if I disappeared one day?”

She had asked him playfully soon after they had grown close, throwing the question out lightly.

“Who knows?”

He had just smiled quietly, his answer as enigmatic as always. But ever since then, he had occasionally watched her closely. Charlotte felt his gaze instinctively, like prey sensing a predator.

His look was somber, intense, no longer fiery or destructive but potentially incinerating everything in an instant if mishandled.

Richard always had an uncanny intuition. Surely, he must know she was beginning to contemplate the end of their blossoming relationship.



Ch. 33 ASEF 33

What would happen if the Earl discovered her? She might be branded a vulgar woman, but what about his dishonor?

With restless thoughts keeping her awake, Charlotte's insomnia worsened. She reached for her bedside and found the water pitcher empty. Sighing softly, she wrapped herself in a shawl and got up from bed.

As she quietly entered the kitchen, she realized someone was already there. Charlotte nodded silently, about to leave, when a low voice made her stop in her tracks.

"You don't have to go, Charlotte."

"..."

"If I'm not making you uncomfortable."

She didn't mean to disturb the quiet night; it seemed she was misunderstood.

"No, I just didn't want to intrude."

Adjusting her shawl, Charlotte turned back into the kitchen where only a table lamp illuminated the darkness.

"Looks like you can't sleep either, Lady Janice."

"Insomnia is like an old friend to me."

She gestured for Charlotte to sit across from her and sipped from a glass of sherry. The faint smell of alcohol hit her.

“Lady, wouldn’t warm milk or herbal tea be better than alcohol?”

“Nonsense. I’m no child.”

She waved dismissively and poured herself more sherry. Watching her, Charlotte hesitated before asking, “Are you alright?”

Janice looked disheveled. Her cheeks flushed from the drink, her auburn hair long and loose, dressed more casually than she had ever seen her. Normally, her hair was tightly done up, and she dressed almost like a nun.

Instead of answering, she just stared at Charlotte and suddenly said, “You remind me of Cynthia, yet you don’t.”

“Pardon?”

“More in the way you act than look.”

It felt eerily familiar. When had she heard that before? Then it clicked.

“Someone said something similar before.”

It was Richard, on the day they first met.

“Really?”

Charlotte nodded, and Janice smiled.

“He has good instincts.”

“...”

“Cynthia was quiet, seldom spoke, but was always keenly observant.”

Her voice was so soft she had to strain to hear as she seemed half-asleep.

“Maybe call it intuition. She knew the right time to flee.”

Charlotte couldn't quite grasp her meaning but nodded anyway. As she poured the last of the sherry into her glass, Janice added, “I believe you have that same sense, as her daughter.”

Suddenly, a chill ran down her spine. With a creak, Janice staggered to her feet, pushing back her chair. Charlotte moved instinctively to support her, but Janice brushed her hand aside with a warning.

“Run, Charlotte.”

Her eyes were gentle as if bestowing mercy upon a friend's daughter for the last time.

“Run while you can.”

Patting Charlotte's frozen shoulder, Janice straightened up as if she had never wavered, and left the kitchen.

“There are no eternal secrets in this world, child,” an old servant's warning echoed in her mind, sending shivers down her spine as if cold water had been poured over her head.

The candlelight, already flickering precariously, snuffed out suddenly as a draft swept through the room.

Over the past three days, Seoren Hall had been bustling, greeting visitors during the day and preparing for dinners at night.

Even on nights without guests, relaxation was not an option. Socializing on Corlen Island was regarded as the second most crucial season in the Ethelwood social calendar, just after the official season. The hall's entrance was piled with invitations, and Chloe Kensington sifted through them to decide her activities for the evening.

Sometimes, instead of sending a card, women would naturally invite her to their parties during salon teatimes.

"I've recently acquired a piece by the renowned painter Gustave, right from the capital. I'm planning a modest appraisal gathering and would be delighted if the Countess could attend and share her insights."

The words were gilded, but the underlying intention was clear. Chloe responded with a feigned ignorance and a smile.

"Oh, if it's that artist, I've been quite interested in his style. You have quite the discernment, Baroness. I'd be delighted to accept your invitation."

"I'm glad you'll come. And, pardon me for asking, but I've heard there's another connoisseur in the Kensington family..."

Without needing to specify who, Chloe, hiding her smile behind a fan, tilted her head playfully.

"Well, he's not much into art, and Franz is still too young..."

Finally, another lady interjected.

“True, but I heard the Earl has transferred his secondary title to his brother, Richard. Is that true?”

Forced to respond directly, Chloe nodded.

“Yes, that decision was made long ago.”

“And I understand he’s also inheriting lands and an estate in the south.”

“Yes, managing Gredel Hill alone is already a lot of work. With Franz beginning his succession training, it’s best for Richard to manage that estate for the family’s sake.”

The women, having coaxed the answer they wanted, leaned in collectively.

“That estate must be substantial, too. Managing tenancies and the estate without a wife must be tough for a bachelor.”

“Indeed, such matters are best handled by a wife.”

“As we’re discussing, my niece is here on a retreat, perfectly of age for marriage...”

“Oh, Mrs. Winster, although Sara is certainly charming, isn’t she a bit too petite to stand beside Richard? More importantly, Mrs. Kensington, have you heard about my daughter...”

As one opened the topic, others hurried to promote their daughters or female relatives. Though stories of a duke’s daughter had quieted the crowd before, everyone now treated it as a thing of the past. Seeing Richard Daniel Kensington as an appealing prospect for marriage, they held nothing back.

Chloe smiled inwardly, pleased. This type of competition was not unwelcome. Her husband Seymour was increasingly keen on his brother finding a bride.

“I would love to accept all invitations, but he doesn’t care for fuss, which is regrettable. However...”

Before the competition intensified, Chloe cleverly broke the flow and nodded towards an empty plate. A maid who had been waiting a step behind quickly whispered something to her colleague.

Soon after, the maid who had quietly left the salon returned. Her hands gently placing the teapot on the table were somewhat clumsy.

“I haven’t seen this girl before.”

“Forgive me, madam. Charlotte is just not accustomed to this work.”

Another maid, catching the brief comment, interjected with a slight bow. Chloe tilted her head in curiosity.

“Charlotte, you say...”

Muttering to herself, a maid whispered in her ear.

“Charlotte Hegel, madam. She’s the daughter of the servant Cynthia.”

“Ah.”

A memory Chloe had momentarily forgotten came back to her.

“Has Cynthia’s illness improved?”

Contrary to everyone's expectation that she wouldn't last a month, the mother and daughter were still at Mistymoor Hall. Chloe had liked the quiet and demure impression the girl had made at their first meeting. She appreciated people who knew their place and refrained from overstepping.

Cynthia Hegel was just such a person. That's why, despite losing her way as a servant, she had been allowed to stay. Clear punishments and rewards were preferable, after all. That her daughter was brought into the mansion had not been a difficult decision.

"Yes. It's all thanks to your care, madam. Thank you."

Charlotte bowed deeply, her hands clasped politely. Just as Chloe was about to speak, one of the patiently waiting ladies suddenly spoke up.

"Madam, sorry to interrupt, but what were you about to say?"

"Oh... I got sidetracked."

Turning away from Charlotte, Chloe continued.

"I plan to host a dinner in two days. I intend to invite everyone here."

The room held its breath. She was happy to give them the words they awaited.

"You may bring your daughters or nieces. The more distinguished guests, the better."

Chloe glanced around at the suddenly animated crowd before shifting her gaze back.

“Charlotte.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Could you inform Richard about this? He’s likely in the library.”

Though Richard was her brother-in-law, their relationship was not particularly close. Folding her fan, she concluded.

“After that, you may rest. You don’t look well.”

‘Run, Charlotte.’

‘...’

‘Run while you can.’

That night, Janice clearly knew everything. The next morning, she acted as if nothing had happened.

Unaware of the situation, Anna repeatedly mentioned how unusually pale Charlotte looked. Charlotte simply blamed her pallor on not yet adapting to the island of Corlen. It was a relief when Anna shrugged it off without further questioning; she might have crumbled and confessed everything if pressed further.

No, that’s not it. No matter what, she would never speak. Charlotte knew it. Anna outwardly obeyed Janice but secretly despised her. A few other servants who knew Janice’s past felt the same.

The unspoken rule about not discussing certain topics in special places was inevitably broken. While cleaning

silverware in the kitchen, Anna and another maid openly discussed topics that were otherwise avoided.

“I made my own fate. I’ve heard of a governess marrying her employer, but who would marry a mere maid?”

“Exactly. Especially not a woman with a public scandal. No mistress would accept her, she wouldn’t get a job anywhere else so she has no choice but cling to Gredel Hill.”

“Yet she still hovers around the earl, as if believing he still has feelings for her, despite having left once before.”

“Well, who knows. What would we, the lowly, know about it? Most of the servants at Mistymoor Hall had left at that time.”

“Right. I actually went to see a friend working at Cloverfield recently and heard an unbelievable rumor...”

Their intriguing conversation was abruptly cut off. While the two women were engrossed in their discussion, Charlotte sensed someone behind the door and simultaneously dropped the spoon she was polishing.



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“Charlotte?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just lost in thought for a moment.”

The diversion aired out the previously tense topic. Breathing a sigh of relief, Anna, who had picked up the spoon, suggested, “You know, you’ve looked unwell since yesterday. Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? Janine and I can handle things here.”

“I can’t just take a break, though.”

“How about you run to the restaurant nearby and grab some juice? The salon guests will be arriving soon, and it’d be nice to have something to quench your thirst before that.”

“I’ll gladly buy it. Thank you, Anna, Janine.”

Charlotte refused the offered coins and quickly stood up, swinging open the door to head outside. As she did, she locked eyes with a brown-haired boy hiding against the wall. Charlotte sighed in relief and called out his name.

“Finn.”

“Charlotte.”

“Why are you here? You have the day off today and tomorrow, right?”

“That’s because the chef asked me to...”

“Lies.”

Charlotte caught the hesitation in the young island boy’s voice; he was not adept at deceit.

“The chef isn’t here until this evening. He left after preparing lunch and won’t be back for a while.”

“...”

“He wouldn’t have called you in on your day off for errands.”

Caught in his clumsy lie, Finn sheepishly scratched his head.

“Actually, I came to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Are you free tomorrow evening?”

It was an unexpected question. Despite his younger-looking face, Finn was only two years her junior, which had led to them becoming fast friends in a short time. For Charlotte, who had never had a younger brother, this was a refreshing experience since she had been working from a young age and rarely interacted with peers her own age or younger.

As Charlotte gauged the intent behind his invitation, Finn quickly added, “It’s nothing big, but there’s a small festival happening at the town square at nine. You can bring other friends too. The more, the merrier.”

It wasn’t a date request. It was an opportunity to briefly escape her usual thoughts. Charlotte smiled and nodded.

“Then I’ll come. Can I dress casually?”

“Yes! I’ll come to pick you up.”

“No need. I know the way well enough.”

Charlotte wanted to avoid any potential gossip at all costs, especially since rumors spread quickly on a small island. The worst case would be if word reached Richard, who was not one to hide his jealousy.

Finn’s spirits, dampened by her firm refusal, nodded reluctantly. Charlotte, feeling a twinge of guilt, asked with a slight smile, “Not to make it up to you, but could you tell me where they sell the best juice around here?”

An hour later, as guests of the Countess began to arrive one by one, Charlotte’s peaceful break was over.

Dressed like the other maids, Charlotte looked indistinguishable among them. She didn’t mind; considering her indebtedness to the Count’s family, she was willing to work for months without pay.

Chloe Kensington, up close after a long time, stood out like a lily among the lavishly dressed ladies. She was soft, elegant, and beautiful.

Guests invited to the salon vied for the attention of this classic beauty. Ladies with eligible daughters or relatives were especially eager to catch her eye.

“It’s clear why the Earl treats you so well. Being so poised and beautiful, he can’t help but be devoted.”

“I’m embarrassed I can’t fully perform my duties as his wife due to my frail health. You flatter me too much.”

“I heard you’ve been delicate since childhood. This is ginseng my husband fetched from the eastern continent on his last trip; it’s said to be very beneficial for health. I brought it especially for you, Mrs. Kensington. It arrived this evening, so I’ll have a servant send it over.”

“Oh, how kind of you. I’ll gladly accept your gracious offer, Mrs. Deerbell.”

While the Countess conversed with the guests, Charlotte stood ready to serve behind them, just another piece of furniture against the wall, half-listening to the conversations that flowed in front of her. Her legs were sore, and it was somewhat boring, but aside from occasionally refilling empty cups or pulling out a chair for a lady, it wasn’t particularly hard work.

It would have been an uneventful evening had it not been pierced by a sudden conversation.

Richard’s impending marriage.

It was common for men to marry in their mid-twenties, and soon-to-be twenty-eight Richard was slightly past the typical age for marriage.

The Countess graciously entertained the ladies subtly pushing forward their daughters or nieces. Charlotte’s heart sank at this. The Countess’s demeanor was a reflection of the Earl’s. If she was open to discussions about his marriage, it meant the Earl was actively seeking a match for his brother.

Another woman. His wife.

She had braced herself for it, and even during moments of happiness, she had dimly thought about the end... But

hearing it confirmed by others was different. As the conversation continued, her heart grew increasingly painful. Anna, noticing Charlotte's pallid face, quietly whispered for her to go make more tea.

Returning after a brief respite, the conversation had heated up. Charlotte's clumsy attempt at serving was immediately noticed by the Countess, who issued a dismissal.

"Could you inform Richard about this? He's likely in the library."

"Yes, madam."

Charlotte nodded politely and turned to leave. But upon reaching the library, Richard was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Jennon, who was organizing books, shrugged when asked.

"I'm not sure. He left early this morning."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I don't. He went out alone."

"...I see."

"What's the matter?"

Could she really pass this task along? A sudden impulse shook Charlotte.

Three days.

It had been three days since she had properly faced him. She had avoided him intentionally, and knowing her feelings, he hadn't approached her unnecessarily either. Yet, he hadn't completely let go.

Suddenly, she remembered yesterday morning's incident at the Earl's breakfast table. Richard had dropped his knife. As Charlotte bent to pick it up, he suddenly kicked it under the table.

She had ended up under the table, frozen in place. His long, pianist-like hands abruptly clasped her wrist in a firm grip.

Please...!

Charlotte inwardly pleaded, but the strong grip did not let go. This was not the end of it.

"I'm considering selling the troublesome northern estate."

"The value of the surrounding areas is expected to rise soon. It might be better to wait a bit before selling."

During the conversation, his index finger gently traced her palm. The slight contact of skin flared with overt temptation, a skilled provocation reminiscent of those used by professional entertainers. The incident at the opera house came to mind. Though back then they were somewhat concealed in the private box above the auditorium, now they were at a dinner table, making his behavior even more shocking. Despite the obscene touch, the voice above her head remained perfectly calm.

"I worry the Queen's reign won't last much longer. She has no heir, so a nephew will likely succeed the throne."

"Even if Sir Glenn, the nephew, succeeds, I don't expect much change. He's also conservative and pro-aristocracy."

"My, is His Majesty's illness that severe? I heard about it through a letter from a lady-in-waiting to the baroness."

Soon, another maid brought a new knife, and only after being released did Charlotte realize it. This was Richard Daniel Kensington's subtle warning. A message that he was watching how long she could run.

Thinking back on that moment made her head swim. It wasn't yet time. She couldn't face him.

Better to pass the message on.

Hesitant, Charlotte spoke again, "The Countess mentioned something to His Lordship. If you're not too busy, could you pass it on?"

"Sure. I'll take care of it. What is it?"

"It's just that..."

Right as she was about to spill everything, a thunderous sound as the front hall door burst open made her freeze. Simultaneously, she heard the voice of the steward, Thomas Jennon.

"Oh dear, lightning out of the blue. You must not have had time to grab an umbrella."

"The Earl?"

"He's stepped out momentarily."

The low voice was unmistakably Richard's. Mrs. Jennon gestured towards him.

"You might as well tell him directly."

Unable to resist the push on her back, she awkwardly approached the railing where a thoroughly soaked Richard and Thomas, holding his coat, were looking up.

“I’ll have the bath water prepared immediately. How about a warm cup of tea in the meantime?”

“No need...”

Just as the man was about to dismiss the offer indifferently, he looked up. Their eyes met. The gaze between the lovers who had not seen each other for a long time was neither warm, tender, nor sensual. It was cold, brief, and static.

As if he had never looked up at her, Richard turned his gaze back to the steward and corrected himself.

“Actually, a cup of tea sounds good.”

His tone was as usual, utterly unremarkable. Taking a short breath, Charlotte clenched her fists. For some reason, her palm felt unbearably itchy.



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“I’ve brought the tea.”

Charlotte spoke after knocking, but no answer came. Taking a deep breath, she reached out with a trembling hand to knock again when the door suddenly swung open, hitting her with a blast of steamy air.

“I didn’t realize we had a lazy maid in this house.”

The man in front of her, freshly bathed and wrapped in a bathrobe, had a face as flawlessly handsome as ever, but his expression was cold as frost on a winter night.

He tilted his head slightly, twisting his lips.

“Is your mouth just for show?”

Standing before him felt like facing a hissing snake baring its fangs. Reflexively, Charlotte looked down.

This man had never treated her like a maid before. Fear, more than annoyance, prevailed. For Richard Kensington, respect was something he granted only when he deemed someone worthy of it. And Charlotte had been avoiding him like a scared, sensitive mouse for the past three days, clearly not someone he saw deserving of his leniency.

“I couldn’t find the tea leaves...”

Her gaze wandered aimlessly over his face, his deep-set collarbones, and the glimpse of a firm chest beneath. As she was about to bow her head again, a large hand grasped her chin, forcing her to meet his chilling gaze.

“I couldn’t find them.”

Her lips curled inward at his piercing sarcasm. She wanted to say more but feared provoking him further, though how he took her hesitation, his eyes narrowed. The next moment, Charlotte was pulled into the room by her wrist.

“Ah...!”

A scream coincided with the door slamming behind her. She stumbled, crashing against the back of a couch, and as she tried to steady herself, the master of the house stepped closer. The following words made her pale and she collapsed onto the couch.

“Are you sick of me now?”

“...”

“After getting to know me, do I disappoint you? Have you set your sights on someone else?”

“What are you talking about...”

She had never expected things to escalate like this.

“You can be honest.”

Charlotte blinked rapidly, her face pale as Richard knelt down, cupping her face in his hands, feeling his pulse through the tips of his fingers, along with the smell of fresh blood.

“I won’t get angry.”

Of course, that was a lie. The moment he received affirmation, he contemplated strangling her or perhaps biting into her nape. It wouldn’t be a bad way to end things, or even to ruin them.

She was infuriatingly endearing. As innocent as she seemed, her slyness knew no bounds, constantly pushing him to his limits. Her trembling face could be absurd and amusing, driving him into a frenzy no different from a wild beast.

Just as the impulse was about to turn into reality, Charlotte spoke up.

“This is my first time at a resort.”

“ ... ”

“So I got a bit excited... I wanted to try lots of things, like peacefully watching the sea...”

It took a few seconds for him to understand. As Richard’s eyebrows shot up, Charlotte stuttered under his quiet interrogation but eventually nodded.

“The truth is... you’ve been, well, quite suffocating lately...”

Summoning her courage, Charlotte muttered something she soon wished she hadn’t. With a short chuckle, Richard’s hands fell from her cheeks to her shoulders and then firmly lifted her up, tilting her world.

“Let me go, Richard!”

“Don’t struggle. You’re heavy.”

It was a strangely familiar exchange, though whether he was slinging her over his shoulder or cradling her like a princess made little difference. This time, it was the latter.

“Please, let me go!”

“Is that all you can say? I knew you were foolish.”

As she tried to lift her head in a surge of defiance, a strong hand at the back of her neck pressed her face into his firm chest. His cool scent enveloped her, reminiscent of the eerie and sensually charged mist before a storm at sea. It was the kind of scent that might silently creep up and engulf a sailor whole.

“Then tell me.”

Thud.

Her bottom hit the soft cushion. Richard had set her down on a broad couch and climbed on top to prevent her escape. He wedged a knee between her legs and leaned in close, leaving her no room to resist.

“What exactly do you find ‘suffocating’?”

“What...?”

Her voice cracked in panic. As Charlotte regained her senses and pushed against his chest, he continued.

“I’m not used to such words, so I struggle to moderate.”

His tone was that of a student asking a teacher, yet despite the polite content, his touch was rough and unrestrained.

His long fingers stroked her thigh, just as they had once played with her palm under a table. The memory brought

heat to her face. As her cheeks turned red, Richard smirked and whispered in her ear.

“So tell me what you want, Miss Hegel. Do you desire to be treated like a lady? Shall I play the gentleman’s role?”

It was an offer to comply if she wished. Charlotte thought of how he treated high-society women—with impeccable manners, indifference, and a dry smile. Richard was sometimes brutally cold to them, especially when they harbored any hope.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll gladly do so. But I always collect a fee.”

Charlotte didn’t want to know what that ‘fee’ entailed. It seemed better not to know. Desperately, she shook her head.

“I like things as they are.”

“You’re playing with me.”

Richard’s jaw tensed at her quick denial.

‘Don’t make him angrier.’ Instinctively, Charlotte reached out and embraced his neck. His body stiffened, caught off guard.

“...What is it?”

“I like you.”

Her voice softened as she spoke, eyes tightly shut, as if she was committing a grave act.

“Very much. Terrifyingly so...”

Her sudden embrace and impulsive confession seemed to shift the atmosphere that had been tight with tension. With the mood slightly relaxed, Charlotte added in a small voice, her newfound courage bubbling again.

“But it seems you don’t feel the same, and that’s made me a bit spiteful.”

It was half truth, half lie. After all, a lie mixed with a bit of truth was always more convincing than a perfect falsehood.

Richard removed her hands and stood up. As she sat up to follow his motion, they finally came face to face. He casually pushed back his disheveled black hair behind his ear and responded curtly.

“Why?”

His voice was softer than before. Charlotte felt debased for feeling relieved by his gentle tone, her heart fluttering with a vulgar sense of satisfaction. She pouted her lips petulantly as she closed her eyes to his gentle touch.

“You’ve never said that you liked me.”

“ ... ”

“Every time I ask, you leave me speechless and then—”

Suddenly, his lips crashed into hers, cutting her off. His tongue, seeking permission, gently licked her upper lip before entangling with hers, sweeping across her palate and gums until she was breathless from the persistent torment.

Unable to bear it any longer, she pushed against his chest. In response, he bit her lower lip.

“Ow!”

Charlotte covered her mouth with her hands and glared up at him, the sharp pain making her eyes water.

“That hurts!”

She sharply reproached him, but he seemed indifferent, as usual. He had always been sensitive about his own feelings while being oblivious to others. Anticipating another unexpected move, Charlotte quickly turned her head away and stood up.

“I should go now. I’ve been here too long.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Eek!”

She thought she had moved swiftly, but it was futile. Richard swiftly wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and sat her down on his lap. Charlotte had learned the hard way that struggling would only make him hold on tighter. She sighed and relaxed her body, the faint scent of fresh grass emanating from his neck as he buried his nose in it and issued a warning.

“If you turn your back on me again, expect consequences.”

“Ah...!”

A short moan escaped her lips as he bit her neck and then soothingly ran his tongue over the spot. The sensation of skin, muscle, and veins all tingling was overwhelming. After letting her tremble for a moment, he stood up and walked towards the door.

“From tomorrow, come early in the morning.”

“But without Madam Janice’s orders, I can’t—”

“That’s not for you to worry about. Is it?”

His statement wasn’t directed at her. Charlotte turned towards the door, freezing in place. There stood Janice, watching them with icy eyes.

“Yes, young master.”

Janice bowed her head in response.

“As you command, I’ll entrust Charlotte with the service.”

“One more thing.”

Richard nodded satisfactorily.

“Starting tonight, Miss Hegel will use the room next to mine.”

Janice bit her lower lip in the silence that felt like a demand for any objections.

“I’ll prepare it immediately.”



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The hem of her skirt fluttered and rustled against her legs. Janice led the way without uttering a single word. Following her, Charlotte felt like she had swallowed a thorny rose. Every time she tried to open her mouth, the thorn seemed to prick her throat mercilessly.

What did she hear?

How much did she know?

No words could escape her lips. The tension was so thick it felt like it could burst at any moment, and it was only broken when Janice locked the door to the main room. With her back turned, she warned Charlotte with a steady tone.

"I hope this door never needs to be opened."

"...Yes."

Their eyes met, cold and unyielding. Charlotte, with her head slightly bowed, answered meekly. Janice, staring at her expressionlessly, reached into her pocket and handed something over.

"This is the key."

"....."

"You can only open it from your side. Do you understand?"

Handing her the key while telling her not to open the door was contradictory. Charlotte had a vague sense of what this paradox meant. Janice's cold eyes waited for an answer. Clutching the key tightly, Charlotte nodded.

"Yes, ma'am."

Only after hearing the desired response did Janice grasp the door handle. Just as she stepped into the hallway, she paused.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"....."

"From now on, call me Ms. Janice."

It was the most definitive statement of all. The worst-case scenario had come true. Charlotte bit her lip and responded a beat too late.

"...Yes."

The door closed decisively behind her.

That night, fortunately, nothing happened as Janice had warned. The night passed quietly, almost mocking Charlotte, who had spent it on edge, listening for the sound of the door handle turning.

The next day, she was awakened by the bell beside her bed. Following its sound led to Richard's room.

Having slept lightly, her eyes opened quickly, but her body ached from having spent the night tense and fearful. Stretching, she gathered her disheveled hair and tied it back, then changed into her uniform.

As she stood by the door, the main hall's clock struck nine. After a couple of knocks, she turned the handle, and the door opened without resistance. Charlotte took a deep breath and entered the room cautiously.

"I've brought your wash water, Sir Richard."

"Put it over there."

Richard, wearing the same attire as the day before, indicated to a low dresser with a nod. Her gaze was drawn to his unusually disheveled hair and the faint stubble on his sharp jawline. Lowering her head to avoid meeting his eyes, Charlotte placed the basin on the dresser and asked politely.

"Is there anything else you need?"

There was no response. Just as she was about to step back from the shadow looming over her, he spoke.

"If there's nothing else, then I'll..."

"Have you ever shaved someone before?"

"Pardon?"

Instead of answering, he handed her something. Looking at the sharp razor in her hand, Charlotte's eyes widened as Richard asked again.

"Shaving."

It was such an unexpected request that her response came out hesitantly.

"I have, but..."

"Who?"

She had to answer quickly.

“My father.”

His eyes, which had briefly narrowed, softened slightly.

“I’ve done it a few times, but I’m not very good at it...”

“Take your time.”

Richard sat down on the bed, cutting off her attempt to decline. He gestured toward Charlotte, who stood there, unsure of what to do. Biting her lip, she squeezed out a confession.

“You might get hurt.”

“Then you’ll have to be punished.”

“What kind of punishment...?”

“If you’re curious, go ahead and try.”

His smile was chilling, sending shivers down her spine. Sometimes, he seemed like a demon incarnate. He pretended to step back when necessary, but never yielded in crucial moments. Resigning herself, Charlotte stood before him.

“Don’t move.”

He nodded. It felt strange to look down at the face she always looked up to.

Thick eyebrows with slightly upturned ends, wide almond-shaped eyes, long and elegant eyelashes curving gently, a straight and neat nose, sensual lips. And, despite doing

nothing, hair that shone with the quality and luster of daily rose oil treatments.

Despite his cynical nature, he was always so perfect that people couldn't help but be entranced. When their eyes met—his irises a blend of purple and navy—her heart felt like it stopped.

"Is there something on my face?"

Swallowing, Charlotte cautiously made a request.

"Could you close your eyes for a moment?"

"Why?"

Caught off guard by his question, her thoughts spilled out unfiltered.

"Because it's making my heart flutter."

"....."

Richard furrowed his brows. The words were already said, so Charlotte added bravely.

"I'm distracted and might make a mistake."

In other words, she couldn't concentrate because of his face. Richard smirked at her unexpected confession and closed his eyes gently. The intense gaze that had been pinning her in place was gone, and her rapidly beating heart began to calm.

Charlotte knelt on the floor and, looking up at him slightly, raised her hands with utmost concentration. One hand held his cheek, while the other moved the razor blade.

“If you feel any discomfort or pain, please tell me right away.”

She felt like an artist finishing the final touches on a sculpture. His skin was smooth as marble under her palm. Despite the vulnerable position of having his face in someone else’s hands, Richard’s breathing remained steady. It showed complete trust, or perhaps indifference to any potential mistakes she might make.

She didn’t want to disappoint him.

Charlotte focused as much as she could. His porcelain-like face would show any injury immediately.

Or, if he did get a cut, maybe fewer women would look at him.

Startled by her own impulsive thought, Charlotte realized how selfish she was. Though she always vaguely thought of the end, she was perpetually anxious that he would be the one to turn away first. It was only natural for her to suffer from such a gap.

As she hesitated with these sudden thoughts, a veined hand covered hers.

“Keep going.”

“Yes.”

Refocusing, she finished the task. Though it took time, she thankfully made no mistakes. After wiping off any residue, Charlotte stood up and reached for the dresser. Her hand found a small hand mirror.

“All done. Check it out,” she said.

Richard opened his eyes a beat later, looked in the mirror, and stroked his chin.

“Very clean.”

He seemed satisfied. As Charlotte straightened up, relieved, he suddenly turned her around and wrapped his arms around her slender waist. Startled, she froze as he murmured against her stiffened arm, his face buried in her shoulder.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

His warm breath seeped through the fabric. Charlotte, having momentarily resisted, nodded. She had so much to say, but with just the two of them, all words seemed to vanish from her mind.

Reading her thoughts, Richard spoke in a calm voice.

“I knew Janice had noticed a while ago.”

“...Since when?”

“About two weeks ago.”

“Then why...?”

“Because I knew you’d behave like you did yesterday.”

Richard growled, cutting off her trembling voice.

“You acted like a foolish rabbit that thinks it’s completely hidden with its head buried in a hole. Adorably naive.”

“F-Foolish rabbit...”

As Charlotte was left speechless by his sharp words, someone knocked on the door from outside. She jumped up, startled to her core. The voice that followed was that of a steward.

“Are you up, Sir Richard? The Earl is calling for you.”

“I’ll be ready shortly.”

Richard’s lips curled into a smile as he looked at his lover’s pale face. He took off his gown. The sound of fabric falling to the floor made Charlotte instinctively shut her eyes tight.

“Incompetent maid.”

“You usually don’t ask me to attend to this...”

“If I tell you to, you should do it.”

Charlotte fidgeted, unable to argue with his point, until the rustling sound stopped.

“You can open your eyes now.”

“.....”

Richard was now impeccably dressed, as if he had never been disheveled. He straightened his tie one last time.

“I have somewhere to be this evening. Keep that in mind.”

“I have plans this evening...”

She couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence under his gaze, which seemed to ask if she had anything to say. Finally, Charlotte nodded. Richard smiled satisfactorily and started to walk past her. Or so she thought.

“Oh.”

As if he had just remembered something, he turned back slightly and reached out to remove Charlotte’s coif, letting her hair fall free. His low voice delivered a warning to her innocent, wide-eyed face.

“I told you to let your hair down when we’re alone, Charlotte.”

Leaving her frozen in place, he closed the door behind him.

On the awaited festival day, Finn was excited from the moment he woke up. His brother had asked him repeatedly if something good was happening. Knowing he would be teased if he told the reason, Finn didn’t answer.

But there was no hiding it. Watching his younger brother dodge his questions, Carl narrowed his eyes.

“Aha, it looks like you’ve got a girlfriend, huh?”

“No, I don’t!”

“It’s true. Your ears are turning red. That’s a dead giveaway,” Carl teased his younger brother, who was desperately denying it, with a sly smile.

“Are you planning to take her to the festival?”

Finn, who had been denying it vehemently, finally gave in to Carl’s knowing grin.

“Well... she’s not my girlfriend. Just someone I know.”

“A maid from Seoren Hall?”

“H-How did you know?”

Carl flicked his naive brother on the head.

“Ow!”

“Isn’t it obvious, you dummy? There’s no way someone as shy as you already has a girlfriend. The only girls around here are either much older or just kids.”

“...”

“So, what’s her name?”

“...Charlotte.”

“Oh, that’s a pretty name.”

“How can you tell just from the name?”

“I’ve got a sense for these things.”

Rubbing his stinging head, Finn retorted, “Don’t get interested. She said she’s leaving soon.”

“Who said I was interested? Those nobles always leave after a season anyway, like migratory birds.”

Carl, who worked as a stable boy for the nobles, shared this sentiment. After most fishing was banned for aesthetic reasons, the remaining people of Corlen Island were largely employed by the nobles to make a living.

Sensing he was getting in too deep, Finn stood up abruptly.

“Anyway, it’s none of your business, so stay out of it.”

Just then, someone knocked on the door. Finn, seizing the opportunity to escape his persistent brother, moved quickly to answer it.

“Yes, I’m coming!”

As he opened the door, Finn’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What brings you here...?”



Ch. 37 ASEF 37

The island was buzzing with excitement for the festival. It was a celebration for the common folk, so the further away from the nobles' quarters you went, the more you saw walls adorned with flowers and young women wearing flower crowns.

Charlotte's eyes sparkled with curiosity and joy as she gazed out the window, mesmerized. Richard, watching her, had a faint smile on his lips.

She had been so nervous when she was first pulled into the carriage. Despite his kindness of informing her that morning, she looked as if she was being kidnapped by a stranger.

'If anyone saw us...'

'The servants are all busy.'

'What?'

'I've informed the housekeeper.'

He had gone through the trouble of reassuring her in detail because he was impressed that she had already prepared her outdoor clothes. If she had pretended not to know and stayed in her room, his dwindling patience would have finally snapped.

Well, that might have been interesting in its own way.

He thought about her trembling and crying face beneath him. He liked women more when they were crying than when they were smiling. The best moments were when they eventually gave in to temptation or exhaustion after futile resistance.

Though she had marked herself as a member of the working class, her chastity was more akin to that of a high-class lady. That was why he had proposed to her. If he treated her as he wished, she would certainly break.

The unexpected part was that she had turned him down.

‘I’m not ready to be someone’s wife yet.’

‘Not ready?’

‘I’m still young.’

Twenty was the perfect age for marriage for a woman, not an age to call oneself a child. He had accepted her weak excuse because it piqued his interest.

He was curious to see how long she could continue to reject him. When she would abandon status, face, and reputation to follow her overwhelming desires and emotions.

But that was a gross miscalculation. His patience was wearing thin first.

Watching Charlotte Hegel blatantly avoid him since arriving on Corlen Island was infuriating. Maybe it would be best to break her once. Whether or not she could be fixed was a problem for later.

“Where are we going?” Her sudden question brought his dangerously spiraling thoughts to a halt. She had turned

from the window and was looking at him with wide eyes.

“We’re heading to the beach, I think.”

“We’re having a meal. I’ve rented a beachfront restaurant.”

As soon as he spoke, the carriage jolted as it left the village and headed downhill. The emerald sea began to come into view. Richard rested his elbow on the window sill and gazed outside, blinking slowly.

“Then we’ll go to the village festival.”

The newly forming pink sunset bathed his smooth jawline and side profile in a dreamlike glow. Charlotte stared, entranced, feeling as if he might disappear into the light. Without thinking, she reached out.

It was the first time she initiated contact.

Surprised, Richard’s calm eyes flickered with light. Before she could withdraw her hand, he covered it with his and brought it to his lips.

“Oh...!”

He kissed her pale hand sensually, then bit the soft inside of her wrist lightly, like a lazy predator toying with its mate, infusing the gesture with unmistakable sexual tension.

“And after that?” Charlotte whispered, her fingertips tingling with warmth.

“There is no ‘after that,’” he replied, kissing the tender skin below her wrist.

“.....”

“We won’t be going back tonight.”

It was a clear statement. Mesmerized, Charlotte nodded. Richard smiled in satisfaction. Before long, the carriage stopped in front of a restaurant.

“...This place...”

“It’s better to fill our stomachs first.”

The dim light of the evening cast a glow over the flickering candles in their silver holders. The spacious restaurant was empty, with just the two of them as its guests.

The manager led them courteously to the best spot on the second-floor terrace. The walls, decorated with lisianthus and lilies and trimmed with gold, were made of smoothly finished cream-colored limestone, softly illuminated by the moonlight.

With the sound of waves crashing in the background, a variety of dishes were laid out on the white tablecloth. The appetizers included grilled tomatoes topped with balsamic sauce and scallops, followed by thick, juicy beef steak slices from the center cut of the tenderloin.

As the main course was set on the table, the waiter explained, “For dessert, we have cherry clafoutis, baked with a mixture of whipped cream and almond flour, and topped with pitted cherries.”

Throughout the meal, two waiters attended to them, refilling their glasses as soon as they were empty and bringing the next course at the appropriate time.

It was strange being on the receiving end of the kind of service she was used to providing. Instead of feeling

excited, she felt like she was wearing clothes that didn't fit. Nonetheless, her hungry stomach welcomed the delicious food, which melted in her mouth. Having not eaten such luxurious food before, she ate quickly and almost got indigestion.

Then she noticed the white waves crashing outside. As Charlotte fixed her gaze on the sea, Richard, setting down his utensils, abruptly asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No. It's just that the view is so beautiful. And the food is delicious..."

It was too much luxury, almost excessively so. She thought of her mother, Cynthia, who was bedridden. She felt like a bad daughter for leaving her mother's side, even though her condition had improved. Yet, being here with her lover, spending time alone together, made her genuinely happy.

Richard, who had been watching her quietly, raised his hand to call a waiter. Shortly after, the waiter returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. Charlotte watched as the red wine filled the glass in front of her and belatedly reacted.

"I don't drink..."

"It's not strong. Just have a glass."

"....."

"I won't make you drink more."

Since turning of age, the only alcohol she had consumed was light sherry. She was about to refuse again when Richard's large hand covered hers, guiding her to hold the glass. Under the unspoken pressure, Charlotte finally brought the glass to her lips.

“This...”

It was different from what she expected. It was a bit bitter, but also sweet. Quite drinkable. She had intended to take just one sip but ended up drinking half of it. Though it was just one glass, her face quickly flushed. Charlotte spoke honestly with her heated face.

“It’s nice. Different from what I’ve had before...”

Without replying, Richard raised his glass and drank. After sending the waiters away, leaving them alone, he asked, “What were you thinking about earlier?”

“Nothing...”

“I thought you knew you weren’t good at hiding things.”

He never let anything slide when it came to her. Though usually stubborn, the alcohol made Charlotte want to be honest.

“You might find it boring, but I’ve never been to a place like this before.”

“You mentioned the beach.”

“Yes. But it wasn’t a tourist spot or a resort, so there were no fancy restaurants. Just a small village where people have lived for generations.”

It was a barren land with rugged cliffs against the rough sea and no suitable soil for farming.

“It wasn’t as beautiful as this place, and the climate wasn’t good either. Looking back, I don’t even have many fond memories, but I still think about it often. Because...”

The warmth flushing her cheeks had reached her eyes. Charlotte took a deep breath and continued.

“When my whole family was together...”

Even if they weren’t always happy, being together made them feel whole. Her silent but caring father, her sister who always thought of others, and her strict but kind mother.

“I wonder if I deserve such luxury, leaving my mother behind.”

“Charlotte,” Richard began heavily, having listened silently until now.

“You’ve done more than enough as a daughter. More than anyone could ask.”

Charlotte, with her head bowed, shook it slightly.

“My sister died last year after slipping on a mountain.”

“.....”

“It’s actually my fault. If it weren’t for me...”

It was her first time sharing this confession. A truth she hadn’t even told her mother, Cynthia.

“I had taken some time off and was visiting home. She must have wanted to treat me to something, so she went to pick some fruit. ...Stupidly.”

The guilt that had been pressing down on her heart rose up to her throat. Tears fell onto the white tablecloth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring this up.”

As Charlotte hastily wiped her eyes and forced a smile, the sound of a chair being pushed back echoed.

“Let’s skip dessert.”

Richard stood up and walked over, extending his hand to her.

“The festival should be in full swing by now.”

“What if someone sees us...”

“Don’t worry.”

There were no empty lies or clumsy reassurances. Instead, Richard wrapped his arm around her waist and replied,

“I’ll be wearing a mask.”



Ch. 38 ASEF 38

The long-standing festival on Corlen Island had its origins in an ancient legend. The story told of a maiden who one day encountered a god who had descended to earth.

The two fell in love at first sight and soon became inseparable. However, the god couldn't stay away from his heavenly duties for long. He promised the maiden that he would return to take her and their child with him.

But when he finally returned, many years had passed. The maiden, now an old woman who had raised their son alone, was on her deathbed. The god, unchanged and wearing a mask, came to her in her final moments. After she passed, he took his own life at the place where they had first met, and a tree grew tall and strong where he died.

To comfort the spirits of the sorrowful lovers, young couples would hold hands and circle the tree, starting the tradition of the festival. Legend has it that couples who meet during this festival are blessed by the gods and will find long-lasting happiness.

Interestingly, unlike the women, the men wear masks and cannot choose their partners. The women choose first, and the men respond.

As they got closer to the town square, more people started to glance at Richard. Even though he was dressed more casually than usual, his aura drew attention despite the

mask he wore. Charlotte walked calmly beside her lover, seemingly unaware of the stares.

“Delicious beer! Snacks so good you’ll forget to stop eating!”

“Tarts made with freshly picked fruits from this morning!”

“Melt-in-your-mouth homemade candy! So many varieties to choose from!”

Vendors were selling all kinds of treats. Since they had just eaten, they were only window-shopping. As word spread that the ceremony was about to start, the crowd surged toward the square. In the rush, Charlotte lost hold of Richard’s hand. She looked around frantically, searching for him.

“You there, miss.”

It was an old fortune-teller sitting on a carpet. At first, Charlotte didn’t realize she was being called, but the woman beckoned more clearly.

“The pretty girl with the black hair. Yes, you.”

“Yes...?”

When Charlotte answered, the old woman gestured for her to come closer. Feeling it would be rude to ignore her, Charlotte approached and was quickly pulled down to sit beside her.

“I’ve been watching you. You remind me of my granddaughter, and I need to tell you something.”

“What is it...”

“Something very wicked is attached to you.”

“.....”

“It’s severe... dark and oppressive, binding your limbs tightly. A black fog is ready to devour you. A great misfortune is imminent.”

A chill ran down Charlotte’s spine at the sudden ominous words. The woman was blind, adding to the eeriness of the situation.

“You still have a chance to escape. Flee far away. Live as if you’re dead, close your ears and eyes, and survive.”

Just as Charlotte was about to respond, the old woman’s expression turned to one of horror. A long shadow had fallen over them.

“Charlotte.”

Richard had found her and approached from behind. He gently but firmly removed the old woman’s grip on Charlotte’s arm.

“So here you are.”

Just a glance from Richard caused the old woman to tremble violently, like a helpless animal before a powerful predator.

Despite her earlier curse-like words, the old woman was clearly frail. Concerned, Charlotte reached out her hand.

“Are you alright, ma’am?”

“G-Go away, quickly!”

The old woman, who had so insistently called her over, now waved her off as if to ward off evil spirits. Her voice was harsh, but her lips were blue, and she looked as if she might collapse at any moment. As Charlotte looked around for someone to help, Richard's low voice interrupted.

"If we delay any longer, we'll miss the best part of the festival."

"But..."

"Come now."

"Go away! Please!"

With no other choice but to accept her refusal of help, Charlotte followed Richard as he gently urged her to move on.

As they reached the central square, the unsettling feeling from earlier vanished. Before them, young women with long, flowing hair dressed in white dresses and flower crowns, along with well-dressed young men, were beginning the ceremony. The orchestra played a lively waltz with horns, violins, and flutes in the background as couples danced in the center of the square.

The villagers surrounding them clapped and whistled in encouragement. The excitement was palpable, enveloping the entire town. Standing beside Richard, Charlotte watched the dancing couples and couldn't help but exclaim.

"This is wonderful. Everyone looks so lively and happy..."

Seeing her clap with childlike joy, Richard made a sudden suggestion.

“Then let’s join them.”

“What?”

At some point, he had bought a floral crown and gently placed it on Charlotte’s head. The delicate flowers complemented her dark hair beautifully. Richard leaned in and whispered to the hesitant Charlotte.

“We wouldn’t have come if we were just going to watch.”

“That’s...”

“Coward.”

It was infuriating. Annoyed and incredulous, Charlotte lifted her head. He often teased her, calling her a cowardly rabbit, but provoking her at such a moment?

“I’m not a coward.”

Her eyes reddened with frustration. Richard, smiling quietly, replied, “Then prove it.”

He pulled her into the crowd. As if on cue, the music became more lively and faster. Though she had only danced a few times long ago, her body instinctively followed the rhythm as their hands and gazes intertwined.

Her breath quickened. Every muscle, nerve, and vein focused solely on the man in front of her. The way their eyes met and parted, their fingertips brushed, and breaths mingled—it felt like every spectator was holding their breath, watching them.

Before she knew it, the music had ended. Applause erupted all around them. Charlotte, disoriented, found herself

separated from the crowd. She only realized this after regaining her senses. Richard had already found her and was now leading her briskly through the throng, holding her hand.

She thought she saw a familiar face in the crowd—Finn? She wanted to confirm but couldn't. Richard's unusual urgency made it hard for her to keep up. Out of breath, she finally shouted.

"Richard!"

Even she was startled, covering her mouth with her hands. It was the first time she had called him by name, without any title or honorific. The air seemed to pause. Richard, who had been hurrying along, turned his head. Unable to meet his gaze, she stammered.

"Oh, I mean..."

She couldn't finish the sentence because he had swept her off her feet.

"Ah!"

Before she could react, Richard, carrying her, continued walking swiftly. When she dared to open her eyes, his perfect, composed face was right in front of her.

"Where are we going?"

"....."

"Where..."

They approached a waiting carriage, and the driver opened the door with a respectful bow. Richard carried her inside

and sat her down like a doll, then immediately leaned in for a kiss.

“Ah! Mm...”

It was a savage kiss that made her vision go white. His tongue invaded her mouth without mercy, dominating and exploring. Struggling for breath, Charlotte pushed against his chest, finally getting a moment's reprieve.

“Wait... just a moment... I can't breathe...”

“Breathe through your nose.”

He pounced on her again like a wild beast. She didn't even notice when the carriage door closed or when they started moving.

After a long moment, he finally pulled away, leaving a trail of saliva between their lips. She regained her breath, her body limp from exhaustion. The carriage stopped, and the firmly shut door opened. Reluctantly, she let herself be carried in his arms, resigning to what was coming.

His eyes were hungry, as if biting and sucking every inch of her from head to toe still wouldn't be enough.

Tonight would feel like an eternity.

Sensing what was about to happen, Charlotte tightly shut her eyes.

The carriage stopped in front of a two-story villa. A man who seemed to be the caretaker greeted them at the door, but Richard ignored him and headed straight upstairs.

The bedroom was lavishly decorated: a large bay window, a fireplace with iron bars, oriental carpets, iris-patterned wallpaper, a rosewood couch, and a four-poster bed with drapes.

Though she couldn't take in all the details, it was an opulent bedroom.

"Sir Richard, this place..."

Charlotte looked around anxiously, but before she could say more, she felt a sharp pain on her earlobe.

"Ah!"

"So, you still have some composure left."

With a swift movement, Richard bit her earlobe and, like a predator catching its prey, grabbed her waist and threw her onto the bed. His hands moved quickly, unbuttoning her collar and pulling down her dress and petticoat.

As he unclasped her garter belt, hot breath trailed down her thigh. Charlotte, startled, hastily pulled her knees up.

"Lord Richard!"

"Call me Richard."

She tried to sit up and back away, but she was already cornered prey. The heat covering her entire body made it hard to breathe.

Through his disheveled hair, his upturned violet eyes glinted, telling her there would be no escape.

She had braced herself for this moment as they entered the villa, yet she was still scared. Scared there would be nothing

left of her but bones.

She needed a moment, any delay she could get. Shaking her head, Charlotte protested.

“I can’t call you that.”

“You did earlier.”

“.....”

“Take responsibility.”

For what? She didn’t have time to ask as he continued, “For making my cock hard with that name, dear Miss Hegel.”



Ch. 39 ASEF 39 - R19

Chapter warning: this chapter contains scenes of sexual content. Please be warned before proceeding.

“.....!”

Before she had a chance to react to his crude words, his large hands gripped her hips and pushed her back down. Her head fell back again. When her wandering hands touched his head, he bared his teeth and began pulling down her stockings.

“Ah...!”

Every touch ignited a feverish warmth. His lips and straight nose traced the contours of her body, exploring her white, soft thighs, her delicate knees, her slender calves, and her petite ankles.

“Stop... Ah!”

“Stop what?”

His hot, wet tongue licked up her instep.

“Mmm...!”

“Tell me what you want, Charlotte.”

He slowly licked and nibbled his way up from her ankle, to her calf, and then to her thigh. It felt like electricity was

coursing through her body. When his tongue reached her thigh, Richard grabbed both her wrists with one hand and pulled off the thin fabric covering her.

“No, don’t...!”

Her mind went blank. She didn’t even notice that her wrists had been released. He kissed her mound and parted her folds with his fingers, revealing the glistening pink inside. He lowered his head.

“Don’t! It’s dirty...!”

She tried to struggle, but his tongue had already delved deep inside her. The heat in such an intimate place made her head snap back in shock.

Holding her soft buttocks and burying his face in her secret garden, Richard licked and explored even deeper.

“Mmm, ah... Ah!”

When his tongue hit a sensitive spot inside her, her mind went blank again. Her body arched like a fish thrown onto land.

“Ahh... Ah!”

The unfamiliar pleasure coursed through her entire body, a thrilling sensation running down her spine. Instinctively, she pulled his head closer. His caresses grew deeper and more intense, matching her escalating moans. The louder her moans grew, the more her shame faded away.

“Ahh, mmm... Ah!”

The wet sounds, the gasping breaths.

“Ah, ahh... Ah!”

At some point, Charlotte threw her head back. Her entire body stiffened, then her mind went blank. Her body went limp, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps. It felt like she had just sprinted a long distance.

“Haa... Haa...”

“You cry so beautifully. I always knew that.”

Richard straightened up and ran his index and middle fingers over the place he had just pleased. He brought the wetness to his nose and sniffed it. It was an animalistic gesture, like a beast confirming his mate’s arousal. It felt like the man in front of her was carved out of pure savagery, a menacing, ruthless, and violent predator. It sent chills down her spine.

He gave a merciless smile to her dazed green eyes.

“Taste it.”

Before she could refuse, his fingers pressed down on her tongue.

“Mm, mm...”

A strange, salty taste filled her mouth. She couldn’t believe it came from her own body. She wanted to spit it out, but he didn’t allow it. Kneeling over her and straddling her waist, he commanded,

“Lick it. Leave nothing behind.”

“.....”

“It’s better than sucking my cock like a lollipop, isn’t it?”

Her eyes, red from tears, filled with moisture. Despite his harsh words, his hand gently brushed her tear-streaked face.

“Of course, if you’d prefer the latter, you’re welcome to choose, Charlotte.”

His voice was gentle. He was a man who could be a refined gentleman one moment and a savage beast the next. An endlessly tender yet endlessly cruel lover.

Charlotte surrendered to the kind tyrant. Sensing her submission, the pressure on her eased. Only after he licked and cleaned every trace of her essence from his long fingers did she catch her breath.

“Haa...”

Charlotte’s sweat-drenched body glowed with heat from head to toe. As she barely caught her breath, Richard lifted her exhausted body slightly and loosened the corset strings at her back. The familiar tightness disappeared, and her pink nipples stood proudly towards the ceiling.

“They’re beautiful. Even now.”

He looked at her with a peculiar expression, as if appraising a piece of art. Before she could respond, he covered the pink peaks with his lips.

“Ah... ah, mm!”

Like a child sucking at its mother’s breast, he pulled at her nipples with strong suction. All thoughts and reason were paralyzed. Charlotte dug her toes into the sheets and clutched them tightly.

“Mm, ah...”

Overwhelmed by the unbearable pleasure, Charlotte closed her eyes tight. She heard the rustle of him removing his coat. At the same time, his hand returned to part her again, rubbing the spot that had made her writhe earlier. The unrelenting pleasure, moving up and down, sent flashes through her mind.

Her eyes flew open. The moan that had been trapped in her throat burst out like a flood.

“Aaah.....!”

At the end of her long moan, Charlotte’s body went limp, half fainting. It was her second climax.

Richard laughed as he looked down at her, sprawled out and seemingly ready to pass out.

“Poor thing. We’re just getting started.”

Without giving her time to process his words, he continued. Lifting her legs and spreading her knees apart, he positioned his arousal close to her soaked entrance. Charlotte’s eyes widened in shock as she lifted her head slightly, her face turning pale.

“Ah.....”

Though she had never seen a man’s member before, she instinctively knew it wasn’t ordinary in size. Hard and veined, his reddish organ looked menacingly ready to impale her.

Richard lifted her trembling chin with his fingertips.

“The next time, we’ll try the other hole.”

His lips met hers, and without warning, he thrust inside. He had only just entered, yet the searing pain felt like her body was being torn in two.

“Mmmph.....!”

Richard swallowed her scream with his mouth as he pushed in to the hilt. The unbearable pain made Charlotte bite down on his invading tongue. The taste of blood spread in her mouth.

“...Mmm.”

Richard groaned briefly and withdrew his tongue. She saw thin streams of blood trickling down his chin. Charlotte’s eyes widened in shock, momentarily forgetting the pain. She lifted a trembling hand to wipe away the blood.

“Does it hurt... a lot?”

Her voice wavered, but he didn’t respond. Richard stared at her with a peculiar expression. She could tell the pain must have been immense. Tears that had momentarily stopped began to fall again from her shaking green eyes.

“It hurts a lot, doesn’t it... what should we do...”

She couldn’t even think about moving, but she knew she had to get out and seek help. Just as she closed her eyes tightly and tried to move away from him, he pulled back. She thought it might be over, but an intense pain overtook her again.

“Ah, aaaaah!”

He moved inside her relentlessly, hitting the entrance to her womb. It seemed even harder than before. Without giving the pain a moment to subside, he thrust beneath his massive body.

“Ah, ah... it hurts.....!”

Virgin blood stained the sheets from where they were joined. Richard wiped it off with his index finger and smeared it across her trembling neck and collarbone, as if adorning a sacrificial offering to a pagan god. Or perhaps, like a pagan god admiring his offering before devouring it.

“Ah, ha... ah...”

Richard resumed his movements, his hand retreating. His cock plunged to the entrance of her womb, filling her completely. It pierced to the deepest point before slowly withdrawing to the entrance, only to thrust back in the next moment.

“Ah... ah!”

Her fluids, flowing again, aided his movements with wet, slick sounds. He licked her neck, which arched in a graceful curve.

“Ah, ah... ah...”

As he penetrated her repeatedly, the forgotten pleasure began to return. The rough breathing, the smell of sweat, the sound of skin slapping against skin and the wet noises.

Even if she was being devoured down to her bones, it was blissful. The act of love with the person she loved. It was something she had vaguely dreamed of in her innocent girlhood.

“Richard... ah, ha...”

She reached out to embrace him, her palms brushing over the ripple of his firm back muscles. She could feel him pulsing as if he might burst through her stomach. Through her tear-blurred vision, she took in his godlike, perfect face.

“You love me, right?”

It was something she had always felt insecure about, never hearing it directly from his lips. Her heart pounded as she gathered the courage to ask. He drew closer to her lips. Just as she was about to speak, his sudden deep thrust made her body stiffen and convulse as if struck by lightning.

“Aah...!”

Her vision went white. Even as her contracting walls gripped him tightly, Richard continued his deep movements a few more times before he groaned and stiffened.

“Ugh...”

Something hot filled her inside completely, overflowing from where they were joined.

“Ah...”

She couldn't take it anymore...

Charlotte glanced down at him as he withdrew, her face paling at the sight. He was still as large and imposing as before, despite having just climaxed. The man she had just been with was undoubtedly a monster.

“Charlotte.”

In contrast, she was utterly exhausted, unable to move even a fingertip. She couldn't even respond to his call as her heavy eyelids closed.



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She could barely move a finger. Her voice was hoarse, making it difficult to speak. When she finally managed to lift her eyelids, she saw a thick blanket covering her up to her waist.

She was alone in the room. As Charlotte struggled to sit up, the door clicked open.

“Charlotte.”

“...Ri...”

“You don’t need to speak if it’s too much.”

Richard, now clean and neatly dressed, approached and set down a silver tray. It held a simple breakfast: bacon, scrambled eggs, a halved and lightly grilled tomato, and orange juice. Surprised to see only one serving, she looked up, and he immediately responded.

“I’ve already eaten.”

His hands gently placed the knife and fork in her hands. Though hungry, Charlotte shook her head, too weak to eat. A cool hand rested on her forehead. His face moved close, making her cheeks flush. The light filtering through the translucent curtains highlighted his light brown hair.

“Not hungry?”

“.....”

“Are you in pain?”

His gaze drifted to her lower abdomen, reminding her of the previous night. The man who had driven her to unconsciousness with relentless force. The pleasure that had devoured her to the bone. Richard cupped her blushing cheeks, drawing his face closer.

“You don’t seem to be in pain.”

Unable to turn away, Charlotte nodded. As he briefly moved away, her back pressed against his firm chest instead of the hard headboard.

“Open your mouth.”

“What...?”

“Your mouth.”

Caught off guard, she opened her mouth, and a piece of tomato slipped in. Too surprised to chew, she felt his arm tighten slightly around her waist.

“If you want more of what we had last night, just say so.”

“.....”

“I can give you other things too.”

His breath on her neck made her ears tingle. Startled, Charlotte quickly shook her head. As she chewed and swallowed, another bite of food followed.

Their early breakfast ended after she managed to eat a bit more than half. Although she had fainted during their encounter, there were no traces left from the night before except for the marks from his bites and kisses. She guessed he had cleaned everything himself, not wanting anyone else to see her bare body.

“Janice will have said you were sent on an errand early. You can go up through the kitchen.”

“And the person we saw last night...”

“You don’t need to worry. Nor about the coachman sitting in front now.”

His brief words left no room for doubt. He had arranged everything to avoid her being questioned about her whereabouts. Though it was strange that Janice had cooperated so willingly, Charlotte figured it was natural for subordinates to obey their superiors. This thought helped her set aside her worries.

She remembered seeing a pin the night before. Just as she hesitated to mention it, the carriage suddenly stopped. She peeked through the curtain and saw a boy. The coachman shouted at him.

“Carl, you little rascal! Jumping out like that, you could’ve caused an accident!”

“Ah! Sorry, sir. I’m late.”

“Do that again, and you’ll be in big trouble.”

“Yes! By the way...”

The boy, cheekily bowing his head, suddenly turned his gaze to the carriage. His eyes met Charlotte's.

"Can I ride next to you, sir? We're going the same way. I'll get off midway, I promise. Please?"

"Where do you think you're going! Get lost!"

A sense of déjà vu washed over her. It was strange. Though it was her first time seeing the boy, his face felt familiar. She was about to open the window for a better look when a hand reached from behind.

"Kyaa!"

Her vision went dark. Richard had covered her eyes with one hand and pulled the curtain shut with the other. As a bewildered Charlotte hesitated, she felt a sharp pain in her earlobe.

"Ow!"

She didn't even notice the carriage starting to move again, as he followed by biting her neck.

"Ow, that hurts!"

Her high-pitched scream was futile. Richard turned her around and bent down. He had somehow undone her collar and left bite marks down to her collarbone.

The gentle lover from the morning was gone, replaced by a wild beast inside the carriage. Charlotte scratched his bony hands, trying to escape his grasp.

"Good. Struggle more."

"....."

“I told you before it excites me more when you do.”

Because his little rabbit was too stupid to learn, right?

He whispered, holding her squirming body tight, biting her persistently as if marking her.

“Ugh... ah...”

She felt like she was being punished for no reason. It hurt and felt unfair, but she couldn’t resist. Eventually, Charlotte surrendered. Only when tears welled up in her large eyes did the sudden punishment end.

By then, the carriage had smoothly stopped at the back door of Seoren Hall. Richard, gently touching the clear bite marks, adjusted her clothes. Then he stepped out of the carriage first and, pretending to be the kind gentleman, extended his hand to her. Bitterly, Charlotte tried to ignore him and step out, but a sharp pain in her lower abdomen made her stumble.

“You never listen, do you?”

Clicking his tongue, he skillfully caught her by the waist and helped her down. As she set foot on the ground and looked up to thank him, he bent down and lightly kissed her forehead.

“Make sure to rest all day today.”

“...Yes.”

“Don’t overexert yourself, and if possible, stay in your room.”

“Understood.”

Only after promising repeatedly could she turn and walk away.

As she quietly opened the kitchen door, she was relieved to find it empty, the early dawn just beginning to break. Carefully tiptoeing up the servants' stairs, she felt a moment of relief upon reaching her room without encountering anyone.

"...Charlotte."

She froze as soon as she silently closed the door. Someone was in her room.

"Where were you last night?"

Charlotte turned slowly, stiff with fear.

"...Finn?"

She couldn't understand why he was there. It was completely unexpected. Her voice shook with confusion.

"What are you doing here?"

"...The door was open."

With his eyes lowered, Finn bit his lower lip as if wanting to say something but hesitated. Charlotte didn't notice, her heart still racing. Once she calmed down a bit, she spoke more steadily.

"You shouldn't just come in. It's someone else's room."

"I'm sorry. But more importantly..."

"Leave."

Finn looked like he had more to say, but Charlotte didn't give him a chance.

"Please, just go."

She knew what he wanted to ask: where she had been last night. She couldn't tell him, and she didn't want to. Finn was a good kid, but that was all. It felt like an invasion of her privacy.

"Charlotte..."

"Please, just leave. I'm sorry I broke my promise."

She knew she was at fault for that. She should have told him she couldn't come, even through Anna. But she was too overwhelmed to do so.

After a few seconds of silent eye contact, Finn lowered his head and stood up. Despite his tense expression, he complied without resistance.

"Thank you."

"One more thing."

Just as she was about to close the door, Finn blocked it with his hand and asked abruptly, "Charlotte, if you knew someone was doing something immoral, what would you do?"

"...I'd tell them to stop."

"What if it's too late for advice?"

"Then..."

Charlotte took a moment to gather her thoughts before responding.

“Then I’d leave them be. It’s their own issue.”

“.....”

“Is that all?”

She had no more to say and was too tired to continue. The lack of sleep from the previous night had left her exhausted. She closed the door.

Despite feeling uneasy, time passed quickly without giving her a chance to dwell on it.

The day after returning to Seoren Hall, Richard left for Corlen Island upon receiving a telegram about a friend’s sudden death. The remaining staff were busy preparing for an outdoor banquet, taking advantage of the improved weather. The men moved tables and chairs outside and decorated the walls, while the women arranged the table settings and handled kitchen duties. Charlotte was busy helping out.

“Charlotte, what are you fiddling with?”

“Ah, nothing. I was just thinking... should we put three or four of these flowers here?”

To catch her breath, Charlotte had taken something from her pocket and was toying with it, but she quickly hid it and changed the subject. Anna, who was too busy to stay curious for long, nodded.

“Yes, focus on the red ones to make it vibrant. Each table should have three vases.”

“Got it.”

“Make sure to remove any stray leaves. The Countess doesn’t like imperfections.”

“Understood.”

Charlotte used special scissors to trim the small branches and thorns from the delivered flowers.

For a supposedly casual event, it seemed quite lavish to Charlotte. There were a variety of foods, from canapés topped with cheese and bruschetta with tomato salsa to a whole roasted pig. The tables were decorated with sugar sculptures and flowers in glass vases. At the center was an ice sculpture of a swan.

As the uniformed staff hurried around, Charlotte focused on arranging the last vase of flowers.

Clang.

“...Ah!”

“I’m so sorry!”

A servant carrying a heavy chair bumped into her, causing the vase she was holding to shatter on the floor. Before she could even process the mess, the servant rushed off at someone’s call. As she bent down to pick up the broken pieces and flowers, a shadow fell over her. She froze when she saw the shoes in front of her.



Ch. 41 ASEF 41

“How disgraceful.”

The woman who had firmly stepped on the flower petals was looking down at her with a cold gaze.

“...Ma’am... No, Madam Janice.”

As she tried to get up, a strong force pushed down on her shoulders.

“Sit there and listen.”

“.....”

“Now that I know you’re a careless girl who treats her body carelessly, I have no more advice to give. I’ll just warn you about one thing.”

Her voice was as cold as ice.

It was Janice who had covered up Charlotte’s absence during the festival night. Given that, it was only natural that they had been together that night. But now that she was being blamed directly, she couldn’t bear to make eye contact. She felt like an ingrate for doing something so wrong to the woman who had treated her kindly when she first set foot in Mistymoor Hall.

“You might be fine as a temporary plaything.”

Feeling vague guilt, Charlotte lowered her eyes, but Janice continued as if it didn't matter.

"But that's all. If you indulge in ambitions beyond your means, you'll have to pay a heavy price."

The ominous voice became an invisible hand that gripped Charlotte's neck threateningly.

"You, of all people, are not worthy of such ambition."

"...Madam Janice."

"You'll soon be discarded like trash by him, but if you cling to him then..."

The hand squeezing her shoulder felt as if it could break the bone. Charlotte barely managed to swallow her groan and squeezed her eyes shut.

"I will kill you without fail."

It was a curse and a threat so deeply rooted that it could not be more sincere. Suffocated by the malicious intent that blackened her breath, she couldn't even twitch a finger.

She couldn't remember when Janice had left her seat. Kneeling there, lost in thought, someone approached Charlotte.

"Charlotte?"

Looking up, it was Finn. Contrary to the distant atmosphere of the past few days, Finn naturally held out his hand with a worried expression.

"Are you alright?"

“I’m fine.”

“Charlotte. I have something to say...”

“I’m sorry, but I’m a little busy right now.”

Rejecting his hand, Charlotte got up to finish collecting the shards. Soon, guests began to arrive one by one.

As the sun set beyond the horizon, lamps were lit, illuminating the bustling space. Elegant ladies and gentlemen in stylish tailcoats chatted amicably. At the center stood the countess and the earl, dressed elegantly.

“Thank you for accepting our invitation. I hope you have a pleasant time, though it may be humble.”

“Humble? It’s been a while since we’ve had such a rich and beautiful banquet. Thank you for giving us a good time.”

The ladies seemed disappointed that their target, Richard Kensington, was absent, but they didn’t show it too crudely. The host Earl raised his glass for a toast.

“To the health of Her Majesty the Queen!”

“Cheers!”

“To the eternal prosperity of Ethelwood!”

“Cheers!”

As always, the role of a maid at a noble’s banquet was to stand ten steps back and wait quietly for instructions. Just as it had been at Miss Spencer’s birthday.

Although many things had changed since then, and many events had occurred, the situation remained the same. An

invisible yet palpable wall, like a glass barrier, divided the two worlds. Even if they had become deeply involved that night, nothing would change.

Charlotte once again recognized her place. Richard Kensington would never come to her side. She couldn't even dare to want it, and even if she did, he wasn't the kind of man who would step down to her level. Likewise, the thought of her rising to his world was out of the question.

'Do you love me...?'

When she had asked that question in a moment of blinding confusion, no answer had come. Instead of a response, the man had given a smile so intoxicating that it took her breath away. He captivated her cruelly, without even holding her hand.

A mere plaything.

Janice's words, sharp as knives, stabbed at Charlotte's heart.

No. It can't be. If that were true, on the day she had desperately confessed her feelings like someone drowning, he would have taken advantage of her then and there. But he hadn't. He had several chances, yet he never took them. He waited and was patient. What man would endure such restraint for a mere plaything?

And most importantly...

Charlotte's face turned pale as she searched her waist.

It was gone.

“Anna, I’m sorry, but I need to go to the bathroom for a moment.”

“Now?”

“My stomach...”

Anna turned her head, frowning. Then, seeing Charlotte’s face as pale as a ghost, she looked shocked.

“What’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

“My stomach hurts. I think my period has started.”

“Alright, take your time. If it gets too bad, I’ll tell Lady Janice...”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be quick. Thank you.”

Charlotte hastily declined Anna’s offer and slightly bowed her head. She then quickly walked into the mansion.

She needed to find it. She had been in and out of the mansion, so she must have lost it inside.

‘This is...’

‘This is a ring my late father left me.’

‘Why are you giving me something so precious...?’

‘Keep it.’

The hand that tucked her hair behind her ear.

‘Until I return.’

The voice that gently enclosed her in its warmth.

As she remembered, her eyes welled up with tears. Anxiety, impatience, and despair choked her. She must find it. Wiping away the tears that threatened to fall, Charlotte frantically searched every corner of the hall, until she bumped into someone.

Thud.

“Watch it!”

“I’m sorry!”

The strong smell of alcohol hit her nose. As Charlotte bowed deeply to apologize and tried to pass, the man grabbed her wrist tightly. Before she could even scream, he pulled her into an embrace and grinned.

“What are you doing here, pretty thing?”

“Let go, please...!”

His hot breath brushed against her neck. His sticky hand groped her waist. It felt like a spider crawling on her skin. The intense disgust made her tremble. She cursed her body for freezing up.

Cold sweat ran down her back, and she couldn’t even find her voice.

“No! Someone, please... mmph...!”

“Be quiet.”

A man roughly clamped his hand over her mouth to stifle her scream, while his other hand tightly restrained her struggling body as he dragged her to a secluded spot.

“Mmph...!”

She frantically looked around, but there wasn't even a delivery boy in sight. She was only released from his grip once the door shut behind them.

Thud.

"If you stay still, you might even enjoy it."

The man, eyes glazed with lust, had taken her to a makeshift guest room on the first floor.

"I won't be rough. Okay? I'll even pay you well..."

"No!"

As Charlotte threw herself towards the door, the man grabbed her by the hair.

"You little...!"

"Aah...!"

Slap.

Her cheek burned with sharp pain. The violence made her legs give out, and she collapsed. The man, having smoothed his hair back, knelt down and lifted her chin with his finger.

"I tried to be a gentleman, but you just had to cross the line. This is why commoners... right?"

Through her disheveled black hair, her peridot-green eyes shone. The man's lips curled into a loose grin, captivated by her unexpected beauty. The sight of her swollen cheek was annoying, but she was quite the rare beauty. Forcing her was one thing, but having that smooth, white skin cling to him willingly would be a special treat.

“Sorry for hitting you. But think about it. It’s sudden, but wouldn’t you like to climb up the ranks?”

“...No, no...”

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut. The hand gripping her chin was revolting. His breath, so close, smelled like a sewer. Her continued refusal quickly soured his mood, and he yanked her hair even harder. Tears streamed down from the renewed pain.

“Agh...!”

“What does a maid like you know? If I like you, I could even make you my mistress.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard such words. For a woman of the working class, being pretty meant one of two things: ruining your life by force or by choice. Either becoming the mistress of a wealthy noble or ending up in a brothel.

That’s why Charlotte had no regrets about last night. She had chosen to give her purity to someone she loved, rather than have it taken away by force someday.

“No. I said no...!”

She hadn’t realized how different it would feel. Every touch from this nameless man felt like her skin was rotting away. Even as her head throbbed from the relentless slaps, the disgust and horror made her want to vomit.

She’d rather be beaten to a pulp than be violated like this. Even if it meant breaking an arm or a leg, it would be better.

Spit.

The man, undeterred by her desperate resistance, stopped unbuttoning her dress. He touched his cheek in disbelief, finding it wet. His face flushed with anger, his lust turning into a wildfire of rage.

“You really want to die, don’t you...!”

“Gah, cough...!”

“Die!”

His hands wrapped around her neck, cutting off her air. She struggled, clawing at his hands, but it was no use.

“Die!”

The murderous intent was clear. Her body convulsed from the sudden lack of oxygen, and her vision began to blur. Just as her eyes began to roll back and she was about to lose consciousness—

Thud.

The hands around her neck released, and the man collapsed to the side.



T/N: I’m back! Sorry for the long wait. I’ve posted 15 new chapters for this novel (ASEF) and will post the final 9 chapters either tomorrow or sometime this week so I can focus on my other ongoing novels. I’ll work on <Limits of Paradise> next and then move on to <Enemies Meet in an Arranged Marriage> sometime this month. For now,

schedule is still tentative because of my busy work days.
Thank you for understanding!

Ch. 42 ASEF 42

As the air rushed back into her lungs, Charlotte coughed violently, struggling to catch her breath. With great effort, she managed to lift her upper body and clutched her neck with both hands.

“Cough, cough...!”

“Charlotte!”

“Gasp, ha....”

“Are you alright?”

It was only when her frantic breathing began to stabilize that she could finally look up. Standing there, holding a small object, was Finn. He quickly put down what he was holding and, still catching his breath from the shock, spoke softly.

“I was coming to get more drinks when I heard strange noises, so I came to check.”

“Th-thank you...”

Her heart still pounded with fear, and tears welled up in her eyes, falling uncontrollably.

“That man is...”

“Probably one of the guests.”

“C-could he be...”

Sensing her rising anxiety, Finn quickly checked the man’s pulse and added with relief.

“He’s not dead. He’s just heavily drunk and won’t remember anything by morning.”

“Thank goodness... thank goodness...”

“Now, let’s get you up. I’ll take care of the rest.”

As Charlotte was helped to her feet, she noticed something shiny in Finn’s vest pocket. Instinctively, she reached out for it. Finn, seemingly unaware, turned to grip the doorknob.

“Charlotte, what’s wrong? We need to get out of here...”

“Let go!”

“Charlotte!”

“Why do you have this? Why is this with you?”

“...”

In her palm was a ring, a platinum band with three diamonds set in the center. Finn, momentarily speechless, finally began to speak.

“It’s just a coincidence...”

Click.

“Ahhh!”

The door on the opposite side opened, and a maid’s shrill scream echoed through the mansion. The commotion

quickly drew a crowd.

“What on earth is going on, gasp...!”

“There’s... there’s a dead man!”

“Ahhhhh!”

“Everyone, quiet down!”

Fortunately, the screams hadn’t reached the ballroom, so only the staff had gathered. Janice, who had somehow arrived amidst the chaos, sharply examined Charlotte from head to toe.

Disheveled hair, disordered clothes, bloodshot eyes from burst capillaries, a swollen cheek, and handprints on her neck.

As silence fell under Janice’s commanding presence, she bent down to check the fallen man’s pulse, sighed softly, and issued her orders.

“Quietly bring the Earl here and take her to a bed. Do it discreetly, without drawing any more attention.”

Due to the unexpected incident, the party, which was supposed to continue past midnight, ended a bit early. Normally, the atmosphere would be buzzing with excitement after such a grand event, but things had changed.

Under the efficient direction of the manager, the staff went about their cleanup tasks silently. In the midst of this heavy atmosphere stood Charlotte Hegel, the outsider.

The Earl's gaze, cold and piercing, bore into her as she explained what had happened, standing before him like a criminal.

"...and in the struggle, I saw the piece and hit him on the head with it."

"You had the presence of mind for that? You're more composed than I thought."

Luckily, the man had only suffered minor injuries and his life wasn't in danger. Since he was one of Chloe's carefully selected guests, it would be problematic if relations soured. Although he was heavily drunk, they could smooth things over with some coaxing. Nevertheless, the fact that something like this happened in his villa was deeply unsettling for the Earl, regardless of who was at fault.

Leaning back in his chair, Seymour listened silently, rubbing his face in exhaustion.

"So why was the kitchen errand boy there?"

"He heard my scream and came running."

Charlotte raised her eyes. Thankfully, the lie slipped out smoothly. Although Finn had intervened to save her, the man he had harmed was a noble. If the noble decided to press charges, Finn could face severe punishment, possibly even imprisonment.

Ethelwood was still a rigidly hierarchical society. It would be easy to throw a small errand boy into a filthy, stinking, harsh prison cell in the blink of an eye.

She didn't yet know why Finn had the ring, but that was a problem for another time. She couldn't repay his help with

betrayal.

The Earl's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he seemed unwilling to press the disheveled woman further.

"...Alright, you may go."

Instead of replying, Charlotte bowed deeply and exited the room. Left alone, Seymour tried to gather his thoughts. But within minutes, there was a knock at the door. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head, but the persistent knocking continued.

"Come in."

He finally gave in. Janice entered briskly and asked directly.

"What have you decided to do?"

"About what?"

"I'm talking about Charlotte Hegel."

Janice's eyebrows shot up at the evasive answer, and she pressed aggressively.

"She's just a temporary guest causing trouble. Shouldn't she be thrown out immediately?"

Her prepared tirade made Seymour's head throb again.

"It was just a drunken mistake by the baron. Charlotte Hegel was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Handling the situation quietly and without further complications seemed best, especially if Chloe remained unaware.

Sensing his thoughts, Janice clenched and unclenched her fist before speaking with a meaningful tone.

“Well, are you sure about that?”

“What are you implying?”

“She’s Cynthia’s daughter, and I thought she’d be leaving soon anyway, so I didn’t mention it. But it turns out she’s quite the flirt.”

“What?”

“She was practically chased out of her last job a few years ago.”

Seymour’s eyes narrowed sharply, signaling her to continue. She smiled slightly as she spoke.

“She was accused of seducing the young master of the house she worked for...”

“Rumors aren’t always trustworthy.”

He spoke firmly, though he was visibly taken aback. Janice seized the opportunity to continue.

“That’s not all. When young master Richard was shot, it seemed suspicious even then.”

“What do you mean?”

As expected, he was completely caught off guard by the name and stood up abruptly.

“The culprit was that very young master. He came to see Charlotte Hegel.”

Janice drove the point home, watching his shocked expression.

“Do you still think she’s just an innocent victim?”

A heavy silence fell over the room. After a long pause, the Earl, his face flushed with anger, gave his order.

“Throw her out at dawn.”

His tone left no room for reconsideration. He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

The pounding on her door woke Charlotte, who had been tossing and turning all night due to the pain in her neck and cheek. The command to pack her things and leave was like a bolt from the blue.

Before she could even react, Janice coldly informed her.

“You have until sunrise to pack. Otherwise, you’ll be thrown out with nothing.”

Charlotte’s lips moved to protest, but Janice’s stern demeanor left no room for argument. She had no choice. Fortunately, she didn’t have much to pack, so it didn’t take long. As she donned her coat and stepped outside, Janice, who had been waiting against the wall, led the way with a stone cold expression.

“Don’t worry about Cynthia. Let us know once you’re settled, and we’ll send for her.”

It was a surprisingly considerate gesture, given the harshness of throwing out a woman who had just been assaulted. Charlotte, carrying her belongings, stopped in her tracks.

“I...”

“ ...”

“I don’t understand why you’re being so cruel to me while caring for my mother.”

Janice also paused at the unexpected words.

“You care about my mother, your friend, yet you treat me, her daughter, so harshly.”

This was undoubtedly Janice’s doing. In the study, Seymour Kensington had not seemed inclined to throw her out. Even if he had been concerned about the scandal and decided to send her away later, he wouldn’t have done it in such a manner—whether out of concern for appearances or his own conscience.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon. A red band of light emerged from the distant sea, casting a faint glow over the island. As the oppressive silence weighed down on her, Janice finally replied.

“Because you coveted the only thing that was mine.”

It was an unexpected remark. Charlotte had anticipated accusations of overstepping or being out of line. It felt like someone had struck her over the head with a blunt object.

“When have I ever...!”

She staggered, her hand trembling as it gripped the wall for support.

“I’ve never coveted anything of yours.”

All she had wanted was just...

Just...

Heat surged to her eyes, tears welling up beneath her bloodshot whites. Janice, who had turned away, swiftly approached. Before Charlotte could react, Janice grabbed her chin, forcing their faces close together, and whispered menacingly.

"I know what you're thinking."

"..."

"Yes, it might be love now. For now. But tell me this."

Her eyes glinted more menacingly than the man who had attacked Charlotte. The overwhelming madness left Charlotte breathless.

"How long do you think that will last?"

Charlotte realized that the older woman before her wasn't looking at her. She was staring into a distant past, one much older than the present.

'Choose, Janice. Will you leave on your own, or be dragged out?'

'My lord, I...I love Seymour...!'

'If you leave, I will find you a good marriage. I even have a letter of introduction ready.'

'...'

'It's entirely your choice.'

A young Janice stood before an impregnable fortress.

‘I will leave.’

She began to show signs of pregnancy after she had already made her choice. It was too late by then.

‘You abandoned me.’

‘Seymour!’

When she returned, heavily pregnant, she was no longer greeted by the lover she once knew.

Her face twisted with blood rushing in, filled with frustration, misery, anger, and shame—too pitiful to even look at.

“They took my child from me the moment it was born. Before the fever from my difficult labor had even subsided!”

Charlotte froze. This was the first she had heard of it. The shocking confession left her unable to breathe deeply.

So, maybe...

Janice turned her head away from Charlotte’s pale face and released her grip.

“If you go around talking about this, you’ll never see Cynthia again.”

Charlotte collapsed, overwhelmed by the airtight threat. Any mercy or consideration for a friend was completely gone. The long-time companion was now merely a tool for blackmail.

“One last thing.”

Charlotte’s voice was barely a whisper as she addressed the woman who had turned her back.

“That man, does he have anything to do with you?”

“Who knows.”

Janice’s ambiguous reply came as she walked away.

“Think whatever you want.”

That was the end of their conversation.

Waiting by the back door, a carriage soon rolled up silently. The coachman stepped down and extended his hand.

“Give me your luggage.”

“...Thank you.”

Charlotte’s face was as pale as if she might collapse at any moment. The coachman started to ask if she was alright, but the deep sorrow in her eyes made him hold his tongue.



T/N: If you haven’t noticed, I’ve also created a Ko-Fi profile in case you want to show some support! (no pressure though). You can see the link if you click on the little attachment beside my name!

Ch. 43 ASEF 43

“Ugh, it’s so cold!”

Carl snuggled up next to his silently tossing brother, pressing his cold cheek against his brother’s warm face. Finn jerked away in surprise.

“What are you doing?!”

“Man, it’s freezing outside. Just stay still for a second. Ah, that’s warm.”

It had only been a few hours since he stumbled into the house and collapsed. Finn, finally managing to push off his unhelpful brother’s limbs, sat up in bed, glaring at Carl, who was now snug under the stolen blanket up to his chin.

“You went out at this hour?”

“I had no choice. They called me out suddenly.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They said they needed two horses immediately. So I had to feed them, saddle them, and trim their hooves...”

“It’s freezing out there. Seriously.” Carl shivered, muttering under his breath.

“What a rough morning.”

“Where did the horses go?”

“To your workplace. Seoren or whatever it’s called... Finn?”

Carl, who had been yawning and pulling the blanket tighter, suddenly opened his eyes wide upon seeing his brother bustling around.

“Where are you going?”

“To the docks.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask.”

Finn hurriedly changed his clothes, grabbed his coat, and slipped on his shoes before turning the doorknob.

“Prepare some warm milk. We’re expecting a guest.”

“What?”

“They might stay for a while.”

“What do you mean, hey...!”

Before Carl could ask anything more, the door slammed shut.

A sharp northern wind cut across Finn’s cheeks. His legs felt weak, probably from moving so quickly after waking up. He stumbled a few times on the downhill path but kept running, gritting his teeth.

He couldn’t miss her.

‘Looks like Charlotte dropped this.’

‘Janice...?’

‘Find her and give it back. It’s the only way you might get to talk to her again.’

‘...’

‘She just went inside.’

He had accepted the sudden suggestion without a second thought, which was the problem. He shouldn’t have ignored that uneasy feeling. He regretted losing his composure when he opened the door to the commotion. Maybe...

“Charlotte...!”

Out of breath, he shouted at the distant figure loading cargo onto a boat. Charlotte turned around at the sound. When their eyes met, Finn ran even faster.

“Don’t go! Please, wait!”

He ran with all his might. When he reached the dock, his legs gave out, and he doubled over, dry heaving from the exertion.

“Finn...”

Charlotte stood there, looking surprised, and questioned him.

“Why are you here? How did you know?”

“Please, don’t go.”

“What?”

Finn wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and straightened up to face Charlotte.

“If you leave like this, you’ll be kicked out. I’m sure Janice is behind this.”

“How do you know that...?”

“The ring.”

“...”

“She gave it to you. And maybe that drunk guy too...”

It was a moment of realization. Charlotte’s eyes wavered.

“Come back with me. I’ll explain everything. Yesterday was just too chaotic...”

“And if you explain, what will change?”

As Finn reached for the luggage on the boat, a cold voice cut through the air.

“What will change if you explain?”

“Charlotte...”

She wasn’t naive. She had grown up in a harsh environment, too harsh to be oblivious to the ways of the world.

“What power do we have?”

Things were bad now, but Charlotte knew they could get worse. Janice wouldn’t leave her alone after she had uncovered secrets. She had heard about a woman who was drugged, ruined, and sold to a brothel. If the Earl and Janice

wished so, it wouldn't be difficult to arrange something similar.

Still in shock, rational thinking was impossible. As Charlotte turned away and was about to get back on the boat, another voice called out.

"What about that man?"

A familiar yet unexpected voice. Finn's eyes widened in surprise.

"Brother?"

Carl, who had followed closely behind, also wiping sweat from his brow, approached briskly.

"The man who was in the carriage that time, right?"

"Brother...!"

Ignoring Finn, Carl grabbed Charlotte's luggage and signaled the waiting fisherman to leave.

"I don't know what's going on, but this kid has never lied, so I'm going to get involved."

"And you are...?"

"The man with you, isn't he your lover? He looked like a noble."

The boat began to depart behind them. Carl's words struck Charlotte like lightning as she stood there, empty-handed.

"Are you really going to leave without saying goodbye?"

Those words broke her, and the tears she had been holding back burst forth. Finn caught her as she collapsed forward.

It was a bone-chilling, cold dawn. A sailor jumped lightly onto the dock and tied the boat securely. After making sure everything was fastened, he turned around and asked politely.

“Shall I carry your bag, sir?”

The lone passenger, wearing a deeply pulled-down fedora, shook his head in silence. The sailor swallowed hard. It was his first time ferrying such a mysterious guest.

‘Who is this, at this ungodly hour?’

It had all started when someone knocked on the door of the dock’s night-duty room early in the morning. Ignoring it seemed like a bad idea, as the person seemed ready to break down the door. Annoyed, he opened the door, expecting a drunkard, but the man he faced was surprisingly well-dressed. Taller by at least two heads, with a pale, cold face that resembled a marble statue. The custom-tailored suit was an obvious fit.

“Who are you, sir?”

For over a decade, he’d lived as a rough sailor, battling the waves. Yet, just facing this man, he felt a strange, overwhelming pressure. His anger quickly subsided, and his body instinctively shrank back.

The man spoke in a low voice.

“I need to go to Corlen Island.”

His voice was deep and resonant, with a slight metallic edge, likely from fatigue. The sailor, eyes wide, responded.

“At this hour...?”

“I’ll triple the pay.”

“ ... ”

“I’ll pay you three times your daily wage for a round trip to the island.”

“But...”

Triple the pay. It was a tempting offer, but it was illegal for a lone sailor to take a small boat out by himself. A pang of conscience struck him. As he hesitated, the man smoothly asked.

“What are you waiting for?”

The sailor momentarily lost his composure at the sight of the man’s slightly revealed face. It was an extraordinary beauty.

While he was stunned, the man placed an advance payment in his hand. Seeing the substantial amount, the sailor’s hesitation vanished.

“Do I need to wait for you to come back?”

“That’s up to you. Just be here at the agreed time.”

The man, who had been speaking so naturally, stepped off the boat. A carriage was waiting at the dock as if expecting him. As the door quietly opened, the sailor caught a glimpse of bound hands in the dim light. He took a sharp breath.

The man paused, seemingly having heard the breath, and without turning his head, asked.

“What? Do you have something to say?”

“N-no, nothing at all...”

Cold sweat trickled down the sailor’s back. He stammered and bowed deeply towards the man’s retreating figure.

He instinctively knew he shouldn’t tell anyone about this.

Keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the ground, he heard the footsteps recede and the carriage door close with a thud. The horses, blindfolded, kicked up dust as they sped away.

Later that morning, Finn knocked a couple of times and turned the doorknob.

“You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Much better.”

Charlotte nodded with a faint smile. The swelling on her cheeks and the marks on her neck had somewhat faded over the past few days, but she still flinched at loud noises, showing she was still shaken.

“Where’s Carl?”

“He went to work right after you arrived. Here, drink this. It’s warm.”

Finn handed her a cup of warm milk. As she took it, she felt the warmth spread through her body.

“Thank you.”

Finn, looking at her with concern, nodded and sat down on the bed next to her. It had been five days since he persuaded her to stay at their home instead of leaving. Their parents were away for work and only returned on weekends, so it was just the siblings at home during the week. After lending her his bed, Charlotte had slept deeply, waking intermittently over the past five days.

She looked much better now, probably because she had been sleeping a lot. Watching her, Finn spoke heavily.

“What are you planning to do now?”

“I don’t know.”

Her eyes were swollen from crying every time she woke up. She put down the cup and covered her eyes with her palms. Finn clenched and unclenched his fists, then spoke decisively.

“Come back to Seoren Hall with me. I’ll explain everything.”

“Do you have any proof?”

A dry voice responded.

“Proof?”

“Proof that the drunk man is connected to Janice. Evidence that she’s behind all of this.”

“That...”

“You don’t have any, do you? What good would it do for just the two of us to talk about it?”

“But...!”

They had suspicions but no concrete evidence. Even if they pushed hard, they could only go so far. Charlotte thought back to how she ended up on Corlen Island in the first place.

It was Janice who decided who would come to this resort. Maybe it was all part of her plan from the beginning. After all, she had always been bothered by the closeness between Richard and Charlotte, a mere servant’s daughter.

Now, Charlotte understood why. But she couldn’t tell anyone.

She had been on the island for five days now, but it was time to... Charlotte took a deep breath and steadied herself.

“Can I borrow some paper and a pen?”

“Charlotte...”

“Please.”

Finn hesitated for a moment before nodding. As he left the room, she was finally alone.

“I won’t cry.”

Charlotte quietly murmured to herself, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. She whispered to herself, trying to find comfort. Their relationship was bound to end sooner or later. There were plenty of lovers who never made it to marriage. At least they had been happy for a while...

For a while...

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte made up her mind and opened her eyes. Just then, Finn returned with the paper and pen. Charlotte wrote a short letter and then asked softly,

“Finn, are you going to work at Seoren Hall today?”

“I can take the day off if I explain the situation. If you’re scared to be alone, I can stay...”

“No.”

Charlotte shook her head and made a request.

“Could you secretly slip this under Richard’s door?”

“Charlotte...”

The letter said she was leaving because her feelings had changed. She didn’t want Richard to think she had been kicked out so miserably.

“...Alright. If that’s really what you want.”

Finn nodded gloomily and soon left the house. A little while later, Charlotte picked up her luggage from under the bed and stepped outside.

It was at that moment.

“Mmph...!”

A man who had been lying in wait pounced on her. A hand reached out from behind and clamped over her mouth. She struggled desperately, but it was no use. The handkerchief covering her nose and mouth made her lose consciousness, and she went limp.



Ch. 44 ASEF 44

Seoren Hall was eerily quiet, except for the fact that one person had seemingly vanished into thin air.

As Finn stepped inside the mansion, he immediately sought out a familiar face.

“Anna.”

“Finn?”

“Do you have a moment?”

Finn was just a kitchen errand boy, not particularly close to her. When she nodded, he glanced around briefly and gestured for her to follow him to a secluded spot under the stairs. As Anna approached, he handed her something.

“What’s this?”

“Could you slip this under Sir Richard’s door? You’re on cleaning duty today, right?”

“...”

“Please. It won’t cause any trouble.”

It was a sudden and odd request, but his eyes were pleading. She had a hunch about what it might be. Anna nodded and tucked the folded letter into her apron just as a loud voice echoed from the entrance hall.

“Sir Richard!”

It was Janice’s voice. Heading towards the commotion, they saw Richard Kensington, who had been away from the island for a while, standing there.

He handed his gloves and coat to Janice, who had come to greet him, and then glanced around the room. For a brief moment, his eyes met Anna’s, but it was fleeting.

As he climbed the stairs, Janice followed him, speaking warmly.

“Aren’t you tired from your trip? I’ll prepare a bath for you right away.”

“The Earl?”

“He’s out at the moment. He went for a walk with the Madam.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Excuse me?”

“Anna Scott.”

As the atmosphere grew tense, Anna quickly ascended the stairs and stopped in front of Richard. She glanced at Janice, who was looking puzzled, and waited for his next words.

“Where is Charlotte Hegel?”

Anna, with her head bowed, responded calmly, almost as if she had been expecting the question.

“She was expelled.”

“Anna!”

“How?”

Despite the sudden news about his lover, Richard’s expression didn’t change. His voice remained flat and emotionless, just like always. As Janice lunged to silence Anna, a heavy thud sounded behind them, followed by a young maid’s scream echoing through the entrance hall.

“Ahhh!”

“Oh my...!”

The coachman had dragged a sack out of the carriage. More accurately, it was a blood-soaked man covered by the sack.

The figure on the ground groaned and writhed in pain. No one dared to move. The air was thick with tension. The shocking scene made Janice collapse to the floor.

“What on earth...?”

“Pretending not to know, are we? That’s quite cold.”

“Richard...!”

“Is it because you were too far away?”

Richard looked down at Janice’s pale, trembling face and nodded to the coachman. Following his orders, the coachman dragged the writhing sack to the foot of the stairs. Dark red blood smeared the ground, making it look like the entrance to hell.

“Isn’t this a familiar face, hmm?”

The coachman untied the sack. The hair that emerged was unmistakably familiar. It was the man who had attacked Charlotte Hegel, the same man Janice had used and discarded. His face was a mess, beaten so badly he could barely open his eyes.

“Richard...!”

Janice, clutching at Richard’s pant leg, started to speak but fell silent when she saw his eyes. This wasn’t someone who could be reasoned with or pleaded with. The dark, ominous air around him was suffocating. He was like a predator, starved and now sated with blood.

“It’s time for a confrontation.”

He smiled, a violent grin that seemed to come from deep within.

“Bring the Earl.”

“Yes.”

The coachman—no, Carl—responded.

“What on earth is going on, Richard?”

“You’ve arrived.”

The voice was trembling with shock and anger. The urgent call had brought him back to a horrifying scene. The entire place was filled with an oppressive air that made it hard to breathe.

The servants were frozen as if they had seen a ghost. Bloodstains on the white marble floor led to the sack lying there. From inside came the sound of labored, painful

breathing. Without even a moment to process the shock, he reached out hurriedly.

“Oh...”

“Chloe!”

He caught his wife as she fainted without a sound. As his eyes moved to the woman sitting on the staircase landing, he realized what was inside the sack. His legs gave out, and he staggered. The steward who had followed him approached.

“Earl.”

“I’m fine. Take Chloe to the bedroom. Franz and Peter too.”

The steward nodded and took the Countess. Following his orders, the staff scattered like shadows. Seymour, watching it all in silence, spoke heavily to the man observing them.

“Let’s talk in the study.”

Leaving those words, he quickly exited the scene.

Inside the study, he drew the thick blackout curtains, plunging the room into darkness despite it being noon. Apart from the crackling fireplace, the room was eerily quiet.

The two men sat on the couch, a stark contrast to each other. Seymour, hands clasped and elbows on knees, seemed suffocated by the pressure, taking slow, deep breaths. Richard, on the other hand, lounged with his legs crossed, leisurely sipping tea.

“Why the sudden confrontation?”

“Do you need confirmation?”

Seymour sighed heavily and straightened up.

“How did you know? How much do you know?”

“Anna Scott, Carl Feilot.”

Richard named them one after the other.

“They’ve served as my eyes since I arrived on Corlen Island.”

“Why?”

“Because Janice seemed suspicious.”

“Richard!”

It was as if he had anticipated this outcome. Despite his calm demeanor, the fingers in his hand gripping the cup were starkly visible.

“She orchestrated all of this.”

“That can’t be.”

Richard placed his cup down and gave Seymour a cold smile as he shook his head.

“Shall I bring the baron back? Put a gun to his head again, and he’ll spill everything.”

“You did that? Are you insane?”

The Earl stood up abruptly, his anger flaring. Even though the baron came from a less influential family, he was still

part of high society. If this went to trial, it would undoubtedly lead to a scandal.

“This is all because of Charlotte Hegel, isn’t it?”

There was no answer. The redirected anger flared up like a fire catching on dry twigs.

“It’s all because of that woman! That vulgar, presumptuous...”

“That’s enough.”

Crash.

The teapot and cup shattered on the floor, sending hot tea steaming across the wooden boards. Richard had kicked the table, and shards of porcelain scattered onto his jacket, which he brushed off nonchalantly.

“You’d better not provoke me any further.”

“...”

“I’m barely restraining myself from putting a bullet through both your heads.”

The voice was icy, sending a chill down Seymour’s spine. As he stood frozen, facing Richard’s cold contempt, Richard quietly rose and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“...”

“Where...”

Seymour hurriedly followed Richard, who was leaving the wrecked room. He felt a sense of finality, as if this might be the last chance. Richard paused briefly and coldly brushed off Seymour's hand that had caught his arm.

"It's all over."

"Richard!"

"Janice Brown. You handle that crazy woman. Kill her quietly or lock her up in an asylum. Do it before I change my mind."

"Don't... don't call her that."

That woman...

The words rose to his throat but sank heavily back down. Seymour, clutching Richard's shoulder desperately, spoke almost pleadingly.

"I wanted to give you land and a title."

"..."

"If you want... even Mistymoor Hall."

'Brother.'

'Don't call me that.'

'Brother, I...'

'Don't speak to me!'

His heart felt like it was collapsing. It was as if he was reaping the consequences of his past actions.

There had been a time when he ignored and pushed away what he didn't want to acknowledge. A son born to a woman he once loved but who had betrayed him. A son who resembled neither him nor her.

"If you want..."

He had hated him. Perhaps even more than he hated her. When the boy enlisted, he hadn't given him a warm embrace or a farewell.

'I understand now why you treated me the way you did.'

'...'

'I'm leaving for good now. I hope you find happiness with your wife. ...Brother.'

He had tried to live as if he had forgotten the image etched inside his eyelids. He ignored it until the news of his death in action arrived at Gredel Hill.

"Not even able to recover the body...?"

It was as if the ground beneath Seymour Arthur Kensington's feet had given way. The grief was unbearable, a torment that he couldn't even bury in his heart.

Then, a miracle happened.

"Why, have you seen a ghost?"

One night, as he was sinking deeper into despair, he returned, battling through the storm.

Cynthia, the nanny, had a fit, screaming that he wasn't the same person, that he was a monster wearing the shell of a dead man. But Seymour didn't listen. Richard Daniel

Kensington was his eldest son, his child. He knew him better than anyone.

Or so he thought.

“If you want, it’s all yours... When I grow old, I’ll pass everything on to you.”

He had to pause to catch his breath, his throat tightening.

“So please, Richard... please...”

The pleading voice caught Richard’s attention, and his gaze turned towards Seymour. The moment their eyes met, the Earl felt a chilling sensation spread from his fingertips. Though Richard’s features were as sharp and cool as ever, it felt like a massive black snake was coiling behind him, staring down with venomous fangs dripping poison.

“Why should I?”

“ ... ”

“Why bother waiting to inherit it all?”

“Ri-Richard...”

A curse. The monster of the Kensington lineage passed down through generations.

The Earl took an involuntary step back, feeling the cold scales of the snake in his mind. His back hit the mahogany desk.

Richard stepped closer, one step at a time, facing the Earl who looked as if he had seen a monster.

“I could just kill you now, and your wife, and your kids too.”

He could do it immediately if he wanted. The only reason he hadn't was because the Kensington family was useful in many ways. They helped him blend into society, provided him with prey, and kept his secrets tightly sealed to avoid tarnishing the family name.

Richard leaned on the desk, looking down at the cowering Seymour, who turned his head away.

"You won't see me again."

"..."

As he turned the doorknob, he spoke one last time.

"Father."

Click. The door closed. Left alone, the Earl slid to the floor, covering his face with trembling hands. He choked on his sobs, unable to fully cry out, and sat there for a long time, shaking.

It was a cry of utter despair.



Ch. 45 ASEF 45

When Charlotte came to, she was already on a ship. She wanted to look around, but her eyes were covered, and she couldn't see. Worse yet, her mouth was gagged, preventing her from making any sound. At least she wasn't lying on a hard floor but on a soft makeshift bed, so her body didn't ache, though her limbs were bound, preventing her from standing.

"Mmmph... Mmmph..."

She struggled for a long time, but there was no sign of anyone around. Just as her strength was beginning to wane, she heard a small scream from the deck, followed by a heavy splash as something was thrown into the sea. Before she could guess what it was, the door creaked open.

Fear gripped Charlotte, and she pressed herself as close to the wall as she could. Despite her pitiful resistance, calm, confident footsteps approached slowly. Memories of a few days ago suddenly flashed in her mind.

No...!

Finally, a man's hand touched Charlotte's trembling cheek, which felt like a small animal caught in a trap. The cold touch made her jerk her head up. Recognizing who it was, tears began to fall from her eyes. The large hand that wiped away her tears tensed.

“I made a mistake.”

“.....”

“I should have cut off his arms and legs and slit his throat.”

A vein stood out on his otherwise neat forehead. Seeing her still-swollen cheek, he regretted killing that bastard too easily. Drowning him to avoid more bloodshed had been a mistake. It wasn't like him to show mercy.

“Ri-Richard...?”

Just as he was considering retrieving the baron and executing him properly, her trembling hands clung to his hand on her cheek.

“It's you... I'm sure of it...”

Her tear-soaked blindfold touched his cold hand. The woman clinging to him was more desperate and pitiful than ever, as if he were the only thing in her world.

...This is quite something.

His long eyes narrowed, and he licked his lips.

“Richard...”

“.....”

Charlotte clung to his unresponsive hand, finally letting out the sobs she had been holding back. All thoughts of leaving vanished the moment she faced him. She just wanted confirmation that it was him in front of her. She wanted to be held and comforted in his firm embrace, as if waking from a terrible nightmare.

“Please, the blindfold...”

Just as she was about to ask him to remove it, his lips crashed onto hers. The fierce invasion made Charlotte freeze in fear. His tongue mercilessly swept through her mouth, claiming every part of it, from her palate to her teeth and the underside of her tongue. He didn't bother untying her bound hands and limbs.

“Ah, mmph...!”

Her body, already conditioned by countless touches and kisses from that night, responded instinctively. Only after letting out a breathless moan did she finally pull away from his broad chest.

“Ha... ha...”

As she took deep breaths to fill her lungs, the tightly bound blindfold slipped off.

“Charlotte.”

It seemed to be the ship's wheelhouse. In her now-clear vision, she saw his sharply defined features. Through the window behind him, she could see snowflakes hitting the glass. Charlotte parted her lips to speak.

“This ship...”

“We're leaving.”

He whispered into her ear as he held her limp body. Where to? She wanted to ask, but instead, she slowly closed her eyes and accepted his approaching lips once more.

The ship set off.

Leaving the burning Seoren Hall far behind.

A thin, winding path snaked through the dark forest.

Outside the carriage window, all Charlotte could see were endless white birch trees. The half-ripened moonlight seeped through the clouds, illuminating the dirt road ahead of the four-wheeled carriage.

It had been two weeks since they left Corlen Island and set foot on the mainland again. When Charlotte asked where they were headed, Richard had simply placed her in this spacious, cushioned carriage without a word. As she gazed out at the dark forest path, she glanced sideways at Richard, who was sitting next to her.

“.....”

He was deeply slouched in his seat, arms crossed, fast asleep. When expressionless, he was like a crocodile lurking deep in a swamp, with only its eyes visible, making anyone tense. But now, he looked like a sleeping angel from a bible. The stark contrast made Charlotte stare absentmindedly until a voice from the front startled her back to reality.

“Aren’t you sleepy?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You can speak informally, you know.”

“...Maybe once I get used to it.”

The person in front was Anna, the maid who had accompanied them. She had been taking care of Charlotte

throughout the journey.

After leaving the island, Charlotte had changed into clothes Richard bought for her and had been attended to by Anna, making her look every bit the noblewoman. The managers at the hotels they stayed at along the way treated them without suspicion, assuming they were a traveling foreign noble couple.

“How much longer until we arrive, Anna?”

“I asked the coachman a little while ago, and he said we should arrive in about an hour.”

Charlotte nodded at the straightforward answer and closed her eyes.

Lady Winkle.

Sir Richard Winkle and his wife, Charlotte Winkle. The unfamiliar noble title felt odd on her tongue and made her throat itch. It was the man sitting right next to her who had given her that title.

“I’ve bought a title and land in Katia.”

“...That’s the neighboring country.”

It was the country just across the sea. Before Charlotte could even react to the sudden mention of a foreign land, Richard continued.

“Before that, we need to finish some paperwork, so we’ll stay at a villa near the border for a few days.”

As he spoke, he was unusually wearing glasses, sitting at the hotel room desk and signing documents. She caught

glimpses of papers related to bank accounts and property deeds.

When had he prepared all this? She wanted to ask when he had planned it all, but she hesitated, not wanting to seem like she was interrogating him.

“Charlotte.”

As she stood there, unable to do or say anything, Richard, having roughly organized the documents, stood up. He walked over to the fireplace, reached for the shelf, and picked up a cigarette case.

“You seem like you have something to say.”

“.....”

He found a match and lit the end of the filter.

“I’m getting tired of you whining like a puppy needing to pee, constantly watching my reactions.”

Charlotte had grown accustomed to Richard Kensington’s blunt way of speaking. This meant she should either say whatever she was hiding now or keep her mouth shut. It also implied that if he had to figure it out himself, it wouldn’t be any fun for him.

“Or is it just my imagination?”

He was never a man known for kindness. Hesitating, Charlotte finally spoke up urgently.

“My mother.”

There were many questions she wanted to ask, but this one had been haunting her mind the most. Her mother was still

at Mistymoor Hall.

“What about my mother? I should at least send her a letter...”

Richard took a long drag, two or three times, before stubbing out the cigarette in the ashtray. His eyes were slightly red, likely from fatigue.

“I can’t believe you took so long just to ask that.”

“What do you mean, ‘just that’? How can you say that?”

Charlotte’s voice grew stronger with indignation. The conversation seemed to be going off-track, giving her a strange sense of déjà vu. She felt like she had heard similar words from him before.

“At least you care about your mother, even though you were practically neglected growing up.”

“Richard!”

She had grown accustomed to dropping honorifics with him since their long journey began, a kind of unspoken coercion. As Charlotte turned her back sharply, Richard, sitting on the couch by the fireplace, reached out towards her. His gesture was like soothing a sulking puppy. When she ignored him, he called her name.

“Charlotte.”

His voice was so tender it made her cheeks flush. He could be incredibly gentle when he wanted to be, though such moments were rare.

“Lady Winkle.”

“.....”

“Already tired of your husband?”

“That’s...!”

“That’s harsh. I didn’t expect to be ignored so soon.”

Charlotte’s mouth fell open at his unexpected words. He was always the one who held the reins in their relationship, inflicting wounds and then tending to them. It was absurd and exasperating to see him act as if she held the power. He was no different from a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

As she turned her head in frustration, the brazen wolf was smiling at her. Richard rose from his seat, approached her swiftly, and pulled the speechless Charlotte into his arms.

“Let go of me.”

“No.”

“You’re suffocating me.”

“Liar.”

Thud. In the midst of their scuffle, they fell onto the bed together. The sensual scent of white musk tickled her nose. Finally exhausted, Charlotte buried her head in his broad shoulder. She hated how easily she melted after a few soothing words, despite her anger moments ago. His unrealistically handsome face, which made her stop thinking altogether, was the problem. It was unfair how he was only gentle at times like this.

Who was the unpredictable one with incomprehensible thoughts?

“...It’s not fair.”

Lost in her thoughts, Charlotte mumbled in her sleep. Hearing this, Anna quietly draped a blanket over her.

“Whoa, whoa.”

Shortly after Charlotte fell asleep, the coachman pulled on the reins. The carriage, which had been traveling through the forest, gradually slowed down in front of a heavy iron gate. A servant waiting inside approached with a lamp and opened the gate. As he moved closer to the slightly open carriage window to greet the unfamiliar employers, he removed his hat.

“Greetings to Lord and Lady Winkle...”

“Shh.”

The servant looked up to see a man holding a finger to his lips. Though the lamp’s light didn’t fully illuminate his face, it was clear he was incredibly handsome.

“.....”

The man’s gaze naturally shifted to the side. There, a woman slept with her face resting on his broad shoulder, a blanket covering her up to her shoulders. Her long, dark hair cascaded down to her waist, blending seamlessly into the darkness. They looked like a pair of painted figures.

“Ah...”

It felt like he was glimpsing a forbidden, illicit scene. The atmosphere was both mysterious and oddly seductive. While the servant stood there, momentarily entranced, the silence was broken.

“The lady is sleeping, so greet her tomorrow.”

Thud.

Anna, who had spoken briefly, reached out and closed the window. As the servant awkwardly stepped back, the coachman cracked his whip again.

“Yah!”

With a snort, the two black horses resumed their trot, their hooves pounding the ground as they continued on their way.



Ch. 46 ASEF 46

“Charlotte.”

Charlotte woke up to the familiar voice. It felt like more time had passed than she had realized. Her body felt refreshed. The first thing she noticed was the soft feeling against her back. She was sure she had fallen asleep in the carriage.

Slowly opening her eyes, she saw a high ceiling. She was lying in a canopy bed surrounded by white curtains. The sunlight touching her feet made her realize they must be at the villa. Charlotte turned her head to the side. Someone was sitting in a chair by her bedside. As soon as their eyes met, she instinctively sat up.

“You’re awake.”

“Mother!”

The voice belonged to Cynthia.

“How did you get here...?”

“That man who’s going to be your husband brought me here a few days ago.”

The man who would be her husband—Richard. But how? When did he manage this?

“If you had a lover, you should have told me sooner. You gave me quite a shock.”

Cynthia smiled faintly at the astonished Charlotte. She reached out her hand, but something seemed off. She was groping the air as if trying to find where Charlotte was. Holding her mother's hand, Charlotte's lips trembled as she asked,

"Mom, are your eyes...?"

"Oh, you must be surprised."

Cynthia, holding her daughter's hand tightly for the first time in a while, explained calmly.

"I didn't tell you, but as my health declined, my eyesight also started to deteriorate."

As Cynthia continued, Charlotte's face turned ashen. It all made sense now. The times her mother had broken glassware or stumbled in the evenings were because of this.

She had been too preoccupied with Richard to notice.

"I... I..."

Cynthia stroked her daughter's hand, comforting her as Charlotte struggled with guilt and sorrow.

"It's alright. I may not regain my sight, but it's fine. I'm happy thinking about you having a good husband and living well. I felt guilty about being a burden at Mistymoor Hall, but I'm grateful to be taken care of like this."

"...Do you know who he is?"

Charlotte's voice trembled as she asked. She hadn't asked Richard more because her mother firmly believed he had died on a colonial island years ago. She worried about the

shock it would cause her mother and felt sorry for Richard, who was treated as if he were dead.

“Of course I know.”

Cynthia nodded brightly.

“He’s Sir Richard Winkle, a trader from Katia.”

‘He has the same name as the young master I once served, which made me feel more affectionate towards him. He seemed polite and kind.’

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Mrs. Hegel, ma’am, Sir requests your presence for breakfast.”

It was Anna.

The breakfast was simple yet nutritious. Fresh milk, scrambled eggs, bacon, and pudding. Anna attended to Cynthia throughout the meal, considering her poor eyesight.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me, Sir Winkle.”

“Please, feel free to call me Richard.”

“But we’re not married yet, is that really alright...?”

“We’ll be family soon, so I’d prefer if you didn’t find it difficult.”

Charlotte listened to the conversation between her mother and Richard, half in admiration and half in disbelief. From the beginning to the end, their dialogue flowed naturally, respectfully, and with a hint of affection.

She felt gratitude and respect for Richard, who treated her mother with such courtesy. At the same time, she was amazed and slightly bewildered by his perfect facade. Regardless, the man at the head of the long dining table continued the conversation, elegantly slicing his bacon as he encouraged them to eat more.

“Charlotte and I plan to take a walk after breakfast. Would you like to join us?”

“No, thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I’m feeling a bit sleepy today. How about tomorrow?”

“If that’s what you prefer, I won’t insist.”

Cynthia’s cup was empty by then. Anna, always quick to notice, helped the elderly woman upstairs. Richard also stood up and extended his hand to Charlotte. She took it somewhat hesitantly, but his strong grip pulled her up effortlessly.

Despite being a quaint house in the woods, the backyard had a small walking path. The ground was covered with a soft layer of snow over frozen earth. As they walked between the white birch trees, it all felt somewhat surreal.

A secluded, beautiful place where they didn’t have to worry about prying eyes. It felt like stepping into another world.

Each breath turned into a puff of mist in the cold air. As Charlotte rubbed her cold hands together, Richard, who had taken off his gloves, reached out and wrapped her hands in his, then tucked them into his coat pocket. The warmth from his touch spread through her cold skin, causing a gentle

warmth to rise from her neck. With her head lowered, Charlotte spoke first.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For taking care of my mother. I didn’t expect you to.”

She wanted to confirm that he had left Corlen Island for that reason, but she kept her mouth shut. Even knowing a small piece of his thoughts wouldn’t let her see inside his mind.

Once, she had asked Anna in the hotel.

“What about the Earl?”

“Well, I don’t know the details...”

Seeing Anna avoid her gaze, Charlotte had a rough idea of the situation. He had turned his back on his family for her.

It was astonishing. She was curious about what kind of resolve it took for a man who seemed never to let go of his privileges to turn his back on his family for her. To leave behind everything he had achieved and choose her.

Was this all a dream? Like sweet sorbet that melts away the moment you speak of it.

The happiness felt overwhelming, making her both fearful and inevitably joyous. Not long ago, she had been ready to leave him to avoid being a burden. Now, she was thrilled to be able to stay with him without worrying about others’ opinions. She felt ashamed of how shallow and contradictory she was.

“I don’t know how to thank you... I...”

As if reading her complicated thoughts, he gripped her small hand tightly, stopped, and turned to look at her. Gazing down at her innocent eyes, he tucked a stray lock of her hair behind her ear. His touch was tender, but his words were sharp.

“Just stop using that useless brain of yours.”

His eyes narrowed. His voice was soft, but his smile was menacing. In the secluded space, the atmosphere shifted dramatically, and Charlotte stiffened. Shh. He silenced her attempts to speak with a finger to her lips and continued.

“I read your letter. You put quite a bit of thought into it before you left.”

To the point of tears. His smile deepened.

“That was...!”

“Were you expecting someone to come for you?”

‘Tell me. It’s all in the past anyway.’

Charlotte shook her head vehemently, his smooth tone almost hypnotic. Despite her pale face, his eyes remained cold.

Another man for Charlotte Hegel? He had turned the place upside down looking for any trace of him. If he had found him, he would have taken her right in front of him and then killed him without a trace.

Thinking of her crying face made him feel a hunger like on the ship. As he reached out, a sharp pain stung his other hand.

“That’s too much.”

Charlotte had scratched his hand with her nails and forcibly pulled her hand away, turning her back on him.

“There was no one like that. How could you think there was?”

Anger and frustration, stronger than the fear she felt moments ago, surged within her.

How could he doubt her chastity?

“Isn’t it you who has many people of the opposite sex around, not me?”

She could list a few names right away.

Kiara Spencer, Louise Denoir, and the woman from the ship.

And the young, pretty noblewomen who came under the Countess’s invitation but kept sneaking glances at him.

“If you’re angry about some imaginary man, then I...”

It was then that she felt an arm wrap around her waist from behind, pulling her into a tight embrace. Startled, she struggled to break free, but it was useless. He was someone who seemed to have been born without the ability to yield.

Eventually, Charlotte gave up and relaxed her body. She decided to respond with indifference. Holding her soft body close, Richard rested his chin on the top of her head and whispered,

“Are you jealous?”

“ ... ”

“There’s one way to fix that.”

She was intrigued. She tried to keep her mouth shut to avoid reacting, but curiosity was tickling the back of her throat. As his broad chest pressed against her back, Charlotte’s face turned bright red. He had unbuttoned his coat and enveloped her in it, making them appear as one to any onlookers.

“Aren’t you curious?”

Richard lowered his head and whispered in her ear. The warmth of his breath made her ear feel like it was on fire. It was cold outside his embrace, but where they touched, it was burning hot.

“What... what is it?”

No sooner had she asked than he grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face him. Her heart sank as she looked at his face. Just when she thought she was getting used to it, his beauty still took her breath away.

The white snow surrounding them only accentuated his cold and noble aura. No extravagant words were needed to describe him.

“Mark me.”

While she was momentarily dazed, Richard loosened his tie and exposed his neck.

“What...?”

“Bite, lick, or suck.”

“ ... ”

She was dumbfounded. Just as Charlotte was questioning her hearing, he drove the point home.

“Or all three.”

She wondered if she had heard him wrong. While she was flustered, he calmly presented his neck for her to mark as her own. As she stepped back, he advanced, making her retreat meaningless. Eventually, she collapsed to the ground, and Richard knelt in front of her, tilting his head.

“Or should I do it?”

“...”

“Is that what you want?”

He was the kind of man who would actually do it if she said yes. Realizing this, Charlotte quickly shook her head. Hesitantly, she leaned towards his neck. As if in a trance, her lips touched the cold skin of his neck, and he let out a low, satisfied laugh like a well-fed beast. His hand, which had been wrapped around her waist, slowly moved upward.



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The man who stepped out of the carriage adjusted his medical bag. A woman approached him, extending her empty hand for a handshake. Judging by her attire, she seemed to be a maid who had come to greet him.

“You must be Dr. Brent.”

“Yes, that’s right. And you are?”

“Anna Scott. Just call me Anna, Doctor.”

“Alright, Anna.”

After their handshake, Brent looked around.

“I’ve lived here all my life, but this is my first time coming here.”

“Well, that makes sense. It’s been empty for quite some time.”

The mansion, surrounded by a forest of white birch trees, was made of white stone, giving it an otherworldly appearance. It looked like a fairy’s hideaway.

He had never visited this place before. The doors had always been firmly shut, and as a child, he had been scared by tales from adults about a monster living there. So when he heard the news that the place had new owners, he was curious about who they might be.

“Who is the patient I’ll be attending to?”

“She’s an elderly lady who just turned fifty. She’ll be staying here for a couple of months, and you’ll need to visit two or three times a week during that period.”

“What’s her name?”

“Cynthia. Just call her Mrs. Cynthia.”

It seemed she didn’t want to provide a last name or more details. Though curious, Brent didn’t press further. After all, he had already been paid generously in advance for his house calls.

Nodding, Brent followed Anna as she led him through the entrance hall and up to a bedroom at the far end of the second floor. Just as she was about to open the door, Anna turned to him with a reminder.

“Mrs. Cynthia...”

“...”

“Her vision is impaired.”

Non-contagious pneumonia with vision loss. It wasn’t common, but it wasn’t unheard of either, so it didn’t matter much. What was more important was the opportunity to build connections with seemingly influential people. Brent’s eyes sparkled with youthful ambition.

“Understood. Will I be able to meet Mr. Winkle after the examination?”

“I can’t promise that. He’s been very busy lately.”

“Then at least Mrs. Cynthia...”

“...I’m not sure.”

As if to avoid further questions, Anna knocked on the door and, receiving permission to enter, turned the doorknob.

“A carriage will always be sent for you, so just come on the appointed days and times to attend to Mrs. Cynthia and then leave.”

In short, she was telling him to stay discreet and almost invisible. Before Brent could respond, the conversation ended, and the door quietly opened.

With the arrival of the new couple, the once quiet estate in the birch forest started to see more activity. Along with Dr. Brent, who was in charge of Cynthia’s care, there were now a cook and an assistant, an errand boy, a young man from the nearby village supplying groceries, two handymen, and two women handling cleaning and laundry.

One would expect the place to become lively with so many people, but this estate was an exception. While the presence of people took away the desolate feeling, the atmosphere remained unchanged. Instead of being bustling or noisy, the estate maintained a consistently calm and quiet air.

The reason was simple: a set of peculiar rules given from the first day.

Lower your gaze and remain silent when the employers are present.

Do not speak or look at them unless they address you first.

Lost in thought inside the carriage, Brent felt someone press his hand. It was Rose, the housekeeper, who had finished

her work and was riding back with him.

When their eyes met, she offered him a snack wrapped in a handkerchief.

“Have one. You must be hungry.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you? I should be the one thanking you for the ride.”

Rose chuckled warmly and then asked, “So, what were you thinking about so deeply, Doctor?”

“Well...”

Brent hesitated for a moment before shaking his head.

“It’s nothing important.”

“Come on now, it’s written all over your face.”

“...”

“Is it a secret?”

Chewing on a raisin, Rose drew back the curtain of the carriage window. Outside was a world of pure white.

“You know, I quite like it here. When I first got the job offer, I thought the pay was good and the work seemed manageable, so I figured there must be some catch. But it’s actually been quite nice. No one is overly demanding, and the breaks are proper. The only issue is all the secrecy.”

The village was rife with speculation. Some said the couple was on the run from the law, others that the man had

kidnapped the woman. Some even suggested they weren't a married couple at all but young lovers who had eloped.

Initially, Brent found these rumors ridiculous, but now he was starting to think there might be some truth to the last one. It had been two weeks, and they still knew almost nothing about the reclusive couple living in that beautiful, isolated mansion. Wasn't it strange?

"Mrs. Rose."

After a pause, Brent spoke up.

"Have you ever seen Mr. Winkle?"

"No."

He was disappointed by her answer, but what she said next caught his attention.

"But Lily said she has. Apparently, Mrs. Winkle spoke to her first."

"Mrs. Winkle?"

Rose nodded.

"She said Mrs. Winkle is exceptionally beautiful. Black hair, green eyes. She looked quite young."

"And Mr. Winkle?"

"He wasn't with her. But... I don't know if I should be telling you this, seeing as you're still single."

Rose laughed and leaned in as if to whisper a secret. Brent, who was caught off guard, brought his ear closer to her mouth, and his face turned bright red at her words.

“Every morning when Lily goes in to clean, the bed sheets in the couple’s bedroom are always a mess. And Mrs. Winkle looks quite tired.”

So, it didn’t seem like she was kidnapped, right?

Rose added cheekily just as she popped the last raisin into her mouth.

“Neigh!”

“Whoa there!”

Suddenly, the carriage jolted as the horses neighed loudly, and the driver pulled sharply on the reins. Brent and Rose barely managed to steady themselves when the driver, looking startled, quickly jumped down and ran to the front of the carriage. Moments later, he returned, pale-faced, and urgently knocked on the window.

“Dr. Brent!”

When Brent opened the door, he saw the terrified face of the driver.

“What on earth is going on?”

“A woman suddenly ran out in front of us. But her condition...!”

Shocked, Brent swiftly grabbed his medical bag from the seat beside him.

“Just breathe naturally and relax your shoulders, miss.”

“The instructions that followed were simple and clear. It was evident that the head of the dress shop had years of experience. One of the seamstresses behind Charlotte straightened her shoulders, which she had unconsciously hunched.

“Good. Keep your back straight. That way, the measurements will be more accurate.”

Charlotte responded with an awkward smile to the woman’s friendly grin.

Since waking up, Charlotte had been wearing nothing but a thin chemise. She had enjoyed the rare luxury of getting up alone in a spacious bed and having a leisurely breakfast.

As soon as she answered Anna’s question about whether she had finished her meal, four unfamiliar women burst into the room. Before she could react, they began taking her measurements meticulously.

“Thank you for your patience!”

Just when she thought it was over, she was told to move to the tea room on the first floor. Once there, the seamstresses were dismissed, and the woman seated across from her spread out several sketches.

“I’ve been sketching all the way here. Of course, it’s not ideal to make any cuts before taking proper measurements, but I wanted to do my best.”

The head of the dress shop, Zhenya, recalled the letter she had received the previous day.

[To Mrs. Zhenya Clitwood of Clarice Dress Shop,

I am sending a blank check. Feel free to write any amount you desire.

Richard Winkle]

It was a brief but elegantly written request.

Normally, she wouldn't have given such a request a second thought. It came from a noble on the outskirts, but the moment she confirmed the blank check was genuine at the bank, she dropped everything and hurriedly packed. It was an offer she couldn't refuse as an ambitious dressmaker.

The client before her was a rare golden opportunity. It was a chance to create the dress she had always dreamed of without worrying about the cost. It was a perfect opportunity to show the up-and-coming dress shops that they couldn't compete with her.

"With your long neck and prominent collarbones, a deeper décolleté line would be perfect. A dress that emphasizes your slim waist would suit you best. Naturally, embroidering flowers on the hem and adorning it with pearls would make it even more stunning. And of course, the evening dress should be even more enchanting..."

Zhenya excitedly rattled off unfamiliar terms, causing Charlotte's expression to become increasingly confused. She understood it was about dresses, but after being bombarded since early morning, she could hardly concentrate.

When Richard had casually told her to pick out some dress templates a while ago, she should have known. She thought he meant to buy some clothes for the time being. But this seemed excessive. How many dresses were they planning on...?

Sensing Charlotte's slightly uncomfortable expression, Zhenya paused and asked with a professional smile, "Oh, do you not like the designs? I understand. In Ethelwood, high-waisted wedding dresses that emphasize purity and girlishness are still in vogue. But I think a mermaid line, which is more slender and elegant, would definitely suit you..."

"Wait, wait... just a moment!"

The dazzling array of terms made it impossible for Charlotte to keep up. She had a bad feeling that if she stayed silent, she would be subjected to another hour of this. Raising both hands to stop Zhenya, Charlotte took a deep breath and asked,

"What exactly are you talking about? Since earlier?"

"Pardon?"

"What... dress?"

"Oh!"

Finally understanding, Zhenya clapped her hands.

"A wedding dress! I should have congratulated you first. I'm sorry, that was very thoughtless of me."



T/N: They're getting married. I can't wait! 😊

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“.....”

Charlotte had to stay silent for a moment to grasp the situation. She bowed her head slightly, while Zhenya continued to chatter without pause.

“I’m really envious, miss. You’re marrying someone so generous and wealthy.”

The mansion was somewhat remote, providing privacy, and the surrounding scenery was breathtakingly beautiful. The furniture was all made of high-quality rosewood by master craftsmen, and every painting on the walls was an original, not a reproduction. The porcelain and glass figurines on the hallway cabinets added to the mansion’s elegance.

If there was one thing Zhenya knew well from dealing with nobility, it was genuine luxury and high-quality items. Her keen eye for recognizing rare treasures was unmatched and couldn’t be easily learned. She had survived fierce competition in the heart of Ethelwood for decades, which wasn’t an easy feat. From her perspective, Richard Winkle wasn’t just a flash-in-the-pan millionaire; he was the real deal.

He was likely a nobleman in his forties. Although his bride seemed quite young, it wasn’t uncommon in Ethelwood for there to be a ten or twenty-year age difference in marriages.

“First of all.”

Charlotte finally spoke after lifting her head, having gathered her thoughts.

“I need to talk to him first. Can we discuss this afterward?”

She felt there was a lot to discuss with him. No, not just a lot—an overwhelming amount.

Noticing her serious expression, Zhenya finally fell silent and nodded awkwardly. As soon as Zhenya left, Charlotte headed straight to the second floor.

“Richard!”

Richard looked up as the door to his study suddenly swung open.

“What do you mean by suddenly getting married?”

“And what is the meaning of barging in without knocking?”

Richard put down the pen he had been using and removed his glasses. The process of seeking asylum was more complicated than he had anticipated, with many documents to fill out. He hadn’t even had a chance to stretch in hours and had stayed up all night in his chair, leaving him sleep-deprived.

Charlotte, who had approached him and placed her hands on her hips, watched as he pressed his temples to relieve his throbbing headache.

“I asked you first.”

“.....”

“Suddenly talking about wedding dresses and such... I just can’t understand...”

Charlotte’s voice, which had been pouring out her frustration, gradually quieted down as Richard slowly lifted his head, eyes closed.

“Is that all this is about?”

“.....”

He stood up and walked around the mahogany desk, approaching Charlotte.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Ah!”

Before she could react, Richard extended his arms, trapping Charlotte between the desk and himself. He grabbed her chin to prevent her from looking away and whispered,

“Let me go...!”

“Think about it. You’ve lost count of how many times you’ve begged beneath me.”

“.....”

“You clung to my waist, pleading for more, and now you’re saying this?”

Despite the rawness of his words, Richard’s expression remained calm and unflinching.

His eyes were dark from lack of sleep, a bit of stubble adorned his sharp jawline, and his shirt was unbuttoned just enough to reveal a hint of his collarbone. Overwhelmed by

his masculine scent, Charlotte froze and tightly shut her eyes.

“Even so!”

His hand, which had been resting on the desk, slowly moved up to her waist. As their noses almost touched and the tension in the air reached its peak, tears welled up in Charlotte’s eyes. She bowed her head and mumbled.

“Even so...”

“.....”

“...without a proper proposal...”

She didn’t want a rushed marriage as if frying beans over a lightning bolt. Even if it wasn’t the fairytale wedding she had dreamed of as a child, at least...

“Ugh...!”

As she hesitated, he lowered his head and covered her lips with his. He bit her lower lip gently, as if asking for permission, then plunged in without hesitation.

“Mmm, ugh...!”

As Charlotte struggled to process the sudden kiss, she heard the sound of a drawer opening. Before she could see what he had taken out, he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her slender body closer and laying her down on the desk.

“Ah!”

The hard wood pressed against her back, and papers scattered to the floor. Reflexively, Charlotte reached out, but

Richard grabbed her hand, momentarily breaking the kiss and allowing her to gasp for air.

“Ugh, ha...”

Through her panting, she saw him standing over her, looking down with a haughty expression. The man who had laid his lover on the desk where he had been working moments ago now seemed like an imposing and fierce tyrant on his throne.

There was a click as something opened. Richard, still staring intently at her, took something in his mouth. Before she could see what it was, he lifted her left hand.

“What... what are you doing...?”

Before she could finish her sentence, he took her ring finger into his mouth. The sensation of his warm, soft mouth and skillful tongue made Charlotte’s body stiffen with a jolt of electricity.

“...Ah!”

Just as she thought he might bite down, he released her hand, revealing an elegant platinum ring on her finger. It was the diamond ring he had decided to keep for a special occasion.

“Charlotte.”

“.....”

“Marry me.”

His hand slid up the inside of her skirt. Leaning in close, Richard whispered, “I need you.”

Charlotte's eyes wavered. The longer she hesitated, the more his purple eyes narrowed.

If she refused, he was ready to tighten his grip on Cynthia. That was the plan. He even considered severing a tendon in her ankle if necessary. Maybe even both.

"Alright."

Just as his thoughts reached a dark extreme, Charlotte wrapped her arms around his neck. Richard, uncharacteristically surprised, stiffened as she hugged him tightly, tears streaming down her face as she accepted.

"Let's get married."

It wasn't the romantic proposal she had hoped for, but it was enough. He was a man who rarely showed his emotions, even in bed.

"I need you."

It was clear and hit her ears with certainty. It melted away all the anxiety she had secretly harbored. This was a significant step forward. Someday, she believed she would hear the words she truly longed for.

"I love you."

So, for now, she decided to compromise. Pulling him closer, Charlotte whispered, "I love you, Richard."

Their relationship had always been unequal. But despite having many chances to escape, she had never run away.

Therefore, she had to endure him—this beautiful yet cruel man.

From the moment Charlotte accepted his proposal, everything proceeded swiftly. They cleaned and renovated an old chapel near the mansion and invited an official priest to confirm the arrangements.

The guests and witnesses for their marriage were already chosen: Cynthia and Louise. Charlotte's heart sank when she saw an unexpected face.

"I can't thank you enough for your help."

"Don't mention it. I was well compensated."

Louise responded with a smile to Charlotte's gratitude. She had traveled a long way to integrate Charlotte into the Denoir family and teach her the manners and etiquette of high society.

After the Count of Denoir collapsed from high blood pressure and passed away, leaving no male heirs to inherit, Louise, unmarried, inherited the title. Six months ago, with financial backing from Richard, she invested in a promising merchant guild and achieved great success, reviving her family.

While solidifying her position, Richard made another unexpected proposal. He asked Louise to accept Charlotte into the Denoir family and teach her the ways of high society. In return, he promised to introduce her to the Katia social circle.

The Katia social circle was even more exclusive than Ethelwood, placing great importance on bloodline and rank. Once admitted, the connections it provided were invaluable, making Richard's offer irresistible to Louise, who was looking to expand her influence.

Though initially overwhelmed by Richard's meticulousness, Louise eventually accepted his proposal.

"It's only been three weeks, but you already look like a noble lady."

"That's too generous, Louise."

Louise smiled at Charlotte's modest reply. It seemed that much had happened to her as well.

A few months ago, she had been a timid and fragile girl, always addressing even a fallen baron's daughter with utmost respect. Now, she had transformed into a confident and graceful woman. Once a source of faint jealousy, Charlotte had become an eager student and cousin, someone Louise felt genuine affection for.

"With the wedding just a week away, how do you feel?"

"I'm very... excited."

Charlotte blushed and smiled. Seeing the bride-to-be filled with anticipation and happiness, Louise couldn't help but smile too.

"I can imagine."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. Anna entered with permission.

"Mrs. Clitwood is here for the fitting."

"Ah, it's already that time."

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Louise stood up. Today was the last day of lessons. Her luggage was packed early in the morning, and a carriage was waiting at the front hall.

“I’ll see you at the wedding, Charlotte.”

“Yes, thank you, Louise.”

After saying goodbye and being escorted out by another maid, Louise felt the cold wind brush her cheeks as she stepped outside. She climbed into the carriage and started down the long forest path. She noticed another carriage approaching from the opposite direction. As they passed, she saw two people inside—a man and a woman.

The woman caught her eye. She was wearing a mask for some reason. Curious, Louise knocked on the driver’s window, and the coachman turned around.

“Is something wrong, ma’am?”

“Who were those people we just passed?”

“Probably the doctor. The old lady is ill.”

“And the woman?”

“Ah.”

The coachman seemed to recall something.

“One of the maids twisted her ankle yesterday. With the shortage of staff, Dr. Brent mentioned bringing in a replacement. That must be her.”

“I see.”

Satisfied with the explanation, Louise turned her gaze back to the window.

The days were growing colder. As she stared blankly at the scenery, something struck the window. It was sleet, a mix of

snow and rain. The fine powdery flakes quickly turned into heavier precipitation. Her gaze shifted to the sky. The once clear and bright sky was now gathering dark, ominous clouds.

It seemed a heavy snowfall was imminent. A very severe one. The chill that crept down her neck made Louise pull her shawl tighter around her shoulders.



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Cynthia beamed with joy. Even if she couldn't see clearly, she knew with her heart's eye that her daughter standing in front of the full-length mirror looked like a fairy.

"You look so beautiful, Charlotte!"

"Oh, Mother, you flatter me."

"I can't believe the wedding is tomorrow. Time really flies, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it really does."

Charlotte shyly lowered her gaze and fidgeted with her fingers. Cynthia, standing behind her, gently stroked her soft hair.

"People always said you were beautiful since you were little."

"No, Mother. My sister was always the prettier one."

Charlotte's face clouded over slightly as she bowed her head.

"If only things hadn't turned out the way they did... Father too..."

As the wedding approached, memories of her family, which she had tried hard to forget, came flooding back. Her father,

who had become violent after losing his job but was still caring when sober. Her sister, with whom she had shared a bed and blankets, and who had been her closest friend.

Sometimes she felt guilty for enjoying good food and wearing nice clothes. Sensing her daughter's feelings, Cynthia placed a comforting hand on Charlotte's shoulder and smiled gently.

"Charlotte, my dear daughter."

"....."

"All that matters is that you live well."

"Mother..."

"That's all that counts."

Tears welled up in Cynthia's wrinkled eyes. Charlotte turned around. The mother and daughter, so alike, faced each other. Cynthia gently wiped the tears from Charlotte's reddened eyes and took her hand. Composing herself, Charlotte changed the subject naturally.

"How have you been feeling lately?"

"The doctor has been taking good care of me, so I'm fine."

"And your eyesight?"

"I can see well enough to recognize you from this distance. Cough, cough..."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

Cynthia nodded after a brief coughing fit. Her eyesight was deteriorating, but she wasn't completely blind yet. She could still make out blurry outlines of objects. Occasionally, she bumped into furniture or nearly fell, but with someone by her side, there were no major incidents.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Madam, Dr. Brent is here."

A familiar voice called from outside. Curious, but only for a moment.

"Well, I should get going. You must have a lot to do as the bride-to-be today."

Charlotte nodded and gave Cynthia a gentle hug as she coughed again.

"Yes, I'll see you at dinner."

Even though her condition had improved significantly, they couldn't let their guard down. Pneumonia could easily relapse in the increasingly cold winter. They had to be cautious until she was fully recovered.

"Alright."

The mother and daughter exchanged smiles. Cynthia's health was still a concern, but aside from that, everything was going smoothly. Almost too smoothly, as if they feared a passing devil might get jealous.

Despite his young age, Dr. Brent was a very competent physician. He removed his stethoscope and smiled gently.

"Your heartbeat is strong. How are you feeling, ma'am?"

“Yes, I feel great. Like I could fly. Though I’ve been feeling a bit more sleepy than usual lately.”

Cynthia, sitting on the bed with a thick blanket over her, responded cheerfully.

“Please, don’t overexert yourself. The snow is getting heavier.”

“Of course.”

Even as they spoke, the view outside the window was filled with large, fluffy snowflakes. Every day, two servants diligently cleared the snow around the mansion, keeping it pristine. However, just a short distance away, the snow was piled up to their shins.

“Here is a week’s worth of medicine. I’ll leave it with Anna, so just take it as you usually do.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Drink plenty of warm water and try to avoid going outside as much as possible.”

“I will.”

Brent stood up and picked up his medical bag. Just then, a voice was heard from outside the door.

“The carriage is here, Doctor.”

“I’ll be right out.”

Brent put on the coat he had taken off earlier.

“I should walk you to the door. I feel bad every time.”

“Please, don’t mention it. I’ll be on my way now.”

“Yes, see you again.”

As they exchanged goodbyes and Brent was about to leave, he turned back.

“By the way.”

“Yes?”

“How is Susan doing?”

“Oh, the maid you recommended.”

Susan was a maid Brent had introduced to replace Rose, who had twisted her ankle. With the other staff, including Anna, getting busier as the employers’ wedding approached, extra help was essential.

“She’s been helping me and assisting with the household chores. Thank you for recommending such a capable person.”

“Not at all. I’m glad to hear that.”

Brent’s previously tense expression softened.

“I should have done a more thorough background check before introducing her, but things were quite hectic.”

“Given that she had a major accident and lost her memory, it’s understandable. She’s quiet but very kind.”

At first, they were startled by the woman wearing a mask, but upon hearing about the large scar on her face, they felt a surge of sympathy. Considering Brent’s recommendation,

they decided to give her a chance, and Susan had exceeded their expectations.

“She seems to be about my age. It’s heartbreaking to think about what she might have gone through.”

“Her memory will return soon enough. Take care.”

Brent bowed slightly and opened the door. Susan, who was standing in the hallway, reached out to carry the medical bag, but Brent gently declined, indicating he was fine.

“No need to see me off today, Susan. Please take good care of Madam.”

“Yes, Doctor. Take care.”

After receiving a polite bow from Susan, Brent walked away. Once he was out of sight, Susan knocked on the door again. Upon being invited in, she saw Cynthia sitting up in bed, gesturing her over.

“Did the doctor leave safely?”

“Yes. How are you feeling?”

Susan sat in the chair by the bedside where Brent had been and poured tea from the pot on the table, handing a filled cup to Cynthia.

“Thanks to everyone’s concern, I’m feeling much better.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Her voice was oddly low as she responded. Susan skillfully handed Cynthia the pills. Cynthia swallowed them with a sip of water, then coughed lightly. Susan gently rubbed her

back until the coughing subsided. Once it stopped completely, Cynthia took a deep breath and smiled.

“Thank you. The mansion is so quiet today.”

“With the wedding so close, everyone is busy working on the chapel.”

From Anna, who was overseeing everything, to the errand boy, everyone was incredibly busy preparing for tomorrow’s wedding. The bride, Charlotte, was planning to spend the day in town with Mrs. Zhenya to sort out some jewelry issues, while Richard was expected to finish all the necessary approvals in the morning and return around lunchtime.

“There’s a whirlwind of emotions with my child’s wedding approaching. Susan, you...”

Cynthia trailed off mid-sentence, yawning deeply.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Talking about her child in front of someone who had suffered a terrible ordeal and lost their memory seemed too cruel. Cynthia hesitated, unsure how to continue, but Susan’s unexpected response surprised her.

“I had a son.”

“A son?”

“Yes.”

Susan’s formerly polite tone had shifted to a casual one. Cynthia’s eyes widened in shock as Susan leaned in close

and removed her mask. Cynthia's face turned pale at the sight.

"You, you are..."

"It's been a while."

Susan—or rather, Janice, who had discarded her mask—revealed her face, twisted by burn scars, and smiled.

"Why... why are you here... you...!"

Mr. Winkle had told her that he brought Charlotte, who had been wrongfully expelled from the Kensington household. Cynthia knew the general situation from him, but she couldn't comprehend why Janice appeared before her in such a dreadful state.

Summoning all her strength, Cynthia tried to get out of bed and head for the door. However, she was yanked back by her hair and fell to the floor.

"Aaah!"

"You know about my son."

Janice, with her arms crossed, looked down at Cynthia, who lay on the floor in agony.

"And my husband."

"What...?"

Cynthia gasped, paralyzed with shock. The woman before her, Janice Brown, seemed off. Her eyes were unfocused, and a bizarre smile played on her lips. It was as if she couldn't distinguish between her son and her husband. The

chilling realization made Cynthia inch backward, dragging herself across the floor.

“What are you talking about...? Who are you here for...?”

“You don’t need to know. I...”

Janice’s mouth twitched as she spoke.

“I’m going to set everything right. So... you all just need to disappear.”

“Aaaah!”

“If you lose everything like I did, then he’ll come back to me. Seymour...”

Janice’s grip on Cynthia’s hair was relentless as she hauled her up with uncanny strength. Cynthia writhed in pain, feeling as if her hair would be ripped out. Her screams echoed hollowly, unheard by anyone.

“Let go! Mr. Winkle will be back soon...”

“I know. Everyone will be back soon.”

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway. Cynthia’s mouth opened and closed helplessly. She needed to resist, but her body refused to cooperate.

‘Tomorrow is my daughter’s wedding... Charlotte, run...’

But the words never left her lips.

“Goodbye, Cynthia.”

Janice’s eerie smile widened as she plunged a hidden knife straight into Cynthia’s heart. Cynthia’s hand, which had

been reaching for the door, twitched briefly before falling limp.

Almost simultaneously, the door behind her opened.

“You’re here, Seymour.”

Janice pulled out the dagger and let it drop, turning her head away. Cynthia’s limp body sprawled on the floor. Richard, entering the scene, quickly assessed what had happened. Before Janice could react, he grabbed her wrists and slammed her face into the ground. A short, pained groan escaped her lips.

“...Ugh!”

“Do you realize,” Richard’s voice was rough and chilling, like scraping stone, “what you’ve done?”

“Seymour...”

Janice’s restrained body squirmed. The unexpected name from her lips made Richard narrow his eyes.

“Are you insane?”

“Seymour, I...”

Janice suddenly began to sob, her breath hitching.

“I chose money over you and gave birth to a monster.”

Muttering, she picked up the dagger she had plunged into Cynthia’s heart moments before.

“But you marrying another woman... I can’t let that happen. Never!”

In the next instant, she slashed her own wrist without hesitation.

“Aaaah!”

The excruciating pain made her lips tremble. Blood gushed from her severed artery. As the pressure pinning her down abruptly lifted, Janice raised her head. Richard stood up, pinching his nose, trying to regain his composure. His dark pupils narrowed vertically.

Blood.

The long-suppressed urge surged, mocking him. He staggered backward, but the scent of blood tickling his nose caused the bones in his hand to protrude.

His breath quickened with thirst. He tried to leave hurriedly, but Janice, now crawling, grabbed his ankle and whispered a curse.

“Drink.”

“ ... ”

“The monster I birthed, that’s you.”

Her bloodshot eyes met his. He barely suppressed his instincts. Richard moved with great effort, as if his ankle was weighed down, and grasped the doorknob.

Just beyond this door.

“Or...”

Janice laughed maniacally, dragging Cynthia’s still-warm body and slashing her wrist as well. Fresh blood trickled down the pale flesh.

“Or is a Hegel’s blood better?”

His patience snapped. As the monster lunged at her, Janice welcomed it with a smile.

Charlotte returned home a bit later after selecting her jewelry.

As soon as she stepped into the eerily silent mansion, an inexplicable sense of dread crept up from her toes.

“Mom...?”

She took a deep breath and climbed the stairs. As she slowly opened the door, she was met with a gruesome sight.

Blood pooled across the floor. Two women lay lifeless. And...

A man, having finished feeding, licked the blood from his wrist.

“Ah...”

The man slowly lifted his head. His eyes were like a snake’s.

“Aah...”

Charlotte’s mind went blank. Fear, anger, sorrow—all these emotions struck her at once, making her step back. The monster, having dropped the corpse, approached her.

Don’t come closer.

Don’t come closer...!

Charlotte's pupils rolled back. She lost consciousness and collapsed.

Charlotte did not wake up, not even on the day of her mother's funeral.



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The chapel, once prepared for a wedding, was now draped in black cloth.

Where flowers were meant to adorn the altar, a coffin and lilies now rested. The officiant, who was supposed to conduct the wedding, was instead leading a funeral mass.

The funeral was solemn and quiet throughout. The woman who had lost her mother was so overcome with shock that she couldn't even attend. A few townspeople and Dr. Brent stayed by the grave until the very end, standing beside the imposing figure of Mr. Winkle.

It was the first time Brent had seen his employer up close. He was younger and more handsome than expected, but there was an eerie aura about him.

Just as Brent turned to leave after the ceremony, a familiar face approached him.

"Thank you for coming, Dr. Brent."

"Anna."

Her eyes were swollen, likely from crying throughout the service.

"I'm truly sorry. A beast, they said."

The story he had heard was this: A wild animal, desperate for food in the winter, had entered through an open door and killed the two women. The sharp teeth marks suggested it was either a wolf or a wild dog.

“If only I had been at the estate...”

“Who could have known this would happen? It’s not your fault, Anna.”

Brent gently patted her shoulder as she began to sob again, offering her comfort. After a while, Anna managed to stop crying and looked up.

“I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

Offering a shoulder to cry on was the least he could do. After all, the deceased had been his patient, and he had managed to save one woman.

“Well, I must go prepare for Susan’s funeral.”

“Take care. I should go check on the lady of the house.”

Anna dabbed at her remaining tears with a handkerchief before saying goodbye. Brent turned and climbed into the waiting carriage.

As the carriage rolled on, he muttered to himself while gazing out the window.

“She needs to wake up soon...”

He felt sorry for the bride who had lost her mother just before her wedding. Brent had tried to see Charlotte for a

consultation, but he was always turned away with the explanation that she would call for him once she woke up.

Witnessing the horror firsthand, he could only imagine the shock she had endured. He prayed for Charlotte to wake up soon.

And then, one day, Charlotte Winkle—no, Charlotte Hegel—disappeared.

Brent heard the news much later.

A woman lifted her newly mended dress and marveled at it.

“It’s perfect! Thank you, Cecile.”

“I’m glad you’re satisfied.”

“I was a bit worried because this place is so remote, but the rumors were true. I love it.”

The customer, smiling, paid the remaining balance. Charlotte, who had taken the money at the counter, smiled as she saw her off. The small tailor shop fell silent again after the doorbell tinkled and the customer left.

Charlotte picked up the fabric she had been working on and opened a drawer to get her needle and thread. Just as she was about to focus, the bell rang again, signaling another visitor. Charlotte’s face lit up when she saw who it was.

“Zhenya.”

“How have you been, Charlotte?”

“Thanks to you, I’ve been well. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

“Why thank me? It’s your own skill that’s brought you success.”

Zhenya, as vibrant and glamorous as she was two years ago, placed a paper bag on the counter. Inside were sandwiches.

“Have you had lunch yet?”

“I was just about to.”

“Oh, come on, don’t lie. I brought this so we could eat together.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte cleared away her sewing materials and brought over a small console table, placing it in front of Zhenya.

“Please, have a seat. It’s still a bit messy because the place is so small.”

“I understand completely. I started out with a small shop too. And honestly, this looks pretty good.”

Zhenya sat down and glanced around. The shop was a tiny space of about 15 square meters, opened just three months ago in a remote part of town. The only furniture was a display cabinet draped with various fabrics, a counter, a console table, and a couple of chairs. Though it was still a bit sparse, it had a cozy feel to it.

“How’s the business going? Are you getting used to it?”

“Yes, the number of orders is steadily increasing, and I’m enjoying it more and more.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It seems like everything’s going well.”

Zhenya smiled as she picked up a piece of fabric Charlotte was working on and examined it closely.

“You were always a smart student. During the two years you worked at the boutique, you really honed your skills.”

“Thank you so much. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t taken me in...”

Zhenya remembered the desperate face that had knocked on her door two years ago, as if it was being chased by a monster. Before she could even ask what was wrong, Charlotte, pale as a ghost, had clung to her.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you? Please, take me with you.”

“What? What are you talking about all of a sudden...?”

“Please, I’m begging you. Please...”

Zhenya had been even more shocked because she knew Charlotte’s mother had passed away just the day before her wedding. And it was the day of the old lady’s funeral. The bride, who should have been dressed for mourning, had fled in nothing but her undergarments. Her bare feet, stepping on the cold, frosty ground, were a sight that left Zhenya at a loss for words.

What finally made Zhenya decide to act was Charlotte’s next words.

“If he catches me, I... I...”

I’ll die.

The impact of those words hit Zhenya like a blow to the back of the head. She couldn’t just leave Charlotte, who was clinging to her desperately, alone—not as a fellow human being, and certainly not as a fellow woman.

“...Alright. First, let’s get you changed. We’ll make you look like one of the seamstresses I brought with me.”

Thankfully, Zhenya had everyone wear hats pulled low and had left one person behind to count heads just before they left. That was how she managed to sneak Charlotte out of there.

From that moment on, ‘Charlotte Hegel’ became ‘Cecile Dune.’ She continued to use an alias and learned to sew at the boutique, eventually becoming skilled enough to open her own little repair shop far away. Thanks to her natural talent, word of mouth spread, and now, three months in, she was getting a steady stream of one or two orders a day.

“I should get going. It’s a relief to see you doing well.”

“Why don’t you stay a bit longer?”

“I just stopped by on my way through.”

Charlotte knew that there was nowhere else around here for Zhenya to visit. She followed Zhenya to the door and saw her off. Once her welcome guest had left, the small shop fell silent again.

Charlotte continued working for a while, then stretched and stood up as the sun began to set.

“Maybe I should call it a day.”

She yawned softly and tidied up the threads, needles, and fabrics scattered on her workbench. She drew the curtain inside the display window, put on her coat, and stepped out of the shop, locking the door behind her.

As she headed towards her boarding house a few blocks away, someone on a bicycle waved from the opposite side of the street.

“Cecile!”

“Derek.”

Derek Waden was the son of the boarding house owner. He had helped her move in on her first day, and they had become friends since. He wasn't particularly handsome, with his tanned skin, black hair, and dark eyes, but he had a warm, friendly demeanor and a kind personality that made him well-liked.

“Heading in a bit early today, aren't you? Need any help with that?”

Derek, who had quickly approached and dismounted his bicycle, glanced at the bag in Charlotte's hand.

“Oh, it's fine. It's light. Thanks, though, Derek.”

“No problem. What are friends for?”

After their brief exchange, the two walked side by side. Around them, carriages and pedestrians bustled through the narrow streets lined with buildings of similar height.

“You got off work early at the general store today too, Derek?”

“Yeah, it’s the boss’s wedding anniversary. He wanted to close up early and head home, so he let me off early too.”

“...I see.”

The mention of a wedding anniversary caused a subtle shadow to pass over Charlotte’s face, which quickly returned to normal. Derek, noticing the change, was about to say something when they arrived at the boarding house. Charlotte entered first and spotted the landlady.

“Oh, you’re here, Mrs. Waden.”

“Well, look at this. You two came back together?”

Sarah Waden, the landlady, was a formidable woman who had raised her son alone after her husband’s early passing. She eyed the two of them suspiciously, and Derek, closing the door behind him, quickly offered an explanation.

“Mom, we just ran into each other on the way.”

“Really? I thought maybe you waited for her...”

“Mom!”

Ignoring the playful bickering between the mother and son, Charlotte took off her coat.

“I’ll head up now.”

“What about dinner?”

“I’m fine tonight, thank you.”

The boarding house had three floors. The second floor housed two rooms, the third floor had an attic room, and the landlady and her son lived on the first floor. Tenants could have breakfast and dinner in the communal kitchen on the first floor for a small additional fee. Charlotte had found this wonderful place thanks to a timely visit to the general store where Derek worked.

Those were precarious and uncertain days. Derek was the first person to extend a hand to her. When a complete stranger asked if something was wrong, Charlotte, almost in a trance, had shared her situation, mixing in a few lies.

After hearing her story, Derek had brought her to this house.

“Think of it as your home and feel at ease.”

“Derek...”

“When I first saw you, you looked so tired and worn out. I couldn’t just ignore it.”

Looking back, Charlotte could only think how incredibly lucky she had been.

In her room, she took off her coat, washed up quickly, and changed into her chemise. Opening the window, she saw the crescent moon hanging in the darkening sky. It was the same moon that had shone that night.

That night.

“Ugh...!”

A sudden wave of pain hit Charlotte, making her clutch her chest. Memories she didn’t want to recall, memories she

shouldn't recall. They were too vivid to be nightmares and too unbelievable to be real.



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“Charlotte.”

In her hazy memory, she could still see the man looking at her, not even bothering to wipe the blood dripping from his lips down to his chin. She vaguely remembered him catching her just before her collapsing body hit the ground.

She was in shock for days, unable to gather her thoughts. She didn't even attend her mother's funeral. When she finally regained some clarity, the only thing on her mind was escaping that dreadful place. So, she fled, desperately trying to avoid his gaze.

“...It'll be okay. It has to be okay.”

Charlotte took a deep breath, steeling herself as she walked unsteadily towards the bed.

“I'll never have to see him again.”

She was whispering this like a mantra when suddenly there was a knock at the door. Startled, she hesitated for a moment before cautiously opening it. It was Derek.

Seeing Charlotte's pale, ghost-like face, Derek looked worried.

“Sorry to bother you so late, Cecile. My mom asked me to bring this up to you.”

“...Oh...”

“Did I scare you? You look... pale.”

Derek handed her a tray with some yogurt and fruit. It seemed Sarah had been concerned when Charlotte said she wouldn't be having dinner. Charlotte gave Derek a faint smile as she took the tray.

“No, it's fine. I was just a bit startled.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Derek scratched the back of his head awkwardly and didn't immediately turn to leave. Charlotte looked at him curiously, and after a moment of hesitation, he spoke again.

“Cecile, I was wondering... if you're free this weekend, could we maybe spend some time together?”

“This weekend?”

“Yes, Saturday evening.”

Charlotte blinked in surprise at the sudden request. Derek bowed his head, unable to hide his embarrassment. His neck turned a deep shade of red. For some reason, this sight felt oddly familiar to Charlotte.

Derek was twenty now, the same age she had been when she went through all that trauma and barely escaped her nightmares. It was an age of innocence, honesty, and vulnerability.

“Derek, I...”

“It's okay if you can't. Really, don't feel pressured.”

Seeing Charlotte's hesitant expression, Derek quickly added, his face flushing even more. Charlotte thought for a moment before responding.

"Alright."

"Oh, well, if you can't—wait, what?"

Derek, who had started to turn away in exaggerated resignation, spun back around.

"I said alright. You want to have dinner together, right?"

"Yes, that's it... but..."

Charlotte had always been defensive and passive in response to his attempts to get closer. Derek had expected another rejection this time, so her unexpected agreement made his face light up instantly.

"Then I'll come pick you up after work."

"Okay, that sounds good."

Like a puppy wagging its tail happily, Derek quickly responded. Charlotte smiled and nodded.

"Well, I'll..."

"Yeah, I'll take the empty dishes back to the kitchen after I finish."

"Great!"

Derek finally nodded and turned to leave. Charlotte watched his retreating figure descend the stairs before closing the door and lying down on her bed.

She should have said no, but she couldn't bring herself to do it after seeing his expression.

For two years and three months, she had lived like a shadow. Could she ever truly escape that nightmare, escape from him? She longed for a bit of peace, to smile again. Wanting a moment of happiness wasn't wrong, was it?

Dinner with Derek turned out to be surprisingly enjoyable.

Instead of a quiet restaurant, he had chosen a lively but cozy pub. It seemed like he had picked the place to make her feel more at ease.

Derek, being used to dealing with people, had a natural gift for conversation. He skillfully avoided any topics that might make her uncomfortable. His friendly demeanor helped Charlotte lower her guard, and the atmosphere remained cheerful throughout the evening.

"...and if my friend hadn't caught me, it could've been a disaster!"

"Wow, that must have been scary, Derek."

"You have no idea. As soon as I got home, my mom gave me such a scolding..."

"Hahaha."

Charlotte laughed heartily, her face slightly flushed from the alcohol. Derek, momentarily entranced by her smile, awkwardly cleared his throat.

"But what about you, Cecile?"

“Me?”

“I’d like to hear your story. About your family, your work, anything really.”

Despite not seeming particularly distant or dark, she always had an air of mystery about her. She was a good listener and kind, but she never shared much about her past. Derek had always been curious.

Caught off guard by his sudden request, Charlotte looked down, her expression momentarily blank.

“Well, I’m not sure where to start.”

“Oh... you don’t have to if it’s difficult. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not that hard to talk about. Really.”

As the mood shifted, Derek looked uncomfortable, prompting Charlotte to smile reassuringly.

“There were four of us in my family. My father, mother, sister, and me.”

“You said ‘were’...?”

When he cautiously asked about the past tense, she responded immediately.

“They’re gone now. It’s just me.”

She deliberately pushed another memory out of her mind.

“Oh...”

Derek sighed, finally understanding why she rarely talked about her past or clammed up when family topics arose. He

felt a pang of guilt.

“I’m sorry, Cecile.”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to be sorry, Derek.”

“But...”

“It’s really okay. It was a long time ago.”

Charlotte waved her hand dismissively and took another sip of beer. The unfamiliar drink made her cough, and when Derek reached out to pat her back, she declined.

“I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’ll get used to it.”

Charlotte forced a smile.

Thankfully, the atmosphere didn’t stay heavy for long. Derek, realizing she was uncomfortable with personal topics, smoothly shifted the conversation. Charlotte, too, quickly engaged with his stories, as if she hadn’t been upset at all. They talked about many things on the way back to the boarding house—childhood memories, his current job at the general store, and the tailor shop.

“I had a great time today, Derek.”

“Me too.”

Derek, standing at Charlotte’s door, blushed as he continued, “If it’s okay with you, maybe tomorrow...”

“Derek.”

Charlotte interrupted him, knowing it was impolite, but her face was serious. Derek looked up, startled, and saw her solemn expression.

"I can't accept your feelings."

"Cecile..."

"Please don't ask why. I just..."

Charlotte paused, choosing her words carefully, then spoke with determination.

"I've decided not to love anyone."

She had made that decision the day she fled from him with nothing but the clothes on her back. Her last experience with love had ended so disastrously that she couldn't imagine loving anyone again.

For her, love equaled loss and pain.

"I'm sorry, and thank you."

With those words, Charlotte closed the door, leaving Derek standing there, speechless.

He stood in front of the firmly closed door for a moment before slowly walking away, his heart aching more with each step.

From the day he first saw her at the general store, he had been drawn to her. There was something about her shadowed, weary face that he couldn't ignore. He had tried to get closer to her, always hovering around her like it was a coincidence. That's why he had been so overjoyed when she

accepted his dinner invitation. But now, it felt like his world had collapsed.

Not wanting to return to his stifling room, Derek wandered outside aimlessly. The alcohol he had been too tense to feel earlier now hit him hard. He roamed through the alleys, not caring where he went.

The alleyways of the bar district, now darkened by the setting sun, were filled with drunken men, prostitutes, and drug-addicted vagrants. A young man stumbling around drunk was easy prey for them.

As Derek walked through a narrow alley, he bumped shoulders with someone.

“Move.”

“What? You little punk!”

He had only pushed the man aside because he was blocking the way, but the vagrant grabbed him by the collar immediately. The stench made Derek wrinkle his nose. The vagrant’s companions quickly surrounded them.

“What’s going on?”

“This kid just hit me. He must have a death wish!”

“Is that so?”

As the atmosphere grew more menacing, Derek’s drunken mind began to clear. Just then, a fist flew towards his face. With a heavy thud, Derek fell to the ground, clutching his swelling cheek. Kicks rained down on him before he could even defend himself.

Curled up tightly with his eyes shut, he suddenly heard the vagrants' screams echoing through the alley.

"Ugh!"

"Ah! What the hell is this guy?"

"Aaargh!"

Derek forced his heavy eyelids open. Blood splattered the ground, and the vagrants lay scattered, beaten. The man who had taken them down without mercy extended a hand to Derek.

"Are you alright?"

The man's long, clean fingers seemed incongruous with the violence he had just unleashed. As soon as Derek took his hand, he lost consciousness.



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Charlotte took a deep breath as she stepped out of her room. She had braced herself for the awkwardness that would follow rejecting Derek's feelings, but surprisingly, it hadn't been as bad as she anticipated. They rarely crossed paths.

While this was somewhat convenient for her, it didn't make her feel any better. Especially when she saw Sarah in the morning.

"Good morning, Sarah."

"Good morning, Cecile."

"You don't look well these days. Is something bothering you?"

"It's nothing serious..."

Sarah's expression darkened as she poured coffee into Charlotte's cup. Observing her, Charlotte spoke thoughtfully.

"Is it because another boarder left? I'm sure you'll find someone soon."

"That's part of it, but..."

"...Derek didn't come home again last night, did he?"

"Yes."

Charlotte's face also grew somber.

"He's been coming home late or not at all lately."

It had been a week already. Sarah, speaking almost to herself, cautiously asked, "Cecile, do you have any idea what's going on?"

Her question was half confirmation. Things had started to change after the dinner they had together. Charlotte understood the implication behind Sarah's question. But she could only shake her head.

"I don't know."

"I see. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"It's okay. Feel free to talk to me anytime."

Charlotte forced a bright response, finished her coffee, and stood up.

"Well, I'm off."

"Take care."

Sarah, also smiling awkwardly, saw her off.

The woman inspecting her dress smiled brightly.

"The embroidery you added makes my dress look so much better. Thank you, Cecile!"

"I'm glad you're satisfied. Your detailed order helped me focus."

"My theater troupe will be jealous when they see this dress. Would it be alright if I recommended your shop to them?"

“I’d be grateful if you did. Please, feel free to refer me to them. If they mention that Elena sent them, I’ll give them extra attention.”

Charlotte smiled warmly as she handed back the change. Dealing with various customers had been challenging at first, but it was getting easier. She’d learned a lot by watching Derek at the general store.

Noticing Charlotte’s slight change in expression as she thought of Derek, the customer asked gently, “Is something bothering you?”

“Oh, no. It’s just...”

As she tried to brush it off, an unexpected question came up.

“Has the rent for the shop increased?”

“Excuse me?”

“I heard a rumor that a businessman from Katia is buying up buildings around here.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“That’s a relief. I was worried.”

The woman, visibly calming down, suddenly brought her hand to her mouth.

“This is just a rumor, but you never know. Lean in a bit.”

Charlotte found herself leaning in closer, almost instinctively, as the woman continued her story.

“A businessman from Katia arrived here a few months ago. I think it was about a month ago. He seems to be in the brokerage business, but he had some business to attend to here.”

Her voice grew quieter and more secretive.

“But recently, I heard he’s started gambling and loan sharking around here.”

“Gambling...?”

“Yes. He bought an entire building and turned it into a gambling den. Somehow, he got the mayor’s approval, claiming it’s a legitimate business. But how can gambling be legal? And the loan sharking too—I’m pretty sure they get people into debt at the gambling hall and then lend them money at exorbitant interest rates, basically fleecing them.”

Charlotte’s ears perked up at this. At the same time, an absurd thought crossed her mind. It was a ridiculous notion, but if it was ‘that man,’ it could be possible.

He had a knack for luring people in sweetly before pushing them into a pit.

“What’s the businessman’s name?” she asked slowly, trying to hide her tension.

The woman, oblivious to Charlotte’s anxiety, replied, “Gerald? I think that’s what it was. I don’t know his last name.”

“Oh...”

“Oh my, look at the time. I didn’t realize how late it was while we were chatting.”

The customer, noticing Charlotte's relieved expression, stood up to leave. Charlotte also rose to see her off and opened the door.

"You mentioned you have a performance today. Take care, and good luck!"

"Yes, thank you again, Cecile."

The actress gave Charlotte a light hug before heading out.

After seeing her off, Charlotte tried to return to her work. But her mind was too noisy to focus.

Even though the name was different, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Drawing the curtains on the display window and closing the shop early, Charlotte took a postcard from her drawer.

[To Zhenya,

You must be surprised to receive this letter out of the blue. I have an urgent matter that I need your help with.]

After some hesitation, the words began to flow more easily.

On her way home, she stopped by the post office to send the letter. When she arrived at the boarding house, the place was buzzing. Sarah, who had been so downcast in the morning, opened the door with a bright face and hugged Charlotte.

"Charlotte!"

"Sarah?"

"I'm sorry for worrying you this morning."

“It’s okay. But...”

Charlotte’s eyes quickly shifted from Sarah’s unusually well-dressed appearance to someone standing behind her. There was Derek, also dressed smartly.

“What’s going on?”

“Guess what? Derek has decided to take over the general store!”

Sarah’s eyes sparkled as she spoke.

“Take over?”

“Yes. The owner had to close the shop due to some personal issues, and Derek bought it for a bargain!”

“Wow.”

“He did incur some debt in the process, but with good business, he’ll pay it off in no time!”

The unexpected news made Charlotte’s eyes widen.

“He had to keep it a secret from even me because it was such a delicate matter. And there I was, worrying for nothing...”

“Mom, that’s enough.”

Feeling awkward, Derek interrupted suddenly, meeting Charlotte’s gaze somewhat sheepishly.

“Are you just getting in?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to join us for dinner?”

It seemed like they were going out to celebrate Derek’s success. Not wanting to intrude on their family time, Charlotte smiled and shook her head.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll pass.”

“Then let’s have dinner together another time, Cecile. A friend of ours is joining us tonight, so it might be a bit much.”

Sarah, affectionately linking arms with her son, put on the gloves resting on the hallway drawer. As the door closed behind them, Charlotte sat down at the dining table and sighed.

Everything was going well. Everything. There were no problems.

Yet, an inexplicable sense of foreboding lingered.

Trying to shake off the unease, Charlotte stood up and got back to work.

‘Lady Luck must be on my side. Definitely.’

Derek reflected on the significant fortune that had come from a bit of bad luck. He couldn’t help but think he was blessed with good fortune in people—and luck in gambling, something he’d never experienced before.

“Oh dear, lost again!”

“Give us a break. Haven’t you won three rounds in a row?”

Two men sitting across from each other at a round table groaned, clutching their heads. Meanwhile, Derek grinned as he raked in the money.

“If I keep letting you win, it’ll never end.”

“Are you sure you haven’t been doing this for a while? You’re winning almost every hand.”

“Not at all. I lose sometimes too.”

It was true. There were days he lost, but he always won more than he lost, ensuring he never ended up in the red. With the money he’d earned, he paid half of the acquisition cost for the general store and was about to finalize the contract. Everything was going smoothly, like a ship sailing with a favorable wind.

“Well, I’m off for now.”

“Leaving with another win, I see.”

Ignoring the envious glances, Derek stood up and walked out of the lavishly decorated gambling hall. As he did, he made eye contact with a man standing among the staff. The black-suited men parted as the familiar face approached.

“Gerald.”

“Derek.”

The man called Gerald had an imposing presence that was palpable even from a distance. When they first met, Derek had felt like he was standing before a predator, his body stiffening even as he nearly lost consciousness from the pressure. Though his appearance had changed slightly,

Gerald was still the benefactor who had saved him and introduced him to this place.

Gerald's eyes swept over Derek, lingering on the coins he held.

"Looks like you won big again today."

"Luck seems to be on my side."

"Heading out already?"

"Yes, I have plans tonight."

"I see. Take care."

With a brief nod, Gerald turned away, and the men who had parted for him began to gather around again.

Society was moving away from the old class system, with capital and business taking precedence. Derek had initially wondered why Gerald had come to such a remote place, but seeing people from the capital seek him out made Derek admire him even more.

Currently, the place accepted common folk, but soon it would become an exclusive club for socially and financially recognized gentlemen.

Waiters carrying expensive wine and cocktails on silver trays, beautiful waitresses cheering beside gamblers, and the elegant smoke of cigars held by well-dressed wealthy men—all exuded the scent of wealth and luxury.

'I will succeed. And I will walk in here with pride.'

With a determined look, Derek headed to the exchange counter to convert his coins into cash and left the grand,

glittering building.

Unaware of the distant, watchful eyes following him.



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Charlotte's eyes widened in shock.

"Derek from the general store is at the gambling den?"

"Yes, can you believe it? I was so surprised. I only went there because I was following a patron."

"My goodness."

It was the moment when her worst suspicion was confirmed. The actress, who had visited again, chattered away, noticing Charlotte's frozen expression.

"There are so many people who walk in there and come out completely ruined. Derek must be so young and full of energy that he doesn't fear anything. Oh, Cecile?"

Charlotte's legs suddenly felt weak, and she swayed. The actress caught her by the shoulders.

"Are you alright? You look so pale."

"I'm fine. I just haven't been sleeping well lately."

Ever since the news about Derek taking over the general store, Sarah had been beaming with happiness every day. Now, Charlotte's vision blurred with concern.

Her instincts were usually spot on, and this time was no exception. Ever since she heard about the businessman and

the gambling den, there had been a sense of foreboding, and now she knew why.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte managed to compose herself.

“I think I’ll close up early today. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, everything’s perfect as always. Thank you, Cecile.”

The actress, smiling brightly, was about to leave when Charlotte called out to her.

“Elena, is the gambling den far from here?”

“No, not really.”

“Could you show me how to get there?”

After getting directions from Elena, Charlotte saw her off and quickly closed the shop. She headed straight for the gambling den.

“Derek...”

What she saw there was shocking. From a distance, she recognized Derek leaving the gambling den. Elena’s account was true.

It was a grim realization. Charlotte slowly approached the spot where Derek had been. As she approached closer, two men who seemed to be guards blocked her way.

“Excuse me, but this place is not for ladies.”

“I’m Derek’s sister.”

It was a confident bluff. She remembered Sarah mentioning that the businessman who had set up here was a friend of Derek's. If her guess was correct, this businessman was running the gambling den.

The guards, taken aback by her assertive demeanor, whispered among themselves. One of them went inside briefly and then returned, addressing Charlotte politely.

"Please, come in."

The very thought of what might be lurking inside or what awaited her made her spine tingle. Taking a deep breath, Charlotte stepped forward.

The man led her through the building to a room deep inside. The hallway was dim but meticulously decorated. They stopped in front of a large door, and after three knocks, the man opened it. Inside the spacious reception room, a man sat with his back to her.

The guard nudged Charlotte forward. As she hesitantly approached, the man finally spoke.

"Did you say your name was Cecile?"

It was a voice she had never heard before. Charlotte lifted her gaze, meeting the eyes of an elderly gentleman. It wasn't 'him'. A wave of relief and strange exhaustion washed over her.

"I never heard that Derek had a sister."

"No, I'm not. Just a close acquaintance."

Was this the same frightened woman from moments ago? Her bold reply made his eyebrow twitch.

“Please, have a seat.”

“No, I’d rather just say what I need to and leave, if you don’t mind.”

Charlotte clenched and unclenched her fists, standing her ground.

“I’d like you to stop bringing Derek here.”

“That’s odd. That’s not what I heard. Did Derek say that?”

The subtle irritation in his voice made Charlotte sit up straighter. They were alone in the large reception room, and outside were the man’s subordinates. It was a frightening situation, but she couldn’t back down now. This wasn’t the worst-case scenario she had imagined. She knew men far more intimidating and ruthless than him.

“No, he didn’t. But Derek is young.”

Charlotte shook her head slowly, choosing her words carefully.

“He’s at an age where he can’t distinguish between bravery and recklessness. He doesn’t fully understand what’s dangerous and what’s safe.”

“.....”

“I’m not his real sister or guardian, but I know his mother. A mother who has devoted herself entirely to her only child.”

She thought of Sarah, who had warmly welcomed her when she had no one else in this unfamiliar town. She couldn’t bear to see Sarah’s world fall apart.

Charlotte, who had been acting boldly moments ago, now bowed deeply, her voice filled with desperation.

“So please, Mr. Gerald. Don’t let Derek come here anymore. Forgive me if I’ve been rude.”

As the actress left the reception room, Charlotte remained, waiting for a definitive answer. Only after she received it did she leave. Once she was gone, the curtains, which had been drawn, were pulled back. Gerald, hearing approaching footsteps, took a sip of vodka and spoke.

“She’s quite brave. Not quite what you described.”

“Are you interested?”

Though the question was posed calmly, the atmosphere was tense, like a predator baring its teeth. Gerald quickly shook his head and replied.

“Of course not. Think of my age. Do I seem like someone who would covet another man’s woman?”

The threatening air around the man eased slightly. Gerald, observing this, swallowed his familiar admiration.

He had seen countless beautiful works of art, both genuine and fake, but the man before him was stunning every time he looked at him.

‘Richard Winkle.’

‘Gerald Hacker. What brings you here?’

Expecting a pale, nerdy young lawyer, Gerald had been pleasantly surprised. From their first meeting, Richard had overpowered him with just a look.

‘I have an offer you can’t refuse.’

When Richard smiled, Gerald instinctively knew that this man was a dominant force, always on top. Richard was similar to him but operated on a different level.

The fruits of their trust were sweet. With Richard’s brilliant business ideas, Gerald had significantly expanded his small company over the past two years and achieved great success. What Richard wanted in return was peculiar.

“So far, everything has gone as you wished. What’s next?”

Richard Winkler smiled, a look Gerald had never seen on his partner’s face. It was a smile both threatening and alluring, sending chills down Gerald’s spine.

“I’ve given you much, and now it’s time to collect.”

As he spoke, Richard turned to watch the woman walking away outside. Nothing in this world came for free.

“What kind of nonsense is this!”

The sudden ban from the gambling den was a bolt from the blue for Derek. He had never imagined he would be barred, and thus had no contingency plan.

Half of the payment for the general store was still due, and now his way of making money was blocked. He had almost no savings left. Considering the debt Sarah had accrued from struggling to run the boarding house, the future looked bleak.

“What am I supposed to do now? How...”

Derek clutched his throbbing head, wandering aimlessly down the street. Just then, someone grabbed his arm. He looked up irritably, only to see a familiar face.

“Cecile...?”

“Get up.”

With a stern expression he had never seen before, Cecile dragged him somewhere. She took him to none other than the boarding house.

“Cecile!”

“I know everything.”

As Derek recoiled at the door, shaking off her hand and about to speak, Charlotte cut him off firmly.

“I know you’ve been frequenting the gambling den. And that your recent flush of money came from your winnings there, right?”

“How... how did you...?”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you not realize how many eyes are watching places like that?”

A thought suddenly struck Derek.

“Wait, Cecile, you...”

“Yes, it was me.”

“What right do you have!”

Derek, unable to contain his sudden surge of anger, raised his hand. In that instant, the door swung open, and it was

he who found himself sprawled on the floor, slapped hard.

“Mom!”

“You useless fool!”

Sarah, who had heard everything from Charlotte the night before, looked down at her son with a face flushed with rage.

“Of all the things you could do, you turn to gambling! Even if you grew up without a father, how could you... how could you...”

“.....”

“How could you do this to me...?”

Her voice, choked with shock and anger, trembled. Derek, clutching his burning cheek, avoided her gaze. The betrayal and despair that had frozen the two of them were palpable. Watching the scene, Charlotte quietly broke the silence.

“Let’s all sit down and talk.”

The three of them entered the house without a word.

Faced with his mother’s disappointed expression, Derek finally broke down and confessed everything. His story was just as Charlotte had expected. Gerald had saved him by chance and introduced him to the gambling den, where he quickly became addicted and couldn’t escape.

“I must have been out of my mind... I’m so sorry, Mom.”

Sobbing uncontrollably, Derek was, at that moment, the young man Charlotte had known. Sarah, who had been crying while holding her son, cupped his cheeks.

“It’s alright. We still have our home. We can give up the general store and start over...”

“But... we still have so much debt, don’t we? The money we borrowed to run the boarding house...”

“We borrowed it from a friend, so they’ll understand our situation. It’s going to be okay, Derek.”

“If it’s alright with you.”

Charlotte, who had been quietly watching the two, spoke cautiously.

“For now, you can sell goods at my shop.”

“Cecile!”

“I’ve already bought the inventory for the store, and there’s no other way to handle it.”

“But, won’t that be...”

“I’ll be focusing on my work with the theater company for a while, so I can take commissions here and work on them.”

Elena would understand their situation. Hesitating at Charlotte’s sudden suggestion, Derek finally nodded.

“Thank you so much. If we sell at cost, we can clear out the stock quickly. I’ll vacate the space as soon as possible.”



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Thanks to the combined efforts of the mother and son, they managed to sell the general store within two weeks, minimizing their losses. They also sold all the merchandise, not only through Charlotte's shop but also by setting up street stalls and working hard. Charlotte even helped by paying several months' rent in advance, doing everything she could to assist.

"Now, all that's left is to repay the money we borrowed for running the boarding house, and we'll be debt-free!"

"That's wonderful news, Mrs. Sarah."

"It's all thanks to you. I don't know how I can ever repay this kindness..."

Sarah hugged Charlotte tightly, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Don't think of it as a favor. I've received so much more from you."

Charlotte meant it. Despite working hard for two years to learn the trade and open her own shop, she still felt an emptiness. She often dreamed of her mother, Cynthia, holding her tightly. Sarah had filled that void, becoming a mother figure in her life.

Though she tried to hide it, Charlotte was always yearning for family and affection.

“If you don’t mind...”

Sarah wiped her tears with the back of her hand, released Charlotte from the hug, and looked her in the eyes.

“I’d like to treat you as part of our family.”

“What...?”

“Actually, Derek told me you don’t have any family.”

Holding Charlotte’s trembling hands tightly, Sarah asked cautiously.

“If you have nowhere else to turn, Cecile... Would you let me be your mother and Derek your brother?”

“Mrs. Sarah...”

Charlotte’s hands shook. Sarah, seeing her unexpected reaction, looked uneasy.

“Oh, if you don’t want to, then—”

Before she could finish, Charlotte buried her face in Sarah’s ample bosom.

“I’d love that. Oh...”

“Cecile...”

Was this really okay? Could she, with her hidden past, be part of their family? Despite knowing it was wrong, she couldn’t help but yearn to be with them, to share in their family love. Hearing Sarah say aloud what she had always secretly wished for brought tears streaming down her face.

“But there’s something I need to confess first.”

Sarah had opened her heart and accepted her sincerely. So Charlotte decided to tell her everything, hoping she would still be accepted afterward.

Holding Sarah tightly, Charlotte hesitated before speaking.

“My real name is... my real name is...”

Ding dong.

Just as she was about to reveal her secret, the doorbell rang.

Sarah was the first to regain her composure. Smiling, she released Charlotte from the hug and went to answer the door. A man she had never seen before stood there.

“Who are you?”

“Are you Mrs. Sarah?”

“Yes, I am...”

“I’m here to deliver this.”

The man handed her a debt collection notice. As Sarah read the paper, her face turned ashen, as if all the blood had drained from it.

“This can’t be! This is...”

“What happened?”

Charlotte, who had approached from behind, took the paper from Sarah’s trembling hands. Her face also turned pale as she read it.

“I... I borrowed money from Mr. Hans next door, not from some company like this!”

“Yes. And Mr. Hans transferred that debt to us.”

The man continued his explanation nonchalantly.

“So, please confirm the due date and sign here.”

“A week from now...? This is so one-sided!”

“If you have any complaints, take them up with the creditor directly. I’m just the collector and have no authority.”

It wasn’t just him; two more burly men stood behind him. With Derek not around and only an elderly woman present, they had no chance of resisting.

“Hey, you can’t just—!”

Charlotte tried to block them, but the man pushed past her and barged in.

“I’m not leaving until you sign.”

His face showed he was ready for a fight. As Charlotte wondered what to do, she noticed the creditor’s name on the paper.

[Gerald Hacker]

“This can’t be happening...!”

The rosy future they had envisioned crumbled in an instant. Sarah, already drained from previous hardships, lacked the strength to face this new misfortune. She signed the document helplessly and handed it over. The men left the house in a rush.

“That bastard! How could he stab us in the back like this! What did we do to deserve this?”

When Derek returned and heard what happened, he slammed his fist on the table in frustration.

“I’ll handle this. I promise.”

“How? Those people... they don’t play by the rules.”

Sarah, leaning against the couch and sipping water, shook her head.

“I heard they’re involved in the rental business too. I didn’t pay much attention, but now it’s come back to bite us...”

Charlotte had heard similar rumors but had been too focused on the gambling side to give them much thought.

The silence among the heartbroken trio was broken by another knock on the door.

“Mail delivery!”

When no one responded, thinking the house was empty, the postman slipped a letter under the door and left. Derek picked it up.

“Cecile, this one’s for you.”

The sender was Zhenya. Charlotte had forgotten about the letter. She had an idea of what it might contain, but the “urgent” label gave her a sense of foreboding. She quickly tore open the envelope.

[To Charlotte,

Charlotte, I looked into the businessman you mentioned. His name is Gerald Hacker. He used to run a small company and lost his wife early on.

He was almost bankrupt but miraculously revived his company two years ago. Since then, he's grown his business into a monstrous entity in the underworld.

He has a partner, though the name is unknown, there are many rumors. One thing's for sure, he's described as a strikingly handsome man in his thirties.

A former lawyer.

I'm not certain, but I have a bad feeling about this.

Please be careful, Charlotte.

Zhenya Clitwood]

"Oh..."

Her heart sank. As Charlotte collapsed to the floor, Sarah screamed.

In her collapsing vision, Charlotte realized that this warm, kind-hearted mother and son were innocent. The guilt lay solely with her.

The endless game of hide-and-seek was over, and the seeker had found her. It was time to face the consequences of her escape.

The next morning, before Charlotte could even gather her thoughts, a carriage stopped in front of the house. A man introduced himself as being sent by Gerald and pointed

directly at Charlotte, instructing her to get into the carriage. It was as if Gerald was certain she would understand by now and had sent someone accordingly.

Charlotte wondered how much of this had been planned by Gerald and how long she had been a pawn in his game. The more she thought about it, the more chills ran down her spine, making her shudder repeatedly.

“What is this, exactly...?”

“I know Gerald’s business partner.”

“Cecile...?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.”

Charlotte reassured the alarmed Sarah and Derek before turning around. Surrounded by men in black suits, she climbed into the carriage on her own.

The ride was silent. Despite the pity one might feel for the small woman trembling like a lamb being led to slaughter, no one spoke a word. The men treated Charlotte as if she were a mythical creature that would turn them to stone if they made eye contact.

“...”

In the suffocating silence, Charlotte found herself standing before a massive door once again. She considered knocking, but the man leading her opened the door immediately.

“Please, go in.”

Without a moment to prepare herself, Charlotte swallowed hard and stepped forward. Contrary to her expectations, the

reception room was bright. Sunlight streamed through the windows, warmly illuminating the carpeted floor. It was so serene and soft that it made her question if this was the same place she had entered before.

But Charlotte wasn't fooled. She had experienced it before: the road to hell was often paved with heavenly illusions.

She saw a familiar yet almost forgotten profile. His light brown hair, which could appear blonde in the right light, was illuminated by the midday sun as he stood by the open window, basking like a contented cat. The sunlight highlighted his sharp features and chiseled jawline.

The suffocating silence pooled in the room like a deep swamp. Charlotte stopped four steps away from him and slowly called his name.

"...Richard."

She had always known they would meet again. He was a tenacious man who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals, so she knew she could never escape him forever. However, stepping back into the giant spider web she thought she had escaped was more horrifying than she had imagined.

"Richard."

Only after calling his name clearly again did he slowly turn his head. The moment their eyes met, a powerful shock coursed through Charlotte.

She had expected him to strangle her, to push her ruthlessly, and perhaps even be prepared for death. But the face she saw was as calm as a still lake. It was her own face that was contorted with fear.

“Since when...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

Her question was loaded. Since when had he known her whereabouts? How much of this was a trap he had set, and what lengths had he gone to for it?

Unlike her, who was on the verge of an emotional explosion, Richard remained composed. He tilted his head slightly and responded.

“Does it matter now?”

“What...?”

His next question was even more shocking.

“Where is that Derek or whatever his name is?”

“What are you talking about...?”

“I asked where that bastard you’ve been cozying up to is. Did he run off when he heard you were coming here?”



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Charlotte couldn't believe her ears. Her legs gave out, and she collapsed to the floor as Richard slowly approached. Seeing her instinctively scoot away from him, he sneered.

"It hasn't been long, but with that pretty face of yours, you couldn't have failed to seduce a young man like him. You two looked quite cozy. Have you been rolling around together for the past two years? With the skills I taught you?"

Richard knelt down to her level, his words biting through clenched teeth. Charlotte, snapping back to reality, shook her head desperately.

"It's not like that!"

"..."

"I said, it's not like that! Why are you humiliating me like this?!"

Shame and humiliation welled up to her throat. She struggled to escape, but the shadow cast over her was dark and wide. Richard lifted her chin with his finger and growled menacingly.

"If there wasn't a man, then why have you been missing for the past two years?"

"That's because..."

It seemed he didn't know she had been at Zhenya's dress shop. Though strangers had occasionally snooped around the shop over the past two years, they hadn't discovered her. She had dyed her hair and used a pseudonym, hiding her identity so thoroughly that even her dorm mates didn't know who she really was. It was all thanks to Zhenya's cooperation. If she revealed this, it would undoubtedly bring harm to Zhenya.

Richard, seeing Charlotte clench her mouth shut after vehemently denying his accusations, let out a derisive laugh and stood up.

"You deny it so desperately, I'll believe you for now."

Her denial was her saving grace. If she had admitted it, he might have strangled her right then and there.

The man who had been ready to crush her a moment ago stepped back. Charlotte, barely catching her breath, glared at him.

"Let Sarah and Derek go."

"Why should I?"

"They have nothing to do with this! If you don't, then..."

Half pleading, half threatening, she tried to muster all her strength to continue. Suddenly, there was a loud crash as something shattered against the wall.

"Then what?"

"..."

“Are you going to spread rumors that Richard Winkle is a monster who drinks human blood and should be put on trial for witchcraft? Is that your plan?”

Witch trials, an outdated and superstitious practice from centuries ago. In an era where cars were being developed and science was gaining prominence, who would believe such nonsense?

Especially against someone who was part of the upper echelons of society, unlike her, a mere laborer by birth and by profession.

“Tell me, Charlotte. Do you wish to see me tied to a stake and burned by the people?”

There had been times she hated him enough to want to kill him. But now, facing him again, all she felt was a crushing sense of despair, leaving her unable to think or feel anything.

“I...”

After a long silence, Charlotte, with her eyes fixed on the floor and her breath shaky, finally spoke.

“What do you want me to do...?”

Her voice trembled. His steps, which had retreated, slowly returned. He stood right in front of her. Though she didn't look up, the polished leather shoes were so close they seemed ready to crush her hand.

“Who knows.”

“...”

“You should know that yourself.”

The sound of his footsteps grew distant, followed by the door opening and closing. Charlotte was once again left in a vast, silent void.

When Charlotte finally lifted her head, the only thing left in the room was the shattered remains of an ivory statue. It lay in pieces, broken just as she felt.

Everything was in black and white. The world had lost its color and crumbled around her.

Richard had a cruel habit of trapping people in a maze without any way out. No matter how hard she tried to escape, it seemed the conclusion had already been decided. But she couldn't just fall apart like this...

As she clutched her throbbing head and trudged back home, the moment she opened the door...

“Charlotte!”

Derek, with a frantic expression, was just about to leave, his shoes half on.

“What happened?”

“My mother... my mother...!”

Charlotte realized then that even a glimmer of hope was not meant for her. Despair was only beginning.

A week had passed since Sarah lost consciousness due to extreme stress. They had taken turns caring for her, even closing the shop for a while, but it wasn't enough.

“When will she wake up...?”

The doctor, who had come to check on her, quietly shook his head.

“She suffered a severe head injury when she collapsed. It’s unlikely she’ll recover well...”

“How could this happen...”

“She might not wake up at all. You should prepare yourselves...”

“Mother...”

Ah, there was no place left to retreat to.

Looking at Derek’s haggard face, Charlotte felt the harsh reality. The few boarders they had were leaving one by one due to the landlady’s absence, leaving behind only debts. Now, the only thing left was her decision.

After the doctor left, Derek stayed in his room for a long time and only came out late in the evening. His face still looked gaunt and exhausted, but there was a certain resolve in his eyes.

Charlotte was hesitating at the door, wondering how to bring up her departure, but Derek spoke first.

“Thank you so much for all your help, Cecile.”

“Derek?”

“For paying the house call fees and everything else...”

“What are you talking about? All of a sudden?”

“I think I need to sell this boarding house... and move to the countryside.”

Charlotte held her breath at Derek’s words. This house was Sarah’s cherished treasure and her entire fortune.

Yes. This was inevitable.

Charlotte closed her eyes briefly and then opened them.

“I... I can’t anymore...”

“Derek.”

Charlotte placed a calming hand on Derek’s shoulder as he stammered, trying to hold back his tears.

“Listen carefully. All the debts will be cleared.”

“What...?”

“In time, Sarah will wake up. Everything will be alright again.”

“Cecile, what are you talking about...?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. That business partner... the one with the real authority... is actually my...”

Charlotte forced herself to speak to the bewildered Derek.

“Former fiancé.”

“...!”

A chilling silence enveloped the two of them, as if someone had poured ice water over their heads. Derek, his lips

moving without sound in disbelief, finally spoke after a few minutes.

“Is it true...?”

“Yes.”

Though they were only engaged, it was practically a common-law marriage. To be blunt, she had been his mistress—a relationship devoid of emotion, purely physical.

It was only after leaving that she realized she was the woman everyone had scorned and despised. In matters of love, she had always been a fool, blind to reality. She was the one who always spoke of love, who clung to him, begging for his embrace.

What she couldn't understand was why he had tried to take responsibility for her, never once speaking of love. The reason remained a mystery.

“We broke off the engagement due to a misunderstanding two years ago, but we happened to meet again because of this situation and talked it over. As a result...”

Charlotte briefly explained her relationship with him, omitting unnecessary details, and then finished speaking to Derek, who was still in shock.

“The misunderstanding is resolved, and I've decided to go back to him. If I ask, he will clear all the debts.”

“Cecile!”

Pretending to be self-sacrificing, acting kind—she was a revolting hypocrite and an irredeemable villain. She couldn't bring herself to admit that this innocent mother and son

were suffering because of her. She was terrified of seeing the affection in their eyes turn to hatred, of losing the family she had finally found.

“If you’re going because of us, don’t. Please.”

Derek, noticing the bag she was holding, rushed over and pleaded.

“Mother and I will be fine, really...!”

Tears welled up in Derek’s eyes as he grasped her shoulders. Charlotte flinched. She sensed someone’s presence beyond the door. She coldly shook off his hands and grabbed the doorknob.

“I’m going because I want to, not because of you.”

Everything around her was his ears and eyes. Charlotte forced herself to appear indifferent and emotionless.

The door opened, and the waiting coachman took her bag.

The carriage stopped in front of a three-story townhouse in an affluent neighborhood. The maid, Fenet, greeted Charlotte.

“I’ve been instructed to take good care of you, miss. Please make yourself at home. If there’s anything you need or any inconvenience, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

There was something off about her words.

The house was neat and clean, but it lacked a sense of warmth. Fenet was the only person handling the household

chores. It didn't seem like they were struggling financially or had trouble finding help.

Charlotte's suspicions finally surfaced when she saw the white sheets covering some of the furniture. It had been a few months since they moved in, hadn't it?

"Does Mr. Richard not come here often?"

"No. He's been quite busy lately. We see him about two days a week."

"Oh..."

"Sometimes he goes on business trips for several days."

As Fenet said, it was rare to see him. The business he started with Gerald was flourishing, and even when he returned home, he often shut himself in his office.

They only saw each other late at night. Despite having a guest room, they shared the master bedroom. When the door creaked open late at night, Charlotte would stiffen and pretend to be asleep, keeping her eyes tightly shut.

Click.

Tonight, too, he came in late. Charlotte, as usual, kept her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep.

"..."

She heard the rustling of the sheets as he got into bed beside her. Just as she felt a sense of relief, Richard grabbed her shoulder and swiftly moved on top of her.

"Ah...!"

Her pretense of sleep was exposed. When she opened her eyes, she was met with his cold smile.



Ch. 56 ASEF 56 - R19

Chapter warning: this chapter contains scenes of sexual content. Please be warned before proceeding.

“You don’t need to tremble like that. I don’t have a hobby of devouring terrified women.”

Even in the darkness, his features were clear. His lips, twisted in a mocking curve, delivered a chilling voice that weighed down on her.

“So... you knew everything?”

She had thought he was too tired from work to pay attention. But contrary to her assumption, he showed no signs of fatigue.

“Your restless nights were quite a sight. Like a convict awaiting execution.”

“...”

“The image I remember is very different from this.”

Two years ago, any semblance of politeness had long been discarded. When no one was around, he revealed the true face hidden beneath his mask.

As his face drew close enough for their lips to touch, Charlotte turned her head away. She recalled that night, seeing him with blood dripping from his mouth. Clicking his

tongue, Richard grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him again.

“Don’t turn away or show me your back without my permission.”

At the same time, his hand slipped under her chemise, caressing her soft thigh.

“Stop! You said you wouldn’t...!”

“I said I wouldn’t devour you, not that I wouldn’t touch you. And...”

His hand, having removed the last piece of cloth, moved unhesitatingly to her most private place.

“Ah...!”

“If you don’t like it, I’ll stop right now.”

Richard smirked arrogantly, sliding his long finger inside her. The sudden stimulation made Charlotte’s body arch like a fish on a hook. Grasping her trembling waist, he pushed his fingers deeper.

“You’re tight. Is it because it’s been a while?”

“How... how do you know that? Ah...!”

“Do I look like an idiot?”

The warm, wet interior was just as he remembered. Pressing the familiar spots without hesitation, Charlotte let out a moan like a pressed instrument.

“Ah...!”

“If there had been another man in your life, do you think I’d let you off so easily?”

If she had been involved with someone like Derek, he would have beaten him to the brink of death, left him barely alive, and taken her right in front of his eyes. He wanted to see her despairing expression as she looked at him.

After that, he would have chained her and kept her in a place devoid of sunlight, using her until he was tired of her.

“Ah... uh... ah!”

As his movements became more intense, Charlotte unconsciously clung to his broad shoulders. Feeling the hard muscles under her palms, she raised her knees, clutching the bed sheets with her toes curled.

“Ah... uh...!”

Only when her vision went white did the torturous pleasure end. Pulling out his soaked fingers, Richard pried open her lips, making her lick them clean.

“Suck. How lewd.”

A cold command that brooked no refusal. Before Charlotte could regain her senses, the mattress shifted and then steadied again.

“Pack your things from today.”

Richard, now dressed in a robe, informed her.

“What...?”

“We’re going to Cardel Island the day after tomorrow.”

It was an unfamiliar name.

Richard's assignment was to a tropical island that was just beginning to undergo rapid development.

As soon as Charlotte stepped off the boat and onto the bustling island, she noticed the native men and women with their bronze skin and dark eyes, standing out from the locals.

Most of the people carrying the luggage were natives. It was a strange imbalance. Moreover, their eyes seemed dull and lifeless, as if they had lost their spirit. Charlotte concluded it was likely because it had been less than ten years since they were subjugated after a conquest.

"This place is..."

"Shh."

Just as she opened her mouth in curiosity, someone approached. An elderly gentleman, hat in hand, greeted them with a broad smile.

"Well, well, look who it is. I heard you were coming, but it's good to see you again."

"It's been a while, Captain."

"I've long since retired, but hearing that title always warms my heart."

With a hearty laugh, the man's gaze naturally shifted to Charlotte standing beside Richard.

"And who might this lovely lady be?"

Charlotte lowered her eyes in embarrassment as a brief introduction followed.

“Charlotte, this is Brad Zern, my superior officer during my military days.”

“Oh.”

Military days. Charlotte’s brief exclamation was met with a sharp glance.

“This is Miss Charlotte Hegel, my fiancée.”

Fiancée. Before she could even process the word, Brad respectfully extended his hand. Caught off guard, she placed her hand on his, and he briefly kissed the back of it.

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hegel.”

“Oh... it’s nice to meet you, Captain.”

“Please, just call me Brad. You too, Richard.”

“Sure.”

Richard replied smoothly, gently withdrawing Charlotte’s hand. Brad, smiling silently at the gesture, turned his head slightly.

“It looks like the porters have loaded all the luggage onto the carriage. Let’s continue our conversation there.”

Quiet eyes followed them as they headed towards the carriage.

Inside the carriage, many stories were exchanged. Brad, who had just turned sixty, was a noble and gentlemanly figure. He had spent his life as a soldier, was dispatched

here five years ago to suppress the rebels, and after losing his wife a year ago, he retired and now lived in a large house with his daughter.

“If you hadn’t helped me invest my pension, I would have been in a tough spot.”

“It was only a temporary difficulty. Besides, with your help on this project, my investment has paid off.”

“Introducing you to the island’s governor was no big deal. By the way, Olivia will be thrilled to see you. When she finds out you’re here...”

The conversation, which had been flowing smoothly, suddenly halted. Meeting Charlotte’s eyes, Brad smiled awkwardly.

“I was being rude. Please forgive me, Miss Hegel. It was just a joke.”

“It’s fine, Captain.”

Though he had asked her to call him Brad, the formality felt more comfortable for Charlotte at this stage. Brad’s smile softened at her polite response, and he turned to look at Richard, who was gazing out the window.

“You are indeed fortunate to have such beauty by your side.”

“Am I?”

Richard, leaning his elbow on the window frame, responded indifferently. It was a stark contrast to the cold manner in which he had brushed off Brad’s earlier gesture of kissing

Charlotte's hand. Brad continued to force conversation, sensing the tension.

It didn't seem like a marriage of convenience given Richard's personality, yet there was a clear chill between them. Bringing her here didn't seem like an act of affection, but rather an unwillingness to be apart, even for a moment. Despite the apparent heat, there was a notable distance between them.

"Just when I thought he had softened up a bit, he's still the same."

Brad clicked his tongue softly and shifted his gaze back to Charlotte, who was seated next to Richard.

"Did you know, Miss Hegel, that this guy used to look like a drenched puppy when he first arrived?"

"...A puppy?"

A word that didn't suit him at all and one she couldn't possibly associate with him. If she had been drinking water, she might have spat it out. Brad continued, smiling at Charlotte's startled reaction.

"With that face of his, he'd look so pitiful, even if you just talked to him. 'Yes, sir.' 'No, sir.' Only two words, and he wouldn't mingle with his comrades. He was like a hedgehog, locking himself in his own fortress and pushing everyone away."

"Brad."

Richard quietly interrupted, seemingly irritated by the conversation.

“Miss Hegel must be tired from the journey and would probably like to rest.”

“Oh. Is that so?”

Brad looked apologetically at Charlotte, who shook her head emphatically.

“No, please continue.”

Ignoring the sharp look Richard gave her, Charlotte urged Brad to go on. She was curious, but it was also partly out of defiance.

Days had gone by with her being kept close yet treated like she was invisible. He barely spoke to her unless it was absolutely necessary. Neither of them had brought up ‘that day,’ as if they were engaged in a dangerous tug-of-war, neither willing to make the first move. Outwardly, it seemed peaceful, but it was a precarious peace.

Brad glanced between the two of them before continuing.

“One day, a kitten wandered into the barracks. It was just a tiny thing, barely able to walk, probably because its mother had died. The men didn’t know what to do and were all flustered. And then, surprisingly, this guy stepped up.”

“Really?”

It was an unbelievable story. Charlotte’s eyes widened, and Brad nodded.

“He picked up the kitten, and it suited him so well. He said it looked hungry and quickly went to a nearby village to get some food for it. Thanks to him, the kitten survived.”

“That’s a relief.”

“It sure is. It grew up healthy and now lives at my house.”

As the conversation continued, the carriage gradually slowed down. There was the sound of heavy iron gates opening, and the carriage moved from a dirt road to a gravel path before coming to a stop.

Richard was the first to stand, as if he had been waiting. He got off the carriage with a natural grace that seemed almost more fitting than the owner himself, and extended his hand to Charlotte. She took his hand and stepped down, followed by Brad. A man who appeared to be the butler approached them.

“Welcome back, sir.”

“Is the guest room ready?”

“As per your instructions, sir.”

“We’ll need a larger room. There are two guests.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s go inside.”

After finishing his conversation with the butler, Brad led his two guests towards the entrance of the large mansion. As the door opened, a clear, high-pitched female voice could be heard from inside.

It was a young woman with a bright demeanor.

“Father, where have you been...?”

“Ah, Olivia. This is...”

Before Brad could introduce them, the woman named Olivia's face lit up as she focused on one person.

"...Richard?"

"It's been a while, Miss Olivia."

Richard called her by name without hesitation and smiled lightly.

"It has been a while..."

Olivia blushed, clearly flustered. Unconsciously, Charlotte placed a hand over her left chest. She felt a heavy pain there. As she struggled to maintain her composure, Brad interjected.

"I forgot to introduce you. This is my daughter, Olivia, Miss Hegel."

"Oh..."

The introduction continued seamlessly.

"Olivia, this is Miss Charlotte Hegel, Richard's fiancée."

Olivia's face, which had been flushed, turned pale in an instant.



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Olivia Zern was a vibrant seventeen-year-old girl. She inherited her father's gentle features, with hazel hair and eyes that were a shade darker. Though shy at first, once she opened up, she could be quite talkative.

"Richard was like an older brother to me. He didn't talk much, but he was always kind."

Charlotte vividly remembered Olivia's face turning pale when Brad introduced her as Richard's fiancée. Olivia was a pure and straightforward girl, her emotions clearly visible. Her gentle and kind nature made it easy to grow fond of her, even if she was, in a way, a rival for Richard's affections. It was hard to harbor any ill feelings towards her.

But then Charlotte shook her head inwardly. What did it matter if Olivia was a rival or not?

"I see."

"How did you meet Richard?" Olivia asked, now comfortable enough to use Charlotte's first name, her eyes full of curiosity. Charlotte, snapping out of her thoughts a beat later, hesitated before answering.

"My mother was his nanny."

"Oh my."

Charlotte unconsciously clasped and unclasped her hands, lowering her gaze. Olivia and Richard came from the same world, and Charlotte was unsure how Olivia would react to her being from a working-class family.

Just as the silence started to become uncomfortable, Olivia grabbed Charlotte's hands tightly.

"Olivia...?"

"Oh my goodness, that's so romantic!"

"What?"

"You defied your family's opposition to be together, didn't you? Isn't that right?"

Olivia's eyes sparkled with admiration and excitement. Charlotte was so taken aback that she hiccupped. Olivia, releasing Charlotte's hands, let her imagination run wild.

"I wondered why you used a different surname. I thought it was just because you had left the count's family to be independent, but there was more to it! Living on a distant island, I guess I'm out of touch with the world."

At that moment, someone knocked on the door from outside.

"Miss, your father is calling for you."

"I'll be right there."

It was Kana, the local maid. Olivia stood up promptly.

"I'm sorry for taking up your time today, Charlotte."

"It's alright. I had some free time."

Yes, in this prison-like place, time was all she had in abundance.

Charlotte gave a tired smile.

After Olivia left and the door closed, Charlotte glanced at the clock. It was almost the time Richard had mentioned. Slowly, she rose and headed to her room to prepare for going out.

At the same time, a cold gaze was fixed on the open scenery.

Since arriving on Cardel Island, Charlotte Hegel had been like a wilting flower. Even as she responded with moans when touched in bed, she steadfastly turned away from him, her spirit unyielding. Her silent resistance, rather than submission, both amused and challenged him.

“Look in the mirror. This is us right now.”

“No...! No, it’s not. It’s not...”

“Even as you writhe in pleasure.”

“No...”

You are mine. Your body and soul, all of you.

He had whispered these words like a curse, countless times, while holding her slender waist.

Her body, flushed and tear-streaked, was soft and sticky with sweat. He covered her escaping hands and pinned her fleeing body down. There were moments he thought of strangling her, but as his fingers traced her soft curves, a deep desire surged within him.

Since he had brought her to the island, he wondered if he should lock her away where no one else could see her. Make her surrender to pleasure until her mind was filled only with him. Then she wouldn't think of escaping again.

"Mr. Winkle."

Someone called out to him, and his racing thoughts came to an abrupt halt. The man turned his head. It was Edwin, his temporary secretary, who had run up the steep stairs and was now wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

"Phew... There you are."

"I was just thinking about something. What's the matter?"

"It's dangerous for you to stay here for too long."

"I have guards with me, so it's fine."

"Even so..."

No one could survive a sniper's bullet from a distance. Richard scoffed briefly at Edwin, who was hesitating and speaking in a hushed tone, and then brushed past him, heading down the stairs.

"It's been a while since we subdued the rebels, and yet we still haven't eradicated the remnants. The local governor must be aware of this."

"They're persistent and tenacious. Like wild dogs, even if you muzzle them, their fangs remain sharp."

Despite the outward appearance of peace, the island still had an undercurrent of unrest. It had been a year since key

figures from Ethelwood started being kidnapped and murdered one after another. One man who barely survived six months ago was still unable to communicate properly due to the severe aftereffects of torture.

“It’s partly the fault of those idiots who poke the beehive without expecting to get stung.”

“Well...”

Despite these horrific incidents, the discovery of rich coal deposits in the undeveloped northern part of the island had drawn a flood of businessmen and nobles from Ethelwood, more interested in immediate financial gain than the potential threat to their lives.

To Edwin, a bastard child of an Ethelwood nobleman and a local woman, Richard Winkle was just another one of these opportunists. The only difference was that Richard’s military service on the island gave him a slight edge over his competitors.

He had gone missing once; could he have ties with the rebels...?

As if reading his thoughts, Richard, who was descending the stairs briskly, suddenly turned his head.

“The guy we captured last time.”

“He’s tough. Still refuses to talk.”

“Interesting.”

Interesting? Edwin was puzzled by this cryptic comment as Richard resumed his quick descent.

“What about the rat we told to contact?”

“He agreed to our proposal.”

Richard’s lips twisted into a sneer as he spoke the next words.

“The next appointment.”

“A visit to the orphanage.”

Charity, in name, but in reality, it was one of the strategies to win over the local residents. Edwin hurried to keep up with his boss, continuing to speak.

“Miss Charlotte has already arrived and is waiting.”

As always, after their intense and exhausting encounters, when he abruptly informed her that someone would be coming for her during the day, Charlotte had no choice in the matter. However, contrary to her expectation of being dressed up like a doll and taken to some social event, she found herself at an old, rundown monastery.

“This place...”

As she stepped out of the carriage and approached the door, an elderly priest in a uniform greeted her.

“Welcome.”

“This is...?”

“This is the Lancel’s Orphanage, a home for children orphaned by poverty and war.”

“Oh.”

Before she could hide her surprise at the unexpected answer, a small child peeked out from behind the priest. As Charlotte looked at the child, more children appeared, all of them staring at her with curious eyes.

“Principal! Who is that lady?”

“You little rascal! Show some manners to our guest.”

“Ow!”

The priest pretended to scold the child, giving a playful tap on the head that was as light as a feather. His face was full of affection. Charlotte’s dazed mind slowly began to clear. Surrounding her and the priest were children with dirty faces and clothes worn down to threads.

“Please forgive them, Miss Hegel. They’re still very young.”

“It’s alright. But, Father, you are...?”

“I apologize for the late introduction. I’m Jeremy, the head of this orphanage.”

The priest introduced himself and extended his hand for a handshake. As they shook hands, he led her inside.

“You’re Mr. Winkle’s fiancée, correct? I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

The situation was bewildering. Following him through the corridor, Jeremy began to explain.

“As you can see, this is a monastery that’s over a hundred years old. It was abandoned after the war but was repurposed as an orphanage a year ago by order of the Ethelwood regent.”

The building was structured in a square around the main chapel. In the center, there was a grand elm tree surrounded by flowers and benches, creating a garden-like atmosphere.

Though the building was old, it seemed well-maintained. The children, despite their shabby clothes, were bright and cheerful.

But what did this place have to do with him? No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t find any connection. Just as her confusion peaked, Jeremy continued.

“Mr. Winkle is truly a good man. While the support from the mainland has been helpful, we are in constant need of more due to the increasing number of children. We are very grateful for his generous contributions.”

“Pardon...?”

Charlotte was stunned and stood still, doubting her ears. Just then, a small voice came from below.

“Hold me...”

It was the same little child who had asked who she was earlier, around four or five years old. The child had followed her and was now tugging at her skirt, extending tiny arms towards her.

“Hold me.”

“Deon, you little rascal...”

“Hold me, please.”

“I’ll hold you instead, alright?”

Jeremy, flustered, tried to pick up the child, but the child shook his head.

“Hold me.”

“You little...”

Worried about offending the fiancée of an important benefactor, Jeremy tried to pull the child away, fearing the loss of their much-needed support. But then he heard Charlotte’s soft voice.

“Alright.”

Charlotte smiled gently and lifted the child into her arms. The child was warm and soft. Supporting the child’s bottom with one hand, the child buried his face into her chest, snuggling closer. Jeremy, watching in surprise, quickly reached out.

“He’s heavy; let me...”

“It’s fine. He’s just a child.”

Charlotte added, “He’s not heavy at all,” as she stroked the child’s small head. The child calmed down in her embrace. Thinking about how she might have had a child even smaller than this if she hadn’t run away on her wedding day gave her a peculiar feeling.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Jeremy suggested, “Let’s go to my office. There’s a couch where you can set him down.”

“Alright.”

Following Jeremy’s lead, Charlotte headed toward the director’s office.



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Deon was just a child longing for an adult's embrace. As Charlotte gently stroked his back a few times with her warm hand, he quickly fell asleep. Even when she laid him down on the couch, he slept soundly, unaware of the world around him. Stroking the cheek of the child who had fallen asleep with his head on her lap, Charlotte felt a pang of sympathy. It was then that Jeremy, who had brought in some brewed tea, began to speak.

"He lost his parents when he was just a baby. Growing up without knowing affection, he's become quite clingy."

"I see. That explains it..."

He seemed so starved for love. As Charlotte silently petted the child, she asked cautiously.

"What happened to his parents?"

"They got caught up in the war between the remaining Cardel resistance and the government forces four years ago. This child was their only son. It was Mr. Winkle who saved him. At that time, there wasn't a proper orphanage, so I took him in at a makeshift one."

Charlotte's mind snapped to attention at these words. She looked up sharply.

"Four years ago...?"

“Oh, I’m sorry if this is a sensitive topic. I imagine you went through a lot then, too.”

Jeremy’s words made everything clear. So, it was this island where he had gone missing.

Even during meals with Gerald, he would always listen silently when the past came up. She had a vague suspicion, but she never imagined it was really this island.

“No, it’s alright.”

She didn’t know why he had brought her here, but one thing was certain: this might be a chance to uncover the truth about ‘that day.’ Who was he really, and what had happened on this island?

“I’d like to hear more details.”

Charlotte leaned forward, picked up her teacup, took a sip, and prepared to listen intently. After a moment of hesitation, Jeremy began his story with a serious expression.

“It’s a long story, to be honest.”

Ethelwood conquered and colonized Cardel Island five years ago, in the winter.

It was a territory gained without much bloodshed or war. Cardel was a small monarchy, an independent state that had been rotting away under a long dictatorship.

As the people’s dissatisfaction grew, the king, who was paranoid about a possible rebellion, literally sold the island.

Through official agreements, the country fell into the hands of the Queen of Ethelwood.

However, they overlooked one thing: the oppressed class that opposed the ruling class. Feeling resentment towards the Ethelwood forces that began to settle in, starting with the regent, they eventually formed a rebel group a year later and demanded independence. The first regent was kidnapped and brutally murdered.

Upon hearing the news, the queen immediately dispatched the military, and a grueling war ensued for the next two years.

“During that time, countless people who were neither here nor there were sacrificed. It was a chaotic period.”

Richard was also one of the officers dispatched then. A young sergeant who had just been commissioned and earned his stars. He set foot on the island three months before the war, which seemed to be nearing its end, flared up one last time.

“There were severe casualties on both sides. It ended in a victory for the Ethelwood army, but...”

“Even so, I’ve seen armed soldiers everywhere.”

Although the atmosphere wasn’t overtly hostile, there was an underlying tension on the island. Even Olivia, the daughter of a former soldier, was accompanied by three or four guards when she went out.

“It’s only recently that the rebels surrendered, so there are still remnants around. But there’s no need to worry too much.”

“I see.”

Despite her words, Charlotte’s face was full of concern.

“You don’t need to worry about Mr. Winkle. He’s not someone to be taken lightly.”

As if understanding what she was worried about, Jeremy’s words made her previously pale face flush red. Flustered, Charlotte quickly changed the subject.

“How did Mr. Winkle save Deon?”

“Well...”

“You could just ask me directly.”

She hadn’t even noticed when the door had opened. Suddenly, Richard was behind her, startling her as he took the teacup from her hands. He took a sip, frowned, and set the cup down on the table before seating himself on the couch at an angle.

“Oh, you’re here,” Jeremy greeted him warmly. Richard acknowledged the priest with a nod before turning his gaze back to her.

“What were you talking about?”

“Uh...”

Charlotte, still taken aback by his sudden movements, snapped back to reality when Deon stirred on her lap. Sensing the tension, Jeremy quickly stood up and scooped Deon into his arms.

“Deon, let’s continue sleeping in your bed.”

“Okay...”

Half-asleep, Deon quickly dozed off again in the familiar embrace.

“I’ll put him to bed and be right back,” Jeremy said, swiftly leaving the room with the child. Now, she was alone with Richard in the small sitting room.

Charlotte couldn’t shake the feeling that the story Jeremy had told her was somehow distorted. Wasn’t this the same man who got jealous over a child resting on her lap? And yet, it was he who had saved that very child.

“You’re late.”

“Something came up on the way.”

“So, why did you ask me to come here?”

“You seemed bored.”

Richard casually crossed one leg over the other and replied leisurely, “You seem to have a lot of free time, so I thought you might want to pick up a hobby.”

“A hobby?”

“You’re not fond of dogs or cats. There’s also the risk of disease.”

“Richard!”

She couldn’t listen to him equate orphaned children with stray animals any longer. As Charlotte sprang to her feet, Richard continued nonchalantly.

“This place is short-staffed. There’s only the head priest and one other priest.”

He was suggesting that she could help out here if she wanted to, though she would need an escort. It was an unusually generous offer from someone who usually acted possessive and kept her confined. Charlotte, feeling a bit deflated, sank back onto the couch.

“What’s gotten into you? You usually can’t wait to lock me up.”

“You.”

Richard stood up and extended his hand toward her. Flinching, Charlotte closed her eyes, but all he did was brush a stray lock of hair from her forehead.

“I don’t want you to wither away.”

“...”

“The only person the kind and angelic Miss Hegel doesn’t show sympathy for is me.”

Isn’t that right? he murmured softly, smirking as he walked to the door and turned the knob.

“But only during the day. Three hours.”

“...”

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

Charlotte nodded at his back as he stood waiting for her response.

“Alright. I’ll do it.”

For the first time since arriving here, she felt a sense of purpose.

Volunteering at the orphanage turned out to be more enjoyable than she had expected. Though she initially wanted to do laundry and cleaning, Kana, her escort, dissuaded her. Instead, Charlotte mended the children's worn clothes, read them fairy tales, and taught them basic arithmetic. Most of the children warmed to her, but Deon became particularly attached, sticking to her side like glue.

"Charlotte, will you come again tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

On the first day of her volunteering, Deon had thrown a tantrum when she said she had to leave. Now, two weeks later, he had grown more mature, though he still sought reassurance. His repeated requests for a promise were both endearing and heartbreaking.

"Miss, it's time to go."

"Alright."

Richard was a man who kept his word to the letter. Exactly three hours later, the carriage arrived. Charlotte sighed, hugged Deon tightly, and then let go.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Deon."

"See you tomorrow."

As the children waved goodbye, the coachman cracked the whip, and the carriage began to move. Charlotte, her shoulders aching from Deon's clinging, rubbed them as Kana, sitting across from her, spoke up.

"Miss."

"Yes?"

"You're very kind. Do you have a sibling around Deon's age?"

"Oh, no. It's just that... I feel a connection."

She wasn't an orphan, but she understood what it felt like to have no one to rely on. As she trailed off, Kana, interpreting her expression, made a pointed comment.

"It's quite ironic, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Who do you think killed those children's parents?"

"..."

Living among the perpetrators and pretending to be a saint.

Though unspoken, the words cut deep, like a sharp knife. As Charlotte's face darkened, Kana seemed to realize her mistake and quickly apologized.

"I'm sorry, Miss."

"..."

"I was thinking about my brother who went missing recently. It wasn't your fault... Please forgive me."

Kana's tearful face looked so fragile, like a wounded cat. Charlotte couldn't bring herself to be angry. She shook her head.

"It's alright. If you're comfortable, could you tell me more about your brother?"

She wasn't offering to do anything specific, but she knew how much it could help to share one's pain with someone else.

"Can I really?"

"Of course. If it helps ease your heart even a little."

Tears began to fall from Kana's eyes.

Kana's story was heartbreaking. Her parents had died early from a disease, leaving her with only her brother. Though he wasn't confirmed dead, he had been caught up in a conflict, and she had no idea if he was alive or dead. Listening to her long story, Charlotte felt deep sympathy and sorrow. She wanted to help in any way she could. After much thought, she realized there was only one thing she could do.

Click.

"Richard."

The man who entered was the only one who shared a bedroom with her. Unlike usual, Charlotte was in her nightgown as she reached out to take Richard's coat. He smirked at her uncharacteristic behavior.

"What's this? Waiting for me?"

"Sometimes, I do that."

He raised an eyebrow at her simple reply but didn't seem annoyed. Relieved, Charlotte took his vest and put it away.

"I thought I should thank you."

"For what?"

"For allowing me a bit of freedom."

"Remember, if you pull any stunts, I'll tighten the leash again."

This time, it was Charlotte who frowned. It had been nearly three months since they had reunited. No matter what she said, he always managed to douse her words with cold water. She still found him hateful and frightening, but until he grew tired of her and let her go, she didn't want to continue hurting each other.

"I understand."

Richard stopped and looked down at her, clearly expecting a response. Charlotte calmly answered and then opened her mouth to broach the main topic she had for him today.

"I have something to say."

At that moment, a strong hand pulled her waist towards him.



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Chapter warning: this chapter contains scenes of sexual content. Please be warned before proceeding.

“Let go. I have something to say.”

“No.”

Thud. He pulled her into an embrace and they both fell onto the bed. His cold hand slid up her thigh, lifting the hem of her chemise, traveling over her waist and then higher. His hand stopped at her chest.

“Ah... ha...”

His large hand cupped her small breast, pressing and kneading it skillfully. Charlotte instinctively curled up under his touch, her body reacting to the familiar yet overwhelming sensation.

“Ah... ah...”

Richard, lying beside her, slowly moved his hand downward. He pulled off her drawers, parted her folds, and slipped his fingers inside. As Charlotte tensed her thighs at the sudden intrusion, he kissed her neck soothingly.

“Ah... ah...”

With her vision filled with darkness, every touch felt more intense. As she moaned softly, Charlotte reached for the

candle on the nightstand, but a large hand pressed hers down.

“Mm... no... ah...”

“Charlotte.”

Richard turned her over completely, pulling her chemise off over her head. He positioned himself over her and began kissing his way down her spine. A shiver ran through her, making her gasp.

“Ha... ah!”

He nibbled her skin here and there, as if marking his territory, leaving red bite marks that he licked soothingly. He continued down to her peach-like bottom.

“What did you do today?”

“I... went to the orphanage... ah...”

“You go there almost every day.”

“Ah... no, don’t!”

His hot, wet breath touched her most sensitive area. As Charlotte tried to squirm away, he tied her hands with something soft. It felt like silk—a necktie, perhaps.

“Kneel.”

“No... I can’t...”

The shame was overwhelming. Even though they were alone in a guest room, this was still someone else’s house. This was too much...

“You have time to think?”

He whispered harshly, commanding her.

“Kneel.”

Easily overpowering her, Richard positioned himself behind her and buried his face in her sex.

“Ah... ah!”

The sensation was electric, making her throw her head back. His long tongue darted inside, licking her inner walls. After tormenting her for a while, he found her most sensitive spot, sending waves of pleasure crashing over her. Her juices flowed freely.

Richard, savoring her taste like nectar, finally unbuckled his belt. He grabbed Charlotte’s head, turning her face to meet his for a kiss.

“ ... ”

She was too exhausted to respond. Unfazed, Richard lifted her weakened hips. He pressed her clit between his fingers, making her shiver and gasp.

“Ah... ah...”

“Your hole is twitching. It’s a sight to see.”

“Ugh... sob... ah...”

“Have you ever seen dogs in heat before?”

The sight was quite something. A woman, his woman, on her knees like a bitch in heat, panting from the overwhelming pleasure. Sometimes he wanted to choke her

while she slept peacefully, but then he'd want to hold her close and comfort her.

"I'm going to mate with you."

"Ah..."

Charlotte shook her head at his crude, almost naked words. Seeing her stubborn pride, Richard smirked and pressed down harder on her clit.

"Ah... Aaaah!"

Charlotte's body stiffened and convulsed as she moaned. Without giving her a moment to come down from her climax, he pushed into her, his thick, heavy member reaching the entrance of her womb in one thrust.

"Aaah!"

"You're so tight. It's worth the effort of taming you."

He patted her head as if praising her. Then, he pulled out almost completely before thrusting back in. Her body, propped up on her elbows with her wrists bound, shook with each movement. Her breasts bounced with the rhythm.

"Ah... ah... mm..."

Richard gripped her hips firmly and began to thrust slowly but powerfully.

"Ah... ah... ha... mm..."

As the pain faded and the pleasure took over, her instincts kicked in. The room filled with the sounds of their flesh slapping together, her moans, and the wet sounds of their

union. Charlotte's body, lost in the sensation, started moving in sync with his thrusts.

"Aaah... ha... ah!"

Even though the room was dark, her vision went white as she reached her peak. She grabbed the soft pillow with both hands, her body trembling in orgasm.

"Aaaah...!"

Richard, holding her trembling body, increased his pace. One hand greedily squeezed her breast, while the other tormented her clit. His rough, pounding movements sent her freshly climaxed body into another frenzy.

"Ha... ah... mm...!"

Just as she thought she might lose her mind from the overwhelming pleasure, his relentless movements stopped. Gripping her buttocks tightly, Richard came.

"Ugh."

"Aaah...!"

Another climax shattered her senses, the world around her breaking apart. Hot liquid filled her insides, and Charlotte passed out.

When she opened her eyes again, it was the next morning, with the sun just starting to rise. As she lifted her heavy eyelids, she found herself covered by a thick blanket up to her shoulders. The bed sheets that had been soiled with their fluids were clean, and her body, once drenched in sweat, felt fresh.

“Ah...”

As she tried to get out of bed, a sharp pain shot up from her intimate area. She collapsed to the floor, and just then, the door opened silently. Before she could see who it was, she was lifted back into the bed by strong arms.

“Richard.”

“Don’t go out today.”

“I have to. I’m fine.”

She had promised Deon. She didn’t want to be an adult who broke promises. As she stubbornly tried to get up again, Richard clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“Your pointless stubbornness hasn’t changed.”

“I have to go.”

“Then go with me.”

“But...”

“Are you refusing?”

His growling tone made her surrender immediately. After all, she did have something to ask him...

“Alright. Let’s do that. Just don’t get in my way.”

“So, you’re telling me not to bother you.”

“Ouch!”

Richard pinched her nose playfully.

“That hurts!”

Charlotte glared at him, but he just laughed and bent down to give her another playful bite, holding her tightly as she tried to wriggle free.

“Charlotte.”

His gentle touch and soft voice, which she hadn't felt in a long time, made her stop struggling. Richard buried his face in her pale neck, feeling her rapid pulse. It had been a while since he held her when she wasn't stiff with resistance.

“I can't breathe...”

“Shh.”

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Get some sleep.”

His voice was soft and quiet, a stark contrast to the harshness from earlier. Feeling a sudden wave of emotion, Charlotte let herself relax and closed her eyes. Sleep came quickly.

Contrary to Charlotte's expectation that Richard would have no talent for dealing with children, he was quite popular at the orphanage.

“Pick me up!”

It was a strange sight. Despite not saying anything particularly kind or using a gentle touch, the children took to

him immediately. Even Deon reached out to him, and Charlotte, watching from a distance, muttered to herself.

“...Is it because of his face?”

“Miss?”

“It must be because of his face. Right?”

Otherwise, it didn't make sense for him to gain followers so quickly. Looking for confirmation, she saw Kana nod awkwardly.

“Yes...”

“You don't look well. Are you feeling sick today?”

Charlotte asked offhandedly, noticing Kana's pale complexion. Realizing the insensitivity of her question, she quickly shut her mouth. Kana, fidgeting with her hands, spoke in a small voice.

“Miss, my brother...”

Charlotte glanced at Richard, surrounded by children, and led Kana to a corner. She whispered softly.

“I mentioned it to him.”

Charlotte had brought it up over a late breakfast in the guest room after a bit more sleep.

“I have a favor to ask. There's someone named Kana who helps me. Her brother's whereabouts are unknown. Could you look into it?”

“Why should I?”

"I just... I would appreciate it. I lost my sister too, so... it tugs at my heart."

Despite her hesitant words, Richard said nothing in response. She worried it might be too difficult a request. As she fretted over how to tell Kana, Richard stood up and spoke quietly.

"I'll see what I can find out."

With that, Charlotte felt relieved and prepared to go to the orphanage.

"Thank you, Miss!"

"It's nothing. I said I'd help where I can."

She meant it. She wanted to help in any way she could, knowing the pain and horror of losing a family.

Kana nodded, tears welling up.

"Yes... but it might be difficult."

"What do you mean?"

"A witness saw my brother last."

"A witness?"

"He was taken by men in black masks..."

"Oh my god."

Charlotte gasped, covering her mouth. Just then, Deon's cries echoed.

"Waaah!"

“I should go. We can talk later.”

“Yes.”

Kana nodded, and Charlotte hurried over to tend to Deon.



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Richard had to leave shortly after due to some urgent business. Jeremy, who escorted Charlotte to the director's office, brought out some tea. As she took a sip of the steaming hot tea, warmth spread through her body from her lips. Jeremy, watching her, smiled gently.

"Seems like you were quite surprised today."

"Oh, yes."

"You're not used to seeing Mr. Winkle like that, are you?"

"No, it's actually a bit... unexpected."

It was surprising enough that he didn't push away the children clinging to him, but he even skillfully held Deon when he asked to be picked up. It was a side of him she had never expected, either in the past or now.

"Mr. Winkle visited here once before, when he first started his sponsorship."

Reflecting on the past, Jeremy continued calmly.

"At first, I was wary of him because of his cold demeanor. I wondered if he might harm the children or disrupt things here."

"I understand."

“But then, as he watched the children from a distance without saying a word, he asked me if there was anything he could do for them.”

Jeremy couldn't forget the man who asked that question with a face that showed no trace of warmth.

“At that moment, I thought, ‘Well, let's see,’ and mentioned that we needed a significant amount of funding. I never dreamed he would actually agree to it.”

Charlotte's tea was starting to cool in her hands. Jeremy smiled at her, who sat there quietly like an actor who had forgotten their lines.

“I don't know the details between you two, but if I may be so bold, I hope you get along well with him. You're a good person, and despite appearances, so is he.”

“.....”

“He's a kind person once you get to know him.”

The words of the priest stayed with her all the way back. Kind, gentle. Weren't those the furthest words from describing Richard? Even in bed, he was someone who ordered her around according to his desires. Yet, thinking of the occasional gentle moments, she was confused about which side was the real him.

When she returned to the mansion from the orphanage, Olivia greeted her.

“It seems Father and Mr. Winkle will be home late tonight. Let's spend some time together, just us girls.”

“That sounds nice.”

Her mind was already in turmoil. Seeing him now would only add to the confusion. Thinking it was just as well, Charlotte nodded.

The two had dinner together and sat in front of the crackling fireplace, chatting until late.

“It’s almost midnight,” Olivia said, yawning, “I’m going to bed now. How about you, Charlotte?”

“I’ll head to bed soon too. Goodnight, Olivia.”

“Goodnight. See you tomorrow.”

After another long yawn, Olivia went off to bed, leaving Charlotte alone in the now quiet living room. It seemed like everyone else, including Kana and the other household staff, had gone to bed as well.

Charlotte leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes. She wanted to enjoy the peaceful silence a little longer. Just as she was about to drift off, she heard voices.

“It was a tiring day.”

“Indeed it was.”

It was Brad and Richard, heading straight towards her. Startled, Charlotte quickly hid behind a cabinet by the wall. The door opened, and the two men entered, both looking exhausted. A butler followed them in.

“I’ll prepare some water for washing and some hot tea.”

“Ah, thank you. Although, I’d prefer something to warm me up, like a drink.”

“Would scotch be alright?”

“Please do.”

Brad nodded at the butler’s words and offered Richard a seat. Richard didn’t refuse and sat down in the same spot Charlotte had been sitting just moments earlier, warming himself by the fire. He got straight to the point.

“So, Richard. What happened to that rat Kaon you captured? Did you hand him over to the military?”

“Not yet. There’s still more I need to find out.”

Charlotte’s eyes turned towards Richard as he answered slowly. His face, illuminated by the flickering firelight, looked as cold and unyielding as ever. His perfect, almost inhuman beauty was striking.

“What more do you need to find out?”

“It seems his comrades are stirring things up, trying to rescue him. I thought we could use that to wipe them all out in one go.”

Although she didn’t fully understand the conversation, an inexplicable chill crept up from her fingertips as it went on. Rats, comrades, extermination.

For some reason, Kana’s face suddenly popped into her mind. She had begged Charlotte to find out about her brother’s whereabouts. As these thoughts connected, Charlotte shook her head, trying to dismiss them. Surely not. It couldn’t be.

“Well, I trust you’ll handle it well. You’re not one to mess around.”

That was the end of it. As soon as the silence settled between the two men, a servant entered with the two glasses of scotch they had requested.

Rats, comrades, extermination.

No matter how hard she tried, Charlotte couldn't shake off the conversation from last night. She was relieved that they hadn't caught her eavesdropping, but half of her wanted to wake him up and confront him, while the other half wanted to pretend she hadn't heard anything.

In the end, she did nothing until the morning light. Doing nothing was the right way to put it.

He had promised to look into Kana's brother's whereabouts. But if Kaon was indeed Kana's brother, then he had deceived her once again.

She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to shatter the fragile peace she had finally found.

Charlotte clung to the faint hope that maybe, just maybe, Richard was a good person, as Jeremy had suggested yesterday. She wanted to believe that there was a reason he was covered in blood on the day her mother died two years ago, and that she didn't need to leave his side.

It was a selfish and self-centered reason, but she couldn't let go.

Lost in thought, she didn't even notice the sharp pain. It wasn't until she heard her name that she realized something was wrong.

“Charlotte.”

It was Olivia. She was sitting across from her, embroidering a handkerchief. When Charlotte looked up, she saw Olivia’s worried face.

“Are you alright?”

“Oh...”

Olivia pointed to Charlotte’s hand. A drop of blood had formed where she had pricked herself with the needle. Putting down her embroidery, Charlotte laughed awkwardly.

“I must have pricked myself while my mind was elsewhere.”

“Does it hurt? Wait a moment. I’ll call Kana.”

The last thing she wanted was to face Kana right now. But she had no choice. Before she could protest, Olivia had already stood up and pulled the call bell. Soon, Kana appeared with a first aid kit, as Olivia had instructed.

“It will stop bleeding soon. This is a bit much.”

“This place is different from Ethelwood. The climate, the food, everything. Even a small wound can become infected, Charlotte.”

Olivia’s gaze turned to Kana.

“Please disinfect and treat it thoroughly. Thank you, Kana.”

“Don’t worry, Miss.”

Kana nodded and sat beside Charlotte.

“Could you give me your hand?”

“Oh. Here you go.”

In a daze, Charlotte extended her injured hand, and Kana quickly disinfected it and wrapped it with a small bandage. She was just about to secure the bandage when there was a knock on the door.

“Miss.”

“Come in.”

A maid entered after the knock, glancing at Olivia, Charlotte, and finally Kana before speaking politely.

“The Captain is calling for you.”

“Right now? Just me?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.”

Olivia put down her embroidery and turned to Charlotte.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay.”

With a soft click, Olivia left, leaving Charlotte alone with Kana. Kana finished the bandaging and closed the first aid kit.

“It’s not a deep wound, so you don’t need to worry. Just try not to strain your hand too much for the rest of the day...”

“Kana.”

Charlotte interrupted her quietly. Kana looked at her, surprised.

“Miss?”

“I have something to ask you.”

“Yes, please go ahead.”

“Is your brother’s name... Kaon?”

Please, let it not be true. She hoped against hope that her suspicion was wrong. But her hope was shattered in the next moment.

“Yes. How did you know...?”

“Oh my God...”

“Miss...!”

Kana’s eyes widened in shock. The impact of the revelation hit Charlotte like a wave, bringing on a headache. Kana supported her, helping her lean back against the chair.

“Maybe... I can help.”

Charlotte’s voice trembled as she spoke. It felt like the ground was crumbling beneath her feet. Her hands shook with the betrayal she felt.

How could he... It can’t be true. It mustn’t be.

Images of Richard’s different sides flashed through her mind.

Richard caring for a stray kitten.

Richard rescuing orphans and sponsoring the orphanage.

And those rare moments when he held her with inexplicable gentleness.

Even in this turmoil, a sliver of hope tormented her. She had to confirm it one last time.

“Richard.”

He looked up from the bed when she called his name. It was unusual; after their endless nights together, she would always fall asleep immediately. But now, she lay with her back turned to him.

“What is it?”

“I have something to ask you.”

“.....”

“Do you know someone named Kaon?”

There was a brief silence after her bold question. The silence was broken not by an answer, but by a question.

“Where did you hear that name?”

“I overheard some servants talking while they were delivering groceries today. It seems to be quite a well-known name around here.”

A brazen lie. Half a gamble. Richard was a perceptive man. Charlotte clutched her pillow, her heart pounding with the uncertainty of his response. Just when she thought her heart might burst, he finally answered.

“He’s a wanted criminal.”

“A criminal...?”

The answer was unexpected. Charlotte turned to face him, startled.

“He’s one of the leaders of the remaining rebel forces, a radical.”

Richard, brushing back his disheveled hair, lay down on the bed, resting his head on the pillow and closing his eyes.

“But he’s already been captured and will be executed soon.”

“...Executed? For what crime?”

“A while ago, he made a bomb and threw it at a construction site. It didn’t just affect the remaining Imperial soldiers; innocent workers got caught in it too.”

The bomb’s indiscriminate damage did not spare anyone. Charlotte fell deep into thought. This was something Kana hadn’t told her. It made sense why he hadn’t mentioned it to her.

As she was torn between Richard and Kana, unsure of whom to believe, Richard’s cold voice broke the silence.

“I don’t know where or how you heard that story, but it’s best if you don’t get involved.”

“.....”

“Just stay here quietly.”

It was more of a command than a suggestion. Despite seeming to have changed, he was still the same—overbearing, arrogant, and self-centered.

Charlotte bit her lip quietly. He turned away, seemingly indifferent, and blew out the candle on the bedside table.

Darkness enveloped the room immediately.



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At the same time, in the darkness, the woman opened her eyes when she heard someone calling her name.

“Kana.”

“Jenine.”

A man dressed in all black and wearing a mask silently slipped in through the window. His name was Jenine, one of the two leaders of the rebels.

He was now deep in enemy territory, an extremely perilous situation.

“How’s it going? Any progress?”

“If you mean Charlotte Hegel, she’s halfway convinced.”

“When do you think it’ll be done?”

“Possibly by next week...”

“That’s too late!”

The man roughly grabbed Kana’s shoulder.

“Kaon is in danger.”

“What do you mean?”

“According to our sources, he’s set to be executed this weekend.”

It felt like she had been doused with ice water from head to toe. Jenine looked at the frozen Kana and urged her.

“We need to move up the plan, Kana. There’s no time.”

Charlotte’s mind was a tangled mess. It felt like she was trapped in a labyrinth. She couldn’t figure out whom to trust or whose side to take anymore.

After learning about Kaon’s true identity from Richard the previous day, she hadn’t been able to sleep at all. She felt so down that she didn’t want to talk to anyone, and it just so happened that she was alone in the mansion today. She had a simple meal in her room and had instructed that no one, including Kana, should enter her bedroom.

Having heard both sides, she now needed to confirm things for herself. She needed to find out which version of Richard was real and whether Kana’s words were true.

She stood by the window, looking out at the mountains, trying to sort through her chaotic thoughts. Just then, someone touched her shoulder.

“Miss.”

“...Kana...?”

The door had definitely been closed. How did she get in?

Seeing Charlotte’s widening eyes, Kana smiled faintly.

“Did you ask him?”

“Ask what...”

“.....”

“Oh.”

Charlotte’s questioning tone faded as she closed her mouth.

“No, not yet...”

“I see.”

Kana’s voice was strangely subdued. Charlotte managed to force a smile.

“I was planning to ask today.”

“You won’t be able to.”

“What?”

“I said, you won’t be able to.”

Charlotte didn’t even have time to gasp in shock. Kana swiftly moved, grabbing Charlotte’s arm and striking her pressure point with the edge of her hand.

“Ahh...!”

“I’m sorry, Miss.”

As her vision blurred, she heard a low voice.

“Sleep well.”

“Ugh...”

Her head was spinning. She felt nauseous and on the verge of vomiting.

Charlotte struggled to open her eyes. Her surroundings came into focus. She was in an abandoned ruin, tied hand and foot to an old couch.

“You’re awake?”

She wasn’t alone. A voice came from behind. Instinctively, Charlotte closed her eyes again. The footsteps approaching her stopped right in front of her.

“No, not yet.”

“Did you hit her too hard?”

“She should be waking up around now.”

The man’s voice was unfamiliar, but the woman’s voice, though coming from just a few feet away, was one she recognized.

“Well, whatever. What about him?”

“I’ve contacted him. He should have gotten the message by now.”

“You did tell him to come alone, right?”

“Yes. Otherwise, we said we’d kill his fiancée.”

Fiancée.

She knew immediately who they were referring to. Her eyes snapped open. The woman, who had been talking to the man standing behind the couch, looked down at her.

“You’re awake, Charlotte.”

“...Kana.”

Her voice barely came out. Kana knelt down to meet her eye level.

“Try to bear with it, even if it’s uncomfortable.”

Her tone was completely devoid of the respect she used to show as a maid. This seemed to be her true self.

“Where... where are we...?”

“You don’t need to know. We’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

Leaving where? Did she mean they were going to let her go, or...?

Charlotte tried to push away the deepening thoughts, but a cough erupted from her throat. Kana, watching her cough repeatedly, patted her back. Charlotte wanted to shake her off, but with her hands and feet tied, all she could do was turn her head away in resistance.

“You’ve got quite the pride.”

“What exactly did you do?”

“I’m just giving back what I received.”

“Was everything you said about your brother a lie...?”

“No. That part was true.”

Kana stood up, her demeanor shifting back to cold efficiency as she looked at Jenine.

“When did you tell him to come?”

“This evening. We’ve got two hours left.”

“Alright. I’ll keep an eye on her. You go stand guard outside.”

“Got it.”

Charlotte could no longer focus on their conversation. Richard’s face flashed in her mind. She struggled, reaching out and managing to grab Kana’s hem, glaring up at her.

“What are you planning to do with him?”

“We won’t harm you. You’re innocent in this.”

“Stop dodging the question...!”

Her eyes stung, likely from burst capillaries caused by her agitation. Kana clicked her tongue sympathetically as she looked at Charlotte.

“I told you, the story about Kaon is true.”

“...”

“When that man brings Kaon, we’ll exchange you for him. It’s a kind of trade.”

“Then promise me you won’t kill him.”

“Why should I?”

Charlotte was at a loss for words. Kana genuinely seemed confused.

“From what I saw while working at that mansion, no matter how good the food or clothes were, you never looked happy.

I don't know what your story is, but wasn't he keeping you there against your will?"

Charlotte couldn't deny it. It was true. She had run away, and he had found her, tightening his grip until she had no choice but to return.

He was ruthless. And she hated him. The man who might have killed her mother was always suffocating her. But still...

"...Even so..."

"..."

"Don't kill him. Please. Just promise me the exchange will be the end of it."

The mere thought of him dying made her vision go black. It felt like the world was collapsing and she couldn't breathe.

A cold silence enveloped them. Kana looked down at Charlotte with a bitter smile.

"You're just like the rest of them."

"What do you mean..."

"All you care about is your own pain and loss. You don't give a damn about the horrific things others have been through or how they've managed to survive."

"Kana."

"Do you know what your fiancé, your country, has done to ours?"

Her voice was thick with restrained anger.

“They invaded a peaceful island, turned the locals into addicts, and blinded them with luxurious goods. Then they exploited the island’s resources and took over.”

This was news to Charlotte. But the more she heard, the more it explained the unease she had felt since stepping foot on the island.

“The company your fiancé co-leads is just as guilty. They’re parasites, draining this island dry.”

Kana’s clenched fists and flushed face showed her long-suppressed rage. Charlotte closed her eyes and then opened them slowly, asking in a measured tone.

“So... did you throw the bomb at the construction site?”

“Shut up.”

“What about the innocent workers? They have wives and children too.”

“Shut up!”

Bang. Kana’s fist slammed into the wall right next to Charlotte’s head. It was a fierce threat, but Charlotte didn’t even flinch.

“Your cause is just. You have every right to be angry.”

“...”

“But your methods are wrong. You can’t justify innocent casualties just to vent your rage. You should have tried to talk things out at least once. Right now, you’re just people who run away and lash out, dragging innocents into your mess.”

Kana glared at Charlotte for a long time before turning and walking away. As the sound of her footsteps faded, Charlotte swallowed her tears.

It struck her then, as she spoke, that she was in no position to judge. She had done the same.

That night, that horrible night. Even if what she had witnessed was unforgivable, she should have asked him.

What happened?

Why were those two people dead?

Why were you in that state?

‘...Charlotte.’

‘Don’t come near me!’

‘...’

‘Sob... You monster. You’re horrible...’

But she hadn’t asked. Instead, she ran away. Cowardly, cruelly. Without thinking about the people left behind.

And because of that, more people around her got hurt.

She had known he was different from the start. The burlap sack in the parlor, the genetic disease Franz mentioned, and the occasional vertical slit in his pupils.

She had sensed something was off but turned away from his strangeness. When she learned this island was the one he had gone missing on, she thought she should investigate but let herself be swayed by his occasional kindness.

Maybe, to him, she was the only one who could have been his victim. A pitiable victim who couldn't get full acceptance from his lover, causing him to become more twisted.

By the lake. That night. When they met again. If she had asked him more, would their relationship be different now?

“Sniff...”

Tears finally streamed down her cheeks. She missed Richard.



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“Wake up.”

Charlotte’s condition was already terrible even before she was kidnapped, as she hadn’t slept at all the previous night. Perhaps that’s why, despite the nerve-wracking situation, she couldn’t fight off the drowsiness.

“Ugh...”

Who knows how much time had passed since she had fainted? Kana, who had disappeared somewhere, returned.

“Wake up, Charlotte Hegel.”

Kana shook her until her eyes fluttered open and then helped her sit up. She untied the ropes around Charlotte’s legs.

“Your precious fiancé is here to get you.”

“Where...?”

“Downstairs. I’ll untie your feet.”

Kana roughly pushed her to lead the way down the stairs. Charlotte stumbled forward, her hands still tied behind her back. She felt the cold of the bare floor against her feet, having lost her shoes during the abduction.

As they reached the landing, a voice came from behind her.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said.”

“ ... ”

“I hate to admit it, but you were right.”

“Kana...”

“We did involve innocent people. We shouldn’t have.”

Her voice was softer, less sharp than it had been earlier in the day. Knowing they wouldn’t see each other again after today, Kana spoke candidly.

“In any case, I plan to make amends for that, even if our cause was just.”

“You’ve... you’ve made the right decision.”

Charlotte meant it. Despite being kidnapped and treated harshly, she understood why Kana had been driven to such extremes. This version of Kana, as well as the one she had seen at the mansion, were both her true selves. Just like how Richard had his gentle and cold sides, both were part of who he was.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte replied softly.

“Richard is a man of his word.”

“Is he?”

“Yes. So Kaon will be safe.”

Her words were full of conviction. Richard always kept his promises.

“I hope so. That way, you’ll be safe too.”

Kana muttered to herself and quickened her pace.

“Right now, your fiancé and Jenine are in a standoff. If Jenine gets agitated, things could get messy. Let’s hurry down.”

As they descended the stairs, Charlotte saw him standing in the rain. Richard had dismounted from his horse and was dragging the hostage like a sack of goods. Watching this, Kana shouted.

“Kaon!”

A man with a sharp face, dark skin, and black hair—he indeed resembled Kana. Tears streamed down her face as she instinctively tried to move forward, but Jenine held her back. Pointing his gun at Richard, Jenine commanded.

“Prove you’re unarmed first!”

In the dim light, Richard turned his head towards Charlotte, and their eyes met. Her gaze wavered. It had been less than a day, but his cheeks seemed slightly more hollow. His expression was unreadable, but one thing was clear: he had come alone, risking everything to protect her.

Without a word, Richard complied with the instructions. He took off his coat, turned his pockets inside out, and raised his hands to show his palms. Only after confirming he was completely unarmed did the next command come.

“Release Kaon!”

At Kana’s command, he roughly shoved the hostage forward. The figure stumbled but managed to regain balance, taking one shaky step at a time toward them. When the hostage reached the midpoint, Kana couldn’t hold back any longer and rushed forward to embrace her sibling.

“That’s enough, Jenine. Now let Charlotte go.”

Supporting her injured brother, Kana shouted. Tears welled up in Charlotte’s eyes as she watched the siblings reunite. Then, with a firm push, Kana sent her towards Richard.

She saw him waiting for her. Charlotte, weak and unsteady, shuffled towards him on her dirt-covered bare feet. Just as she reached him, her legs gave out, and she began to fall forward. Strong hands caught her, pulling her into a firm embrace. She caught a faint scent of musk.

“Richard...”

“...”

“I need to tell you something...”

She wanted to share what she had realized—that they should have talked more. That night, she shouldn’t have run away like that. They should have either resolved their misunderstandings or ended things clearly.

“Shh.”

But her words were cut off. He pulled her closer, cradling her head against his chest. Just as it seemed they might escape, a scream tore through the air.

“Ahhh!”

“Jenine, you bastard!”

Charlotte’s heart sank as she turned to see Jenine, who had previously aimed his gun at them, now pointing it at the siblings.

“What is happening...?”

“Quite the spectacle.”

Her mind went blank, unable to process what was happening. Richard, with a silent smile, gestured towards Jenine.

“Bring them over.”

“Richard...!”

Jenine nodded and bound Kana’s hands just like Kaon’s. He then dragged both of them towards Richard. Charlotte, still bound and unable to dismount from the high saddle on her own, stammered in shock.

“Wh-what is going on...?”

“You moved faster than I expected, which was annoying. I planned to watch and wait until the right moment to capture everyone.”

“Y-you mean this was all planned...? From the start...?”

“Did you think I would leave that woman by your side without investigating her thoroughly?”

“H-how could you...”

“People are easily swayed by gold and quick to betray, no matter who they are, even blood relatives.”

No.

It felt like a blow to the back of her head. He wasn’t going to spare them. Desperately, Charlotte pleaded.

“...You promised. You promised.”

“I kept my promise.”

“How is this keeping your promise?”

Richard finally looked at her, tilting his head as if he genuinely didn’t understand her confusion.

“Wasn’t the hostage exchange successful?”

“...”

His calm response left her speechless.

“I was wrong. About everything. You really are...”

Her eyes, which had been burning with heat, now felt cold. Her dry lips parted.

“You’re still the same... You haven’t changed.”

Her voice was dry and cracked. When she realized that the lifeline she had clung to was actually a trap to drag her deeper into despair, she couldn’t even cry.

“Still selfish, cruel, and ruthless.”

As she continued speaking, Richard’s icy expression began to shift ever so slightly. But Charlotte, consumed by the despair beneath her feet, didn’t notice.

“I’ve brought them as ordered.”

Jenine approached and saluted him respectfully. Richard glanced at the siblings, who were glaring at each other, then turned away.

“Hand them over to the military. That should satisfy the regent.”

Just as he grabbed the reins and placed his foot in the stirrup—

Bang.

“Neigh!”

“Aaah!”

Like a signal flare, Jenine’s gun fired. The bullet pierced the horse’s leg, causing it to rear up and collapse to the side. Charlotte was thrown to the ground, and excruciating pain followed.

“Aaaah!”

“Charlotte!”

Richard, pale with fear, rushed to her side. He knelt beside her and examined her condition. Her leg, trapped under the horse, appeared to be broken.

“It hurts! It hurts so much...!”

Her body, crushed under the horse, cried out in agony. Richard placed a large hand over her eyes and whispered softly.

“It’s okay.”

“Richard...”

“You should rest now, Charlotte.”

“...”

“When you open your eyes again, it will all be over.”

Her vision went dark. But in that brief moment, the image of him was seared into her heart like a brand.

An expression full of vulnerability, anxiety, and fear. It was a face she had never seen before. From the first time they met until now, he had always been like an unyielding ice wall—cold, merciless, and unbreakable.

But now, he wore an expression she had never even dreamed of seeing.

“Ri...”

Just as she tried to call his name again, the sound of a gun being loaded pierced through the pouring rain.

Click.

“What a touching love story.”

Simultaneously, the clanking of metal and the footsteps of several people surrounded them. Rebels, who had been hiding without making a sound, emerged and aimed their weapons at them.

“...”

After closing her eyes, Richard slowly turned his head as he lifted the horse off her. Kana, panicking, looked around and grabbed Jenine’s arm.

“No, Jenine. If you do this...”

“Move!”

“Ah!”

“Kana!”

Jenine roughly shoved Kana aside and fixed his gaze on Richard. With the gun barrel pointed at his face, Richard didn't blink as he asked, "Since when? Did you change your mind, or was it from the start?"

"From the start. But does that matter now?"

"No."

"I like your composure."

Just as Jenine was about to pull the trigger, Richard spoke.

"I have a proposal."

"What kind of proposal? You already betrayed me once."

"I'm not asking for my life, so don't worry."

A curious smile played on Jenine's lips. Richard was an interesting man.

He had known Richard was no ordinary person, but his calm demeanor even in the face of death was both unsettling and intriguing.

"Let's hear it."

"You can kill me, but if you kill this woman, your family will die too."

"...What?"



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She couldn't believe her ears.

"What kind of nonsense is this? Can't you see the situation?"

"I heard you have family in Ethelwood. Maybe you sent them away to avoid the fallout if things went south."

"You bastard!"

Jenine's face turned red with rage as he lunged at him. Grabbing the man kneeling in front of his lover by the collar, Jenine glared at him.

"How did you find out?"

"Isn't that basic? You always keep a leash on an untrained dog."

Richard, who had calmly offered his collar, replied in an indifferent voice. The tables had turned.

"You despicable human being..."

"If you listen to me, I won't harm your family."

"..."

"But I understand you need to vent your anger. If you let both of us go, you'll surely come after me and cause more

trouble. Am I wrong?"

It felt like his mind was being read. Richard, now in control, issued a command to the speechless Jenine.

"So shoot me now. Let her go."

His voice was so calm it was hard to believe he was discussing his own life.

"This is the last mercy I can offer."

"Richard...! No!"

Even under the weight pinning her down, Charlotte struggled. Tears mixed with the pouring rain, adding a salty taste to her lips. She wanted to see him, but his hand firmly blocked her view.

"No, please! Please...!"

Her pleas fell on deaf ears.

Bang.

The hand covering her eyes fell away. She locked eyes with him as he collapsed to the ground.

Charlotte.

The moment stretched into an eternity.

I love you.

She could understand without words. No flowery language was needed.

"Aaaah!"

The gunshot seemed to signal chaos. In an instant, imperial soldiers and rebels clashed, turning the area into a battlefield.

But Charlotte heard none of it. Her world crumbled beneath her feet.

And then darkness fell.

She must have dozed off again. If not for the warmth covering her hand, she might have collapsed onto the bed.

“Charlotte.”

“Olivia.”

“Are you alright? You need to rest.”

“I’m fine.”

Olivia, her face full of concern, pulled a chair over and sat beside her. Her gaze shifted to Charlotte’s belly.

“You’ll really collapse if you don’t take care of yourself. You’re not alone anymore.”

“ ... ”

Instead of replying, Charlotte placed a hand on her belly. She was three months along. Her bump was starting to show.

She had found out about the pregnancy after returning to the mansion with him, wounded. The memory still sent chills down her spine. It was a miracle he had avoided a fatal injury.

It was thanks to Kana's desperate leap that saved them all when the triggers were pulled.

"Kana...!"

"Don't get the wrong idea. I only did it because I had unfinished business with Richard Winkle."

"..."

"This is the price for supporting the orphanage."

"Kana..."

"When his gunshot wounds heal, leave this place. We'll never see each other again."

Kana, Kaon, and Jenine vanished amidst the chaos, and true to her word, they never saw them again. The remaining rebels were subdued by the imperial soldiers led by Brad. Later, Charlotte learned that Richard had anticipated such a situation and had made arrangements in advance.

The doctor said it was a stroke of luck for both of them. The bullet narrowly missed his vital organs, and despite being pinned under the horse, she didn't miscarry in the early stages of her pregnancy.

"It's okay. This baby will be fine."

For some reason, she felt certain. She believed the baby would inherit his father's resilience and be born healthy. As Olivia quietly looked down at Charlotte's belly, she suddenly asked, "Do you think it's a boy or a girl?"

"A boy, I think."

"How can you be so sure?"

“Just a feeling.”

Charlotte smiled faintly and turned her gaze toward the bed. The man lay there, sleeping like the dead.

“Spring is almost here.”

“Yes.”

“He’ll wake up soon.”

“I think so.”

Nodding at Olivia’s words, Charlotte gently stroked his cold forehead and nose. It reminded her of their first meeting.

He had been sitting on a plush couch, leaning back with his eyes closed, so pale and beautiful that she had mistaken him for a finely crafted bisque doll.

“Are those eyes just for show?”

Of course, that illusion shattered the moment the doll opened its eyes.

“When is the due date again?”

Charlotte, who had been smiling at the memory, was pulled back by Olivia’s question. After doing some mental calculations, Charlotte answered, “In the fall.”

“Babies born in the fall are said to be blessed by the goddess of harvest, destined to achieve valuable results throughout their lives.”

Olivia smiled softly and glanced at the baby bib Charlotte was embroidering.

"I hope the baby is born in cool, pleasant weather."

"Yes, that would be nice."

A sweet, cool breeze blew in from the window. Soon, the garden would be in full bloom.

She had spent the whole morning by his side and had come downstairs to read by the fireplace as part of her prenatal care. While she was engrossed in her book, a maid knocked and entered, holding a letter.

"Mrs. Winkle, you have a letter."

Ever since her pregnancy became known, the staff, under Brad's orders, had begun addressing her as Mrs. Winkle.

"Oh, thank you."

A letter. Could it be a reply from Zhenya? She had sent a letter to her, omitting the more serious details, to avoid worrying her. The letter mentioned that she had unexpectedly reunited with him and cleared up misunderstandings, leading to their reconciliation.

Charlotte eagerly picked up the letter from the silver tray, her curiosity piqued.

"The sender's name isn't on it."

"Yes, I found that a bit odd as well..."

"Alright. You can go now, thank you."

"Yes, ma'am."

After sending the maid away, Charlotte took a deep breath and opened the envelope. As she read, her eyes widened in astonishment.

To Charlotte Hegel, or rather, Mrs. Charlotte Winkle,

If you are reading this, it means this letter has safely reached you. I sincerely hope that is the case.

I cannot describe how shocked and relieved I was to hear about you and Richard.

You must be surprised to receive this letter out of the blue.

Perhaps you have heard of me from afar, or maybe not. Knowing Richard, he likely kept everything thoroughly secret, as he cannot tolerate even the slightest flaw.

Where should I begin?

Ah, let's start from the most recent incident you remember.

The day you left the island with him, a fire broke out at Seoren Hall. It consumed many things and turned them to ashes in an instant.

I suffered severe burns, but fortunately, my wife Chloe and our sons were unharmed. Sadly, not everyone made it out. I still mourn and pray for those we lost.

Despite knowing this might shock you, I felt you had the right to know about the dark past of our family.

You might have guessed by now, but Janice Brown, the housekeeper, was my former lover and first love.

At one point, I planned to elope with her, to marry and start a family. It was a desperate and intense love that made

everything else seem unnecessary.

But Janice ran away.

She returned after some time, neither too long nor too short, with a swollen belly.

At first, I had no intention of accepting her. I was already married and had moved on. I expected my father to throw her out.

But when he learned the child was mine, his attitude changed.

Despite offering a large sum for her to leave after giving birth, Janice stood firm. She refused to leave a second time. My father gave her a position as a housekeeper.

I loved the child, but I also hated him.

I hated him as much as I hated his mother. He reminded me of the first love I had painfully severed, only to be ensnared by it again.

As the child grew, he began to resemble me more and more. He called me brother, unaware that I wanted to kill him. He liked and followed me.

Then one day, he suddenly decided to enlist. He left, knowing everything.

I thought it was for the best. I hoped he would settle on that island and never return, so I wouldn't have to deal with my uncomfortable feelings anymore.

I was a terrible father until I heard he had gone missing.

That child, Richard, went to die. He discovered the ugly truth about his birth.

One stormy night, when I was about to jump out of the window, unable to bear the guilt and longing, Richard returned.

But he was no longer the same child.

Charlotte, I heard about the massacre that occurred at the mansion.

I know you fled on the day of your mother's funeral and were captured by him years later.

You must have witnessed something horrific that day. A blood-soaked room. A man feasting in front of it.

As you might have guessed, he is human, yet not entirely human. Something changed when he returned from that island.

I don't fully understand what it is, but after extensive research into our ancestors' history, I reached one conclusion.

A genetic disorder that has been passed down from our ancestors manifested in him under certain circumstances.

In the Kensington family, a mutant is born every few generations, or even more rarely.

They are born with extraordinary beauty, exceptional intelligence, and superior physical strength. They can be killed by a knife or a bullet, but they do not fall ill. They age, but after twenty-six, their aging process slows down to a third of that of others. If he doesn't die prematurely like our

ancestors, when you are eighty and in your old age, he will appear to be in his early forties.

And they drink blood.

If they do not drink blood, they suffer from severe thirst, go mad, commit horrendous acts of violence, or take their own lives in torment.

From what I have gathered, he has not drunk blood recently. Not since that horrific night.

He is likely trying to suppress it, but I am worried about when the side effects will surface.



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Thinking about how pale your face must be as you read this letter makes my heart heavy. You might be thinking that you were right, that running away was the right choice.

But I swear, after returning to Ethelwood, Richard has never killed a human to drink their blood. As far as I know, he quenches his thirst with the blood of animals he hunts in the wilderness or the blood Janice brings him.

Charlotte, aside from the dark past of the Kensington family, there is something I must tell you, which is why this letter is so long.

After everything settled, I heard about your situation. I immediately met with the doctor who secretly performed autopsies on Cynthia and Janice's bodies.

Cynthia died from excessive bleeding caused by a sharp weapon. Janice's hand showed signs that she had tightly gripped a weapon.

Charlotte, your mother was not attacked by a beast. It was Janice who killed Cynthia.

And Janice's cause of death was suicide. She slit her own wrists.

Richard is not guilty of any crime. The only thing he didn't tell you was about his 'condition.'

The decision is yours to make.

But as his father, I have one request.

If he wakes up, if he survives, please give him just one chance.

All of this is my fault and the result of my sins. You can blame and hate me, but please don't ruin your life because of it.

I will end this letter here.

I wish you happiness.

—Seymour Arthur Kensington

When she read the last sentence and whispered the recipient's name, her strength left her. Overwhelming fatigue, sorrow, grief, and anger all mixed together, constricting her heart.

"Richard..."

A teardrop fell from her chin onto the letter, smudging the ink. Clutching the letter tightly, Charlotte bent over, gasping for breath.

Just then, someone knocked on the door.

Knock, knock.

"Charlotte?"

"...Olivia."

"I heard you got a letter?"

“Oh.”

Olivia’s gaze fell on the letter in Charlotte’s hand.

“What does it say? Who is it from...?”

Seeing Charlotte’s tear-streaked face, Olivia sat beside her, worried.

“It’s nothing.”

“ ... ”

“Just... someone I used to know.”

Wiping her tears with the back of her hand, Charlotte met Olivia’s curious eyes and began tearing the letter into pieces.

No one must know.

Though it wasn’t written, she instinctively knew this story should never be shared.

Before Olivia could stop her, Charlotte threw the shredded pieces into the roaring fireplace. The flames devoured the letter like a beast pouncing on its prey.

“I’m tired. I’ve been knitting all day.”

“Shall I help you to your room?”

“Thank you, I would appreciate that.”

With Olivia’s support, Charlotte stood up and paused at the door.

“...Charlotte?”

Her gaze lingered on the spot where the letter had been consumed by the flames, now nothing but ashes.

“Did you forget something?”

“No.”

Charlotte shook her head and smiled.

“It’s nothing.”

Her smile was much lighter than before. Olivia, puzzled, returned the smile as she opened the door.

“M-Madam...! Miss!”

The maid who had delivered the letter came running, her face pale with fear.

“What’s the matter?”

“Mr. Winkle...!”

The air seemed to stop. Her heart, which had been beating slowly, began to race.

“Charlotte!”

Summoning all her strength, Charlotte lifted her dress and rushed up the stairs. She could barely hear Olivia and the maid calling after her.

“...Huff, huff...”

She reached the bedroom door, breathless, and with trembling hands, she turned the doorknob.

“.....”

The door opened silently. Bathed in the warm spring sunlight, he was there. Leaning against the headboard, basking in the light.

His gleaming auburn hair, amethyst-like purple eyes. The long neck and the collarbone visible through his disheveled nightgown.

“Richard...”

Gasping for breath, Charlotte took one step at a time towards him. He turned his head slowly towards her.

Very slowly.

“I’m back.”

He greeted her as if he had just stepped out for the day and returned in the evening.

“...Welcome back.”

She replied with a bright smile.

After a long winter, it was finally spring.

To Earl Seymour Arthur Kensington,

A belated greeting to you. Spring is here, and everything is coming back to life. I hope you have been well.

I received your letter. Although it was a surprise to see no sender’s name, as I read through it, I could feel the depth of your thoughts and concerns, and I am grateful for that.

You may have already heard the news.

Richard woke up a while ago. The doctor called it a miracle.

The major cause was not the gunshot wound but the severe head injury he sustained when he fell. The impact on his brain was significant, and there was a high chance he would never wake up again. He could have died after a few years in that state.

But he came back, against all odds.

Though he is not fully recovered and is still undergoing rehabilitation, he is improving day by day. Yesterday, we walked in the garden together. We watched butterflies flutter among the blooming flowers.

Some might say...

"How can you live with the son of the woman who killed your mother?"

Earl, I am now six months pregnant.

How can I describe the indescribable feeling I had when I found out I was expecting? It was terrifying and overwhelming, but at the same time, I felt like I had someone who would always be on my side.

The world seemed both frightening and not so scary, as if I could do nothing and yet everything at the same time.

Janice probably felt the same way.

I think I can understand a little of what she felt when she came to Mistymoor Hall with her swollen belly.

To Janice, Richard was her last hope and her everything. He was a treasure worth giving everything for. That's why she

clung to him and went to such extremes.

I'm not talking about forgiveness. Who can truly forgive whom? I haven't even forgiven myself. And I am neither a saint nor an angel. I get jealous and sometimes have malicious thoughts.

When I think of my mother, I still feel hatred. I hope Janice is in hell, suffering for her sins.

But, aside from that, I understand her. As a human to another human, as a mother to another mother.

To repay you for the courage it took to tell me the truth, I must say that I believe a tragic fate tied the three of you to a wheel of suffering.

The Earl, Janice, and Richard were all both perpetrators and victims to one another.

I was able to come to this conclusion thanks to your long letter. I am grateful for it, even if belatedly, through this letter.

Earl, we have decided not to go to Ethelwood or Katia. We plan to build a home and settle here on Cardel Island.

We want to find ways to atone for and rectify the wrongs committed by Ethelwood, even if just a little.

I know you might be worried. The rebel forces are still at large, and we don't know the whereabouts of their leaders, making this situation potentially dangerous.

But I realized something as I held him that night, as he grew cold.

I decided not to fear them anymore. By understanding and accepting their perspective, I no longer find them frightening or repulsive.

Understanding might be the greatest form of love one human can give another.

So I have chosen to understand them, and Richard from that night as well.

Richard and I are gradually dismantling the exploitative structures that pillaged the island's resources and oppressed its people. We are using our funds to improve welfare, refurbish the orphanage, build schools, and start charitable endeavors.

Although he still seems uneasy about our actions, he is supporting me a lot more than before. His temperament has softened considerably.

As for the matter of blood drinking you were concerned about... I have encouraged him to replenish as he used to.

Honestly, it scares me a bit. Drinking fresh blood is not exactly a pleasant thought. But more than anything, I want him to stay with me for a long time.

We are researching extensively and looking for others like him. We hope to eventually find a solution that everyone can accept. We will keep trying and never give up.

As I write this letter, I can hear his footsteps coming to the bedroom after talking with the secretary.

I should wrap this up now.

I will write again once the baby is born.

Until then.

—Charlotte Winkle

P.S.

Lastly, along with the news of my pregnancy, I have another piece of good news to share.

We have decided to adopt a child named Deon from the orphanage.

He is a very kind, smart, and lovely boy.

I hope you can meet him someday, along with our baby.

<A Snake Entwining Flowers — The End>



T/N: If you've read up to this point, I sincerely thank you for the time you took reading this novel. I had a good time knowing about Charlotte and Richard's story, although sometimes Richard makes me scared. He's just so unpredictable! Haha. If you wish to support, please consider leaving a review on NU. I don't know why so many people rated it as 1-star, perhaps R18 scenes with lots of alluding to animalistic characters are not their cup of tea :) Anyway, that's all from me. If you want to read my other ongoing works, feel free to check out [Limits of Paradise](#) and [Enemies Meet in an Arranged Marriage](#). Until then!